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What makes Luther a Lutheran?

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1 Introduction

When I started research on this paper I began with the still astonishing fact, that it is deeply disappointing to tell convinced Lutherans that Martin Luther, after receiving last rites died Catholic. After all these years of historical criticism and destruction of the idealistic caricatures of their heroes, Protestants still seem to be too uncritical towards Luther as the figurehead of their church and movement. Concentrating on his critique of the papacy and church, they seem to forget that he never gave up his deep conviction of the apostolicity, catholicity, and, finally, the unity of the church. And with that, they do not adequately acknowledge his belief that he belonged to that institution founded by Christ and preserved by him throughout the centuries.

After several weeks of reading regarding the contradiction between Luther and Lutheranism, that which seemed so clear became more and more vague. So in the end I have a paper which probably contains more questions than answers. Thus I appreciate any comment, critique, or mention of research in an area which I have overlooked. Nevertheless, the following paper will look to the process of finding a “Lutheran” identity and it contrasts that identity to Luther’s ambiguous reluctance to become something like the fountain-head of the reformation movement.

2 Luther’s self-understanding

Those, who in the very first years of the reformation labeled themselves with the name of Luther, did not find his approval. On the contrary, in his “Sincere Admonition to all Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion” of 1522, Lu-

ther became furious when he found himself being used as the label, and with it, the identity, for very different groups, men, and, of course, opinions which did not match his preaching and teaching at all. To a certain extent, it was Luther's concern to not get involved in any kind of rumor, riot, or rebellion.

As clear evidence shows, he also had a theological reason to refuse to become the hero of the reformation movement. Luther understood himself behind his vocation. Thus he asks that any kind of personal esteem towards him be abolished. It seemed to him as fraudulent to the gospel and a matter of self-sanctification, de-honoring God and the gift of his grace.

What was Luther's self understanding? How did he see himself in God's plan? What was the label he accepted? Well, there are some programmatic titles he used for himself:

2.1 *The Programmatic Change of his Name*

Until Fall 1517, Luther used the version "Luder" to sign letters and documents with his own hand. In late Medieval High German, this term held the connotation of English words such as "dirt" and "garbage". In his famous letter to Albrecht of Mainz, dated October 31, 1517, this spelling is changed to "Luther". This spelling was then used continuously until the end of his life. Also, between 1517 and 1519, Luther used another signature "*eleutherius*", that is, "the liberated, and at the same time, Christ's servant and prisoner". Following Bernd Moeller and Karl Stackmann's interpretation, Luther saw himself torn into God's justifying action and the resulting knowledge of the complete inability of humans to act independently in accord with the requirement of obedience to God and love for one's neighbour. Simultaneously, Luther felt free from scholastic bindings to act properly according to the law, collecting merits for his future salvation. He is free from human obedience to follow the call of God. While Moeller/Stackmann stress Luther's accentuation of his liberation and, with that, the experience of freedom which relates his breakthrough to the larger movement for liberty in early modern times, Bernhard Lohse focuses more on Luther's understanding of Christ's au-

thority which endowed him with the particular freedom to argue with scholastic theology and initiate some ideas for reform. With regard to Luther's famous 95 theses which uniquely contains the introductory phrase "*in nomine domini nostri Hiesu Christi*", Lohse points out that Luther obviously was deeply convinced to do so by the assignment of Christ. This argument matches with the findings of Kurt Victor Selge who showed that it was the question of final authority which dominated the beginning of the reformation in Wittenberg.

2.2 Doctor of Scripture

Much more than any other title, Luther stresses his dignity and position as a master or doctor of Holy Scripture, which to him embodied the ultimate authority. Therefore, it served as the unquestionable basis for any theological argument for him. Recalling his vocation as doctor of theology, Luther expresses his strong emphasis on scripture and its teaching, contrary to the praxis of indulgence and other ecclesiastical errors. Simultaneously, Luther points to his oath, which forces him to avoid errors, heretical teaching, and, on the other hand, points to correctly teaching the truth of the gospel. Until 1521, this is the main article of identify to Luther's self-understanding, although he uses it later in certain polemics.

