

Luther argues that, although “the church has no power to make new divine promises of grace,” “[t]his one thing indeed the church can do: It can distinguish the [w]ord of God from the words of men” (LW, 36: 107). This is possible, he explains, following Augustine, because or insofar as

the truth itself lays hold on the soul and thus renders it able to judge most certainly of all things; however, the soul is not able to judge the truth, but is compelled to say with unerring certainty that this is the truth. For example, our mind declares with unerring certainty that three and seven are ten; and yet it cannot give a reason why this is true, although it certainly cannot deny that it is true. It is clearly taken captive by the truth; and, rather than judging the truth, it is itself judged by it. There is such a mind also in the church, when under the enlightenment of the Spirit she judges and approves doctrines; she is unable to prove it, and yet is most certain of having it. For as among philosophers no one judges the general concepts, but all are judged by them, so it is among us with the mind of the Spirit, [w]ho judges all things and is judged by no one, as the Apostle says [1 Cor 2:15] (107 f.).

Elsewhere Luther argues to much the same effect, appealing to the same Pauline text.

The Romanists must admit that there are among us good Christians who have the true faith, spirit, understanding, word, and mind of Christ. Why, then, should we reject the word and understanding of good Christians and follow the pope, who has neither faith nor the Spirit?

... Besides, if we are all priests, . . . and all have one faith, one gospel, one sacrament [i.e., baptism], why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is right or wrong in matters of faith? What becomes of Paul’s words in 1 Cor 2[:15], ‘A spiritual man judges all things, yet he is judged by no one’? And 2 Cor 4[:13], ‘We all have one spirit of faith’? Why, then, should we not perceive what is consistent with faith and what is not, just as well as [sic!] an unbelieving pope does?

We ought to become bold and free on the authority of all these texts, and many others. We ought not to allow the Spirit of freedom (as Paul calls him [2 Cor 3:17]) to be frightened off by the fabrications of the popes, but we ought to march boldly forward and test all that they do, or leave undone, by our believing understanding of the [s]criptures. We must compel the Romanists to follow not their own interpretation but the better one (44:135)

Also relevant is another passage, which I leave untranslated:

Es ist ‘nit genug, daß dir sagst, Luther, Petrus oder Paulus hat das gesagt, sondern du mußt bei dir selbst im Gewissen fühlen Christum selbst und inwendig empfinden, daß es Gottes Wort sei, wenn auch alle Welt da wider spreche. So lange du das Fühlen nicht hast, so lange hast du gewißlich Gottes Wort noch nicht geschmeckt und hangest noch mit den Ohren an Menschenmund und -feder und nicht mit des Herzens Grund am Wort und weiß noch nicht, was das ist Mt 23: Ihr sollt euch

nicht Meister heißen auf Erden, denn einer ist Euer Meister, Christus. Der Meister lehret im Herzen, doch durch das äusserliche Wort seiner Prediger, die es in die Ohren treiben, aber Christus treibts in das Herz' (Friedrich Gogarten, *Luthers Theologie*: 247, quoting WA, 10 II, 23, 5).

(The close connection between this passage and the statement of Luther's quoted by Bultmann [GV, 1: 108] seems obvious:

Divine faith clings to the word that is God himself, believes, trusts, and honors this word—not for the sake of him who speaks it, but rather feels that it is so true and certain that no one can any longer tear it away. . . . The word itself, without any respect for persons, must do enough for the heart, must so grasp and convince one, that, caught up by it, one feels how true and right it would be even if the whole world . . . yes, even if God himself said otherwise.)

Yet another relevant passage:

[M]ein Glaube ist allein auf Christus und sein Wort gegründet, nicht auf den Papst noch auf das Konzil. Darum soll ich auch fest am Evangelium halten unbekümmert um aller Menschen Gebot. Denn mein Glaube ist hier Richter, so daß ich sprechen kann: diese Lehre ist gut und wahrhaftig, diese aber böß und falsch. Und solchem Urteil sind auch der Papst und all sein Anhang, ja alle Menschen auf Erden unterworfen. Darum lügen alle, die da sagen: das Urteil über die Schrift steht by dem heiligen Vater, dem Papst. . . . [W]er den Glauben hat, der ist ein geistlicher Mensch und richtet alle Dinge und wird von niemand gerichtet; und wens eine einfache Müllersmagd, ja ein Kind von 9 Jahren wäre, das den Glauben hätte und nach dem Evangelium urteilte, so ist der Papst schuldig, ihm zu gehorchen und sich unter seine Füße zu legen, wenn er ein wahrer Christ ist (source unavailable).

What is to be made of all this?

One thing, evidently, is that Luther has no truck with any appeals to merely formal authority—to “who said it.” If one is to believe as one is supposed to believe, it can't be because some putative authority has said it, but only because, or insofar as, the truth itself so lays hold of one that one cannot deny it—not even, indeed, if God Godself were to say otherwise.

On the other hand, much of what Luther says could be taken as simply his variation on the common theme that propositions of faith are “self-authenticating.” The important difference from at least some other such variations, however, is the sharp contrast he draws between Christ as, in my

terms, the primal *source* of authority and Christ's preachers as, mere (even if the primary) *authorities* authorized by that source. Because of this contrast, the only thing that can be said to be "self-authenticating," really, is Christ, not the propositions of faith that bear witness to him, all of which—even those of apostles!—require *to be authorized* by whether they do or do not "push" him.

Moreover, Luther does insist that "the word itself . . . must do enough for the heart, must so grasp and convince one" that one has good and sufficient reason to believe it—against anything said to the contrary, even by God. But what is this if not a way of saying that one is to believe, finally, because it's the only way one can make sense of—do full justice to—what one inelucatably believes, even when one does not believe that one believes it!?

In any case, Luther does not claim infallibility for any one. On the contrary, he asserts, "All may err, as councils have repeatedly erred," and asks rhetorically, "Has the pope not erred many times?" (36:108; 44: 134). And against the Romanists who "think the Holy Spirit never leaves them, no matter how ignorant and wicked they are," he is emphatic that "the Holy Spirit can be possessed only by pious hearts" (44:133 f.). Moreover, he claims only that all Christians, having "one spirit of faith," can perceive "what is consistent with faith and what is not, *just as well as* an unbelieving pope does" (135; italics added).

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