

A TRIBUTE TO MARTIN LUTHER

(1483-1546)

KENNETH A. STRAND

AUSS Editor



MARTIN LUTHER

(AFTER A PAINTING BY LUCAS CRANACH)

The current year 1983 marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of the famous Protestant Reformer Martin Luther (b. Nov. 10, 1483)—an event being celebrated by means of numerous conventions, seminars, and other special activities in many countries throughout the world. Reformation-Lands tours are highlighting Luther this year. And publications about the Reformer, prolific as these are year in and year out, appear to be in an upsurge in recognition of the Luther jubilee.

The *AUSS* staff wishes to join in the widespread tribute being given this year to honor the memory of this great religious leader of the sixteenth century, whose life has so profoundly and powerfully influenced subsequent history. In fact, it had earlier been our intent to make this current issue of *AUSS* a special Luther one, but several considerations led us to a decision to defer such an issue until 1984. Prominent among the reasons was our desire to capture as much as possible of the "Luther Year" to report to our readers. We plan to provide a brief review of a number of pieces of the more significant Luther literature of 1983 and to give a survey of "cutting edges" and "new directions" in Luther research as brought to light in some of the major conferences being held during this Luther quincentennial.

The Spring issue of *AUSS* will also contain several significant articles on various aspects of Luther's career and contributions, plus some special features (including a pictorial overview of the Reformer through fifteen portraits of him covering a span of some twenty-six years).

As we look forward to the more extensive treatment with which we will pay tribute to Martin Luther a few months hence, we wish also at this time to join the vast multitudes worldwide—representing such numerous nationalities and religious confessions—who are honoring a leader whose remarkable career has reached down through the centuries to touch us today in manifold ways.

Although Luther's contributions went far beyond the purely theological sphere (with, for example, significant input into the fields of education, philology, and music), there was always for the Reformer the centrality of a deep religious concern. As Luther specialists are coming more and more to learn, Luther's was a very practical and pastoral type of concern—the concern of a person exceedingly alert, sensitive, and alive to the times and to the specific needs around him.

Even a faint verbal portraiture of him is impossible here, but perhaps one glimpse of him as evidenced in one of his own writings may provide a fitting climax and conclusion to this "Tribute." The following is from the opening paragraphs of Luther's *Liberty of the Christian* of the year 1520 (as translated by W. A. Lambert and revised by Harold J. Grimm, in the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, 31 [Philadelphia, 1957]: 343-344):



LUTHER AS DEPICTED IN A WOODCUT FROM 1520

Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it a place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith. It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man when trials oppress him. But he who has had even a faint taste of it can never write, speak, meditate, or hear enough concerning it. It is a living "spring of water welling up to eternal life," as Christ calls it in John 4 [:14].

As for me, although I have no wealth of faith to boast of and know how scant my supply is, I nevertheless hope that I have attained to a little faith, even though I have been assailed by great and various temptations; and I hope that I can discuss it, if not more elegantly, certainly more to the point, than those literalists and subtile disputants have previously done, who have not even understood what they have written.

To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in I Cor. 9 [:19], "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all," and in Rom. 13 [:8], "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was "born of woman, born under the law" [Gal. 4:4], and therefore was at the same time a free man and a servant, "in the form of God" and "of a servant" [Phil. 2:6-7].