

Reformation or Revolt or Revolution?

by Paul Peters

Why do we raise the question: Reformation or Revolt or Revolution? Is it not self-evident that every Lutheran reader will answer it by giving preference to the term “reformation” as most appropriate for the work wrought by the Lord of the Church through His instrument, Dr. Martin Luther, the Reformer? On the other hand, the Roman Catholic reader will be altogether in favor of the term “revolt” or “revolution” for the movement initiated by Luther, the “rebel.” Neither Lutheran, nor Roman Catholic readers have ever learned to think and speak otherwise of Luther’s work. We have but to recall the Christian instruction that we received in our Lutheran day schools and prior to our confirmation to realize how indelibly the term “reformation” was impressed on our minds when our teachers and our pastors spoke to us of Luther and his life’s work. Kenneth Wilson Underwood in *Protestant and Catholic* tells us that “the general picture given of the Protestant Reformation is unvarying where it appears in the Catholic educational system” and “most starkly in the diocesan press” as that of a “religious revolt, not a reform.”¹ However, not only do the average readers, but also the Lutheran and Roman Catholic historians differ in their choice of the terms. The Lutheran and in general the Protestant historians define the work of Luther in its last analysis as a “reformation”; the Roman Catholic historians in their definition of the Lutheran movement adhere closely to the term “revolt” or “revolution.” But this does not prevent Protestant, even Lutheran theologians from making use of the term “revolution” in order to add to the term “reformation” a more far-reaching meaning, while Roman Catholic historians will at times speak of the “so-called Protestant Reformation.”

Our question, however, is not only one of semantics. It is one that demands the most adequate definition for the movement that Luther initiated. In order to find this, we must take into account the work of Luther as such and the terms with which he defined it, together with the definitions given to it by historians, whether they speak of it as a “reformation,” a “revolt,” or a “revolution.”

Protestant Revolt and Protestant Revolution

From the viewpoint of Roman Catholic writers the Lutheran movement was not a “reform” but a “revolt” or “revolution.” E.G. Schwiebert in *Luther and His Times* states that the use of the term “Protestant Revolt” is quite proper if “it implies that the established Roman Catholic Church is the only true Church and that the founding of any other outward organization is a revolt against the divinely instituted authority,”² against “the *Una Sancta Ecclesia* of Rome,” which “is one and the same, to the Catholic, with the invisible church of Jesus Christ,” as *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*³ adds in its use of the term. According to this definition it is self-evident that the term “Protestant Revolt” is representative of the Roman Catholic interpretation of the Lutheran movement. Owen Chadwick in *The Reformation* gives us one valuable example of this use of the term in telling us of Luther’s friend and confessor Staupitz, who “believed that no reformation could be justifiable if at the same time it endangered the unity of the Church.”⁴ Schwiebert also has a definition for the term “Protestant Revolution.” While “it has a similar implication,” it “places the center of gravity in economic, political, and sociological forces and assumes that they were more influential in shaping the course of events than theological differences.”⁵ Again *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* has this to add: “Like the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution, the term implies a violent reaction against existing authority, resulting in far-reaching and fundamental change.”⁶ This is in full accord with what Daniel De Leon, America’s

¹ Boston: Beacon Press, 1953, p. 149.

² St. Louis: Concordia, 1950, p. 8.

³ Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965, p. 2010.

⁴ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, p. 62.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 2010.

foremost Marxian scientist (1852–1914), has to say in *Reform or Revolution*, a lecture delivered in 1896: “Whenever a change leaves the internal mechanism untouched, we have Reform; whenever the internal mechanism is changed, we have Revolution.”⁷ Chadwick again supplies us with a fitting example of this meaning and understanding of the term which “sane and peaceable men” had, who held that if the “loosening of society” as it occurred in Erfurt, where students and townspeople destroyed sixty houses of clergy, “was reformation, they would have none of it.”⁸

Till this day Roman Catholic historians continue to define the Lutheran movement as a “revolt” and “revolution” and to accuse Lutherans of the 16th century of having been responsible for the apostasy of the modern world. Charles W. Kegley in *Protestantism and Transition* calls attention to one of many such books, which, for more than two decades, was a standard and widely used text for courses on modern European history, namely, *A Political and Cultural History of Modern Europe* by Carlton J. Hayes.⁹ In it the Roman Catholic professor, as quoted by Kegley, examines four causes of the Protestant Revolt: (1) the growing nationalism as opposed to the feudal system, (2) the revolt against the papacy as property owner and collector of excessive taxes, (3) the immorality and moral decay of the clergy, and (4) certain “new” religious doctrines, contrary to those traditionally taught by the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that Hayes lists “certain new religious doctrines” as the fourth and last cause of the “Protestant Revolt” is significant. Roman Catholic historians not only reverse this order, but they even regard Luther’s religious doctrines as the sole cause of the “Protestant Revolt or Revolution.”

