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The Continuing Significance of Luther's Prefaces to the New Testament

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When Martin Luther published his first translation of the New Testament into the German language in 1522, he did not publish the Biblical texts alone. He provided his readers with some help by prefaces to the whole New Testament and to the individual books. These prefaces were reprinted in all the following editions of the New Testament and of the whole Bible until the 17th century, but Luther took one of them out and changed the text of a few of them in later editions.¹ However, in the 17th century all these prefaces were removed from the printings of the Bible, and they have never been reinstated in the ordinary editions of Luther's German Bible.

It is highly characteristic that Luther thought it necessary to add these prefaces to his translation. He apparently felt the need of some guidance for the understanding of the New Testament by theologically uneducated people: "It would be right and proper for this book to go forth without any prefaces or extraneous names attached and simply have its own say under its own name. However, many unfounded (*wilde*) interpretations and prefaces have scattered the thought of Christians to a point where

no one any longer knows what is Gospel or Law, New Testament or Old. Necessity demands, therefore, that there should be a notice or preface, by which the ordinary man can be rescued from his former delusions, set on the right track, and taught what he is to look for in this book, so that he may not seek laws and commandments where he ought to be seeking the gospel and promises of God" (p. 357). And that is in fact true: the New Testament is a book of antiquity that not only requires translation but interpretation as well. And besides that, the New Testament is a book handed down in the context of ecclesiastical tradition; and as Luther had come to see, this ecclesiastical tradition had misinterpreted the New Testament at decisive points. So he was convinced that the reader ought to be given some instruction to free himself from this misleading tradition. It might be argued, of course, that this specific need, while existing in the time of Luther, does not exist anymore. Furthermore, it might be said that the adding of prefaces to a translation of the New Testament is questionable insofar as it starts from a certain understanding of the text and intends to suggest this understanding to the reader, who therefore will not be altogether free in his interpretation of the text. So it is undoubtedly true that it cannot be claimed that prefaces are a necessary part of any edition of a translation of the New Testament. At the same time it must be said that a church that

¹ The German text of these introductions is printed in the *Weimar Ausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger), cited as WA, *Deutsche Bibel*, Vols. 6 and 7. The English translation used in this article is taken from *Luther's Works*, Vol. 35, ed. by E. Th. Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 357 ff.

wants to stand in connection with Luther's reformation ought to make it a matter of course that Luther's prefaces or something similar to them might well be part of an edition of the New Testament.

In response to the question of the continuing significance of Luther's prefaces to the New Testament, we might mention only in passing that the knowledge of these prefaces is a great aid in the correct historical understanding of Luther himself. For in these prefaces Luther displayed in a clear way, without any learned pretensions and without the intention of theological discussions, his understanding of the individual writings of the New Testament, his theological interpretation of crucial passages and his critical reservations over against certain texts. This was at an early time in his career, when he had not yet had occasion to discuss such questions in detail. For Luther's attitude with regard to the complex character of the New Testament these prefaces are almost the only available source. It is therefore characteristic that Paul Althaus in his book *Die Theologie Luthers* (1963) must continually refer to these prefaces when he wants to describe Luther's position over against the New Testament and its canon. But there is no need to speak further of this aspect of the prefaces here.

My interest is rather directed to the question: What is the continuing significance of these prefaces for our understanding of the New Testament? With respect to this question it might be said, first of all, that as a Catholic theologian Luther had learned that the Bible is a textbook which ought to be used to illustrate the doctrine of the church. He was therefore accustomed to quoting the Bible in ap-

proximately the same way as the church fathers did. But in his personal struggle about his salvation he had been led to realize that the Bible, above all the New Testament, contains a living testimony that wants to address every man as a "you." Luther understood that this testimony wants to be heard as a message proclaiming to each "you" the good news of God's saving grace and in turn enabling each "you" to love his neighbor. "Thus this gospel of God or New Testament is a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, and thereby rescued all those who were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil" (p. 358). "The gospel, then, is nothing but the preaching about Christ, Son of God and of David, true God and man, who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us the sin, death, and hell of all men who believe in him. Thus the gospel can be either a brief or a lengthy message. . . . See to it, therefore, that you do not make a Moses out of Christ, or a book of laws and doctrines out of the gospel, as has been done heretofore and as certain prefaces put it, even those of St. Jerome" (p. 360). This discovery meant the reappraisal of the fact that in the collection of books called "New Testament" we hear men speaking by the power of God's Spirit and that therefore we ought to approach the New Testament with the intention of listening to the voices of these men who do not want to inform us about a doctrine we already know beforehand, but who want to convey to us a message that we either have not yet altogether heard or that ought to be reconfirmed and made

