



THE
TABLETALK

of

MARTIN LUTHER



*Luther's comments on
life, the church and the Bible*

CHRISTIAN HERITAGE





© Christian Focus Publications
ISBN 1 85792 415 0



Republished in 2003
In the
Christian Heritage Imprint
by
Christian Focus Publications Ltd,
Geanies House, Fearn,
Ross-shire, IV20 1TW,
Great Britain



www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Owen Daily

Printed and bound by WS Bookwell, Finland

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INTRODUCTION



THE history of this remarkable volume, almost as extraordinary as its contents, is thus given by Captain Bell:



CAPTAIN HENRY BELL'S NARRATIVE:

Or, Relation of the miraculous preserving of Dr. Martin Luther's Book, entitled, Colloquia Mensalia, or, his Divine Discourses at his Table, held with divers learned Mesa and pious Divines; such as Philip Melancthon, Caspar Cruciger, Justus Jonas, Vitus Dietrich, John Bugenhagen, John Forster, etc.: containing Divers Discourses touching Religion, and other main Points of Doctrine; as also many notable Histories, and all sorts of Learning, Comforts, Advices, Prophecies, Admonitions, Directions, and Instructions.

I, Captain Henry Bell, do hereby declare, both to the present age, and also to posterity, that being employed beyond the seas in state affairs divers years together, both by king James, and also by the late king Charles, in Germany, I did hear and understand, in all places, great bewailing and lamentation made, by reason of the destroying and burning of above fourscore thousand of Martin Luther's books, entitled, 'His Last Divine Discourses'.

For after such time as God stirred up the spirit of Martin Luther to detect the corruptions and abuses of popery, and to preach Christ, and clearly to set forth the simplicity of the gospel, many kings, princes, and states, imperial cities, and Hans-towns, fell from the popish religion, and became protestants,



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as their posterities still are, and remain to this very day.

And for the further advancement of the great work of reformation then begun, the aforesaid princes, and the rest did then order, that the said Divine Discourses of Luther should forthwith be printed; and that every parish should have and receive one of the aforesaid printed books into every church throughout all their principalities and dominions, to be chained up, for the common people to read therein.

Upon which divine work, or Discourses, the Reformation, began before in Germany, was wonderfully promoted and increased, and spread both here in England, and other countries besides.

But afterwards it so fell out, that the pope then living, viz., Gregory XIII, understanding what great hurt and prejudice he and his popish religion had already received, by reason of the said Luther's Divine Discourses, and also fearing that the same might bring further contempt and mischief upon himself, and upon the popish church, he therefore, to prevent the same, did fiercely stir up and instigate the emperor then in being, viz., Rudolphus II to make an edict throughout the whole empire, that all the aforesaid printed books should be burnt; and also, that it should be death for any person to have or keep a copy thereof, but also to burn the same; which edict was speedily put in execution accordingly; insomuch that not one of all the said printed books, nor so much as any one copy of the same, could be found out nor heard of in any place.

Yet it pleased God, that, anno 1626, a German gentleman, named Casparus Van Sparr, with whom, in the time of my staying in Germany about King James's business, I became very familiarly known and acquainted, having occasion to build upon the old foundation of a house, wherein his grandfather dwelt at that time, when the said edict was published in Germany for the burning of the aforesaid books; and digging deep into the ground, under the said old foundation, one of the said original books was there happily found, lying in a deep obscure hole, being wrapped in a strong linen cloth, which was waxed all over with bees-wax, within and without; whereby the book was preserved fair, without any blemish.

And at the same time Ferdinandus II being emperor in Germany, who was a severe enemy and persecutor of the protestant religion, the aforesaid gentleman, and grandchild to him that had hidden the said books in that obscure hole, fearing that if the said emperor should get knowledge that one of the said books was yet forthcoming, and in his custody, whereby not only himself might be brought into trouble, but also the book in danger to be destroyed, as all the rest were so long before; and also calling me to mind, and knowing that I had the high Dutch tongue very perfect, did send the said



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original book over hither into England unto me; and therewith did write unto me a letter, wherein he related the passages of the preserving and finding out the said book.