After having quoted Hayes’ four causes, Kegley comments: “The order of causes as discussed by Hayes is flatly wrong, as such recent Roman Catholic writers as Henri Daniel-Rops and Pierre Janelle are saying.”¹⁰ Daniel-Rops in *The Protestant Reformation* has this to say concerning “Luther’s religious revolution”: “The revolution he desired to effect was neither social nor political nor ecclesiastical, but theological. He was trying to wage war against the tyranny of error and sin on behalf of what he understood by ‘the Truth.’”¹¹ While this Roman Catholic historian is far from recognizing “the Truth” which Luther championed, even calling “his message a destructive power which he had scarcely dreamed existed,” he nevertheless excludes all social, political, and ecclesiastical causes from the “revolution” which Luther “desired to effect.” Therefore he also speaks of a “spiritual revolution that Luther sought to carry through”¹² and does not distinguish at all between revolt and revolution. Yet this theological use of the term “revolution” only intensifies its meaning. It means nothing less than that the very doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church is being branded as an untruth, a false doctrine. This shows that Daniel-Rops and other Roman Catholic historians¹³ to that extent understand the meaning of the Lutheran Reformation, though they contend against it and seek to stigmatize it as involving an untruth. The same can be said of Luther’s contemporary opponents, who not only understood but in the beginning welcomed his Reformation, although later on they opposed it. Luther brings this out in his reply to his critics.

But Luther Answers his Roman Catholic Critics

⁷ New York: Labor News Co., 1935-60, p. 3.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 61f.

⁹ New York: Macmillan, 1932. Chapter IV of the 1928 edition bears the title: “The Protestant Revolt and the Catholic Reformation,” pp. 112-164.

¹⁰ New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p. 24.

¹¹ Translated by Audrey Butler (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1961), p. 297f.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹³ Mention should be made here of the neo-Thomist, Jacques Maritain, in *Three Reformers* and of Joseph Lortz in *Die Reformation in Deutschland*. Georges Tavard in *Protestantism*, translated by Rachel Artwater (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959), joins them by stating that “protestantism ... considered ... doctrinally and canonically ... is a heresy; theologically it may be seen as the victory of an unbalanced theology at the expense of the analogy of faith” and “a spiritual movement going astray and ... ending up in the denial of many traditional doctrines of the Church” (p. 133).

Luther not only experienced that his Reformation was branded a “revolt” (*Aufruhr*) by his opponents, but he also stated the reason why this would always be the case. In doing this he already tells us wherein the essence of this Reformation actually consists.

First of all, he distinguishes between a “civic revolt” (*leiblicher Aufruhr*), which is in opposition to the legal government, and a “spiritual revolt” (*geistlicher Aufruhr*), which does not deprive a secular government of its rights.¹⁴ Luther’s critics accused him of having caused both revolts. As to the former he says: “All the blame for such error and wickedness is laid on Luther and must be called the ‘fruit of my Gospel,’ just as I must bear the blame for rebellion and for everything bad that happens anywhere in the world.”¹⁵ The specific error with which he is here being charged is not only that of leading people to say, “It is not proper for Christians to bear the temporal sword or to be a ruler,” but also that of leading some to “want the Turk to come and rule!” We too have people in our day and age who “are so mad” that they say it is not proper to bear the sword or who prefer to have the Communists come and rule us. Not all church leaders in our country have the good conscience that Luther had when he said of himself: “I have begun no rioting and rebelling, but so far as I was able, I have helped the worldly rulers, even those who persecuted the Gospel and me, to defend their authority and honor. But there I have stopped. I committed the affair entirely to God and at all times I relied boldly on His help.”¹⁶

And as he helped the worldly rulers, he no less aided bishops and parish priests. He asks the clergy assembled at Augsburg whether they have forgotten how in the beginning his doctrine was precious to all of them. Formerly bishops and parish priests regarded it as such, because they were very much in favor of his attack on the indulgence traffic. Without a word of dissent they had had to permit monks and indulgence vendors to enter their bishoprics and parishes to carry on a thoroughly scandalous trade. When Luther had brought about a change, then he was the “dear boy” (*das liebe Kind*). And when he attacked monastic life and the monks became fewer, he heard no weeping from bishops or parish priests. On the contrary, then he was an “excellent teacher” (*ein feiner Lehrer*). In fact, he knew that no greater service was done the bishops and priests than freeing them from the monks. This his telling reminder culminates in the question: “Why did you not consider that revolt as well?”¹⁷

Our main question, however, is how he answers those who accused him of having begun a “spiritual revolt.” He tells them that by preaching the Gospel, hearts, over which the Emperor is not to rule, are separated one from the other. The father has a different faith from the son and the faith of the son differs from that of the father. Such a separation results in a “revolt” in one and the same house, but the Gospel caused this revolt. Therefore, it is a “spiritual” and not a “secular revolt” (*weltlicher Aufruhr*). Luther had called the secular revolt a “fruit of his Gospel.” The spiritual revolt, however, is “caused” by the Gospel. The difference between both is illustrated by Luther in this manner: Concerning the latter, the spiritual revolt, there may be five in one house who disagree as to their faith and still the house remains standing. Even as the Lord says: “I am come to send fire on the earth,” not that the houses collapse, but that they remain standing. The reason why they do not collapse is that the children in such a house continue to obey their parents and to be obedient to the government. This does not happen in a worldly revolt, in which houses destroy each other. If we keep this in mind, we can understand why the Lord, who is not an earthly king, persists in saying that he is nevertheless a king. The Gospel is His rule, which causes a revolt—not a worldly but a spiritual revolt—with the result that a different faith dwells within the hearts of men. And they who have this different faith do not kill anyone. On the contrary, they teach that everyone should practice obedience in his station. Yet hearts remain divided as far as faith is concerned. My wish,” Luther adds, “is that such a revolt be in every home. Only then will the Gospel be on the increase and become strong.”¹⁸

As much as Luther was opposed to every civic revolt or revolution, so much was he in favor of this spiritual revolt. But his opponents did not distinguish between the two in accusing him and his followers of

¹⁴ St. Louis-Walch Edition (St. L.) VIII, 910.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* XX, 2108f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* XVI, 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 951f. Cf. *Luther’s Works* (LW) (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and St. Louis: Concordia), Vol. 34, p. 14f.