more fully intelligible to us. Therefore one cannot "believe in the New Testament," since there is no dogma proclaimed that one might accept or refuse to accept as a unit; one can only encounter the truth contained in the New Testament if he is ready to submit to the news told by the writers of the New Testament. There is no legitimate use of the New Testament which does not correspond to the manner it intends and expects itself to be read. The New Testament, in spite of its many interesting historical facts and details, can be listened to rightly only if there is involvement in the New Testament proclamation that Christ imparts life, if there is trust in Him as God's bringer of life. And one can hear the message of the New Testament as God's *Gospel* for mankind only *insofar* as the New Testament proclaims this message and we are ready to accept it as believers.

If Luther discovered afresh the character of the New Testament to proclaim the good news of God's love, which is to be announced to all mankind, this was possible only because Luther learned, by reading the New Testament with an open mind in a new way, what faith really is. Here lies the second point where the continuing significance of his prefaces is to be seen. It was primarily by reading the Epistle to the Romans that Luther arrived at that discovery, and therefore it is in the preface to this epistle that we find his most elaborate and telling description of the very essence of Christian faith. Luther here opposes the interpretation of faith as a human achievement that must be supplemented by works. Instead he describes faith under four aspects.

(1) "Faith is not the human notion

and dream that some people call faith. When they see that no improvement of life and no good works follow—although they can hear and say much about faith—they fall into the error of saying, 'Faith is not enough; one must do works in order to be righteous and be saved.' This is due to the fact that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own power create an idea in their heart which says, 'I believe'; they take this then to be a true faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either and no improvement follows. Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit" (p. 370). Here Luther has learned from Paul and John that one cannot have faith by allowing some message or dogma to be true and convincing oneself of the truth of what is said in the New Testament. Faith will truly never begin unless we have been *told*, by reading or hearing, the good news. At the same time God alone by His Spirit can open our minds so that we might be enabled to believe in spite of all that seems to hinder us from believing.

(2) This includes the realization that faith is trust in God's promises: "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith" (pp. 370 f.). That

means that the true believer cannot easily be shaken in his faith, created in him by God's Spirit, either by sad experiences or by intellectual doubts. For he does not consent to a general truth, but trusts in God's grace, which he sees working through Jesus Christ and which cannot be upset by contrary experiences or critical reasoning.

(3) Above all, Luther has learned from Paul that faith is an experience that grasps the whole man and induces him to live out of his faith: "Truly, if faith is there, the believer cannot hold back; he proves himself, breaks out into good works, confesses and teaches this gospel before the people, and stakes his life on it. Everything that he lives and does is directed to his neighbor's profit, in order to help him — not only to the attainment of this grace, but also in body, property, and honor. Seeing that Christ has done this for him, he thus follows Christ's example. . . . For where works and love do not break forth, there faith is not right, the gospel does not yet take hold, and Christ is not rightly known" (p. 361). "Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever" (p. 370). This means that the believer is seen in strict agreement with the Biblical view of man, that is, in his totality; and it is maintained that *either* man is captured as a whole by the good news proclaimed in the New Testament *or* he is not captured and thereby changed by faith at all. This description of faith was a real rediscovery by Luther and is still the undisputable and

demanding interpretation of Christian faith.

