
Why the Name Lutheran.¹⁾

I. WHAT JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS NAME?

We have not hesitated to call our periodical the *Lutheran* (*Der Lutheraner*). We do, however, feel it to be our duty to answer those who may inquire what significance it has and what justification we have in adopting it.

We know full well that from the very beginning not a few

1) The suggestion made in footnote 9, page 6, of the THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY has induced Rev. Carl Romoser, of Granite City, Ill., to offer this reproduction of Dr. Walther's article in Vol. I, No. 1, of *Der Lutheraner*.

have taken offense because the Lutheran Church is named after Luther — after a mere man. This name clearly evidences, they declare, that this Church cannot be the true Church of Jesus Christ, but is only the fabrication of a man, and, say they, such churches are sectarian. "Lutherans," they urge, "by all means read the opinion of St. Paul concerning human names in 1 Cor. 1. 3. Are you not guilty, when you designate yourselves Lutherans, of the very evil Paul condemns?" Not a few Lutherans are at a loss what to reply when opponents make this charge. But plausible as this rebuke appears, on closer inspection it becomes just as much without justification and foundation as it seemed plausible. In the first place, it is a mistake to say that Lutherans first called themselves by this name. History clearly testifies that enemies, in order to revile, first designated them as Lutherans.

Dr. Eck, who held the famous Leipzig debate with Luther, first referred to those who supported Luther's teachings as Lutherans. Luther's opinion about this is clearly stated in one of his writings in 1522, *Admonition against Rioting*. Among other things he wrote: "I beg not to have my name mentioned, and to call the people, not Lutheran, but Christian. What is Luther? The doctrine is not mine, nor have I been crucified for any one. St. Paul (1 Cor. 3, 4. 5) would not suffer Christians to be called after Peter, but only after Christ. Why should I — miserable piece of corruption that I am — have this honor, that the children of Christ should be called after my abominable name? No, no, my dear friends; let us abolish party names and be called Christians after Christ, whose doctrine we have. The papists deserve to have a party name, for they are not content with the doctrine and name of Christ; they want to be popists also. Well, let them be called popish, for the Pope is their master. I am not, and do not want to be, anybody's master. I share with the Church the one common doctrine of Christ, who alone is our Master. Matt. 23, 8." (St. L. Ed. 10, 370.) This appeal of Luther clearly indicates his strong position, and refutes the charge that he ambitiously desired his followers to call themselves Lutherans.

We dare not maintain, however, that it is not permitted for Christians to call themselves after a man. We have an incontestable example of this very thing in the Old Testament Church, where God Himself called the Church after a man. Is it not called the Israelitic Church? Christ calls it such when speaking of Nathanael: "Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile." And

was not Israel a man? Consequently, it depends upon the sense in which children of God call themselves after a man. In that respect only can there possibly be sin. Now, in what sense and for what reason did the Corinthians call themselves after Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ? This was done, we read, that they might separate themselves one from the other. Although Paul, Apollos, and Peter (Cephas) preached the same truth, the Corinthians rejected the one when they received the other. By such designations they declared themselves separate, and thus created factions. The sin that Paul reproves was that they were causing divisions among those who held one and the same faith, and not that they called themselves after these men. Therefore the Apostle rejected even the name Christian which some insisted upon bearing because they used it in this sectarian sense. Even the name Christ, though not a man's, could not be used in this sectarian way. True Lutherans have never called themselves in this objectionable sense after Luther. With this name they have never distinguished and separated themselves from the orthodox teachers. They professed themselves just as much followers of Augustine and all other pure teachers of the Gospel of all times and places. Luther never considered himself the only true teacher. He wrote publicly concerning his contemporary, the Wuerttemberg theologian Brenz: "I esteem your works so highly that I consider mine absolutely worthless when compared with yours and such as yours. And rest assured, I do not speak fables, nor utter anything offensive. Indeed, I do not praise Brenz, but the spirit in you which is so much kinder, friendlier, and more peaceable than mine." Indeed, no man speaks like this when he desires to become the head of a sect. Much more does this sound like the Lutheran who desired to be nothing more than a witness of the truth. Neither do we call ourselves Lutherans in the sense in which we call ourselves Christians. We are not Lutherans because we believe and trust in Luther. Highly as we esteem this mighty instrument of our God, we accept not a word in matters of faith just because Luther spoke it, but only when it is founded on the written Word of God. We do not recognize him as an apostle or prophet. We know that he was highly enlightened, but also that he was, like other men, subject to sin. He is not the head of our Church; he is not our pope. All who accept, in blind faith, all that Luther said, simply because he said it, are as far from true Lutheranism as the earth is from the sky and the night from the day. Luther wrote to Melanchthon,

who was attending the Augsburg Diet in 1530: "It displeases me much when you write in your letter that you have followed me in this matter because of my reputation. I desire no reputation and will not command nor be known as a founder. And even though men immediately put a proper construction upon it, I will not have it. If the matter is also yours and affects you even as much as me, it should not be spoken of as mine." Luther rejected unlawful reputation in the Church, and our Church has never ascribed such reputation to him. We read in the very beginning of the Formula of Concord, one of the most important confessions of orthodox Lutherans: "We believe, teach, and confess that the only real standard according to which at once all dogma and teachers should be esteemed and judged is nothing less than the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever reputation they may have, should not be regarded as of equal authority with the Holy Scriptures, but should altogether be subordinated to them and should not be received other or further than as witnesses, in what manner and in what place, since the time of the apostles, the (pure) doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved."