Luther identified his struggle as a doctor of theology/Holy scripture against papal authorities very closely with St. Paul's fight against Jews and Pharisees. Especially connected to his academic vocation is his identification with St. Paul as the Apostle of the gospel.

Not in this direction, but in that of a formal framework for using his academic titles, the edict of Worms signifies a change. The ban he received included the loss of any right connected to his academic status and his titles. Thus, he turns to other terms which in fact do not change the meaning sketched above.

2.3 Preacher, Evangelist, Prophet

Beginning in 1521 Luther refers to himself as ecclesiastic, preacher or even evangelist. All three self-designations have this in common: they make Luther's

self-awareness of being an interpreter of Holy Scripture central as well as his self-understanding as a preacher of the good news of God's reconciliation and redemption of man through Jesus Christ. In Luther's understanding this task is rooted in baptism, manifesting itself in his own individual person as the common priesthood of all believers.

In our quest for a key to Luther's self-understanding, these self-designations may serve us as guides. Luther saw himself as a preacher, as a Scripture interpreter, who received authority not of himself but through his vocation from God. Sometimes that even allows Luther to call himself a prophet.

In his testament from 1542 Luther refers to his self-understanding without using any of the above mentioned labels.

2.4 Did Luther call himself "Lutheran"?

Using the somewhat critical electronic reserve of database containing "Luther's Works", James M. Kittleson did a quick *recherché* on Luther's use of the term "Lutheran". Interestingly enough, he found 118 quotations just of the German term "*Lutherisch(e)*" in a database provided by ProQuest. His superficial analysis that, unfortunately, because he passed away before completing it, could not completely convince me that

"Beyond the one famous early quotation within its context of rebellion and riot, Luther frequently and consistently accepted and used the label "Lutheran" for the sake of his doctrinal content."

According to Kittleson, the shift to a more content-oriented use of the term "Lutheran" happened with the approval of the Augsburg Confession 1530 as an evangelical document of faith. The proofs he presents, certainly allow this interpretation. Despite this, his argument lacks historical evidence. The interesting question to be precise would be whether other people, even Romans, accepted this label. Following this, the more question, referring to content, as to what type of theology and/or reform is identified by this term.

Kittleson claims that it was the Augsburg confession that became the content of the label “Lutheran”. The Augsburg Confession was certainly adopted as the essential signature of evangelical faith and, with that, as the doctrinal background of the label “Lutheran”. Since the Emperor Charles V. refuted the document, it was of public and legal interest, and it became the confession of the “Lutherans”. Nevertheless, one has to be extremely careful to not exaggerate the meaning of the Augsburg Confession toward this somewhat confessional interpretation. Designed as some kind of common sense among the Saxon faction within the German estates and territories, Melanchthon designed it in close coordination with the courtly consultants of the electoral prince as a paper for consensus. It became a definition for what it is to be Lutheran after the developments in Augsburg that, to my understanding, was never fully recognized as such by either Luther or by Melanchthon. It is not entirely clear to me how much these articulations of the evangelical faith became the leading ideas for understanding the term “Lutheran” by others beyond Luther and Melanchthon. For that reason, I would like to see what was labeled “Lutheran” even before the Augsburg Diet and how much this matches with Luther’s self-identification.

3 Confessional Identity before Confessionalization

Luther in another context gave some content as to what should be understood as the “evangelical” or “Lutheran” reformation. There are at least seven *notae* which characterized the evangelical reform initiated by Luther and his Wittenberg fellows:

- Initiation of reformed studies without Aristotle and the scholastic authorities,
- Bible studies given the highest priority,
- As a consequence, a reform of preaching and schooling oriented towards Early Church/Christianity as its sources,
- Abolition of wrong indulgence praxis,
- Reduction if not the eradication of pilgrimages and popular veneration of crosses in the field, statues of the saints etc.,

- Reform of monasteries and ecclesiastical foundations toward their original meaning as centres of spiritual recreation and schooling
- Mass instruction about Christian essentials (catechism), that is, school reform.