(4) As faith, seen in this genuinely New Testament way, comprises the whole life of the Christian before God, it is simultaneously righteousness as Luther correctly observed; that is, the reality of being made righteous before God (p. 371). Although there are several possible ways to translate "righteousness of God" as used by Paul, and although there are different possible explanations of this Pauline doctrine, there can be no doubt that faith is looked at by Paul and the other chief witnesses of the New Testament as the only way by which a man can encounter God in response to God's initiative and proclamation. This understanding of faith was a genuine rediscovery by Luther; and when New Testament scholarship has not always taken sufficient notice of this, it has gone astray. If there is in fact a certain development in the later New Testament writings with respect to the understanding of faith, the original impetus to criticize this development has been provided by Luther's insistence on the central importance of faith as proclaimed by Paul. Historical exegesis can only confirm Luther's explanation as the correct one.

Luther, however, was led by this rediscovery of the meaning of "Gospel" in the New Testament, as well as of the central importance of the Pauline understanding of faith, to the insight that this Gospel of God's saving action in Christ, as seen and accepted by faith, is not to be found proclaimed everywhere in the NT with the same clarity and that in some places it is not to be found proclaimed at all. Here lies the third continuing significance of his prefaces to the New Testament. This fun-

damental and totally new thesis is expressed in the section "Which are the true and noblest books of the New Testament," originally added to the general preface to the New Testament and then canceled by Luther himself in editions published after 1537. Luther here distinguishes three types of New Testament books. The first type is those books ". . . that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine" (p.362). Such books are: "St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle." Luther thinks that the Christian could well be sufficiently informed about "the Gospel" if he should know only these books. The second group comprises the synoptic gospels, the Pauline epistles (with the exception of Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians) and those books not especially mentioned in the first and third groups, namely, Acts, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John. Luther does not mention specific objections against these books. He only remarks about the synoptic gospels that they "write much about Christ's works and little about his preaching" (p.362). The third group consists of those four writings that Luther deliberately placed at the end of his translation without any manuscript evidence and did not number in his table of contents: Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation. In the prefaces to these four writings he presented very definite reasons which had induced him to doubt the apostolic and canonical character of these writings: Hebrews comes from the second generation and teaches, contrary to Paul, that there can be no repentance for sinners after baptism; James

contradicts Paul by the teaching of justification by works; it does not preach Christ and is later than Peter and Paul. Jude is dependent on 2 Peter and quotes apocryphal texts. Revelation is full of visions that do not belong to the task of an apostolic writer; furthermore, this writer recommends his book much too highly and does not show Christ clearly. Luther even went so far as to say that he "can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced" the Book of Revelation (p.398). Nevertheless, he expressly stressed that he did not want to impose his opinion on anybody (p.397, note 55, p.399) or that he wanted to take these four writings out of the New Testament. But he denied these books the right to be included among the true chief books.

Luther, to be sure, in this context is not quite consistent in his reasoning. On the one hand, he maintains that these writings cannot be regarded as full witnesses of the Gospel, because their teaching stands in opposition to central proclamations of the chief writings of the New Testament, especially Paul. That is, Luther launches a clear theological argument against these writings; and this argument deserves careful evaluation, for it is in full agreement with Luther's fundamental insight that no part of the New Testament can possibly be a valid witness to this Gospel, if it departs essentially from this Gospel. This fundamental insight led Luther to his famous saying that every book of the New Testament is apostolic that teaches Christ, quite independent of its authorship: "Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ

would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it." (P. 396)

On the other hand, Luther combined this appropriate theological argument with the purely historical observation that these four writings are not apostolic since their apostolic origin has been disputed in the ancient church: "Up to this point we have had [to do with] the true and certain chief books of the New Testament. The four which follow have from ancient times had a different reputation" (p. 394). Luther adds that these writings cannot be apostolic because no apostle in the sense of one of those named "apostles" in the New Testament (the Twelve, Paul, James) can have written them (cf. pp. 394, 396, 397 f., 398). Now this definition of the term "apostolic" is that of the second to the fourth centuries, which governed the final delimitation of the New Testament canon. Luther cannot be blamed for adhering to this traditional understanding. But it is, in spite of that, not in agreement with his theological reasoning, which allows the content of a New Testament writing but not the name of its author to decide its apostolic character. This erroneous reasoning handed down by Luther became a real nuisance in the 18th century when, starting from observations about the dubious "apostolic" genuineness of certain New Testament writings, the canonicity and inspiration of these writings were questioned.² This erroneous reasoning has not yet ended. But if Luther was wrong at this point, his observations about the different importance of certain books of the

New Testament or about the problematic character of other books in relation to the proclamation of the central message of the New Testament remain of continuing significance.

