

THE "SUMMER THAT WILL NEVER END": LUTHER'S LONGING FOR THE "DEAR LAST DAY" IN HIS SERMON ON LUKE 21 (1531)

JOHANN HEINZ
Seminar Marienhöhe
D-6100 Darmstadt, Federal Republic of Germany

The fact that Luther's doctrine of justification through faith in Jesus Christ alone represents a theological constancy, from the time of his Reformation breakthrough until the end of his life, is a solid component of modern Luther research.¹ Besides this, however, there is a second, equally continuous line of thought in Luther's theology: the expectation of the imminent return of Christ.²

Already as early as in his *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* of 1520 and in his 1522 "Sermon on Luke 21:25-36," words such as these are found: "I hope that the Last Day is near at hand"; "No one can take away from me [the firm belief] that the Last Day is not far off."³

With his deepening conviction, from 1530 on, that Rome would not be willing to be reformed, that the Jews were obstinate, and that the Turks were an overpowering threat, testimonies of this sort increased. In that very year 1530, before his translation of the whole OT was completed, he published a shorter work entitled "The Prophet Daniel, in German," for the Reformer was sure that the consummation of world history was very near. He stated, "The world runs and hastens so excellently towards its end, that I often feel very strongly as if the Last Day would come sooner than we can complete translating the Holy Scriptures into German."⁴

¹See Johann Heinz, *Justification and Merit: Luther Vs. Catholicism*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, 8 (Berrien Springs, Mich., 1984), pp. 13-15.

²See Ernst Staehelin, *Die Verkündigung des Reiches Gottes in der Kirche Jesu Christi* (Basel, n.d.), 4: 33, 39, 40-42, 56-57.

³Ibid., pp. 39, 40. The expression "dear Last Day" (in the subtitle to this article) appears in Luther's correspondence, in the *Weimar Ausgabe* of his work (hereinafter *WA*), *Briefwechsel* 9:175, line 17.

⁴Staehelin, p. 56.

With advancing age, Luther became increasingly disillusioned with the thought that the world and Christendom would be able to solve their own problems. Among his statements revealing this despair are the following: "It [the world] is the devil's child . . . it cannot be helped nor advised." "Therefore I know of no other advice and help than the coming of the Last Day." "Help, dear Lord God, that the blessed day of your holy future will soon come."⁵

While Luther's doctrine of justification has received, and still receives, almost limitless discussion and evaluation in the literature, it is strange that this second constant element in Luther's proclamation only rarely finds attention among the theologians. In German research on Luther, it is rather the biographers—e.g., Rudolf Thiel, Heinrich Fausel, Walter von Loewenich, and Peter Manns⁶—who portray and try to understand Luther's fervent expectation of the *parousia*. Heiko A. Oberman, however, is especially noteworthy for the attention he gives to this aspect of Luther's religious thought.⁷ He shows clearly that for Luther, because of the Reformer's theological disposition, there is no secular golden age on earth, and that the world's turning point can only be achieved through the *parousia*. With this view, the Reformer stands in the tradition of the NT, and of Augustine and Bernard; as a result, he is in diametrical opposition to modern thinking in general.⁸

Luther tried to understand the "signs of the time," Oberman points out. The sale of indulgences, persecutions, apostasy from the gospel, and rampant immorality—these were, for him, signs of the nearness of the end.⁹ Also, according to Oberman, Luther was not the founder of a new form of Christianity, but a prophetic herald in view of the end, "since the Reformer was driven by

⁵See, respectively, *WA* 32/2:476-477; *WA, Tischreden*, 6:254, lines 25-26 (no. 6893); and *WA, Tischreden*, 5:349, lines 25-26 (no. 5777).

⁶Rudolf Thiel, *Luther* (Wien, 1952), pp. 722-729; Heinrich Fausel, *D. Martin Luther* (München, 1966), 2: 286-314; Walter von Loewenich, *Martin Luther. Der Mann und das Werk* (München, 1982), pp. 314, 370; and Peter Manns, *Martin Luther* (Freiburg i.B., 1982), pp. 187, 213, 220.