One proof of whether Luther's self-understanding matches the common use of his name as a label for the evangelical reform is the question: How much was his program acknowledged by those who claimed to be "Lutheran"?

Luther was expected to completely change the empire in the sense of the *gravamina germaniae nationis*, articulated on every diet since the middle of the 15th century. He became identified in different reform-oriented programs regarding:

- The ecclesiastical reform in head and body,
- The imperial reform,
- The social reform of the society with regard to education, national pride, or social justice (e.g., justice (treatment of the poor, sick, and elderly people),
- The educational reform of schools and universities.

Within the variety of different reform attempts shortly after his public entry Luther became the integral core of the movement. Thus, Luther became identified with many very different and sometimes even contradictory concepts that distorted his original attempts. While some of these 'reformers' indeed back to re-establish their sometimes romantic visions of a "golden past", others looked forward and tried to innovate changes toward modernization of administration, politics and culture. Many of these reforms were connected to the wide-ranging phenomena that we describe with the term "humanism". Even though some "humanists" deeply influenced Luther, he certainly did not join their movement. No wonder that he early started to refuse all of these connections.

One thing is the intention of a speaker or an author. Another thing is his reception. Thus the self-understanding of Luther is not expected to be compatible with

his reception in public. What was it that people identified with the label “Lutheran”? Popular Articulations of Evangelical or Lutheran Self-identification

Let us briefly look to some popular articulations of Evangelical or Lutheran self-identification:

3.1.1 *The Augsburg Anonymous – economic anti-clericalism*

The first mention of Luther occurs with regard to his fearless resistance to any kind of persecution in an anonymously published pamphlet of 1521. The author harshly criticizes the abuse of clerical privileges with regard to certain disproportionate economic distribution and the privilege that the Roman pontiff inherits the property of dead nobles. It seems obvious to me that what the author is reflecting on are the developments in Worms that happened earlier in the spring of the year. Interestingly, he continues with a few references to the metaphor comparing the gospel to a garden planted by Luther and Hutten. The evangelical movement gets interconnected, if not identified with, the knightly humanistic movement as the latter was a strong influence in the Rhine Valley. The following, widely anticlerical passages closely match the critique articulated about the diets by several estates and representatives of lower nobility and the imperial cities known as the *Gravamina germaniae nationis*. At this particular point, the identification with Luther is so general that he is diluted within these large reform oriented movements and loses his specific evangelical background. However, Luther himself had made this connection with his writing “To the Nobles...” possible. In that famous book Luther accuses the clergy of widespread abuse of ecclesiastical privileges and economic support. We must leave the question open as to whether Luther’s treatise was the link between the anonymous writer and the *Gravamina*, or whether it is just a coincidence that all three different sources referred to similar facts becoming with that an expression of the fairly widespread reform orientation in the Empire without any regard to social status or education. The latter interpretation supports intensively the position that the economically focussed performance of clergy, bishops, religious and monks provoked a strong anticlerical sentiment within the cities and a certain group of lower nobility. So Luther becomes

together with Hutten, the leading figure of an imperial if not national reform movement accentuating the reestablishment of the imperial knights with a strong anti-clerical accent:

And if someone asks who had made this booklet, you may tell them: It was made the worlds fool who is a good Lutheran. He made it to praise all nobles.