¹⁸ St. L. VIII, 910f.

being “heretics, the seed of Satan, apostates, rebels.”¹⁹ The basic reason for this charge of heresy and rebellion was none other than that the Gospel was being accused of being a seditious doctrine. “You are not to preach the Gospel,” Luther was told by his opponents, “you are not to condemn our false doctrines and bad life, etc. Revolt issues from it.”²⁰ Luther does not deny this. “Revolt,” i.e., civic revolt, “follows it [the Gospel] at all times.”²¹ But then he adds: the Gospel “does not cause it; instead, it causes nothing but peace and unity.”²¹ The real instigator of such a revolt is none other than the devil, who would like to see a civic revolt take place, so that the spiritual revolt would run aground and be aborted.²² Luther comforts himself with the fact that Christ and the Apostles were also accused of causing a revolt. Christ was crucified as a rebel and accused of having caused unrest from Galilee to Jerusalem,²³ of misleading people, and of making them disobedient to Caesar.²⁴ St. Stephen stirred up a serious revolt among the Jews, although he did no evil, but only good, and said what they could not bear to hear.²⁵ St. Paul had to hear from Jews and Gentiles that he was a blasphemer and a seditious.²⁶ Thus it happened to all the prophets and apostles.²⁷ Therefore, when Luther and his followers heard themselves called apostates and rebels, their reply was: “By the grace of God we are holy apostates; for we have defected from the Antichrist and the church of Satan and have allied ourselves with the Son and the true Church. It befits us to stand with this and to assail the false church,”²⁸ and to bear being called heretics and seditious “until finally our innocence comes to light.”²⁹

When one thinks about these answers of Luther, one can only marvel at his polemical skill in refuting the accusations of his critics. He is not satisfied simply to deny the validity of their criticism and to accuse their false doctrine of being the source and cause of all revolt. He does this also. But in the above answers he meets his opponents by saying as much as: Quite right, indeed a revolt...but what kind of revolt? Not one that is brought about by the wielding of the sword but by the preaching of the Gospel. Our Gospel must be branded “revolutionary” because it proclaims what the people do not like to hear.³⁰ This Gospel is our sword and fist, which no one can resist.³¹ Thus Luther’s answer has the force of a boomerang in that he uses the very term “revolt,” with which his critics sought to brand his work, in order to counteract their accusations and to bring their attack on his teachings to nothing. Therefore, we need not be averse to applying the term “revolt” or “revolutionary” to the work of Luther. Even if the term is too negative to do full justice to the Lutheran movement, nevertheless, it does serve more than one purpose, which the term “reformation” does not succeed in doing. And it should not surprise us when this term is also applied to us today, for all “the people of Christ are revolutionaries in a totalitarian world.”³² There is such a thing as a “salutary revolution”; Lutheran historians use the term in that sense.

The Reformation a Revolutionary Change

When the term “revolution” or “revolutionary” is used by Lutheran historians, its meaning is the very opposite from that of a Roman Catholic historian. It has the meaning that Webster’s Dictionary gives to it as that of “a complete change.” Heinrich Bornkamm in *Luther’s World of Thought* uses “revolution” in this very

¹⁹ LW 2, p. 213.

²⁰ St. L. VIII, 949.

²¹ *Ibid.* XXII, 1073.

²² *Ibid.* X, 369.

²³ *Ibid.* VII, 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.* XI, 1296.

²⁵ *Ibid.* VII, 105f.

²⁶ *Ibid.* XI, 1296.

²⁷ LW 34, p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213f.

²⁹ St. L. XI, 1296.

³⁰ *Ibid.* VIII, 948.

³¹ *Ibid.* XIX, 966.

³² Bengt Sundkler, *The World of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 39.

