



Briefing

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Can we confidently make a stand?

Luther's Approach to Holy Scripture and Ours

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INTRODUCTION

On 14 May 1521, Martin Luther stood before the representatives of Church and Empire and made one of the most famous speeches in Christian history:

Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scripture or by evident reason-for I can believe neither Pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves-I have been con-querred by the Scriptures adduced by me and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because to act against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound.

The published accounts of this speech, which circulated through Europe like wildfire, record a final line that does not appear in the official record:

I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.'

The speech itself is still able to capture the imagination of Christian men and women throughout the world. Here one man stood precariously before the most powerful institutions of his time and refused to budge, because he was convinced that the things he had taught were the faithful exposition of the Word of God. He knew that there were calls for his execution. He suspected that the matter had already been decided in the corridors of power. Nevertheless, he did not feel free to act otherwise. If God has spoken - not just vaguely influenced the course of world history but addressed His creation in human words - a stand can and must be made despite the consequences.

Yet in our world, poised as it is at the close of the second millennium, Luther's confidence is often portrayed as quaint and sometimes even bizarre. The suggestion that God has something to say to men and women belongs to a long-past age of dogmatism mixed with theological naiveté. Today, our appeal is more likely to be to the structures of life as we all know it, to individual and corporate experience. The study of 'Christian doctrine' is most often undertaken in terms of history or philosophy rather than as sustained engagement with those texts which present themselves as the written Word of God to us. (These need not, of course, be mutually exclusive. A responsible articulation of the teaching of Scripture at any given point in history will need to take into account both previous attempts and the intellectual context in which the current attempt is being made.) Those who still echo the approach of Luther and the other Reformers are often awarded the title 'fundamentalist'.

Perhaps a fresh examination of Luther's thinking on this subject might prompt us to ask serious and urgent questions of ourselves and of those who have influenced the directions of much modern theological study. A recovery of the theological dimensions

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of Luther's approach to Holy Scripture may enable us to regain our own lost confidence and to speak with a clear and prophetic voice to a world confused by its own agnosticism. Along the way, we may need to repent of our intellectual pretension and our unwillingness to be the audience rather than the speakers.

THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

Martin Luther was convinced that the living God is not only *able* to speak but has *chosen* to speak to human beings. Human language is not merely a human invention. It is a gift of God, which God Himself condescends to use as He graciously communicates with us. God addresses us in ways fitted to our finitude and fallenness. We are not left merely to struggle with our own words in order to speak the truth about God. God speaks His truth to us in our words. God has overcome the gap between himself and us by expressing Himself in a real human language. This, after all, is the vital difference between the true and living God and the idols of the nations: God has spoken (see Isaiah 44:6ff). Luther was also convinced that this is the most basic element in our relationship with God:

God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a word of promise, as I have said. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise.'

This recognition of God as a speaker can be demonstrated from every period in Luther's life, from his lectures and sermons as well as his more polemical literature. Further, this is not at all exceptional. An affirmation of God as one who speaks, and as one who is prepared to use human words when He speaks, was common to the theological tradition which stretches from Luther backwards through history to the New Testament itself, not to say the Old Testament. This explains why Luther can, quite unselfconsciously, write of God's speaking', 'the voice of Christ' and those things 'the Holy Spirit says'.³

GOD'S WRITTEN SPEECH

Although a great deal of Luther scholarship assumes the opposite, the evidence is overwhelming that Luther considered the Scriptures to be the written speech of God. He recognised other uses of the expression 'the Word of God', but he was nevertheless willing to use this expression of the words (not just the essential

meaning) of Scripture.⁴ Throughout his life Luther would equate 'Scripturè and 'the Word of God' directly and explicitly, even assuming that this was the common understanding of all Christians, including the popes. In other places, he used the two as interchangeable expressions. For example, he insists that the church is 'cap-tive to Scripture, teaching nothing but the Word of God'.⁶ In still other places, he could join the two with the conjunction 'and', using the second expression to make clear the character of the first. For example, in the midst of his homily on the Gospel for the Epiphany from 1522, he exclaimed: 'Would to God that my exposition and that of all doctors might perish and each Christian himself hold to the bare Scriptures and God's pure Word!'

Luther's conviction that the Scriptures are in fact the Word of God to us does not mean that he abandoned any suggestion of genuine human authorship. Regularly, even in polemical contexts in which he was defending the uniqueness of the Scriptures as the Word of God, Luther could speak of their human element without any embarrassment or qualification.' He spoke fulsomely of the conscious decisions made by the human writers which produced a variety of stylistic features. In 1522, he suggested that 'what is preached about Christ is all one Gospel, although every writer has his own distinctive literary style'.⁷ Ten years later, he could speak of the prophet Joel as 'a kindly and gentle man' who 'does not denounce and rebuke as do the other prophets, but pleads and laments'.⁸

Luther believed that this unique fact, that the words of Scripture are at the same time genuinely the Word of God and the product of genuine human authorship, arose from the reality of divine inspiration. While some modern studies assume that error is a necessary characteristic of human language or that incomprehensibility is a necessary characteristic of God's speech, Luther had no difficulty with an intimate involvement of God with both writer and text. The words the biblical writers consciously chose to use were in fact the words God wanted used accurately to convey his will and purposes. Luther used the word 'inspiratori or 'revelatori or even the expression 'the motion of the Holy Spirit' to express what he believed had occurred. He described the result of this process, Holy Scripture, as 'the Word of God written and lettered and formed in letters'.¹¹ In the year before he died, he insisted

that he who wants to hear God speak should read Holy Scripture.¹² These theological convictions, that God has spoken and the Scriptures are in fact God's Word written, were basic to Luther's confidence. That is not to say there were no tensions in his approach to Scripture. He struggled throughout his life with the Epistle of James, making what seemed to some the most outrageous statements about it (e.g. describing it as 'an epistle of straw' and suggesting he felt like 'casting Jimmy to the flames') but never feeling free to eliminate it from his Bible. He insisted on the importance of the context when understanding any particular passage, yet, in debates about the words of institution at the Last Supper, he was unable to see that his own understanding encountered problems in the context, namely that Jesus remains physically whole and entire throughout the meal. He strongly attacked the use of allegory in traditional methods of biblical interpretation, but was not above resorting to it himself at times, when he felt it could serve his purpose of showing that all of Scripture 'inculcates Christ'. Nevertheless, Luther never flinched in his determination to affirm the words of Scripture as God's words and to consider himself a captive to them.

