

# Reformation

Ernst Bizer: *Fides ex auditu*. Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther. Neukirchen Kr. Moers (Verl. d. Buchhdlg. d. Erziehungsvereins) 1958. 160 S., kart. DM 14.70.

This essay is a contribution to Luther studies of importance and value. The author's main contention is that Luther's discovery concerning the meaning of "Justitia Dei" occurred 1518-9 (against a number of modern scholars who consider 1514-5 a likely date), but the value of this work does not stand or fall with this attempted demonstration. It is the method of the author to investigate the principal sources for Luther's development, paying special attention to Luther's vocabulary, a delicate and dangerous task for a period when Luther's thought was in movement, and where his use of words is not always precise, and where old and new elements in his thought jostle side by side. In the course of this investigation Professor Bizer makes so many stimulating points, so many profound comments that future scholars will neglect at their peril this rich and informative discussion. The author tells us that he has been able to work over these subtle and intricate matters in successive seminars, so that to deal adequately with his arguments, a reviewer would need a Sabbatical year.

In going against the trend of modern Luther scholarship, Professor Bizer accelerates a movement already discernible in Scandinavia and Germany, in the important essay by W. Link and in the recent work by Østergaard-Nielsen whom Bizer quotes with approval to the effect that

„Es ist daher eine Schwäche, die die durch die dialektische Theologie inspirierte Luther-Forschung mit der älteren liberalen Theologie teilt, wenn man mit Vorliebe den Theologiebegriff von den Schriften des jungen Luthers ableitet und von dort aus den älteren Luther kritisiert“. („Scriptura sacra et viva vox" 104)

There is perhaps a real parallel here between the "Quest for the historical Jesus" and the search for the historical Luther. It belonged to the liberal age to establish firmly the critical method, and to insist on loyalty to the sources, but this has been followed more and more by an insistence on the Jesus of faith, and the importance of what his followers believed about him. So it has been with Luther studies. Surely Scandinavian Lutheran "motif research" must have dissolved into subjectivism long ago had there not been from the time of Billing onwards, the recognition that a severely historical and scientifically philological technique was indispensable. The publication of the corpus of Luther's early lectures was of the utmost importance for his historical and theological assessment and it was entirely desirable that the traditional views of Luther should be critically examined in the light of this new material, and that it should take time for this to be assimilated. Indeed, if there is a real point in Østergaard-Nielsen's criticism, one feels that there is an even graver danger in this latest trend, of reading back into Luther the formal categories of Lutheran theology. I find Professor Bizer's closing sentence disquieting — „Dieses Doppelte ist bezeichnend für die lutherische Lehre vom Sakrament: das Sakrament wird vom Wort aus verstanden, und das Wort selbst bekommt sakramentalen Charakter. Der Ausgangspunkt für beides ist das neue Verständnis von Röm. 1, 17: „Im Evangelium wird die Gerechtigkeit Gottes offenbart“, d. h. sie wird durch das Wort geschenkt" — that is indeed, good Lutheran doctrine. But is it really what Luther discovered about "Justitia Dei"?

But let us say at once that Professor Bizer accepts the critical canons of the best Luther scholarship, and handles the evidence with skill and fairness. In his refusal to avoid difficult texts he compares more than favourably with Holl and Vogel-sang.



The investigation rightly begins with the famous Autobiographical Fragment (Hereafter AF) of 1545 (WA 54. 179–87). This embodies a number of problems, and Professor Bizer might agree that no solution can solve them all, and that his own, if true would only leave fewer untidy ends than most. Under the year 1519 Luther wrote: —

“Redieram ad psalterium denuo interpretandum, fretus eo, quod exercitator essem, postquam S. Pauli epistolas ad Romanos, ad Galatas, et eam quae est ad Ebraeos, tractassem in scholis“.

The superficial impression of this is that in 1519 Luther could turn to a second commentary on the Psalms, armed with a new understanding of what he goes on to describe as his problem. i. e. the meaning of *Justitia Dei* in Rom. 1, 17, and that this discovery lay immediately in this period. Those who reject this view take Luther's discussion here of *Justitia Dei* to be a digression, a return in thought to the period before his discovery, which, they say is made allowable by the pluperfect “captus fueram cognoscendi Pauli“, or have been driven to the rather desperate thought that Luther has made a mistake and muddled together his two attempts to interpret the Psalms.

It is a merit of Bizer's essay that he solves this problem and enables us to read Luther's account in AF in a plain and straightforward manner. Moreover, he brings forward from Luther's new lectures on the Psalms (WA 5. 144. 1. ff.) a quotation from the period 1519–21 which has all the main ingredients of AF about the “*Justitia Dei*“; Rom. 1, 17, the “*connexio verborum*“, the change from an active to a passive interpretation, the confirmation of his view in Augustine's “*Spirit and Letter*“. We have to weigh these advantages against difficulties which then arise.