sense of the term by defining Luther's Reformation as a "revolutionary change." In order to attribute "world historical" significance to it, he speaks of "the two great revolutionary changes of human history (viewed politically, culturally, and intellectually) ... When Jesus said: 'Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand!' the first of these two turning points was ushered in. Luther initiated the second with the first of his *95 Theses*: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, in saying: 'Repent ye!' intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence.'"³³ In order to bring out that "not only the inner life of Christians but also the political and cultural structure of the West has been more profoundly changed by these proclamations than by any other historical happening" the term "revolutionary change" is used by Bornkamm. Schwiebert also tells us that Luther's "principle of 'justification by faith' included a participation in civic affairs, which he ably expressed in the famous tracts of 1520, appealing to the newly elected Emperor Charles V to reform the Church, since Rome had neglected its duty," seeking "to liberate Germany from the economic and political bondage of the Roman See," and by "his statement of the priesthood of believers" destroying "the whole medieval concept of the divisions of society."³⁴ It is true that Luther was motivated at all times in his work of reform by the principle of justification by faith. The fact, however, that he appealed to Charles V and the Estates to carry out the reform was still done under the presupposition that the government of the Holy Roman Empire had to take over the work of reform whenever the church failed to do its duty. This appeal, however, does not deprive his work of its primary religious character and does not justify historians to call it a "civic revolt." Gerhard Ritter in *Luther, His Life and Work* finds a very fitting wording for the motivation of this appeal of Luther: "To a far greater extent than elsewhere the theologian reached out here, particularly in the *Address to the Christian Nobility*, beyond the narrow spheres of religious and ecclesiastical questions, and cast light on the world of politics, economics, social order, and national interests. But, of course, only with the searchlight of the religious prophet: everything was developed strictly logically from the central idea of the Reformation."³⁵ This "revolutionary change" is also given due consideration by Prof. John Koehler in his *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*: "The statement that the whole history of modern times is to be traced back to Luther's activity is correct."³⁶ In this connection we can understand why Dr. Sasse speaks of a "reformation" and a "revolution" in reference to Vatican II. On the one hand he carries out in his letter *Nach dem Konzil* that "Rome is on its way to a reformation" and on the other hand that Roman Catholic conservatives fear that this "reformation," for which many in the Roman Catholic Church are striving, will finally end up in a "revolution" and "the destruction of Catholicism."³⁷ The change which Luther wrought by his Reformation, radically different from the "reformation" of Vatican II, actually threatened the destruction of Catholicism of his day and called forth the Council of Trent and the Counter-Reformation, the only means whereby the Roman Catholic Church was able to survive.

There is hardly any need of asking whether Luther was conscious of starting such a revolutionary change. He was, although he could not foresee the extent of this change. What he did see he designates with our very term "change" (*Mutation, Aenderung*). And it is worthy of note that he uses the term "change" when speaking of the influence of his doctrine. He does this in connection with the great misuses wrought by the Roman Catholic clergy, which were not "changed," although the Emperor and Adrian VI promised to "change" them. The bishops, who were responsible for them, should have brought about a "change." But they failed to do so. Their theologians even defended these misuses and sought to retain them. The result was that they were regarded as unlearned, incapable, and even dangerous, and their efforts at defense even called forth mockery. Yet these misuses, Luther writes, began to fall away all by themselves, so that "a change was in full swing" in several parts of the country before his doctrine ever put in its appearance. The whole world was so tired of these misuses and opposed them so strenuously, that an immediate "change" was demanded. Had not Luther's doctrine "acquainted the people with faith in Christ and obedience to the government, a dire destruction would

³³ Translated by Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), pp. 33 and 53.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁵ Translated from the German by John Riches (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 99.

³⁶ Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917, p. 338.

³⁷ *In Statu Confessionis*, edited by Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1966), p. 234f.

have prevailed in German lands. But this would have been a disorderly, strong, and dangerous mutation and change (even as Muenzer started it), had not a stable doctrine intervened.”³⁸

In this “Memorial” (*Gedenken*) authorized by the Elector and addressed to the Emperor in reference to the Diet of Speyer (1529) Luther asserts that his doctrine prevented without doubt all of religion from deteriorating. This decline of religion, of which Luther here is speaking, had not only been brought about by the corruption of the clergy but also by the unbelief and skepticism of the Renaissance, even extending to the ranks of the peasantry. Therefore it was necessary “to carry on a simultaneous warfare against the ecclesiastical abuses and the increasing rationalism of the time.”³⁹ And since the change pressed forward with such force that no one could stay it, the Elector of Saxony and the clergy, as Luther tells us, could no longer retain and maintain these misuses without endangering the true doctrine. His doctrine both prevented disorder and created order in the fields of political, social, and cultural changes. In this connection it is important to note that whenever Luther mentions the main article of his doctrine, he usually adds that he teaches love for one’s neighbor and obedience to the government. Thus in his *Apology* to Henry VIII we find his doctrine summarized as follows: “What evil do I teach when my doctrine is simply this that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered for us, died and rose again, as the Gospels and Epistles testify? This is the source and foundation of my doctrine, on which I then structure and teach the love of men for their neighbors, obedience to civil authorities, and the crucifixion of sinful flesh.”⁴⁰

It was on the strength of this doctrine that Luther, for instance, opposed the Peasants’ Revolt, when the demands of the rebels went beyond their *Twelve Articles* and the possibilities of their time. Not that obedience to the government had anything to do with any one particular form of government. It only laid down, to quote Ritter, “the first and most general basic principle of all political authority as against anarchy and chaos.”⁴¹ Finally, beyond anything that the Humanists even considered, Luther in his letter to the *Councilmen of all Cities in Germany* set as his goal, universal, even compulsory, public education for everyone. He also advocated that municipalities should found public libraries and even suggested principles for the selection of books to be placed on their shelves. The education of girls, while not unheard of in his day, was nevertheless one of the many changes introduced by Luther as a general principle.⁴² Ritter sums it up in this telling manner: “Could it be otherwise than that this enormous educational program which was undertaken by the new Church and which extended into every sphere of daily life and work, illuminating them in the light of moral considerations, should have gradually been infused into the blood of the whole nation and have become a permanent leavening in its nature?”⁴³