And also he earnestly moved me in his letter, that for the advancement of God's glory, and of Christ's church, I would take the pains to translate the said book, to the end, that *that* most excellent divine work of Luther might be brought again to light.

Whereupon I took the said book before me, and many times began to translate the same, but always I was hindered therein, being called upon about other business: insomuch, that by no possible means I could remain by that work. Then, about six weeks after I had received the said book, it fell out, that I being in bed with my wife one night, between twelve and one of the clock, she being asleep, but myself yet awake, there appeared unto me an ancient man, standing at my bedside, arrayed all in white, having a long and broad white beard hanging down to his girdle steed, who taking me by my right ear, spake these words following unto me: 'Sirrah! will not you take time to translate that book which is sent unto you out of Germany? I will shortly provide for you both place and time to do it;' and then he vanished away out of my sight.

Whereupon being much thereby affrighted, I fell into an extreme sweat: insomuch, that my wife awaking, and finding me all over wet, she asked me what I ailed? I told her what I had seen and heard; but I never did heed nor regard visions nor dreams. And so the same fell soon out of my mind.

Then about a fortnight after I had seen that vision, on a Sunday, I went to Whitehall to hear the sermon; after which ended, I returned to my lodging, which was then at King Street; at Westminster, and sitting down to dinner with my wife, two messengers were sent from the whole council-board, with a warrant to carry me to the keeper of the Gatehouse, Westminster, there to be safely kept, until further order from the lords of the council; which was done without showing me any cause¹ at all wherefore I was committed. Upon which said warrant I was kept ten whole years close prisoner, where I spent five years thereof about the translating of the said book; insomuch as I found the words very true which the old man, in the aforesaid vision, did say unto me – 'I will shortly provide for you both place and time to translate it.'

Then after I had finished the said translation in the prison, the late archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Laud, understanding that I had translated such

1. The cause of the captain's commitment was his pressing the Lord Treasurer for arrears of pay.



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a book, called 'Martin Luther's Divine Discourses,' sent unto me his chaplain, Dr. Bray, into the prison, with this message following:

'Captain Bell,

'My lord grace of Canterbury, hath sent me unto you, to tell you, that his grace hath understood that you have translated a book of Luther's; touching which book his grace, many years before, did hear of the burning of so many thousands in Germany, by the then emperor. His grace therefore doth desire you, that you would send unto him the said original book in Dutch, and also your translation; which, after his grace hath perused, shall be returned safely unto you:

'Whereupon I told Doctor Bray, that I had taken a great deal of pains in translating the said book, and was very loath to part with it out of my hands; and, therefore, I desired him to excuse me to his grace, that I could not part from it; with which answer he at that time returned again to his master.

'But the next day after he sent him unto me again, and bid him tell me that, upon his honour, the book should be as safe in his custody, if not safer, than in mine own; for he would lock it up in his own cabinet, to the end no man might come unto it, but only himself. Thereupon, I knowing it would be a thing bootless for me to refuse the sending of them, by reason he was then of such great power, that he would have them, *nolens volens*, I sent them both unto him. Then after he had kept them in his custody two months, and had daily read therein, he sent the said doctor unto me, to tell me that I had performed a work worthy of eternal memory, and that he had never read a more excellent divine work; yet saying that some things therein were fitting to be left out, and desired me not to think long, that he did not return them unto me so soon again. The reason was, because that the more he did read therein, the more desire he had to go on therewith; and so presenting me with ten livres in gold, he returned back again.

'After which, when he had them in his custody one whole year, and that I understood he had perused it all over, then I sent unto his grace, and humbly desired, that his grace would be pleased to return me my books again. Whereupon he sent me word by the said Dr. Bray, that he had not as yet perused them so thoroughly over as he desired to do; then I stayed yet a year longer before I sent to him again.

