



The Pilgrim

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

O. P. Kretzmann

Reformation Day, 1967

October, 1967

A few thoughts for Reformation Day, 1967, the 450th anniversary of those hammer strokes on the Castle Church in Wittenberg which shattered the dry-rot-infested structure of medieval Catholicism.

It was the night of February 17, 1546. A man lay dying in a little room in Eisleben, Germany, the same town in which he had been born 63 years earlier. The world was different that night more than four hundred years ago — different from what it had been in 1483. And the difference was the measure of the work of the man who lay quietly waiting for the end. He knew, and had known for several months, that not even the rugged physical endowment of a Saxon miner’s son could make up for the years of monastic discipline, of incessant labor, of agonizing thought, of spiritual turmoil, of toil and tears.

The body of Martin Luther was about to die; but his soul, the great indomitable soul of him, stood poised and ready on the threshold of another dawn. It was not only the dawn of a world in which his faith would at last become sight, but also the dawn of a world here in time and space in which his spirit and his work would become one of the cloud of witnesses through whom the unwearied Spirit of the living God shapes the destinies of men and of nations.

It is therefore no mere accident of history that lying on a table beside the old man’s deathbed were some notes for an essay or lecture in which he had once more given his answers to one of the greatest questions of all time and history — perhaps now today the greatest question before the mind of man in this year of grace 1967.

Luther was writing some notes on the measure and limitations of man, his wisdom and his power. “It takes five years,” he had written, “to become a good farmer; twenty-five years to grow into statesmanship; but one hundred years to begin to understand properly the words and full meaning of the depths of the riches of God as set down in His holy Word.”

THE CRESSET

These notes were in Latin up to this point. Then, curiously, the dying man lapsed into his native German for his final words. And in a trembling hand he wrote: “We are beggars before God. That is true.”

Here is once again the swift, bitter taste of truth, a truth forgotten by most of us who have borne the name of Lutheran over these four and a half dark and tortured centuries. Here is something high and great for our blinded eyes and our equally blinded hearts. Here is a truth which is even more relevant for the contemporary world than for any past age — the truth that man’s relationship to God, relevant faith for our time and condition, lies in our being beggars who are day by day brought back to God by His grace, forgiveness, and mercy. Only the humble, repentant, and penitent “beggar before God” can really know Him in all His forgiveness and in the power and glory of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This theme, I would suggest, runs straight through the main-line Lutheran tradition. To be a Lutheran is to be a beggar before God. There is no place in the Lutheran tradition for pride — whether it be pride in self, pride in our tradition, pride in our numbers, pride in our accomplishments, pride in our orthodoxy. There is, of course, room and more than room for gratitude — the gratitude of the beggar who, asking little, has received so much more than he had asked for, so much more than he could in his most wildly optimistic imaginings have hoped for.

It may well be that the key to healing the breaches within the Lutheran community and between Lutherans *m* and other Christians will be found in a recovery of the beggar image, in starting not from what we have to give but from what we need to receive — from God through each other. It is ironical that, at this particular moment in the Church’s history, this need to receive seems to be most deeply felt not in Protestantism but in certain Roman Catholic circles. The most eloquent and evangelical voices in Vatican II were those of men who had been led to recognize that they were beggars before God and, therefore, beggars before their brethren, separated and unseparated, in the Church.

Lutherans in this country have adopted as the theme of their celebration of the 450th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation the motto, “Life — New Life.” This is a good theme — if we can lift it above the level of a catchy slogan to that of a proclamation of repentance and hope, if (to return to Luther) we can invest it with a profound understanding that

THE CRESSET

all authentic life, and especially the new life to which we are called by the Gospel, is life as a beggar before God. The temptation which we must resist at the peril of our souls is to debase so great a theme to the level of a chauvinistic slogan into which we import prideful notions that to be a Lutheran and to live the new life in its fullness are the same thing. There is “Life — New Life” not only within our communion but also beyond it — wherever men are content to stand before God with nothing to offer and with hands wide open to receive.

