

Luther's Cause

Response by Gerhard O. Forde

The difference in the approach and the tension between the two papers by Leif Grane and Martin Seils indicates, I think, something of the difficulty in attempting at a »wissenschaftlichen« congress of this sort to define clearly »Luther's cause«. The difficulty arises because Luther's cause does not lend itself readily to the kind of description and logical delineation appropriate to, expected or even respected by »die Wissenschaften«. Grane has recognized this when he says at the end of his paper that he has attempted to express Luther's cause only »indirectly«, because that cause could only be handled justly »in a strict sense« if it was taken up directly by being preached. I am in complete agreement. Luther's cause is to see to the preaching of the gospel according to the scriptures in a world of bound and threatened sinners. The cause, I expect, is the actual doing of it, not merely the talking or writing *about* it. We would be grasped by or at least apprized of Luther's cause in the strict sense only if Luther were allowed to or could preach to us, or if »die Sache« itself were preached.

But as Grane rightly observes, we cannot be expected to turn a congress for Luther research into a forum for listening to sermons. That would surely be beneath its dignity! To express the matter perhaps somewhat too sharply but still to underscore Grane's point: We are attempting to discuss and do justice to Luther's cause in a forum which cannot be expected to or cannot really allow that cause to come to expression. Perhaps the crucial question, therefore, is the one put by Grane in this regard: How can we come as near as possible to our topic without forsaking the task of research altogether? Grane suggests we might learn something from the study of literature. I think that is also true. In many instances literary studies these days are more helpful and exciting for theology than most systematic and exegetical work! We need to pay much more careful attention to this.

But until we become retrained in such methods, we must have something to do in the meantime! So it seems to me that here, for the time being, at least, we might pay more attention to the suggestion throughout Grane's paper that we

should try to come to some clarity about Luther's *way of doing theology*. This appears to me to be the most helpful and creative way to proceed. I believe Grane is right in saying that theology for Luther is never identical with his cause but rather an instrument for serving the cause. But the danger here is that we make once again a too abstract and formal distinction between the cause and the content on the one hand and the way of doing theology on the other. The cause is reflected in the way of doing theology and likewise, I expect, the way of doing theology is understandable only in the light of the cause.

It is on this basis that I would like to raise some questions which we might discuss in reference to Grane's paper. If Luther's cause can come to expression *directly* only in the preaching of it, must we not then give more careful attention both to just what exactly preaching is for Luther and how theology relates to preaching? Is it not the case that Luther himself never seems to have made a consistently clear distinction between teaching (theology) and preaching and that this in itself may be one root of our problem? Furthermore, if the actual preaching of the gospel of unconditional grace in a world of bound and threatened sinners is the manner in which the cause comes to most direct expression, then is not the way of doing theology simply the fight to maintain or make room for such preaching in this world? Theology, that is to say, is for preaching.

I would like to ask therefore whether Grane's thesis that Luther's initial campaign was simply the crusade against scholastic theology is not somewhat too formal and abstract. We must ask whether for Luther the kind of theology which scholasticism represents must come under attack precisely because it does not allow, finally, for what Luther understood to be the preaching of the gospel as unconditional and all-sufficient in its direct givenness *pro me*. Scholasticism, that is, represents for Luther a way of doing theology which does not take preaching the gospel (and – although this could be more disputed – the right administering of the sacraments) as the real *telos* (both goal and end) of theology. When one wants to say why this is, one must – as did Luther – take into account the manner in which the preaching of the gospel works in a fallen world. One must move, therefore, more into the discussion of the actual »content«. Thus the very first »Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam« in 1517 moves immediately into the question of the power of the human will. Where it is assumed, as I take it Luther did, that the preaching and the sacraments are themselves the instance in which the unconditional grace *creates* freedom,

then a theology built on the premise that humans already have it in some form or other can only be rejected. A theology, that is, which assumes the human will to be free in some dimension or other vis-a-vis God and his grace will not (at least not self-consciously and consistently) issue in what Luther means by preaching. Such a theology will consist of appeals to the human will and take the form of instruction and lecture about God and things divine. The way of doing such theology would be that of a positive synthesis between »natural« human religious inclination and divine »grace«. Certainly the very first dispute against scholastic theology is a massive attack against all such assumptions and that way of doing theology.

The belief, on the other hand, as in Luther, that the preaching itself *gives* freedom leads to a way of doing theology which makes and insists on a real place for the preaching and the sacraments. Thus the assertion that outside of such an actual happening, the will is bound to itself. A theology therefore which insists on and drives to preaching as the instance in which our problems with God are »solved« does not seek a positive synthesis between natural human powers and divine grace. To make room for preaching as actual instance of grace it negates all such attempts. Thus the prominent place of polemics in Luther's theology. The polemics represents in part, at least, the refusal to allow a theological synthesis to take the place of the preaching; they make room for the preaching.