Bizer's first chapters are necessarily occupied in criticism of Vogelsang, the chief exponent of the view that Luther's discovery occurred in 1514 and is traceable in the “*Dictata super Psalterium*“. Against him Bizer makes some telling points. Vogelsang's hermeneutical solution, that Luther combined the literal-prophetical (Christological) and tropological interpretation of “*Justitia Dei*“ was a brilliant but perhaps too tidy hypothesis. I do not think we can any longer press Ps. 70, 1 as the point at which Luther's discovery clearly emerges. Bizer's point that there is here no wrestling with Rom. 1, 17 and the “*connexio verborum*“ however may indicate a weakness of his own, which is to underestimate the importance of distinguishing Luther's discovery, in his own private meditation, from the point at which such a discovery might emerge in a mass of potential lecture material. Here, as in one or two other places (e. g. Heb. 7, 1 and the sermons on Righteousness perhaps Bizer does not allow enough for the immediate context of Luther's discussions).

Bizer argues that in these first lectures on Psalms Luther is working to a “*humilitas*“-theology which at no point breaks with what we already find in Staupitz (whom Bizer quotes to good effect), in the conflation of a Taulerite mysticism and “*modern devotion*“. But there is some evidence that “*humilitas*“ is beginning to move in Luther's thought away from a moral virtue, into the new theocentric sequence “*odium sui — accusatio sui — humilitas — humiliatio — fides*“. Luther's preoccupation in these lectures with “*Judicium*“ rather than with “*justitia*“ is another indication that he is concerned with repentance, which involves the destruction of man's own self-righteousness, and so with the destruction of the old man, rather than with the building up of the habits of right virtues on the basis of infused grace (he had already begun to attack the “*habitus*“ teaching in 1509). Important essays by Sormunen and Pinomaa have pointed out that Luther at this time seems often to suggest “*salvation by humility*“ but it is worth pointing out that “*odium sui*“ does not disappear with the Young Luther, that it is the heart of Luther's first Thesis of 1517 and is retained in the “*Resolutions*“ on them of 1518. While it is plain that in these lectures Luther has not worked out or perceived his final dialectic of Law and Gospel (though at WA. 3. 246. 19 ff. he uses the imagery of God's Strange, and God's Proper Work) there is evidence that he does not think of it as unevangelically as Bizer supposes. Thus when in a later chapter Bizer



shows it to be a mark of the mature Luther to insist that Christian obedience must be joyful, unconstrained, spontaneous we can point already to WA. 3.649.2 "Qui in fide et spiritu est, ipse in corde et libertate et hilaritate deo servit et vias ejus ambulat".

It is when we come to Luther's Lectures on Romans, that my own difficulties with Bizer's solution arise. For the word "Justitia" is not just a word, it is the main theme of the Epistle to the Romans. Why should Luther undertake a course of lectures on this Epistle and to treat of "Justitia" again and again and often in moving and evangelical language, when it was a word which to the end of his life would fill him with instinctive horror, and which stood blocking the way to his understanding of St Paul? Like Dr. Kingsley Barrett who has also worked through these Scholia, I find it hard to believe that this fine commentary is the work of a man who could not get to grips with Pauline theology. And if it be said that here Luther has not moved much beyond an Augustinian theology, I would ask, in the light of the reference in AF to "Of the Spirit and Letter" whether Luther claims very much more at this stage? There are I consider many echoes of AF in the lectures on Romans, not least the argument at 4, 7 with the Schoolmen who makes an exaction of Grace. In his examination of this passage which Bizer with characteristic fairness admits to be striking, Bizer insists that Luther still misunderstands legalistically what is meant, for he does not simply say that „Die Gnade Geschenk ist“. But in fact Luther does say so "ut nobis . . . gratiam daret" (WA 56. 279. 2), and continues "God offers grace to the humble", and if it be said that here God seems to demand penitence and humility as a condition of grace, we point out that Luther uses language which can similarly be interpreted as late as 1531-2 - (WA 40. 331 ff. ut agnoscentes peccata justificet et eorum misereatur).

Here again Luther insists on the joyful, spontaneous character of Christian obedience (WA. 56. 278. 25 etc.) The frequent references to the alien righteousness of Christ, the constant Christological reference show how Luther is not bounded by an earlier view of Christ as simply "Exemplum" and "Sacramentum". Such a fine passage as WA 56. 204. 14 "He has made His righteousness mine, I am righteous with the same righteousness as His. My sin cannot swallow Him but is swallowed up in the infinite abyss of His righteousness, who is God blessed for ever" - speaks of that "marvellous exchange" of righteousness, which Bizer notes as a mark of the mature Luther.