3.1.2 Popular Polemics

Between 1523 and 1524 the Nuernberg artist Hans Greiffenberger wrote at least seven smaller tracts to defend the Lutheran Reformation. Imprisoned because of his anti-papal paintings and his support of Karlstadt's understanding of the Eucharist in 1524, he was released after an admonition by Andreas Osiander. But in August 1526 he was sued again and punished because he had given the Eucharist to his dying wife without being a minister. In his first pamphlet "World says, there is no improvement of those, which are called Lutheran" he polemically discusses popular piety and its orientation to an outward and visible performance of faith. While he criticizes the popular trend toward foundations, masses, candles and public performance of faith within the Roman church and its followers, he also argues with a particular understanding of those who are labeled as Lutheran but in fact use this label to practice an unchristian, libertine, if not scandalous morality. After a polemical summary of traditional "good works" describing popular 'catholic' piety, he continues about his understanding of work's based holiness. Obviously, Greiffenberger was aware of the popular polemics against Lutherans which accused them of selling "cheap grace" and using the "liberation of the gospel" to perform disgusting libertinism and scandalous morality. Interestingly the Nuernberg artist defends a spiritual inwardly morality which is hidden if not invisible to the outer world.

The position of Greiffenberg well describes the years of differentiation within the Wittenberg Reformation where the spiritualist group, with especially Karlstadt at their front, stepped out and did not follow Luther's direction of a clear separation

from spiritualist or other nonconformist interpretations of the Bible. Nevertheless, he still feels, as a Lutheran or evangelical, the need to defend Luther and his followers from his spiritualistic perspective who he is able to identify with Luther's position.

4 Lutheran Theology?

Did no one at the time judge the use of the term "Lutheran" in light of the background of Luther's Theology? There were just a couple of pamphlets and tracts which dealt with Luther's theology focusing on the fact that in those early years no evidence could be found contrasting Scripture with reformation preaching.

4.1 Humanist sympathy for Luther – Lazarus Spengler

Already in 1519 the Nuernberg magistrate, the well educated and learned Lazarus Spengler, defended his support for Luther with the argument that Luther's teaching was at no point contradicted by scripture. Of his six arguments that he frequently used, only one deals with somewhat like an evangelical program; all the others argue more generally about the validity and dignity of Luther's position or his personality. After a first more general point claiming that Luther's reform attempts match Christian interests in total, the second section goes in a little more into detail when Spengler discusses the impressive piety that were the result of and the great experiences he had due to Luther's writings. It is of important relevance to Spengler that Luther opposed the public performance of piety in ceremonies, the use of the rosary, pilgrimages, candles, fasting and much more. Instead, the Nuernberg patrician prefers true piety "in faith which is modeled in the heart through the love of God in our hearts". He accuses the outward type of piety of following law more than grace, flesh more than the spirit. He then argues about the economic emphasis in regard to faith, not only through indulgence letters but through other pious practices as well.

Spengler's defense of Luther correlates the incoming reformer from Wittenberg, more or less, to the late medieval reform movement, not least to the reform oriented theology he new from John Staupitz and the observant branch of the her-

mits of Augustine. He reduces the attempt for theological reform to the most discussed question about pietistic practices, especially that of the indulgence letters. That matches with the public attention Luther's writing and preaching had gained, more or less, before 1520. With his remarks, Spengler is a true example of the reform-oriented clientele of Nuernberg who supported Luther even though coming from very different backgrounds and starting points of their requests for reform and/or reformation. Nevertheless, the treatise of Spengler is an important witness for the reception of Luther and what was understood as his teaching. Luther becomes identified with the reform movements of the 15th century, especially with some reform ideas which have roughly arisen from the background of some reform-oriented branches within the mendicants their representatives like Proles, Staupitz and others. While Spengler is closely related to a particular spiritualistic Augustinianism, others may have preferred the ecclesiastical understanding of salvation through the church and its offered sacramental reconciliation as it was, for instance, preached by John Paltz. Overall, Spengler's defense, as well as that of others like him, does not trespass the borderlines of late medieval theology and piety.

4.2 Making Luther's Name His Program – Haug Marschalck Named Zoller

With stronger backing for his theology, but also because of the change of Luther's name, an Augsburg patrician published a pamphlet together with other pro-Lutheran writings between 1521 and 1523. Haug Marschalck named Zoller (since 1500 in Augsburg; † 1535) refers to three misinterpretations of Luther's name. Marschalck rejects these polemics and turns every accusation against Luther against his opponents. He interprets the story of the three women appearing at the Grave in the early morning with the public expressions of Martin Luther, Andreas Karlstadt, and Philipp Melanchthon. The angel guarding the tomb and revealing the resurrection of Christ to the women became Frederick the Wise. Obviously, to the citizen of Augsburg, the unity of the Wittenberg reformation movement is almost evident and undivided in these years. Interestingly for our question, many times Marschalck refers to the pure gospel and its proclamation by the Wittenberg theologians.