⁷Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther. Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Berlin, 1981), pp. 55-56, 72-81, 325.

⁸See *ibid.*, pp. 55-56, 72-74.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 78-81.

peculiar thoughts of the devil and the Last Day."¹⁰ Oberman thinks that Luther, with his theology, would probably seem "much too conservative and devout" in the arena of a modern theological faculty.¹¹

Is it because of these apocalyptic elements in Luther's thinking, often evaluated as relics of a past from the Middle Ages,¹² that some interpreters of Luther's theology are so silent with respect to this obviously constant element in the teaching of the Reformer? Whatever the reason, it is strange that the more recent German works on Luther's theology hardly comment on this theme, and that when they do comment on it, this is only occasionally—usually in the form of hints made in connection with his teaching on the "two kingdoms" and the judgment. Such is the case, for instance, with regard to Rudolf Hermann, Gerhard Ebeling, Bernhard Lohse, and Otto H. Pesch.¹³ Only the classical work of Paul Althaus is as yet the most explicit one on this theme.¹⁴

Althaus points out that "Luther's theology is thoroughly eschatological in the strict sense of expecting the end of the world. His thoughts about the eschaton are not a conventional appendix, but a section of his theology which is rooted in, indispensable to, and a decisive part of the substance of his theology."¹⁵ Althaus is, above all, successful in showing clearly that Luther, as a result of the doctrine of the certainty of salvation, rediscovered through the promise of the *parousia* the joy of the early Christian church, and that he could thus overcome the fearful *dies irae*, the "Day of Wrath" of the Middle Ages.¹⁶

¹⁰Ibid., p. 325.

¹¹Ibid., p. 324.

¹²Cf. *ibid.*, p. 73.

¹³Rudolf Hermann, *Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen, 1967), p. 227; Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther. Einführung in sein Denken*, 2d ed. (Tübingen, 1964), p. 199; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther. Eine Einführung in sein Leben und Werk* (München, 1982), p. 202; and Otto H. Pesch, *Hinführung zu Luther* (Mainz, 1982), p. 232.

¹⁴Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1966). (This is a translation by Robert C. Schultz from the 2d German ed. of Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers* [Gütersloh, 1963].)

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 404-405.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 419-421.

How various elements—signs of the end, the *parousia*, admonition, hope, and joy—became for Luther a convincing force, as marks of true Christianity, may be shown in a short summary of his “A Comforting Sermon on the Coming of Christ, and the Preceding Signs of the Last Day, Luke 21,”¹⁷ from the year 1531. The following will be a synopsis of the contents of this “Comforting Sermon.”

As he begins his sermon, the Reformer expresses his conviction that the world can no longer be helped by “preaching, calling, exhorting, threatening, nor supplicating.”¹⁸ The world, he feels, is “the devil’s child” and remains a “murderers’ pit.”¹⁹

The papists, he continues, place their hope in politics. The emperor will come to Germany with his troops and exterminate the Lutherans. This is their *salvator venit*, the “arrival of their Savior”; but, the emperor is a “false savior.”²⁰ Luther does not deny that the emperor is a pious man, but his followers have of a “*Heiland*” (“Savior”) made a “*Feiland*” (“filer”)²¹—i.e., somebody at whom the enemies for a long time file and tinker, so as to make him finally meet their expectations. Luther admonishes his listeners to wait for the “right Savior,” who has promised his return with such certainty that he is no “*Feiland*” (now meaning “failure”), but one who has never failed nor lied.²²

In order to strengthen his church in this expectation, God has given her signs.²³ Just as there are signs for insignificant things, so must there be signs for the *parousia*, which is the most important event that has not yet been fulfilled.²⁴ The signs have, according to Luther, a manifest double-character. They occur in heaven and are

¹⁷WA, 34/2: 459-482. All further references in this article will give both page numbers and line numbers.

¹⁸Ibid., 466.27-28.

¹⁹Ibid., 476.35-477.9; and 475.25.