For Luther's theological rejection of certain books of the New Testament was not motivated and specified by any dogmatic or ecclesiastical reasoning, but rather by proper exegetical evidence. And here is the fourth point where we can see the continuing significance of his prefaces. We might look at his objections in some detail. The Epistle to the Hebrews cannot be written by Paul or any other apostle, according to Luther, because the author clearly confesses himself to be a man of the second generation (Heb. 2:3). And that is true without any doubt. Yet that argument has theological implication only as long as it is erroneously presupposed that the author of a canonical book of the New Testament must have been one of those men called apostles in the New Testament. The second argument of Luther with regard to Hebrews is, therefore, the decisive one: "Again, there is a hard knot in the fact that in chapters 6[:4-6] and 10[:26-27] it flatly denies and forbids to sinners any repentance after baptism; and in chapter 12[:17] it says that Esau sought repentance and did not find it. This is contrary to all the gospels and to St. Paul's epistles" (p. 394). Here Luther is right, without any doubt. But careful historical and theological research will show that, in spite of the theological deviations that Luther found in this letter, the main line of the message in Hebrews is a valid reinterpretation of the Christian proclamation in the time of the delay of the

² Cf. J. D. Michaelis as quoted by W. G. Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament: Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1958), pp. 82 ff.

parousia.³ So Luther's historical and theological observations with regard to Hebrews are in the main still valid.

The Epistle of James is considered by Luther to have been written long after Peter and Paul and therefore not apostolic. Luther substantiates this contention by the assumption that James quotes 1 Peter and Galatians (p.397). While this is questionable, Luther is right in dating James at the end of the New Testament age. But here, too, his theological reasoning is more important. On the one hand, Luther contends that the doctrine of the cooperation between faith and works in James contradicts Paul. "In the first place it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works [2:24]. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac [2:21]; though in Romans 4[:2-22] St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone, before he had offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15[:6]. . . . This fault, therefore, proves that this epistle is not the work of any apostle." (P. 396)

There can be no doubt that Paul and James appear to emphasize different aspects at this point, and here Luther's exegetical observation holds true even if it might be argued that the polemic of James against an idle faith is a necessary reminder for every Christian. Luther, on the other hand, contends that there is missing in James every mention of the specifically Christian message: "In the second place its purpose is to teach Christians, but in all

this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times; however, he teaches nothing about Him but only speaks of general faith in God. Now it is the office of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and resurrection and office of Christ, and to lay the foundation for faith in Him, as Christ Himself says in John 15[:27], 'You shall bear witness to Me.' All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate (*treiben*) Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ." (P. 396)

Even shortly before his death Luther uttered the suggestion that "a Jew might have written the letter."⁴ Now the modern hypothesis that James is originally a Jewish writing secondarily christianized by a few additions seems to me to be improbable.⁵ Yet Luther was right that this writing contains chiefly Jewish paraenesis and cannot by itself be taken as a valid witness of the Christian proclamation. A third observation of Luther in his preface might be mentioned only in passing since its implications are more of an exegetical than a theological kind. Luther observed that there are no inner connections in the epistle: "Besides, he throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man,

⁴ WA, Tischreden, Vol. 5, No. 5443; Clemen edition, Vol. 8, p. 303 (apparently not in English).

⁵ Cf. P. Feine-J. Behm-W. G. Kümmel, *Einführung in das Neue Testament*, 14th ed. (Heidelberg, 1965), p. 297. English translation, *Introduction to the New Testament*, by A. J. Mattill (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 288.

³ Cf. E. Graesser, "Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief," *Marburger Theologische Studien*, 2, 1965.

who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper" (p. 397). Today we can explain and confirm this observation better by pointing out that James is to be assigned to the context of Jewish and Hellenistic paraenetic writings.