Whatever emphasis and consideration these political, social, and cultural changes deserve as a fruit of Luther’s teachings, we would not be doing justice to his work if we would neglect to follow his lead in stressing his doctrine as the primary force of his Reformation. Luther reveals a keen insight into the history of his times by pointing to the growing changes prevailing in his day. Still he does not give precedence to these changes, but lays all emphasis on his doctrine. But there are Protestant historians who reverse matters and lay all stress on the social and cultural changes. Thus we have Preserved Smith in *The Age of the Reformation* asking the question: “What is the etiology of religious revolution?” His considered answer is: “The principal law governing it is that any marked change either in scientific knowledge or in ethical feeling necessitates a corresponding alteration in the faith. All the great religious innovations of Luther and his followers can be explained as an attempt to readjust faith to the new culture, partly intellectual, partly social, that had gradually developed during the latter Middle Ages.”⁴⁴ H. A. Enno Van Gelder in *The Two Reformations in the 16th Century*⁴⁵ follows the same line

³⁸ St. L. XVI, 283f.

³⁹ Edw. Maslin Hulme, *The Renaissance, the Protestant Revolution, and the Catholic Reformation in Continental Europe* (New York: The Century Co., 1915), p. 239.

⁴⁰ St. L. XIX, 381; cf. Neelak Serawlook Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans* (St Louis: Concordia, 1965), p. 30.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.* p. 236.

⁴² St. L. X, 340.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 216.

⁴⁴ New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920, p. 745.

⁴⁵ The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, p. 233.

of thought by distinguishing between the religious reformation as the minor one and the Renaissance reformation as the major one. He calls the latter “major” because he is convinced that in the general development of religion the Humanists, properly speaking, took a more significant step forward than the Protestants. For the cultural life of the 16th century and thereafter he considers the religious reformation of the Humanists more significant than the Protestant Reformation. Like the minor reformation it had a great influence on political and social history. Finally, the minor reformation was partly influenced by that major one. These voices, to which others could be added, may be few and far between, but they do call our attention to the need of answering the question: What is the etiology of the Lutheran movement?

The Lutheran Reformation⁴⁶

Luther uses the term “reformation” for the first time in a letter to Duke George dated as early as 1518. He asks the Duke whether “a common reformation should be undertaken of the spiritual and temporal estates.”⁴⁷ It was to give his movement its historic name. Even at this time Luther was fully conscious of the need of a reformation. In his *Explanation of the Ninety-Five Theses*, on the strength of the 89th Thesis, he says: “The church needs a reformation which is not the work of one man, namely, the pope, or of many men, namely the cardinals, both of which the most recent council has demonstrated, but it is the work of the whole world, indeed it is the work of God alone. However, only God who has created time knows the time for this reformation.”⁴⁸ But the time had come. Of this Luther soon was fully aware. “I have begun it in God’s name,” he tells us in his writing, *Why the Books of the Pope were Burned*, and adds: “I hope the time has come for the cause to move forward in his name without me.”⁴⁹

But what was Luther’s definition of a spiritual reformation? He gives it to us in his interpretation of Genesis 35:2: “Then Jacob said unto his household and to all that were with him: Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments.”⁵⁰ Here Luther points out that the first sin that Jacob in his “fine sermon” punishes is “the sin against the First Commandment, namely, idolatry . . . from which all other sins issue.” From here Luther goes on to say that “all reformation or improvement, which may be undertaken, is in vain where first of all the doctrine is not cleansed.” And by way of contrast he calls attention to what the pope and the church councils call a reformation of the church: a commanding of a few outward ceremonies, but never once giving thought to the Word and to the doctrine, which they do not understand and with which they do not concern themselves at all. Instead they abandon what is best, namely, the pure doctrine.⁵¹ But since Satan is warring against the pure doctrine to destroy it, therefore we should be concerned about one thing above all others, that we may have the true and certain doctrine concerning God. And we always should be mindful of what Jacob commanded: Do away with the false gods, i.e., do away with all the offenses of (false) doctrine and with all ungodliness, so that the people may learn aright to fear God and to trust in Him.⁵² Luther summarizes everything well with the words: “Now this is a fine reformation, that one first of all reforms and cleanses the doctrine. Thereafter the sins of usury, theft, robbery, and adultery are also done away with.” Then follows an admonition that the people and the priests should be fittingly dressed when worshiping in the church. While the Roman Catholics, he continues, reverse this order and begin their reformation with shoes and garments, they neglect what is primary and best. Much rather one should do it this

⁴⁶Schwiebert in *Luther and His Times* (p. 7) informs us that the term Reformation dates back to a Cistercian monk, Joachim of Flora (d. 1202), who took the expression from the Latin Vulgate and made use of such terms as *nova vita* and *reformatio*, an idea which was continued by Dante and other humanists. Preserved Smith in *The Age of the Reformation* (p. 700) supplements this information by adding: “The other name frequently applied by Luther and his friends to their party was ‘the gospel.’ In his own eyes the Wittenberg professor was doing nothing more nor less than restoring the long buried evangel of Jesus and Paul.”