'In which time I heard for certain, that it was concluded by the king and council, that a parliament should forthwith be called; at which news I did much rejoice. And then I sent unto his grace an humble petition,



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and therein desired the returning of my book again; otherwise I told him I should be enforced to make it known, and to complain of him to the parliament, which was then coming on. Whereupon he sent unto me again safely both the said original book, and my translation, and caused his chaplain, the said doctor, to tell me, that he would make it known unto his majesty what an excellent piece of work I had translated, and that he would procure an order from his majesty to have the said translation printed, and to be dispersed throughout the whole kingdom, as it was in Germany, as he had heard thereof; and thereupon he presented me again with forty livres in gold.

‘And presently after I was set at liberty by warrant from the whole House of Lords, according to his majesty’s direction in that behalf: but shortly afterwards the archbishop fell into his troubles, and was by the parliament sent unto the Tower, and afterwards beheaded. Insomuch that I could never since hear anything touching the printing of my book.

‘The House of Commons having then notice that I had translated the aforesaid book, they sent for me, and did appoint a committee to see it, and the translation, and diligently to make enquiry whether the translation did agree with the original or no; whereupon they desired me to bring the same before them, sitting then in the Treasury Chamber. And Sir Edward Dearing being chairman, said unto me, that he was acquainted with a learned minister beneficed in Essex, who had lived long in England, but was born in High Germany, in the Palatinate, named Mr. Paul Amiraute, whom the committee sending for, desired him to take both the original and my translation into his custody, and diligently to compare them together, and to make report unto the said committee whether he found that I had rightly and truly translated it according to the original: which report he made accordingly, and they being satisfied therein, referred it to two of the assembly, Mr. Charles Herle, and Mr. Edward Corbet, desiring them diligently to peruse the same, and to make report unto them if they thought it fitting to be printed and published.

‘Whereupon they made report, dated the 10th of November, 1646, that they found it to be an excellent divine work, worthy the light and publishing, especially in regard that Luther, in the said Discourses, did revoke his opinion, which he formerly held, touching Consubstantiation in the Sacrament. Whereupon the House of Commons, the 24th of February, 1646, did give order for the printing thereof.

‘Thus having been lately desired to set down in writing the relation of the passages above said concerning the said book, as well for the satisfaction of judicious and godly Christians, as for the conservation of



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the perpetual memory of God's extraordinary providence in the miraculous preservation of the aforesaid Divine Discourses, and now bringing them again to light, I have done the same according to the plain truth thereof, not doubting but they will prove a notable advantage of God's glory, and the good and edification of the whole church, and an unspeakable consolation of every particular member of the same.

'Given under my hand the third day of July, 1650.

HENRY BELL'²



The contents of the book themselves were gathered from the mouth of Luther, by his friends and disciples, and chiefly by Antony Lauterbach and John Aurifaber (Goldschmidt), who were very much with the great Reformer towards the close of his life. They consist of notes of his discourses, of his opinions, his cursory observations, in the freedom of private friendship, in his walks, during the performance of his clerical duties, and at table, The reporters were brim-full of zeal: whatever 'the man of God' uttered was forthwith entered upon their tablets. They were with him at his uprising and his down-lying; they looked over his shoulder as he read or wrote his letters; did he utter an exclamation of pain or of pleasure, of joy or of sorrow, down it went: did he aspirate a thought above breath, it was caught by the intent ear of one or other of the listeners, and committed to paper. An anecdote, told by Luther himself to Dr. Zingreff, amusingly illustrates the assiduity of these German Boswells. During a colloquy, in which Dominus Martinus was exhibiting his wonted energetic vivacity, he observed a disciple hard at work



2. A Copy of the Order from the House of Commons

24th February, 1646

Whereas Captain Henry Bell has strangely discovered and found a book of Martin Luther's, called his Divine Discourses, which was for a long time very marvellously preserved in Germany: the which book, the said Henry Bell at his great costs and pains, hath translated into the English out of the German tongue which translation and substance thereof is approved by Reverend Divines of the Assembly, as appears by a certificate under their hands:

It is ordered and ordained by the Lords and Commons assembled in parliament, that the said Henry Bell shall have the sole disposal and benefit of printing the said book, translated into English by him as aforesaid, for the space of fourteen years, to commence from the date hereof. And that none do print or reprint the same, but such as shall be licensed by the said captain by authority under his hand.

