

Professor Stalker

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Celebrations of 1917

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By PROFESSOR STALKER M.A., D.D.



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THE LUTHER CELEBRATIONS OF 1917

BY PROFESSOR STALKER, M.A., D.D.

THE various Presbyterian bodies, at their annual Synods or General Assemblies, in the early part of this year, agreed to recommend to their ministers and Christian people the commemoration at the end of October of the great events in Luther's life, and, as the date is now drawing near and the situation is difficult and delicate, a few words may not be out of place.

It chanced that the present writer in 1883 formed one of a delegation from several of the Churches in Great Britain which went to Wittenberg to participate in the celebration of the Reformer's birth. It proved to be an enjoyable and memorable occasion. Many thousands were present, drawn partly from the town and partly from north, south, east and west; and the enthusiasm was unbounded, displaying itself at every oppor-

tunity in the spontaneous singing of Luther's hymn, "A safe stronghold our God is still." The Imperial Court was represented by the Crown Prince Frederick, father of the present Kaiser—a man of singularly noble presence, every inch a king—and he conversed long and graciously in English with the representatives from the British Isles. The greatest orators of the country were there, including such well-known names as Köstlin, Beyschlag and Kögel. But the favourite was the Berlin garrison-preacher Frommel, who experienced that day a rare triumph; for, having to return to town in the evening, he glanced up at the steeple, to see the time, after he had spoken about an hour in the open air; but ten thousand voices instantly shouted to him from every part of the square, "Oh, do not look up!" Perhaps more interesting, however, was the Court-preacher Stöcker, then at the zenith of his fame. In appearance he bore not a little resemblance to Luther himself; and, when he said that Germany was a steed which few could ride, but that Luther knew the way, all felt that he knew the way too; for his seat at the moment seemed one of the most secure, and none then dreamed of his

being hurled from it by the caprice of an imperial master, the present Kaiser. As 1917 drew near it was certain that there would be many competitors in this country for the honour and pleasure of renewing the homage rendered to Germany's great Reformer; and, till the fatal day in August, 1914, arrived, it would have been denied by nearly all lovers of Germany in this country that war between the two countries could possibly take place.

Of course there can at present be no sending of delegates from this side, and these would not be welcomed on the other; yet the Churches have recommended that the celebration should not be passed by in silence; and, though the commemoration must be shorn of its glory, it may be sincere. Luther belongs to history, and his contribution to the progress of the world is an accomplished fact, which cannot be undone. As we should consider it evidence of a petty spirit and limited intelligence if any Germans were induced by the War to blaspheme such names of ours as Shakespeare or Lord Bacon, Sir Isaac Newton or Charles Darwin, so it would be unworthy of us to belittle in any

way such names of theirs as Kant, Goethe and Beethoven, that have long ago secured their niche in the temple of fame, or to refuse to rejoice with those who are remembering them.

Luther was a hero, if ever there was one. The incident of his life chosen for commemoration by the Germans themselves in 1817, when the celebration made so deep a mark on the national mind that it is constantly mentioned in books on Church History as among the causes of the revival of religion which formed a feature of the first half of the last century, was the nailing-up of the Theses on Indulgences on the door of the Castle-church at Wittenberg, and it is to the same event that the present commemoration looks. It was a great event, from which the Reformation is in Germany at least usually dated; but there were other incidents, some of which might appeal even more to the general mind, especially in countries outside of Germany. The burning of the Pope's bull outside the Elster Gate at Wittenberg was one of these, which illustrated not a few aspects of Luther's character, and especially the humour which

never deserted him even in the most tragic circumstances: the Pope might burn him, but he would take the first turn at burning, and he hurled not only the bull but the decretals—the very embodiment of papal tyranny—into the flames. But unquestionably the most significant incident of all was his appearance at the Diet of Worms, when, in the presence of the principalities and powers of both Church and State, he took his stand on conscience and the Word of God, throwing off the authority of popes and councils. This has been called by Carlyle the grandest scene of modern history, and it exhibited to perfection both the great qualities of the man and the greatness of the cause of which he was the champion. Everything of supreme importance in the centuries since was implicit in that hour, and by those to whom October 31, 1917, may prove to be an impracticable date, April 18, 1921, the anniversary of this scene, may well be looked forward to as a substitute.