⁴⁷Will Durant, *The Reformation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957) p 348; cf. Preserved Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 700.

⁴⁸St. L. XVIII, 267; cf. LW 31, p. 250.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* XV, 1629; cf. LW 31, p. 394.

⁵⁰*Ibid.* II, 910.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 914.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 911.

way that by faith the heart may be cleansed, then outwardly the body and the members by love and outward ceremonies, including garments and customs.⁵³ And in his *Table Talk* he even condenses this summary into the brief statement: “If the doctrine has not been reformed, it is futile to undertake the reformation of morals.”⁵⁴

As to the manner in which such reformation can be carried out, Luther advises a preacher who was sent to him for advice first of all to preach the Word before changing anything until one sees how faith and love are on the increase among the people.⁵⁵ Here again we have Luther laying all emphasis on doctrine and the Word before any change can be wrought in the church, in the lives of the Christians, and for that matter in state and society. But what is this doctrine? Luther’s answer is that the doctrine “is not ours, but God’s.”⁵⁶ It is not a new doctrine. It is the same old doctrine of the Apostles.⁵⁷ He even tells the papists in his exposition of Matthew 5:17: We do not want to destroy your gospel nor preach something else. We want to purify and polish it, as one does with a mirror, which is darkened and spoiled through your filth, so that nothing but the name of the gospel remained, but no one could see anything in it, even as the Jewish teachers retained the text of the Law but corrupted it with their additions, so that no true meaning and usefulness could remain.⁵⁸ Therefore we have followed this procedure, he tells us in his exposition of the Gospel of John: “When we found everything darkened by the pope’s man-made doctrine, . . . we by the grace of God have again brought the Apostolic doctrine to light, that it again shines clearly, and everyone can see what the Gospel, Baptism, Sacraments, Ministry of the Keys, Prayer and everything is which Christ has given us and how we should use it unto our salvation.”⁵⁹ This true doctrine has the one purpose of setting forth Christ, that through Him one’s heart may gain comfort against sin and death. Being taught to believe in Christ is what brings this about. Luther is certain that his doctrine is pure, that he and all his followers have all the articles of faith firmly and well founded in the Scriptures.⁶⁰ The reason why he “cannot doubt” and why his “theology is certain” is that it “takes us outside of ourselves.”⁶¹ Free will, reason, and human wisdom did not discover it.⁶² God revealed this doctrine. It is God’s Word, which teaches true doctrine.⁶³ Luther tells us that he always followed the rule of being guided by the Word when he wanted to gain and make known his opinion concerning the pope’s doctrine. If it was not in accord with the Word of God, he at once knew that such a doctrine had Satan as its author and had the one purpose of deceiving and doing mortal harm to the people.⁶⁴ Here we see how the Word became the “lodestar” of the Reformer.⁶⁵

Luther’s Reformation is so far different from the so-called “Reformation in Head and Members” of the Roman Catholic Church that the term “reformation” first gains its full meaning when applied to the spiritual Reformation of Luther. It loses all meaning when it is used to describe the vain endeavors of the papacy to bring about mere disciplinary and ecclesiastical reforms. While these reforms ended up in an accumulation of mere words, the Lutheran Reformation culminated in an actual event. This event and none other has claimed the word “Reformation” for itself and has made it to become a one-time historical occurrence, as Gerhard Ebeling in *Luther, Einführung in sein Denken*⁶⁶ carries out. But to speak of a Catholic “reformation” gives the word a forced meaning. For the great church-historical movement, to which the term “reformation” does not only

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 914f.

⁵⁴ *Weimar Ausgabe, Tischreden* (W-T) 4, No. 4338: *Sed doctrina non reformata frustra fit reformation morum.*

⁵⁵ St. L. XXIa, 516f.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* VI, 575.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* VIII, 682.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* VII, 424.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* VIII, 682.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* IX, 650.

⁶¹ WA 40, 1, p. 589: *Ideo nostra theologia est certa, quia point nos extra nos*

⁶² St. L. IX, 45.

⁶³ *Ibid.* III, 1082.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* I, 696.

⁶⁵ William Stevenson, *The Story of the Reformation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), uses this term in stating that “the lodestar of the Reformers was neither economics nor politics nor even social amelioration, but religion first and last and all the time” p. 178). This, of course, can only be said of Luther, the Reformer, and of his co-workers in the full sense of the word.

⁶⁶ Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1965, p. 59f.

accidentally apply, has given this designation a significance not arbitrarily to be exchanged for some other. Ebeling then puts the question how it happened that the Lutheran movement did not also culminate in mere words, but that it was brought to such a climax for which “Reformation *has become the one and only term*” (Italics ours). In brief, his answer is that the Word, on which Luther lays such strong emphasis, is not something that must first become an event, but that it is an actual event (*Tatwort*)⁶⁷, or, as we may add from Romans 1:16, “a power to salvation.” Only when we learn that it is this and nothing less, we learn to appreciate the precedence that Luther gives to doctrine and the Word, which teaches this doctrine. It also helps us to understand why he refers to the Word and doctrine prior to any change that they may work in the church and in the lives of her members. Furthermore, the fact that Luther speaks of the hearts that must be cleansed by the reformed doctrine removes his Reformation so far from the mere disciplinary reforms of the Roman Catholics that there is no possibility of a comparison. Luther excludes every possibility of such a comparison by telling the papists: “In short, you and we know that you are living without God’s Word, while we have God’s Word. Therefore our most urgent request and most humble petition are that you will give God the honor, recognize your plight, repent and reform.”⁶⁸ By thus bringing repentance and reform into such close proximity with one another, Luther is enabling us to discern the etiology of his Reformation and to sound its depths.

