

# PREFACE TO THE WITTENBERG EDITION OF LUTHER'S GERMAN WRITINGS

## *Dr. Martin Luther's Preface*

I would have been quite content to see my books, one and all, remain in obscurity and go by the board. Among other reasons, I shudder to think of the example I am giving, for I am well aware how little the church has been profited since they have begun to collect many books and large libraries, in addition to and besides the Holy Scriptures, and especially since they have stored up, without discrimination, all sorts of writings by the church fathers, the councils, and teachers. Through this practice not only is precious time lost, which could be used for studying the Scriptures, but in the end the pure knowledge of the divine Word is also lost, so that the Bible lies forgotten in the dust under the bench (as happened to the book of Deuteronomy, in the time of the kings of Judah<sup>1</sup>)

Although it has been profitable and necessary that the writings of some church fathers and councils have remained, as witnesses and histories, nevertheless I think, "*Est modus in rebus*,"<sup>2</sup> and we need not regret that the books of many fathers and councils have, by God's grace, disappeared. If they had all remained in existence, no room would be left for anything but books; and yet all of them together would not have improved on what one finds in the Holy Scriptures.

It was also our intention and hope, when we ourselves began to translate the Bible into German,<sup>3</sup> that there should be less writing, and instead more studying and reading of the Scriptures. For all other writing is to lead the way into and point toward the Scriptures, as John the Baptist did toward Christ, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" [John 3:30], in order that each person may drink of the fresh spring himself, as all those fathers who wanted to accomplish something good had to do.

Neither councils, fathers, nor we, in spite of the greatest and best success possible, will do as well as the Holy Scriptures, that is, as well as God himself has done. (We must, of course, also have the Holy Spirit, faith, godly speech, and works, if we are to be saved.) Therefore it behooves us to let the prophets and apostles stand at the professor's lectern, while we, down below at their feet, listen to what they say. It is not they who must hear what we say.

I cannot, however, prevent them from wanting to collect and publish my works through the press (small honor to me), although it is not my will. I have no choice but to let them risk the labor and the expense of this project. My consolation is that, in time, my books will lie forgotten in the dust anyhow, especially if I (by God's grace) have written anything good. *Non ere melior Patribus meis*.<sup>4</sup> He who comes second should indeed be the first one forgotten. Inasmuch as they

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. II Kings 22:8. In Luther's German Bible, Deuteronomy is referred to as "the fifth book of Moses."

<sup>2</sup> "There is a reason for the way things happen." Horace *Satires* I, 1, 106.

<sup>3</sup> Luther began to translate the Bible into German during his confinement to the Wartburg. In a letter to Johann Lang, December 18, 1521, he announced his intention to translate the New Testament into German. *WA*, Br 2, 413. This letter contains the first reference to Luther's intention to translate the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> I Kings 19:4. "I am no better than my fathers."

have been capable of leaving the Bible itself lying under the bench, and have also forgotten the fathers and the councils—the better ones all the faster—accordingly there is a good hope, once the overzealousness of this time has abated, that my books also will not last long. There is especially good hope of this, since it has begun to rain and snow books and teachers, many of which already lie there forgotten and moldering. Even their names are not remembered any more, despite their confident hope that they would eternally be on sale in the market and rule churches.

Very well, so let the undertaking proceed in the name of God, except that I make the friendly request of anyone who wishes to have my books at this time, not to let them on any account hinder him from studying the Scriptures themselves. Let him put them to use as I put the excrees and excretals<sup>5</sup> of the pope to use, and the books of the sophists. That is, if I occasionally wish to see what they have done, or if I wish to ponder the historical facts of the time, I use them. But I do not study in them or act in perfect accord with what they deemed good. I do not treat the books of the fathers and the councils much differently.