I still think that it makes more sense of the internal structure of Luther's Romans if he had already made his discovery about Justitia Dei. And this ties up with other facts about his development, the fact that his attack on scholastic theology had become "our theology" of Augustine and the old Fathers by 1516, the fact that he had by now come to know at first hand Augustine's "Spirit and the Letter" (which at the latest he must surely have known by the time his colleague Karlstadt was lecturing on it in 1517). Moreover what he says in this commentary is of a piece with the famous letter to Spenlein of April 1516, a passage which does not square easily with Bizer's view of Luther's development.

In the lectures on Galatians (which Bizer tackles in a later chapter, in the light of Luther's Commentary) Bizer examines two important passages, Gal. 2, 16 and 2, 19. According to him Luther still equates faith with humility, and makes the destruction of the old man a partial pre-requisite for justification. But when he quotes Luther's statement that faith is the real content of the Beatitudes (WA 57. 70. 16) "quia ipsa est mors veteris hominis et vita novi" he ignores the phrase "et vita novi" with its enormous positive connotation for faith. And when he further says of the statement that God does not impute sin, "propter fidem et coeptam confirmationem" that this is "Das Gegenteil von sola fide . . ." and asks, „ist das etwas anderes als ein (wie immer von Gott gewirktes) meritum de congruo?“, he does ill justice to Luther's argument. What Luther intends he has made plain two sentences earlier (WA 57. 74. 9) "omnes fideles sunt justi propter Christum in quem credunt et cui incipiunt fieri conformes per mortificationem veteris



hominis". Here „propter Christum“ is the all important word. The opposite of salvation by faith alone would be salvation by works alone, but even the thought of conformity with Christ is here described in terms of the “mortification of the old man”, as something utterly out of the power of man part from grace. It is not intended as a meritorious cause of the non-imputation of sin, but as something made possible only by the “lex spiritus“. I do not say that this is “sola fide“ but it is very far from its opposite, and in view of Luther’s imprecision in other places, later as well as earlier, I should give him the benefit of the doubt here.

When we come to the lectures on Hebrews Bizer can point to notes of maturing theology, for the break-through, according to him, was near at hand. He rightly points to the passage Heb. 7, 1. Here indeed are Rom. 1, 17 and Psalm 30, 1, and the analogy of other words (*misericordia dei, salus dei*).

But perhaps Bizer does not sufficiently allow for Luther’s exegetical problem here. *Justitia* is a title of Melchizedek, and since he is a type of Christ it appears to be a divine name, a divine attribute. But now Luther says that in the Scriptures “*justitia*“ Dei is not generally taken for what God is in Himself (“male intelligatur“ — if he had not made his discovery must he not have said “bene intelligatur?“) — and can only be understood in this way if it is applied to faith which lifts the heart and unites a man with God — in other words what appears to be an objective divine attribute might on these terms and even here, be seen to be a divine gift. Bizer thinks Luther is coming towards his discovery but is being oversubtle, but perhaps it is Bizer’s subtlety? It seems to me more likely that Luther is not trying to explain how *Justitia* can become a gift, but how a text of scripture in which *justitia* appears as a divine attribute can be explained in terms which rule out the active view of *Justitia Dei*.

The next chapters in Bizer’s work are of importance, and of permanent value. Here Bizer examines Luther’s discussion of the issues raised by the Indulgence controversy, in the Theses, in the Resolutions on the Theses, and in the Acta Augustana of 1518. Bizer develops ideas put forward by Jetter into a most skilful appraisal of Luther’s views of the sacrament of Penance and of the eucharist, in the part played by a doctrine of certainty (*Gewißheit*), and of peace conscience gained by believing the word of Christ. This is the core of the book and it is most illuminating: the subsequent chapters on Luther’s sermons and his exposition of the Lord’s prayer are less cogent and convincing.