The Real Issue of the Lutheran Reformation

It is of the greatest importance to note that Luther does not tell the papists that they are without God’s Word. “We confess,” he tells the Anabaptists, who rejected everything that the papists possessed, “that in the papacy the true Holy Scripture, true Baptism, true Sacrament of the Altar, true Ministry of the Keys for the forgiveness of sins, true Ministry of the Word, true Catechism, as, for instance, the Ten Commandments, the Apostolic Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer, exist.”⁶⁹ What he does say to the papists is that they are “living without God’s Word.” With this he means to say that they are not using the Word of God, and he implies that they do not know how to use it. This implication he is also putting into very telling words: “Under the papacy they could not differentiate between faith and Law. They had a Turkish faith... No one knew how the Gospel differed from the Law or the Law from the Gospel, because their faith only had reference to law.”⁷⁰ In his opening address at the First Disputation against the Antinomians he reminds the disputants: “You have often heard that there is no better way to propagate and preserve the true doctrine than to follow this method, namely, to separate the Christian doctrine into two parts, into Law and Gospel.”⁷¹ In calling attention to the separation of Law and Gospel Luther’s final aim is to safeguard the doctrine of justification by faith in contrast to the faith of the papists with its reference to the Law. Therefore he brings his Theses of the First Disputation against the Antinomians to a close with these two propositions: “38. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans follows this method of teaching: First of all he teaches that all men are sinners; then, that they must become righteous alone through Christ (Rom. 3:23, 28). 39. Luke in Acts also testifies to what Paul has taught both Jews and Gentiles that no one can be justified but through Christ alone (Acts 13:38).”⁷² Teaching this doctrine clearly and repeatedly, Luther accomplished the breakthrough for which the medieval church had been striving in vain. In teaching and preaching this doctrine Luther taught that Christ is not a second Moses. He is not a lawgiver. His legacy is not the Law but the Gospel.⁷³ Thus Luther brought Christ into his own again by teaching that Christ alone justifies one in view of one’s evil works and without one’s good works. When we thus think of Christ, we lay hold of the true Christ.⁷⁴ The fact that Christ in the Gospel gives laws, teaches and interprets the Law, does not belong to

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁶⁸ St. L. XVI, 982, 991f.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* XVII, 2190ff.

⁷⁰ WA 36,10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 39, 1, p. 361.

⁷² St. L. XX, 1631.

⁷³ Werner Elert, *Der christliche Glaube* (Hamburg: Im Furche Verlag, 1956), p. 21.

⁷⁴ St. L. IX, 619.

the article of justification, but to that of good works.⁷⁵ According to Luther there is but one justification and that is by faith. Therefore justification includes nothing else but hearing and believing in Jesus Christ, our Savior. And this hearing and believing is not the work of the flesh (*Natur*) but of grace.⁷⁶

Yet we never come to a full understanding of this doctrine until we are fully aware of the fact that justification is always the justification of the sinner. Luther goes far in telling us that one does not do full justice to justification unless one shows the extreme gravity of sin and makes it great;⁷⁷ in other words, that one does not learn to know the meaning of justification as a “healing of sin” until one has learned that the one who is to be justified is none other than the sinner, who is always the one who is to be freed from sin.⁷⁸ But even the justified one is never without sin. He is still a sinner and yet at the same time is regarded as one who is perfectly just through the forgiveness and mercy of God.⁷⁹ This is the *peccator simul et iustus*, already used by Augustine, but first fully understood and clearly taught by Luther. He interprets it for us in his commentary on Romans 12:1 by telling the Christian that he is “always in sin, in justification, in righteousness, i.e., always a sinner, always penitent, always righteous. For by repenting he becomes righteous from being unrighteous. Repentance is therefore the medium between unrighteousness and righteousness. And thus he is in sin as the *terminus a quo* and in righteousness as the *terminus ad quem*. If therefore we are always repenting, we are always sinners, and precisely thereby we are righteous and being made righteous; we are partly sinners, partly righteous, i.e. nothing but penitents.”⁸⁰ Therefore Luther repeats again and again that repentance must not cease, for the saints always sin. Consequently they are always in need of repentance. True repentance continues until one enters into everlasting life.⁸¹ Who is here not reminded of the first of Luther’s 95 Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” This doctrine is of such importance to Luther that he calls the one who falls away from it an idolater.⁸² And when this doctrine is lost, then nothing remains but error, hypocrisy, ungodliness, and idolatry.⁸³