Herein I follow the example of St. Augustine,<sup>6</sup> who was, among other things, the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone, and independent of the books of all the fathers and saints. On account of that he got into a fierce fight with St. Jerome, who reproached him by pointing to the books of his forefathers; but he did not turn to them. And if the example of St. Augustine had been followed, the pope would not have become Antichrist, and that countless mass of books, which is like a crawling swarm of vermin, would not have found its way into the church, and the Bible would have remained on the pulpit.

Moreover, I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils, even as I (in God) dare to presume and boast, without arrogance and lying, that in the matter of writing books I do not stand much behind some of the fathers. Of my life I can by no means make the same boast. This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*.<sup>7</sup>

Firstly, you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone. Therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding. With them you will not attain eternal life, but, on the contrary, your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell. But kneel down in your little room [Matt. 6:6] and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.

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<sup>5</sup>That is, “decrees and decretals.” The translator has attempted to render Luther’s pun “*Drecket und Drecketal*” in English.

<sup>6</sup>*Epistola* 82. Migne 33, 277.

<sup>7</sup>Prayer, meditation, *Anfechtung*.

Thus you see how David keeps praying in the above-mentioned Psalm, “Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me,”<sup>8</sup> and many more words like these. Although he well knew and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason, as if they were *Markolf*<sup>9</sup> or Aesop’s Fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed.

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually<sup>10</sup> repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you then have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is haft ripe.

Thus you see in this same Psalm how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God’s Word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external<sup>11</sup> Word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly<sup>12</sup> was not given in vain.

Thirdly, there is *tentatio, Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.

Thus you see how David, in the Psalm mentioned, complains so often about all kinds of enemies, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God’s Word (as has been said) in all manner of ways. For as soon as God’s Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults<sup>13</sup> will teach you to seek and love God’s Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil’s raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so

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<sup>8</sup> Ps. 119:26 *et al.*

<sup>9</sup> The very popular medieval legend of Solomon and Markolf was treated in a verse epic, chapbooks, dialogues, and farces. The figure of Markolf, a sly and unprincipled rogue, was known in Germany as early as the tenth century.

<sup>10</sup> *Eusserlich*.

<sup>11</sup> *Eusserlich*.

<sup>12</sup> *Eusserlich*. The correspondence Luther intends to show between actual (*eusserlich*) study of the Bible in its outward (*eusserlich*) form and the external (*eusserlich*) Word as a medium of God’s address cannot be rendered in idiomatic English by translating *eusserlich* with one word.

<sup>13</sup> *Anfechtungen*.

much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. And I heartily grant them what they have won in return for making this of me, honor, victory, and triumph, for that's the way they wanted it.

There now, with that you have David's rules. If you study hard in accord with his example, then you will also sing and boast with him in the Psalm, "The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" [Ps. 119:72]. Also, "Thy commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts," etc. [Ps. 119:98–100]. And it will be your experience that the books of the fathers will taste stale and putrid to you in comparison. You will not only despise the books written by adversaries, but the longer you write and teach the less you will be pleased with yourself. When you have reached this point, then do not be afraid to hope that you have begun to become a real theologian, who can teach not only the young and imperfect Christians, but also the maturing and perfect ones. For indeed, Christ's church has all kinds of Christians in it who are young, old, weak, sick, healthy, strong, energetic, lazy, simple, wise, etc.

If, however, you feel and are inclined to think you have made it, flattering yourself with your own little books, teaching, or writing, because you have done it beautifully and preached excellently; if you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears. Then do not spare any expense! Decorate them with golden bells, so that people will be able to hear you wherever you go, point their fingers at you, and say, "See, See! There goes that clever beast, who can write such exquisite books and preach so remarkably well." That very moment you will be blessed and blessed beyond measure in the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in that heaven where hellfire is ready for the devil and his angels. To sum up: Let us be proud and seek honor in the places where we can. But in this book the honor is God's alone, as it is said, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" [I Pet. 5:5]; to whom be glory, world without end, Amen.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The last two sentences are in Latin in the original text.