

Chapter 2

LUTHER'S FAITH

Wilhelm Pauck

IN HIS SERMON on the occasion of Luther's burial on February 22, 1546, Bugenhagen characterized the reformer, his longtime friend and colleague, with the following words: "... he was without doubt the angel of which the Apocalypse speaks in Chapter XIV: 'And I saw an angel flying through the midst of heaven, who had an eternal gospel to preach,' ... the angel who says: 'Fear God, and give glory to him!' These are the two articles of the teaching of Martin Luther, the law and the gospel, by which the whole Scripture is opened and Christ made known as our righteousness and eternal life."¹

Luther—an angel of God! Such a description suggests that his contemporaries understood his person and work in a religious sense.

I

Luther himself thought of himself and of his work in the same way. He did not wish to be called a prophet (only once² did he speak of himself as "the prophet of the Germans"), but he had the sense of a *divine mission*. In opposition to the defenders of the old faith who called him a heretic, he thought of himself as an *ecclesiasticus* [churchman] by the grace of God.³ God had called him, he felt, to use his office of "Doctor of the Holy Scripture" for the reformation of the church according to the gospel. So he wrote: "I have received my doctrine by the grace of God from heaven, and, what is more, I have kept it in the presence of one who can do more with his little finger than a thousand popes, kings, princes, and *doctores* could do."⁴ In the same spirit, he once described his mission in the following Pauline way: "If I should want to boast, I should glory in God that I am one of the apostles and evangelists in German lands, even though the devil and all his bishops and tyrants do not want me to be such; for I know that by the grace of God I have taught and still teach faith and truth."⁵ Such high claims he justified with the certainty that he was speaking "Christ's word" and not his own. Therefore, he did not hesitate to conclude: "So my mouth must be his whose words it speaks."

Because he knew himself to be an instrument of God and because he felt "more acted upon than acting,"⁶ he argued that the whole cause of the Reformation could not be measured by human norms. When in his old age he looked back upon the beginnings of the Reformation and contemplated "the very great, heavy care and trouble" which the work of the Reformation had cost him, he exclaimed: "Had I known all in advance, God would have been put to great trouble to bring me to it."⁷ Remembering the days of the Diet of Worms, he pondered: "Truly God can drive one mad; I do not know whether now I could be so daring."⁸ However, in the midst of the crisis of his trial, he had written: "The die was cast; and so I did not want to do anything else than what I did. I began to put all my trust upon the Spirit who does not carry on a lazy business."⁹ Thus he explained that all that took place at the height of the Reformation occurred, not because he had planned it so, but by "divine counsel."¹⁰

This feeling of being divinely led he expressed best in the following characteristic words: "God has led me on as if I were a horse and he put blinkers on me that I could not see who came running up upon me. . . . A good deed rarely issues from planning wisdom and cleverness; it must all happen in the vagaries of ignorance."¹¹

These descriptions of the feeling of being called to a work that he had not chosen for himself are all the more impressive because Luther did not derive any pretensions of personal authority from his sense of mission. He did not wish his own special gifts and abilities to be regarded as extraordinary or authoritative. He resented it that his opponents called his teaching "Lutheran," and he got no satisfaction from the fact that his followers called themselves by his name. "Who is this Luther?" he wrote. "My teaching is not my own, and I have not been crucified for the sake of anyone. . . . Why should it happen to me, miserable, stinking bag of worms that I am, that the children of Christ should be called by my insignificant name? . . . I am and will be nobody's master. With the one church I have in common the teaching of Christ who alone is our master."¹²

When, on one occasion, he wrote: "So say I, Dr. Martin Luther, the unworthy evangelist of our Lord Jesus,"¹³ he desired to appeal to the authority of Christ, who alone, according to his opinion, should be heard as a prophet.¹⁴ But, at the same time, he wished to be taken seriously in his judgment of himself as an unworthy servant of Christ. He dared to appeal with certainty to God's word, but he also confessed frankly that Christian obedience was a daily task for him and the cause of never-ending efforts. That is why he did not want to justify his right to speak in the name of God by his own Christian attainments. "Let everyone," he wrote, "be responsible for his own feelings. As for me, I regard myself as a Christian. Nevertheless, I know how difficult it has been for me, and still is, to apprehend and to keep this cornerstone [Christ]. But they certainly do me wrong [who call me a Lutheran], for—God strengthen me!—I am a small, poor Lutheran."¹⁵

No one understands Luther who does not pay attention to the two aspects of his sense of calling: on the one hand, the assertion of being held and supported by God, and, on the other, the rejection of any personal worth and authority.