Even though this does not relate to Luther's self-identification as sketched out previously by Moeller and Stackmann, it matches some of Luther's ideas and closely refers to his program of proclaiming the pure gospel. Marschalck also takes up some anti-clerical issues of his time, but they do not rule his argument in this particular writing. Thus we might interpret this pamphlet as one that does understand Luther indeed as a Lutheran with regard to his self-identification.

4.3 What is Luther's Reform? – Heinrich of Kettenbach

The public understanding of Luther's reform can be seen in Heinrich of Kettenbach's highly polemical writing defending Martin Luther against the bloodthirsty rumors of the papists. Even though it is not dated, it seems that Kettenbach published his pamphlet after he was expelled from Ulm in 1522 and was probably then living in Bamberg. Kettenbach lists ten accusations against Luther which give an idea of the anti-program which the Wittenberg reformers tried to push forward in order to destroy the Catholic Church:

- The reduction of the number of sacraments from seven to three or two,
- The reduction of the confession and its penitential power,
- The critique of the Holy Mass,
- The rumor and rebellious spirit in the Church caused by Luther,
- Luther preaches and teaches a new doctrine and a new faith,
- Luther did not perform evangelical love,
- Luther denied the laws for fasting and ascetic living,
- Luther is directed by wrath and anger,
- Luther's disciples are recruited mainly from illiterate and uneducated people,
- And, if Luther were right the Church had erred for many centuries.

Kettenbach adds four more items to his list regarding the many refugees from cloisters and monasteries: that Luther attracts careless and frivolous folk, that Lutherans have great tribulation and affliction while dying, and, finally, that Lutherans die improperly in the judgment of their contemporaries. The whole list is used by Kettenbach to turn these arguments against Luther's accusers. He does

not present too much positive material about Luther and the Lutherans. Still, we have a glance of how Luther and the Lutherans were disputed in public.

5 Conclusion

The potential list of pamphleteers and their publications describing the Lutheran Reformation, and with it the Lutherans, is endless. Thus we stop here in our investigation – actually a bit arbitrarily – and try to sum up:

The pamphlets we have sketched out in our survey were written by a particular group of people from the upper middle class if not the lower noble class. These writers were educated and knew, at least partially from their humanistic, patrician, or noble friends, what was going on in Worms and elsewhere. Because of that, they are not representative of what was discussed in the pubs, alehouses, or on the streets and the marketplaces about Luther and the Lutherans.

Even though their writings that were published as broadsheets and were very widely received influenced and impacted the popular understanding of Luther and the Lutherans, it was explicitly their intention to inform, correct and argue in public. Thus these pamphlets can be taken as one though certainly neither the only nor the most important source of what was talked about Luther and the Lutherans outside the walls of the university and the church.

We have no clear evidence as to how much their writings influenced the popular understanding of Luther and the Lutheran Reformation. Print runs and quotations show that these pamphlets and broadsheets were wide spread and found a great audience among the public. With regard to this result, one is tempted to say that in the early years of the reformation these pamphleteers and evangelical authors of a very different background made Luther a Lutheran. So the question to be raised is not so much: ‘What makes Luther a Lutheran?’ as it is far more: ‘Who made Luther a Lutheran?’

With regard to the very small portion of broadsheets and pamphlets we have investigated we might conclude that it was to a certain degree that the middle class

literate citizens and clergy which, in their efforts to defend the Wittenberg reformer, made Luther a Lutheran. They did it by identifying him with their different reform interests and attempts. With that, they spoiled the genuine Luther, and Lutheranism became some kind of educated middle class expression of reform and reformation culture which, almost 200 years later, led into "Protestantism". Luther is not so much of importance as much more the identity people could gain by listening to his sermons or reading his books, tracts, and pamphlets.