Many love to associate the hero especially with the Castle of the Wartburg, in which he was detained for a year after the Diet of Worms by his own prince, Frederick the

Wise, in quasi-imprisonment, but really with the intention of protecting him from the machinations of his enemies and restoring his mind to health after the excessive excitement of the preceding years. There his leisure was occupied with the translation of the Bible into the language of his native land, and a masterpiece was produced, not inferior in its influence on the German language and literature to that exercised by King James' Version on the English tongue. "Luther," remarks the poet Heine, "created the German language. This he did by his translation of the Bible. The divine Author of this Book Himself chose him to be its translator and gave him the marvellous power to translate from a dead language, which was already buried, into a living one, which was not yet born. How Luther came to the language into which he translated the Bible I cannot conceive to this day. This old Book is a perennial fountain for the renewal of our native tongue." The Wartburg looks out over an incomparable panorama of mountain and pine in the Forest of Thuringia; and it is a happy circumstance for Luther's fame that, when his countrymen are on pilgrimage to this shrine, they are at

the same time turning their steps to one of the most lovely regions in the Fatherland.

Of such felicities there are not a few in his life. Such is his birth in an inn, where his parents were resting for the night, recalling that other scene where the Mother bore her Child in a stable and laid it in a manger. In his boyhood there is the friendship of Ursula Cotta, the motherly dame at Eisenach, who introduced him to a more gentle existence than that of a miner's home. It was by his singing that he won her attention; and all his life music was to him a consolation and a priceless gift of God. "After working his mind weary," says Heine, "with his dogmatic distinctions during the day, he took his flute in the evening, looked up to the stars, and melted into melody and devotion. The same man who could scold like a fishwife could be as soft as a tender virgin. He was at times wild as the storm which uproots the oak, and again as gentle as the zephyr which kisses the violets. He was full of the most awful fear of God, full of consecration to the Holy Spirit; and yet he knew very well the glories of the earth and could fully appreciate them.

He was a complete man—I might say, an absolute man—in whom spirit and matter were not separated.”

As the years proceeded his troubles were many and his burdens crushing. Some of these came from the perils to which his life and his cause were exposed to his dying day. From these he never flinched, bearing them with faith and prayer. But those by which he was most tormented were the fancies and vagaries of adherents of his own who did not know where to stop. When a hundred things were altering, why should not the hundred-and-first also be altered, to suit the taste and fancy of this scholar or that prince? At one point he himself was supposed by some of his best friends to be making the mistake of not knowing where to stop. This was when he married Katharine von Bora—an escaped nun. But it was by them that the mistake was being made, because this turned out to be one of the wisest steps of his whole life.

His lucky star did not desert him at the last; for, through a freak of chance, he died in the same village in which he had been

born, after intervening with success in a dispute among the Counts of Mansfeld, whose castle crowned the hill at the bottom of which his father dwelt. When asked on his deathbed if he adhered to the doctrine which he had taught to the world, he answered with an unhesitating affirmative; and he died, like his Saviour, in the act of commending his spirit to his Maker.

The doctrine of the Reformation has been summed up by historians in two principles—one formal and one material. These are terms of the schools; but the meaning of the one is that, when the authority is sought on which a human being can rely when exercised about the question of questions, “What must I do to be saved?” he will find it in the Word of God; and the other means that, when the message is sought which the Bible supplies for such an inquiring spirit, it is briefly comprehended in Justification by Faith alone. Those in search of an ampler exposition of these principles may seek it with advantage in his three chief works, none of them long, written at the height of his conflict with the powers of evil—the *Address to the Christian Nobility of the*

German Nation, in which he attacks mercilessly the evils of the time, and especially the papacy; *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in which the sacramental theory is similarly dealt with, and *The Liberty of a Christian Man*, in which, soaring far above the region of controversy, he demonstrates the two propositions—that a Christian man is the most free lord of all and subject to none, and that a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to every one. To the ordinary mind, however, Luther has a sufficient title to honour in the gift to the world of three blessings—an open Bible, the worship of God in the language of the people, and the Protestant manse with wife and children.