II

His *faith* corresponded wholly to the spirit which guided him in his work.

His deepest convictions were determined by his conception of God. God, as he saw him, was the restlessly working, driving power in all that is, the ever-active, creative livingness which lets no creature stand still. God is at work everywhere and in all, also in the godless, even in the devil.¹⁶ The whole universe is his "masquerade in which he hides himself while he rules the world so strangely by making a hubbub."¹⁷ The almighty power of God is nowhere and yet everywhere. Because it moves everything, it is immanent in all; but because it creates everything, it transcends all.

It must be present at all places, even in the smallest leaf of a flower. The reason is this: "It is God who creates, works, and preserves all things by his almighty power and by his right hand, as we confess in the creed. He sends out no delegates or angels when he creates and preserves, but everything is the working of his own divine power. But if he is the creator and preserver, he himself must be present, creating and preserving his creature in its most inward and most outward being. That is why he himself is in the very inwardness and in the very outwardness of every creature, from end to end, below and above it, before and behind it. Nothing can be more present and be more really within all creatures than God himself."¹⁸

"God is smaller than anything small, bigger than anything big, shorter than anything short, longer than anything long, broader than anything broad, slimmer than anything slim, and so on; he is an inexpressible being, above and beyond all that one can name or think."¹⁹

This all-comprehending, all-penetrating creativity is the fountain and spring of life and of all good. It is closer to every one of us than any of us are to each other.²⁰ As it is God's nature to create all from nothing, so he is able "to help the forsaken ones, to justify sinners, to resurrect the dead, and to save the damned."²¹

He is the life of every being. He determines everything. He is present everywhere. But he is impenetrable and inscrutable. In such a way Luther spoke of God—most articulately in his book against

Erasmus, *Of the Bondage of the Will*, and in his treatises on the Lord's Supper, called forth by his controversy with Zwingli. There he disclosed his profoundest thoughts on the creative power by which he felt himself driven and overcome. But he had still more to say.

It makes a difference whether you say that God is present or whether you say that he is present for you. But he is there for you, when he adds his word [to his presence] and binds himself, saying: Here you shall find me. When you have the word, you can grasp him and have him and say: Now I have thee, as thou sayest. So it is with the right hand of God; it is everywhere, as no one can deny; but it is also nowhere; therefore you cannot apprehend it anywhere unless it binds and confines itself for your benefit to one place. This happens when it moves and dwells in the humanity of Christ. There you will most certainly find it. Otherwise you must run through all creation from end to end, groping and fumbling about, here and there, without finding it. Although it is really there—it is not there for you.²²

In Christ, the mysterious, inscrutable Lord of everything has made himself accessible. In him he is comprehensible, because he has revealed himself in him without abandoning his mystery. He is hidden in the humbleness of the child in the manger. In the cross he is not directly visible as the victor over hell, death, and the devil. He is abscondite in the message of Christ about the mercy that seeks the sinner. And yet—"Whosoever does not apprehend this man born of Mary, simply cannot apprehend God; even if they should say that they believe in God, creator of heaven and earth, they believe really only in the idol of their heart, for outside of Christ there is no true God."²³ In Christ, men have the "mirror of God's paternal heart." In him, God is a God for them, their God. In Christ, he is really the ever-renewing fountain of all good.

But men do not want to accept this teaching of God, for, so Luther argued, "Man by nature does not want God to be God; he would much rather that he himself were God and that God were not God."²⁴ Because of his self-sufficiency and selfishness, he is God's enemy. Though, when relying upon himself, he is driven from presumptuous security to despair in himself without being able to extricate himself from this dilemma, he refuses to acknowl-

edge that he is a created being responsible to his creator. This unfaith is his sin. It is incomprehensible to him that he is a creature of God (this is proved by the fact that when he engages in worship, he tends to fashion an idol for himself); but it is utterly unfathomable for him that God should be a Father of sinners. His moral sense rebels against such a thought. If there is a God at all, so he thinks, God is the Lord of the righteous, in whose sight only the worthy ones are acceptable.