Finally, the question might be asked whether we call ourselves Lutheran in order to emphasize that we cling to a new doctrine promulgated by Luther some three hundred years ago,²⁾ or at least desire to adhere to a new church established by him. God forbid! We refuse to be known as Lutherans in the sense in which the followers of Arius, for instance, are called Arians, or the Dominicans after Dominic. Luther preached no new doctrine, but restated the pristine doctrine of the eternal Gospel. Neither did he separate himself from the old true Church, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief Cornerstone. He separated himself from, or rather was forced out of, the communion of those who had fallen from the old faith and were misusing the name of the old Catholic Church to enslave men's consciences by their traditions. The purpose of this periodical is to testify to these truths. We shall, in the first place, call attention to a few of Luther's declarations that clearly prove he was not determined upon spreading his own opinions, but insisted only on publishing God's Word. He writes at the end of his excellent postil: "Would to God that all expositions of mine and other teachers might perish, and every Christian would concern himself

2) Written 1844.

only with the Scriptures, the pure Word of God! You can see yourself from my idle talk how immeasurably superior God's Word is to man's. Yes, no man's words can approach, nor compare with, those of the Lord. He who is able, without commentaries and expositions, to satisfy himself will find no use for mine or other men's commentaries. They would only hinder him. Therefore, dear Christian, read the Scriptures, search the Scriptures, and let mine and other expositions be only scaffolds to the real building, whereby you seize, enjoy, and abide in, the pure Word of God. For there God dwells in Zion." Luther's bitterest enemies must acknowledge that his position was thoroughly based upon the Scriptures. For this very reason he spread them among the people. In confirmation of this let us quote from the writing of a certain Roman Catholic author, Floremundus Raemundus. This man wrote with particular violence against the Protestants and took active part in the persecutions against them. But hear him in his *History of the Origin, etc., of the Heretics of the Sixteenth Century*: "The common people everywhere lived with the Bible (at Luther's time). It had been translated into the mother tongue. One saw the book on all shelves and tables. It was in the craftsman's shop and on the mother's lap. The whole world was engaged in the reading of the Bible. These sectarians, armed with this book, upon meeting a priest or monk, began to argue with him. They insisted upon being shown where the mass was found in the Holy Scriptures. Others demanded proof for the doctrine of purgatory, infant baptism, and the Trinity. Finally, they demanded that every doctrine be proved with exact words. They rejected all traditions and apostolic ordinances; for the arch-heretic had taught: 'The Bible, which is committed to all, is the only standard in all controversies in religion.'" Could any one give a more vivid picture of the growth of a new life in the Reformation-days through the Bible? Who could better defend Luther against the charge that he established a new religion? We let Luther answer whether he despised the true Church and desired to establish a new one. In 1532 he wrote "Against Factious Spirits" (these writings were directed chiefly against the Zwinglians, who denied the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament). He says: "I would rather have, not only the factious spirits, but the wisdom and law of all emperors, kings, and princes bear witness against me, than the least testimony of the Christian Church. For we dare not deal lightly with articles of faith, harmoniously held since

apostolic days, as we would with papistical and imperial laws or other traditions of the fathers and councils." These words are convincing proof that Luther did not despise the Church, as has often been charged against him. He desired to be its obedient son. He was, indeed, no respecter of persons, and yet he never desired, as so many to-day, to stand, in a false way, upon his own conceited self-sufficiency. He maintained that the true Church had existed throughout the centuries. His inquiry, above all, was how she had taught throughout the centuries. He honored, indeed, the voice of the true Church and desired to be in agreement with her; he looked upon her as the pillar and stronghold of the truth, and wished to be a member of the great army of orthodox teachers from the apostles' time down to his own. Never did he deny the duty of hearing and obeying the Church. Matt. 18, 17. Therefore, this is not the point of dispute that once engaged the Lutheran and Catholic churches and still does to-day. The question is not whether man must obey the Church when she legitimately demands it (for she can justly demand such obedience), but whether man must obey her when she commands that which is contrary to the Gospel. Such obedience Luther denied her, and declared that when the voice of Christ is not heard, the Bride, His true Church, must not be heard. He condemned false prophets who bear the name of the Church as a cloak, and hide themselves in it, as ravening wolves. And finally, he separated himself from these false prophets, since they would not permit a reformation. But this act did not separate him from the true Church.