Such are the topics with which our pulpits would have resounded if the Luther Celebration had fallen before the commencement of the War; and, as has been stated above, the Courts of the Church have judged that, in spite of the War, the pulpit should not be silent. The time, however, is one of immense strain and irritation; and it would be easy to sound the praises of Luther and the Reformation in such a way as to do more

harm than good. Since the day of the invasion of Belgium the conscience of Britain has been in absolute clearness and unanimity about the righteousness of our cause; diplomatic and other revelations have been convincing the country more and more of the vainglorious and sinister designs of Germany, and far worse have been the means by which she has been carrying these out; those who have lost their nearest and dearest feel that their sacrifices would be turned into ridicule unless security were found that Europe could not be brought again into such a situation. In short, no preacher can decline the responsibility of connecting what he has to say of Luther and the Reformation with the present War.

I.

We claim to be better disciples of Luther than the Germans are themselves.

The political opinions of Luther it would not be easy in a short space to define. In this region he was not a systematic but a temperamental thinker. He always expressed with force the opinion in his mind at the time; but his opinions were not always the same, and it would not be difficult to extract from his writings sentences supporting almost any political view. In his earliest and best time he was the champion of freedom and conscience, denouncing the tyranny of Rome, which wanted to enslave the whole world, and claiming for the Empire and for every German state the right to have a mind and a will of its own. At the outbreak of the Peasants' War he expressed deep sympathy with the wrongs of the victims of serfdom and charged the nobles to their faces with the inhumanity with which they had long been treating their humble fellow-Christians. But, when the insurgents refused to follow his advice, he was betrayed into language which was felt by

many at the time, as it has been by many since, to be unworthy of him, and which might perhaps be quoted in justification of the "frightfulness" practised at present by those in authority. It was the opinion of Principal Lindsay, whose numerous writings on Luther give unusual attention to the political side of his career, that at this point Luther experienced a mental shock from which he never afterwards entirely recovered. He lost faith in the common man, and was too disposed to put his trust in princes. As the movement the success of which meant life or death to him made headway almost exclusively in the regions of the country where the princes were favourable, he was induced to concede to these an amount of power inside the Church which has ever since been a weight and a hindrance. This timidity has clung to German churchmen ever since; and one of themselves, a scholar of great eminence, whose specialty is the comprehensive survey of history, has acknowledged that Lutheranism naturally allies itself too easily with the monarchical and the aristocratic, being afraid of the freer and more progressive forces in society; since the French Revolution it has

identified itself with reaction in Church and State; and it has had not a little to do with the growth of the military and power-loving spirit in the Germany which has Prussia for its head (TROELTSCH, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen*, pp. 602-5).

It is not, however, to profound political theories in Luther's writings that we need to appeal, but to his plain teaching on the simplest elements in the Moral Law—not to violate one's spoken or written word, not to covet the possessions of one's neighbours, not to steal, not to kill. There never was a prophet of righteousness who uttered his mind on such topics more forcibly; and one could wish back in the world again, for the purpose of denouncing in the terms they deserve such deeds as the horrors unveiled in the Report of Lord Bryce's Commission, the mistreatment of prisoners in certain camps, and the sinking of the "Lusitania," the voice that exposed the abuses of papal misrule in the *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. At all events, Great Britain does not require to be afraid of holding her corner of the book of Luther's teaching, if Germany will hold the other, so

that the turning of the leaves may make the evildoer tremble and the sophist blush who attempts to be the defender of outrages perpetrated against the laws of God and of humanity.

II.

We appeal from the new Prussianised Empire to the old Land of Luther.