Such is man's natural religiousness, according to Luther's opinion. Faith is its opposite. It is the acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and the belief in his accessibility in Christ and his word. Faith meant to Luther simply to have God. "Having God," he wrote in the *Larger Catechism*, "is nothing else than heartily to believe and trust in him; . . . this trusting and believing makes both, God and idol; for these two belong together, faith and God."²⁵

This faith, Luther taught, must be seen as the personal act of the believer ("If you believe, you have,"²⁶ he repeated unceasingly), but he knew also that it is the work of the Holy Spirit and, as such, a gift of God. Faith can therefore be an event only if the Christian becomes a new person. It is Christ who forms this new person. "I do not live in my own person, but Christ lives within me. To be sure, I live as a person, but not in myself or for my own person."²⁷ The person of the believer transcends itself, so to speak.²⁸ This was the experience of Luther's prophetic religion.

He tried to interpret this experience of faith in many ways, for all his thinking circled around it. "Faith," so he defined, "is the knowledge of things not seen; it is directed to things that are not apparent. In order that faith may occur, it is therefore necessary that all that is believed be hidden."²⁹

Faith is a miracle that cannot be understood according to ordinary criteria. Particularly when one has found God merciful, such faith appears as a blindly trusting audacity. "For this is the nature of faith, that it dares trust in God's grace. . . . Faith does not require information, knowledge, or security, but a free surrender and joyful daring upon an unfelt, untried, unknown goodness."³⁰ From here, Luther came to the remarkable conclusion that all certainty must be founded not upon human experience but upon divine revelation. "Our theology is certain," he said, "because it places us

outside of ourselves; I do not need to rely upon my conscience, my senses, and my doing, but I rely upon the divine promise and truth which never deceive."³¹

And yet—faith must be a personal experience in order to be valid. A Christian must have faith by virtue of a personal deed and decision. "You yourself must decide; your neck is at stake. Therefore, unless God says to your own heart: This is God's word, you cannot comprehend it. . . . If you do not feel it, you do not have faith, but the word merely hangs in your ears and floats on your tongue as foam lies on the waters."³²

III

In what a terrific tension Luther held his faith! On the one hand, he viewed it with radical seriousness as the work and gift of God who acts upon man from without. On the other hand, he experienced it as a concrete personal decision and commitment. In contemplating this tension, one understands why religion was a perpetual crisis and an unceasing battle for Luther.

This is the meaning of the *tentationes*, the agonies of faith, into which he was drawn again and again.³³ He felt that the merciful God was withdrawing from him. He was overcome by doubts concerning his work, when he questioned whether he should have dared to upset age-old customs and traditions in the church. He felt that, in the light of the human need for security, the ambiguity of divine grace was unbearable. He then sensed the nearness of God, not as love and consolation, but as wrath and damnation. When such thoughts beset him, he felt that he was being attacked by the devil and thrown into a battle for his faith. He attributed such agonies to his psychological propensity to melancholy, but he knew also that he did not understand their true significance by such a psychological interpretation. Indeed, he held these agonies of faith to be unavoidable because he was aware that, from the viewpoint of ordinary human experience, faith was an impossibility.

He overcame these *Anfechtungen* (assaults), as he called them in his own tongue, by appealing to Christ and by relying upon the

First Commandment: I am the Lord, thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me. When he was free again and restored in the faith, he knew more definitely than ever before that the inborn and acquired human certainties and safeguards are nothing ultimately sure and that man deceives himself when he pretends to possess certainty in himself. Thus, these agonies appeared to him as a means by which the truth of faith, as a truth from beyond man's reach, was confirmed. A Christian, so he concluded, must be continually in the process of becoming. As he is a forgiven sinner who, despite being forgiven, again and again falls into the sin of unfaith, so he is thrown into agonies of faith until the end of his days, in order that he might test his faith by being compelled to fight for it. So Luther could say of himself: "I did not learn my theology all at once; I have had to brood and ponder over it more and more deeply; my *tentationes* have brought me to it, for one learns only by experience."³⁴

He once said that the greatest of these *tentationes* was to know of none at all,³⁵ for such an attitude appeared to him the height of self-deception. He believed it to be an incontestable fact that every man has a bad conscience in spite of all the masks of self-confidence he wears, for at the bottom of his heart he knows himself to be in the wrong before God. Even though he rebels against the gospel of the forgiveness of God, because faith in this gospel involves the surrender of his self and the undoing of his self-determination, he will nevertheless experience faith as a liberation not only from himself but, particularly, from his bad conscience.