With all emphasis on this doctrine, Luther does not want anyone to neglect the teaching of good works. In his exposition of John 15:17,18 he tells us that it is not sufficient that one often speaks of faith and Christ. One must also pay consideration to the fruits of faith. Where they do not become evident or where the very opposite of good works is seen, there Christ cannot be present; there can be nothing but a mere false name.⁸⁴ In the teaching of good works, however, the article of justification by faith, which spells justification and salvation in Christ, must remain unadulterated and pure.⁸⁵ Good works are not drawn in by Luther when he defines the essence of faith. Only as a fruit of faith and as a result of justification are they given due consideration. In his sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity he calls preaching Christ the most precious and certain fruit. From it others follow, so that our life is in real accord with and not contrary to such preaching.⁸⁶ And in his Commentary on Galatians he writes: “We hold with Paul that we are justified alone by faith in Christ, without the Law and works. But after one has been justified by faith and has Christ by faith and knows that He is his righteousness and life, he certainly will not be inactive, but will as a good tree bear good fruit.”⁸⁷ Luther was fond of using this comparison of a tree and its fruit. The tree produces the fruit and the fruit does not bring forth

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 490.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* XII, 208.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* XIX, 1455.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1453.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1452.

⁸⁰ Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, newly translated and edited by Wilhelm Pauck, D. Theol. (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 322f.. Cf. also Otto Clemen, *Luthers Werke*, Fuenfter Band, hrsgb, von Erich Vogelsang (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1963), Dritte Auflage, p. 281.

⁸¹ St. L. IX, 1587; XVIII, 108.

⁸² *Ibid.* IX, 519.

⁸³ *Ibid.* IX, 520.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* VIII, 567.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* XXII, 485.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* XIII a, 802.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* IX, 210.

the tree. “A good tree will always bear good fruit, not for its own benefits, but for the good of men and of beasts; these are its good works.”⁸⁸

It is needless to add more statements from Luther’s writings to prove that Luther was far from neglecting the teaching of good works. His writings abound in it.⁸⁹ It is, however, of importance to know that beginning with his first lecture on the Psalms in 1513 and closing with his last lecture on Genesis in 1545 Luther speaks of good works as fruits of faith, even if he does not always use this figure of speech. In his Psalm lecture he teaches: “Righteousness does not stem from works, but works from righteousness.”⁹⁰ And in his exposition of Genesis 50 he not only speaks of Joseph’s forgiving attitude towards his brothers as that of a “servant of God,” but dwells on repentance and faith and, as fruits of faith, on our warring against sin and speaks of thanking God for His boundless mercy that He has led us out of the bondage of Satan and has redeemed us, thus leading the troubled conscience back to the wonderful truth that it has “forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Christ.”⁹¹

Luther had the assurance that the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith did not only inflict the greatest injury on the papacy and destroy its power,⁹² but that this doctrine was the only one that maintained and defended the work of the Reformation,⁹³ the only one that gave comfort in all trials and persecutions.⁹⁴ It was the lodestar and the guiding principle in all his work of reform. One who studies the Scriptures without this article of faith will obscure and falsify them.⁹⁵ But when one has this pure and certain doctrine of God, one may initiate a real reformation and church order.⁹⁶

Charles V must have had a realization of this doctrine when he said to the Reformers: “Your theology is too difficult; it cannot be understood without much prayer!”⁹⁷ Forsyth then adds, “prayer and theology must interpenetrate to keep each other great, and wide, and mighty.” Luther knew this better than anyone else and said it in so many words: “Our Gospel would never have spread so far if our prayer had not been so strong.”⁹⁸

Reformation or Revolt or Revolution? After having heard Luther answer this question, it does not have to be answered by us any more. Luther himself has answered it for us not only by designating his work as a “Reformation”⁹⁹ and by speaking of it as “our Gospel” having been brought to light again,¹⁰⁰ but also by giving it a meaning which cannot be applied to any other reform movement. Therefore Luther shall have this final say: “Not from men have I received the Gospel, but from heaven alone, through my Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁰¹ And since this Gospel and his doctrine were one and the same, we want to hear him give us this final reminder, which, as he says, “cannot be sufficiently inculcated”: “The doctrine belongs to God, life is ours. If this doctrine perishes, everything will perish. If it flourishes, then all is well: sacrifice, cult, religion.”¹⁰²

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* XI, 19.

⁸⁹ In March of 1520 Luther wrote his well-known treatise on “Good Works.” Cf. StL X, 1298. This volume on page 1389 calls our attention to other treatises on good works by Luther. Ewald Plass in *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), also has a large number of classified references (4846–4924) under “Works,” Vol. III, pp. 1499–1521, where he calls our attention to M. Reu’s “valuable introduction” to Luther’s treatise on good works in *Works of Martin Luther* (I, 184–326). Cf. the footnote p. 1499.

⁹⁰ WA 4, 3: *Hoc est: Non ex operibus erit eius iustitia, sed opera eius erunt ex iustitia.*

⁹¹ St. L. II, 2080F.

⁹² *Ibid.* IX, 297.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 590f.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* XXI a, 1460.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* II, 910.

⁹⁷ P.T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1916, now reprinted), p.78.

⁹⁸ WA 45, 199: *Nostrum Evangelium wer so weit nicht gangen, nisi nostra oratio tam efficax.*

⁹⁹ St. L. XIV, 284.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* XII, 814.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* V, 1991.

¹⁰² WA 40, 1, p. 39: *Non potest satis inculcari, et si perit haec doctrina, universa perierunt. Si ista floret, omnia salva: sacrificium, cultus, religio.*