At the outbreak of the War a friend of the present writer, who had been educated at Leipzig, exclaimed, "Oh, what a change from the simple, friendly, pious Germany of my youth to the boasting, overbearing, Prussianised Germany of to-day!" And to many of us, familiar with Germany, it has been one of the bitterest experiences of life to see the difference in teachers and friends whom we have known and loved. In no department of Christian thought has German scholarship a prouder record than in Christian Ethics—witness the works of Schleiermacher, Rothe, Dorner, Luthardt—yet, when a practical ethical question of immeasurable importance has arisen, the men of character and learning appear to have utterly failed, and we have listened in vain for any condemnation from their mouths of the most flagrant cruelties and injustices. It may, indeed, be replied that it is we who have failed and changed. But, if this be said, then the neutrals must decide between us; and it is here that the coming of the

United States into the struggle is for us so valuable. Much as their immeasurable resources may help us, we estimate still more highly their approval of the course we have pursued and disapproval of the conduct of the enemy; for to us America is a second conscience, whose judgments weigh with us more than those of any other people on earth.

In another neutral country, Denmark, a Christian scholar has taken the trouble to put together a book which has been translated into English and published under the title of *Hurrah and Hallelujah*. It is a collection of utterances about the War, compiled from German preachers and professors; and it has been published for the very purpose of exposing the depths of futility and fatuity to which these have descended, not a few of the extracts bordering on insanity or blasphemy. What, however, can be expected from common men when a scholar like Professor Herrmann, of Marburg, himself a distinguished writer on Christian Ethics, has published a book, under the title of *The English, the Turks and Ourselves*, of which the thesis is that it

is no disgrace to be allied with Turks, though it would be disgraceful to be allied with Englishmen, in whom is to be found nothing but falsehood and hypocrisy? There is no living teacher in Germany who has been more honoured in this country than Dr. Herrmann; and such a performance does not excite our indignation so much as shame and pity that one who had stood so high should stoop so low. How extemporised and artificial, however, is the sentiment of his pamphlet may be inferred from the words of another great writer on Christian Ethics in a work published in 1905: discussing the possibility of completely stopping war, Professor Lemme, of Heidelberg, says: "Christian sentiment cannot recommend the total ending of war as long as there exists such a miserable image of a state as Turkey: the never-ceasing massacres of Christians and the enmity to all culture of the Turkish race compel the judgment that the continued existence of this government is ten times worse than the wars which would be needed for its removal" (*Christliche Ethik*, p. 1020). Can it be doubted which of these two is the true voice of Germany?

In a small work, entitled *German Philosophy in Relation to the War*, Professor Muirhead, of Birmingham University, has proved that the War is not traceable to the great figures of the German philosophical dynasty from Kant to Fichte, but to later and inferior practitioners, and it would not be difficult to date the commencement of the deterioration, as far as religion and theology are concerned. It was out of the victories of the Franco-Prussian War that the inordinate ambitions of Germany were born. Soon after that the present writer happened to hear in the Cathedral of Berlin a sermon from a Court-preacher, delivered on the anniversary of one of the great battles of that war. The Emperor was present, and so were numerous officials of the Court and officers of the army. The preacher described the late war—its hopes and fears, its losses and victories. But he proceeded to expatiate on the consequences which had ensued—the payment of the French milliards, the outbreak of luxury and extravagance, the haste to be rich and the mad rush of speculation. And he finished with the sentence, “We expected roses to grow

on the graves of our heroes—but, lo, nettles!” These words went through the building like the flash of a flaming sword, and you could feel the start of the whole congregation.

Since then the sowing of nettles has gone on apace. One of the sowers has been Treitschke. In this man’s teaching there are not wanting elements of nobleness and truth, for a people cannot but aspire after political liberty, and cannot but cleave to the State or the dynasty which has given them the chance. But the light that leads astray may be light from heaven, and unregulated love of country may prove as dangerous as excessive love of home, which Jesus Himself condemned in such severe terms when it led away from Himself. The pagan worship of the Roman Emperors is revived in the Prussian deification of the State; and Christian Ethics must face the question whether there is a Christian law only for the individual but not for the community, and whether the rules and decencies observed in times of peace may be exchanged in time of war for the scheming and violence of savages.