Luther best described the human situation which leads to the agony of faith in the following words. They describe the fright and terror by which one can be seized at the sound of a rustling leaf, and they symbolize all the insecurities of pride from which one can be liberated by faith alone.

So it can happen that conscience feels all misfortune that befalls us as the wrath of God, and that even a mere rustling leaf seems to be God's wrath. . . . There is nothing more worthless and more despised than a dry leaf that lies on the ground; worms crawl over it; it cannot ward off even the smallest speck of dust. . . . But there comes a time when its rustling will scare man and horse, spike and

armor, kings and princes, the power of a whole army, and even such spiteful and angry tyrants as cannot be scared either by the fear of hell or by God's wrath and judgment, but only become still prouder and more hardened by such threats. Aren't we fine fellows? We do not fear God's anger but stand stiffly unmoved by it. But we can be scared and frightened by the anger of an impotent dry leaf, and the rustling of such a leaf can make the world too narrow for us and become a wrathful God to us.³⁶

IV

From this analysis of Luther's faith we can conclude that his interpretation of the Christian religion corresponded exactly to his conception of the meaning of his mission in the world. In his faith he related himself only to God in Christ; he did not base it upon the content of his experiences. With respect to his work, he relied upon the almighty Lord of history and not upon his own qualities of leadership, of which he did not think much anyway. In his faith as well as in his work as a reformer, he really believed himself "more acted upon than acting." This way of thinking has nothing whatsoever to do with quietism, of which Luther has often been accused. Rather, it is "prophetic"—through and through. This can be proved by the fact that Luther felt himself called to a most personal, active participation in the work which, as he believed, God performed in the world through him. It was God himself, the ever-active creative power, who, by means of the Reformation, made room in the world for his word, and Luther was drawn into this divine work with his whole person. He felt that God had overpowered him; he did not think that he had thereby been drawn into a heteronomous servitude. He was moved, rather, to commit himself to him who had overpowered him and to co-operate with him. Such was Luther's own conception of his faith. His principles of action were: Do not rely on men, but trust in God. Do not fear men, but fear God. That is why Luther acted on the historical scene without special consideration of political and historical consequences. Whosoever wants "to help the cause

of the gospel," he wrote in a letter to Wolfgang Capito,⁸⁷ must preach it without fear and regard of men, in order that "the free, pure and plain truth" may assert itself by itself alone.

In explaining the beginnings and the course of the Reformation to the people of Wittenberg after his return from his exile in Wartburg castle, he said: "All I have done is to further, preach, and teach God's word; otherwise I have done nothing. So it came about that while I slept or while I had a glass of beer with my friend Philip [Melanchthon] and with Amsdorf, the papacy was so weakened as it never was before by the action of any prince or emperor. I have done nothing; the word has done and accomplished everything. . . . I let the word do its work."⁸⁸

These words sound quietistic and politically naïve, but they were spoken by one who, in the name of God, changed the course of history. What Luther meant to express was that his decisions and actions were motivated only by his concern for the word of God, and not by political calculations and predictions. By, and on account of, his faith, he became a reformer. His work, the Reformation, will live as long as this faith finds a response in the hearts of men.

Chapter 3

LUTHER'S CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH

I

THE REFORMATION produced new types of churches. Their character was determined by many factors, among which the religious factor was only one. But the impetus that brought them into being was Luther's conception of the church.

The times had long been ripe for a change. Medieval ideas and institutions were on the point of exhaustion. Forces of a new cultural activity, brought to the fore by the leaders of the Renaissance and of Humanism, threatened to replace them. They manifested themselves in the awakening of human, autonomous initiative, in nationalism, in capitalism, and in the Great Discoveries. In the course of its development, the Reformation entered into a connection with these new cultural trends and thus became a factor in