One might ask then whether »Luther's cause« comes to expression in areas accessible to research primarily in a negative way. That is, in the form of polemic, i.e. a *praeparatio evangelii* (or »preaching of the law!«).

Thus it seems to me that the campaign against scholastic theology involves more than just formal considerations. It is, certainly, a campaign against a certain way of doing theology and the presuppositions upon which such theology is built. The point of the campaign, I think we can say, is to make room for the preaching of the gospel of God's unconditional grace. Now, there is indeed much more that follows from such a campaign which time does not allow us to go into. The basic question for a conference of this sort, I suppose, is that of just what it means for the world, for research, for »die Wissenschaften« that one like Luther fights in this fashion for a place for the preaching of the gospel of unconditional grace. Insofar as the world too has entered into that positive synthesis typified by scholastic theology to one degree or another or still operates on the same presuppositions and carries the vestigial remains thereof, it too will find itself under attack and called to the kind of transformation

necessary to make room for the preaching. I expect that is what the working out of the two ways of divine rule (»two authorities«) and such matters as »Luther and culture« are all about. Perhaps the fact that the world still finds it necessary to defend itself against Luther or to call him before its judgment seat is an indication of the degree to which it participates in rejection of the kind of preaching Luther advocated.

Now, on the other hand, I do want also to say some things about the fine paper by Seils before I stop. I want to say at the outset that I like the paper and have learned a good deal from it. It establishes well the claim that Luther's cause can be described as the insistence that the gospel be understood as »Gebegeschehen« (that must be practically untranslatable), as giving-event. The paper succeeds well in establishing the centrality and decisiveness of the category of gift and giving in Luther's theology. One might, I suppose, want to quibble with theological details here and there (for instance: is »heilsgeschichtlicher Prozeß« the most fortunate way to speak of the Trinitarian self-giving?) but such quibbling would not, it seems to me, get at the question we might best discuss. The basic question arises out of the tension between Grane's paper and Seil's. If it is true that Luther's theology is never identical with his cause (Grane, 57) then we must ask whether that cause can really be captured in a theological description however »correct« and instructive it might be. It seems to me that the problem here goes back to the same basic question about the relationship between theology and preaching. If it is true that Luther's cause comes to direct expression in the actual preaching of the gospel then the problem is that the theological description of the cause, however correct, will always stand in danger of a certain degree of falsification, especially if it mistakes itself for the cause itself. Theology, and research, that is, will have to recognize that it is not itself the cause, nor can it pretend to encompass the cause. The preaching is where the cause is actually enacted, where the »Gebegeschehen« actually occurs. It seems that this might be where we have had difficulty in the past in Luther research. We have had endless debates about whether and where and when Luther theologically considered taught somethings different or new that could not be found here or there in the tradition. The debate goes back at least to the discussion started by Heinrich Suso Denifle about the *iustitia dei*. But it is often difficult to prove that Luther taught something so different. But perhaps the point is that he did not want to teach anything different as such, but only to make the move to actual preaching, actual giving. The crucial instances in

which he is regarded to have taught something different are then very often simply overlooked or regarded as »polemical exaggerations« (for instance, the bondage of the will, divine necessity, the end of the law, etc.). But such »polemical exaggerations« only force the move to the actual giving of the gift in preaching and sacrament. That move itself makes all the difference. But the trick then is not to stop with talking about but to learn to do it, to give the gift so that it creates faith.

Thus the question I have is one which is for me also as a so-called »systematic« theologian rather puzzling. To what degree it is possible to give adequate systematic expression to »Luther's Cause«? Seils succeeds creatively and eminently, I think, in the systematic task. But the very success can be dangerous. For surely if God is systematically described as self-giving that is all in vain if that does not drive to the preaching and the sacrament which actually gives God. Theology, that is, can actually succeed too well in making itself sound like preaching to the degree that it seems to make preaching superfluous. For then a variety of things can happen. The sermon then just becomes a repetition of the theological lecture, with, perhaps homiletical adaptations and embellishments. But theology, in trying to sound like a sermon, tends to falsify or oversimplify the picture of God and the predicament of endangered humanity. In trying to establish the theological claim that God is self-giving we tend to forget the God of wrath, the deep-seated fear we have that God is one who can also take everything away from us, indeed, life itself. The negative, the polemic, is excluded. The law is not preached – as in the 19th century. Certainly it was Luther's recognition – and thus his cause – to realize that not theology, but the preaching and the sacraments alone can rescue us from our plight. Does this not mean that one effect of that cause would be to recognize that theology – and research – has its limitations and that it must not usurp or obviate the place of the preaching? Could that not also be what the campaign against scholastic theology really means? And that we are all, in one way or another still »scholastics«?