²⁰Ibid., 466.36-467.26. It is impossible to render an exact translation of the German word-play “*Heiland*”/“*Feiland*.” “*Heiland*” means “savior”; “*Feiland*” is a fictive word, here meaning a substitute savior.

²¹Ibid., 468.18.

²²Ibid., lines 24-28.

²³Ibid., 466.28-31.

²⁴Ibid., 459.20-23.

effected on earth.²⁵ They are given for the strengthening of the believers and as a judgment for the unbelievers; that is to say, for the Christian they are the promise of the coming liberation, while for unbelievers they are an announcement of the impending judgment.²⁶ At present, the latter still enjoy the "grace" that makes them unconcerned, while the former already may discern the "wrath of God," which, however, will not hurt them, since God cares for his children.²⁷

The signs appear also for the purpose that the believer may know when Christ will return and how to get ready for that event. The latter can only be a source of joy for the Christian; and about the former, Luther does not wish to quarrel, but personally is of the opinion that the signs "already have happened to a considerable extent."²⁸

In order to discern such things, one certainly needs faith, since the "astronomers" regard all these phenomena as being "natural" events.²⁹ The Reformer, by way of contrast, sees in the natural catastrophes of his time (floods and earthquakes), and the political-religious events (the apostasy of the papacy, and the peril of the Turks) signs which faith can discern.³⁰ The proof of the signs lies in the gigantic dimensions and the frequency of the phenomena (Luther uses the expression "thick and frequent").³¹

Faith makes the proclamation of the signs a "lovely, cheerful sermon." This joy is the hallmark of the right interpreter, since the "foretellers and prophets" (Luther probably has the astrologers in mind) merely talk about catastrophes. Only the Christian can understand the "joyous, lovely word 'vestra redemptio.'" Therefore, the *parousia* must be seen through the eyes of Christian hope, and not of worldly wisdom.³² This hope alone lends wings to our life, so that Luther would not want to have been born if there were

²⁵Ibid., 461.21-30.

²⁶Ibid., 460.15-19; 482.24-26.

²⁷Ibid., 460.19-23, 27-30; 464.14-29.

²⁸Ibid., 461.18-21, 31-34.

²⁹Ibid., 461.34-462.19.

³⁰Ibid., 463.10-15; 478.10.

³¹Ibid., 463.24.

³²Ibid., 460.24-25; 463.30-33; 469.30; 470.26-32; 481.12-16.

not a return of Christ. The malice of the world would be unbearable, were it not that God would “strike vigorously” some day.³³

The arrival of the “blessed day” must be longed for, and one must sigh and shout for it, since the Christian in this world is surrounded by “nothing but devils.”³⁴ He who does not desire this day, does not understand the Lord’s Prayer and is unable to pray it.³⁵ According to Luther, the plea in this prayer that “your kingdom come” points to the *parousia*. This supplication is *the* prayer of the Christian.³⁶ In this sense, Luther modifies the words of Paul in I Cor 15 and says that if Christ would not return, we would be the most miserable among men.³⁷

At the present time, Luther continues, the Christians bite into “the sour apple” and drink a “bitter drink,” but then the “sweetness” will come.³⁸ Therefore, Christ now invites his children to stand up and be joyful.³⁹ Even if the proclamation of the gospel finds no reward among men, the Reformer nevertheless lives and preaches, so that the “little flock” may understand it.⁴⁰ He concludes his sermon with the inspiring metaphor that “winter has lingered long enough,” and “now a beautiful summer will approach—a summer that will never end.”⁴¹

³³Ibid., 465.31-466.26; 473.29-32.

³⁴Ibid., 466.31-32; 469.24-25.

³⁵Ibid., 475.14-16.

³⁶Ibid., 474.25-475.14.

³⁷Ibid., 466.21-22; 472.17-22.

³⁸Ibid., 472.26-27.

³⁹Ibid., 478.26.

⁴⁰Ibid., 473.26-29; 479.26-28.

⁴¹Ibid., 481.25-27.