GOD THE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR
Luther's confidence would still be inexplicable except for one further affirmation. Luther maintained that God has not only spoken but spoken clearly. According to some scholars this was simply an argument Luther thought up for his debate with Erasmus in 1525. However, the evidence for Luther's commitment to this principle extends back before the Indulgence Controversy of 1517-21 and forward to the end of his life. In a variety of polemical contexts, and extensively in contexts which are ostensibly non-polemical, Luther insisted that God is able to communicate effectively and that any problems in understanding the Scriptures arise from the deficiencies of the readers rather than of the text. As he said in 1521:

The integrity of Scripture must be guarded, and a man ought not to presume that he speaks more safely and clearly with his own mouth than God has spoken with his mouth.¹³

This clarity, moreover, is a work of the Holy Spirit. He ensures that the words have an

external clarity, related to the words, grammar and syntax, as well as an internal clarity, where the Word of God 'gives perfect light and glory to those who believe it, and brings utter blindness and shame upon those who do not believe it'.¹⁴ Luther will not allow any suggestion that Scripture is obscure or ambiguous because of the consequences this would have for our understanding of God and the Christian life. Such a suggestion would be 'impudent and blasphemous',¹⁵ implying God's incompetence in revealing his Word to his people. It would also leave believers without their one sure refuge in times of doubt and spiritual attack, 'the clear and unmistakable word of Christ.'" Luther was convinced God is an effective communicator, and in His benevolence He has provided a sure and certain word upon which we may take our stand. Here was a sure basis for bold and confident action. In particular, he insisted that those who practise theology must be careful to support their arguments with 'clear, sober passages from Scripture which the devil will not overthrow'.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Luther's confidence, not only that God has spoken but that it is possible to know just what God has spoken, cannot be explained simply in terms of his personality, his culture, or his upbringing. Luther himself located its source elsewhere. The character of God and his dealings with humanity underlined the necessity and fundamental importance of God's speech. Further, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the result of a work of God's Spirit, ensuring the effectiveness of God's communication without destroying the genuine human quality of the means of that communication.

Much of the modern lack of confidence in Christian circles (be it in theological, ethical or apologetic discussion) can be related to a shift in perspective on the origin and nature of Holy Scripture. In some cases, such a shift is acknowledged. In many other cases, it is not. Yet it is important to realise that Luther's perspective on Holy Scripture is integral to his entire theology. It is not a peripheral element that can be jettisoned without consequence. Luther would have argued that God himself and our relationship with Him is at stake. If this is granted, then a serious

re-evaluation of our current approaches is in order. Would our modern theologies ever produce someone willing to risk all as 'a cap-tive of the Word of God'?

POSTSCRIPT: TWO MODERN AII LMPTS TO JUSTIFY THE CLAIM THAT GOD SPEAKS

Much contemporary theology continues to reject any suggestion that the living God addresses His people in human words. Although many important expositions of this doctrine have appeared in the centuries since the Reformation, such studies are often caricatured as products of Enlightenment rationalism rather than biblical theology. However, such a

caricature is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. New interest in the Claim that God has spoken -and so in the verbal character of his revelation - is evident in the academy. Nicholas Wolterstorff, of Yale University, has produced a full-length study of the subject and its philosophical ramifications.¹⁸ Kevin Vanhoozer, of New College Edinburgh, has also recently explored the possibility of recasting a doctrine of Scripture in the categories suggested by speech-act theory.¹⁹ These are not the only contributions on the subject. Mean-while, throughout our world there are places where the Word of God is read and expounded with confidence. We must wait to see what emerges.

REFERENCES

- ¹LW 32, 112-113. Luther's works are here quoted by the volume and page numbers of the standard English translation: *Luther's Works (LW)*. In those few cases where a particular passage has not been included in this translation, the citation is by the volume, page, and line numbers of the critical edition of Luther's works in Latin and German, the *Weimar Ausgabe (WA)*.
- ²LW 36, 42.
- ³LW 32, 244.
- ⁴Luther spoke on a number of occasions of the threefold nature of the Word of God, of which only one form (the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ) is actually God Himself (*substantialiter Deus*). LW 10, 220.
- ⁵LW 39, 277. ⁶LW 10, 219. ⁷LW 52, 286. ⁸LW 35, 132. ⁹LW 30, 3.
- ¹⁰LW 35, 318.
- ¹¹WA XLVIII, 31.4-5. ¹²LW 41, 332.
- ¹³LW 32, 244.
- ¹⁴LW 45, 146. ¹⁵LW 33, 94. ¹⁶LW 36, 134.
- ¹⁷LW 40, 175.
- ¹⁸Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ¹⁹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today', *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, eds Philip E. Satterthwaite & David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 143-181.

FURTHER READING

- D.A. Carson & J.D. Woodbridge (eds), *Scripture and Truth* (Leicester: IVP, 1983)
- D.A. Carson & J.D. Woodbridge (eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986)

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