Finally, the argument is recapitulated and the significance of Luther’s discovery examined in the realm of sacramental theory. But it is here that earlier misgivings return. „Was Luther entdeckt hat, ist zunächst die Theologie des Wortes und im Zusammenhang damit die Bedeutung des Glaubens“. That Luther did in fact develop his theology of the Word in relation to Faith in these years I take to be demonstrated by Bizer. But is this what AF refers to? Is this really what Luther was after in “*Justitia Dei*“? My objection to Bizer’s study is that it pays attention to „Evangelium“ (which he interprets in an unnatural way here as though it were the preaching of the Word in the Lutheran sense) and “Faith“, rather than to “*Justitia*“. Indeed as far as Romans is considered I consider Luther’s early lectures to be a better handling of the problem than what Bizer takes to be his mature doctrine 1517–9, because of the earlier Christocentric concentration. Bizer assumes, but I cannot, that what was discovered in Rom. 1, 17 in AF is “*sola fide*“. But I think we expound AF much more sensibly if we take it to be concerned with the change from an active to passive sense of *Justitia Dei*, from a divine attribute to a divine gift. This would be a much more modest discovery, but it would not be really less important, for it would remove the great stumbling-block which stood in the way of Luther entering into the Pauline world. As I have hinted (and the reference in AF to “Spirit and Letter“ supports the view) I do not think it necessary to believe that at the time of this discovery Luther had moved much beyond an Augustinian theology, but he could now go on to work out the impli-



cations for this doctrine of justification as he developed them out of the pressures of his own inner life, and after 1517, in the context of the great Church struggle.

It is true that in the tension of this problem, "Justitia Dei" held within itself the whole dialectic of Law and Gospel, on the one side the destruction of man's self righteousness, and on the other his turning in faith towards the alien righteousness freely given in Christ. It is true that for Luther this abandonment of self righteousness is for Luther in his early lectures a sequence to which a series of words point — "accusatio sui, odium sui, humilitas, humiliatio, fides". But Faith when it became the great master word did not contradict these, but took them up into itself. This is important, for it explains why we can find in Luther's early lectures expressions which parallel Bizer's "Fides ex auditu" of the mature Luther. Thus WA 4. 356.13 he says of Faith, "hunc enim ducit quo salvetur, et hoc per auditum verbi" and in WA 56.171. 28 (Bizer p. 23) "in solo evangelio . . . per solam fidem qua Dei verbo creditur". The truth is that for Luther faith had now come to have what Pinomaa calls an "existential" character: Faith and the Word have become for Luther by 1518 rich complexities which cover the whole movement of man from his own self righteousness towards the righteousness of God. But we can see how Cajetan could grievously misunderstand Luther at this point, as a good deal of Catholic polemic has done ever since, when it has said that Protestants believe that justification means accepting with our minds that Christ has made satisfaction for our sins.

Thus for me the discovery of "Justitia Dei" in AF seems to be more modest though not less significant for the Reformer's development than what is claimed by Bizer. And we should both agree that Luther's thought and vocabulary are in movement from 1509 onwards and that this development was accelerated from 1517-9 by the pressures of the growing controversy. Professor Bizer has done great service by his detailed investigation of Luther's writings 1517-9, so that for the first time it is possible to give a coherent account of the whole development 1509-21. For Luther's theology arose in no vacuum. In its early stages there was the pressure of his own religious and spiritual difficulties, and from 1517 onwards the need to clarify his thought in regard to Indulgences and the whole relation between the sacraments and inward religion. As I said of Vogelsang, that the nature of the materials make us "beware of certain conclusions", so about Professor Bizer's thesis I confess grave reservations, but am none the less deeply grateful for this fine and rewarding piece of research.

*Manchester*

*Gordon Rupp*

Robert Stupperich: *Melanchthon* (= Sammlung Göschen, Band 1190). Berlin (de Gruyter) 1960. 140 S., DM 3,60.

Robert Stupperich legt hier, gerade rechtzeitig zum Melanchthon-Jubiläum, eine gemeinverständliche Biographie des Mag. Philippus vor. In VII Kapiteln, die wiederum in insgesamt 18 Abschnitte unterteilt sind, wird ein erstaunlich umfassendes Bild vom Leben und von der Theologie Melanchthons gezeichnet. Die Darstellung verzichtet auf allen wissenschaftlichen Apparat, nicht aber auf historische Details und wissenschaftliche Genauigkeit. An vielen Stellen werden die Ereignisse bis in die Einzelheiten hinein geschildert, besonders bei den verschiedenen Unionsversuchen in den Dreißiger- und anfangs der Vierzigerjahre, und bei den Auseinandersetzungen um das Interim. All diese Einzelzüge dienen aber letztlich nur dazu, die Gestalt Melanchthons getreu und gerecht zu schildern. Seine Schwächen werden nicht verborgen, aber es wird gezeigt, wie schwierig oft die Situation war, in der er sich zurechtfinden und an verantwortlicher Stelle eine Entscheidung treffen mußte. Der Vf. beweist dabei eine souveräne Beherrschung zahlloser Details der Reformationsgeschichte und er nützt sie zu einem biographischen Überblick, der schnell orientiert und doch nicht im allgemeinen steckenbleibt. Bis die vom Vf. (vgl.