With regard to Jude, Luther maintained that it cannot be apostolic because the writer himself points back to the apostles (v. 17), which proves without any doubt that this writer belongs to the second Christian generation. While Luther bolsters this contention by saying that Jude is dependent on 2 Peter, it is more likely that the dependence is the other way round. Besides that, Luther also refers to the non-canonical quotations in Jude and to the fact that Jude went to Persia and not to Greece, so he could not have written in Greek. The first contention, while true (vv. 9, 13 f.), does not have the importance given to it by Luther, for there was no strictly fixed canon of the Jewish scriptures in apostolic times. There is also no dependable tradition about Jude, the brother of Jesus, either in the New Testament or elsewhere, so the second contention has no importance either. Luther did not take notice of the understanding of faith as a fixed tradition in Jude (v. 3), a conception which is not in agreement with the main writings of the New Testament. Thus with regard to Jude, Luther's criticism is no longer tenable in its main points. But he was right in observing that this writing belongs to the later part of the New Testament.

With respect to Revelation, Luther protests that there are no visions in the reports about Jesus and in the writings of Peter and Paul, and he contends that Reve-

lation is, in this respect, in agreement with Jewish apocalypticism. "First and foremost, the apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear and plain words, as do Peter and Paul, and Christ in the gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images and visions. Moreover, there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so exclusively with visions and images. For myself, I think it approximates the Fourth Book of Esdras; I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it" (p. 398). Luther's strictures against the visionary character of the Apocalypse overlook the fact that there are some visionary elements in the synoptic tradition and Paul as well. Even if there are some very characteristic differences between Revelation and the Jewish apocalypses, it is correct that the literary type of apocalyptic writings has only a very small representation in the main part of the New Testament. And the theological consequences drawn by Luther from his observation that it is the task of "the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and His deeds" is pertinent with regard to the still puzzling meaning of this apocalypse. Besides that, Luther protests that the author seems "to be going much too far when he commends his own book so highly" (Rev. 22:18 f.; p. 398) and demands its acceptance in a totally unaltered form, in spite of the fact that so much is obscure in the book and "Christ is neither taught nor known in it" (p. 399). Luther is right in stating that this kind of self-assertion is not found anywhere else in the New Testament. Finally, he is also right in noting that the message of God's

deeds in Jesus Christ is contained in this book only in a very fragmentary way.

So, even if we cannot agree at every point with the exegetical and historical reasonings of Luther on these four writings, and even if we are compelled to raise critical questions at some other points where Luther did not see any problems (cf. the institutionalism of the Pastoral Epistles or the Hellenistic idea of salvation in 2 Peter), and finally, even if we should direct theological criticism at certain of the New Testament writings rather than just to these four books as a whole, the fact remains that Luther in his prefaces quite correctly put his finger on the truth of the matter that we do not hear the Gospel in the New Testament everywhere with the same clarity and the same purity.

It is here that we see the fifth way in which there is a continuing significance to these prefaces. Luther was the first to recognize and to affirm with congenial pungency that there are not only superficial and negligible differences between the proclamation of individual writings of the New Testament but also differences that cannot be ironed out and that therefore it is necessary to acknowledge that the whole New Testament does not lie on the same level. There are in the New Testament texts which might easily be misinterpreted and which by themselves do not proclaim the Gospel in a sufficient or uncontaminated way. There are also

books in the New Testament that deviate considerably from the original and central message.⁶

The most important thing that we can learn from Luther's prefaces is that we must read the New Testament in a critical way if we do not simply want to repeat an antique document but if we indeed want to learn to proclaim its central and abiding message in a truly existential and compelling manner. There will surely be disagreements in finding out and defining this central message, and there will be differences in evaluating the obvious differences. But we must learn from Luther's prefaces that we ought to be eager to learn where the *central* message of the New Testament is to be found, for "to teach Christ, this is the thing an apostle is bound above all else to do; as Christ says in Acts 1:8, 'You shall be my witnesses.' Therefore I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely." (P. 399)

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⁶ The recent identification of an Early Catholic stratum of tradition inside of the New Testament belongs in this context too. Cf., e. g., Hans Küng, "Early Catholicism in the New Testament as a Problem in Controversial Theology," in *The Council in Action* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 159—195, and the literature quoted in *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze*, ed. J. Blinzler et. al., *Festschrift für Prof. Josef Schmid Zum 70. Geburtstag* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1963), pp. 252 ff.