We do not have the time to investigate Luther's reaction to that and how much he himself supported these ideas. But a question which should be answered in the end is how much Luther's self identification matches with the picture made of him in the early years of the reformation.

Luther, programmatically, changed his name from Luder to Luther referring to his reformation conversion or breakthrough which allowed him to experience himself as the liberated preacher of the gospel. At least one broadsheet of Marschalck refers to that name and the program behind it. Even though, with a closer look, we have to admit that either Marschalck's or Kettenbach's and other's understanding of the reformation program differs from Luther's self identification: Luther refers to his – and of course others' – reformation of the academic studies of theology and its consequences for practical piety and its orientation towards the early church, his critique of indulgence praxis, pilgrimages, popular veneration of saints and statues in public, the reform of monasteries and ecclesiastical foundations, and, finally, the education of the youth. Marschalck, and with him many other writers, combine Luther's critique with a particular anti-clerical sentiment which actually distorts Luther's genuine intentions. Luther's critique of clergy, bishops, and finally, the Papacy, is the result of an intensive study of Scripture and a consequence of his search for theological or, even better, biblical foundations of contemporary practices for clergy and piety. The pamphleteers react to the numerous popular complaints and critique it by adding Luther's understanding to the widespread criticism of clergy and church. With that, he becomes the unifying figurehead of the reform movements and the large number of complain-

ers. Even though in a large number of pamphlets Luther is characterized as the true preacher of the gospel, they mostly deal with his very concrete critique which seems to match popular complaints.

It was Melanchthon, who in his answer to some questions of Cardinal Campeggio through his secretary Frederic Nausea, highlights this problem. It was neither freedom nor liberty nor a popular discussion about the value of external ceremonies which provoked Luther to initiate a reform. His motives also had nothing to do with a desire to innovate or to put something newly into the fore. Melanchthon's understanding of the Wittenberg reformation as lead by Luther focuses on the theological distinction between human and divine law or request, which causes a great variety of critique, reform requests, answers to long asked questions and so on. They are altogether grounded in Luther's thorough studies of Scripture.

With the background that quite a number of Lutherans did not fully get Luther's self-identification, and with it, his theology, we might conclude that Luther was not a Lutheran. On the contrary: he was made a Lutheran by his followers who did not share the same intellectual and religious grounds, and probably also not his cultural and educational breeding grounds as well. Despite this, they identified him and his mission with parts or even the sum of their reform attempts and the popular critique of many issues in 16th century society, culture, church, and piety. So they made him the hero of their reformation and no longer of "Luther's reformation".

Luther was also made Lutheran by his opponents, first of all by his Roman opponents from the Louvain, and Dominicans up to Eck, Emser, Alfeld, and Cochlaeus, to popular loyalists to the *curia* as quoted in the broadsheets they published in their own pamphlets to fight the Wittenberg Reformation. Popular opponents, even though not published in that large of a number, were more or less of the same importance in impacting the popular understanding of Luther and his reformation as the identifying polemic of his followers and disciples.

The making of Luther a Lutheran refers to his theology, even though it should be noted that especially in his early years he had not fully developed what we later call his theology. Thus I reject any methodological approach which judges popular reaction to Luther's theology on the basis of a later systematized Lutheran Orthodoxy. As I have shown in other contexts, Luther was not a systematic theologian. He never tried to invent a theological system. Properly understood, his writing has to be interpreted from the background of its historical setting and the very concrete context of his addressees and their situations. The main topic of Luther's theology was pastoral care. Thus he did not write with metaphysical reflection but with a pure heart and an existential concern as to how to forward the gospel in a world of affliction, temptation, grief and sorrow.

Luther was not a Lutheran. Those who made him Lutheran distorted an important amount of genuine theology and mission. Luther was a witness of the gospel within the unity of the Catholic Church. That was his belief which he never gave up on.