The real poisoner, however, of the mind of Germany has been Friedrich Nietzsche. It is true he scoffed and sneered at Prussia, but this was only the trick of the literary artist, who knew the piquancy of contradiction; for his teaching is the very essence of Prussianism. It is true that many Christian teachers have written against him; but they have done so with marked restraint, as if conscious that he had behind him a numerous and powerful following, which it would not do to offend. It is to be feared that his disdain for Christian morality and his blasphemy of the Name that is above every name have sunk deeply into the general mind in Germany and will not be easily extirpated.

Lovers of Germany in this country have been watching eagerly for signs of a better mind; and though these have been few and far between they have not been altogether wanting. One aged scholar, a year or more before the War, published a volume of extracts from books, leading articles and speeches, to show how the mind of the country was being abused by the military spirit, and how imminent was the peril of a univer-

sal war. At least one well-known Christian writer protested against the invasion of Belgium, and another, of still greater eminence, condemned the Hymn of Hate, censuring its puerility and warning the country how vain was the attempt to make hatred the foundation of prosperity instead of love. The names of such men it would not perhaps be safe now to repeat; but these acts of wisdom will not be forgotten in happier days, and perhaps they are the harbingers of the return of public opinion in Germany to righteousness and humanity.

III.

We, who stand in need of repentance ourselves, hope yet to collaborate with a penitent Germany in bringing in the Kingdom of God.

When Luther and the Reformation are considered in the light of the War, the sad reflection forces itself on the mind, how little Protestantism at the critical moment affected the decision! It did not delay the outbreak of war even for a day; and this could not be without great guilt on both sides. Germany, Great Britain and the United States, the three great Protestant Powers, could have not only kept peace among themselves, but imposed peace on the world. In such a combination the lead could probably only have been taken by the German Emperor. He had often claimed to be an apostle of peace, and it is possible that this claim was sincere; for, although at the present time he is the Aunt Sally which the populace always in such a case requires against which to discharge the missiles of blame and scorn, he may be the victim of the war-machine, which has passed beyond

his control. But he missed his opportunity, and no man ever threw a larger heritage away. Had he made himself the leader of a league of peace he would have died the greatest monarch on earth, and been remembered as one of the greatest benefactors of the race. His country, too, would have had the place in the sun of which he has spoken—the sunshine of the respect and honour of mankind. But this golden harvest cannot now be reached; and, the more genuine the Kaiser's religious professions may be, the more haunting must be the reflections in his secret mind on the misery he has brought on mankind and the millions whom his policy has sent before their time to their account.

But the three great Protestant nations were, besides, the three great missionary nations; and those whose vocation it was to teach the rest of mankind to love one another are at one another's throats in the sight of the heathen. At the Edinburgh Conference in 1910 all the Protestant Churches and Missionary Societies were seen in such union and co-operation that the young and sanguine be-

gan to talk about the christianisation of the world in a single generation. The growth of income was a common theme of congratulation. Yet the income of all the missionary bodies for a year is surpassed by the expenditure on the War for a day, and the total expenditure on this single war will infinitely exceed the expenditure on Foreign Missions since the world began. The more conscious any side is of its own share in such colossal folly, the less will it be inclined to exaggerate the guilt of another; and, the deeper the sense of guilt, the less distant will be the day of reconciliation.

In an article in the September number of *The Nineteenth Century and After* a military contributor advocates the suspension of all intercourse with Germans for a generation; and doubtless in the Teutonic nations there could be found plenty ready to return the compliment. But the humaner policy of President Wilson, to wage the War not against the German people, but the Prussian autocracy, will hold the field. From the first the President has endeavoured to keep his people to the wise maxim that the end of war is peace, and if there be

established among the civilised nations a league for compulsory peace, and, if, at the same time, among the Christian peoples there arise a voluntary league for the evangelisation of the world, on a scale of expenditure imitated from the sacrifices and services of the present struggle, then may the calamities of this generation prove to be the gateway to a new era of human happiness and progress, although it must not be forgotten that, when Christian men or nations have allowed themselves to drift so far asunder, they can only hope to return effectively to one another through first returning to Him who is the fountain of wisdom, love and concord.

THE END

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