(Vera Copia) HENRY ELSYNG



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with pencil and paper. The doctor, slyly filling his huge wooden spoon with the gruel he was discussing by way of supper, rose, and going up to the absorbed note-taker, threw the gruel in his face, and said, laughing lustily: 'Put that down too.' There can be as little doubt of the completeness as of the authenticity of their notes. Filled with the most profound respect for 'the venerable man of God', they would have deemed it sacrilege to omit, or alter, or modify, aught that fell from his lips. The oracle had spoken; it was their pride and glory to repeat his words with the most scrupulous fidelity. We will describe the result., in the words of an eloquent letter to the translator, prefixed to the folio edition of 1652:

Herein is a full character of the free and zealous spirit of Martin Luther, who was a man of God raised in his generation with invincible courage to beat down the strongest holds of Satan, wherein for many generations he had captivated the spirits of our forefathers under poperie. The depth and soliditie of his judgment may be discovered in the writings which he himself did publish in his life-time: but in this collection of his extemporary discourses published since his death, the fullness of his affection, and genuine readiness of his spirit, may be seen, which did incline him to advance the truth of the gospel, and manifest the testimonie of Jesus upon all occasions. And truly, I have met (in that which I have looked upon) with many excellent and fundamental truths, necessarie to be minded in this age, as well as in that wherein he spake them; and the gracefulness which they have in their familiar and careless dress, doth make them the more commendable to all men of ingenuitie, not only of popular capacities, but even of more raised thoughts. Whence I do probably conjecture that the plainness and great variety of matters contained in these discourses, did in the first reformation ingratiate the delivery and insinuate the consideration of most eminent truths with acceptance into all men's apprehensions, so far as to cause the enemies of those truths to endeavour the suppressing of this book, which they found to be so much taking with everybody, and so full of deadly blows given to their superstition and hierarchic, to their profaneness, hypocrisie, and impietie.

We should, indeed, seek in vain elsewhere for more striking and interesting specimens of the talents, the disposition, and the manners of the great Reformer, than in this volume of his '*Table-Talk*'. And certainly if the personal character of any individual deserves to be dwelt upon, it is that of Luther. In no other instance have such great events depended upon the courage, sagacity, and energy of a single man, nor can there be





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found a more profitable study than the temper and peculiarities of one, who, by his sole and unassisted efforts, made his solitary cell the heart and centre of the most wonderful and important commotion the world ever witnessed; who, by the native force and vigour of his genius, attacked and successfully resisted, and at length overthrew the most awful and sacred authority that ever imposed its commands on mankind.

In perusing the work itself, we may here observe, it must always be recollected that they show the Reformer in his undress, and are not to be taken as specimens of what he wrote or preached when girded up for great occasions; – though it maybe observed that, like most men of genius, there was less difference in the language and manner of Luther in private and public, than is the case with those who cannot afford to be free, homely, and familiar: – a great peculiarity of both his preaching and writing was, that, despising all form and authority, he went straight to the hearts of his hearers and readers, and never hesitated to use an image or impression, however coarse or homely, provided it conveyed his meaning with liveliness and force.



The first German edition of the *Tischreden*, or Table-Talk, of Martin Luther, a folio volume, was published at Eisleben, in 1566, under the editorial care of John Aurifaber. This edition was reprinted twice in 1567, and a fourth time in 1568. The last reprint is prefaced by some new pages from the pen of the editor, who complains of one Dr. Kugling, as having, in a rival edition, made material alterations of the text. This rival edition, however, would appear never to have got beyond the manuscript form; at all events, it is unknown to bibliographers. The four editions already specified are exact reproductions, the one of the thero, infinite typographical blunders included. In 1569 appeared a new edition (Frankfurt, folio), with an appendix ‘of prophecies which the venerable man of God, just before his holy death, delivered unto divers learned theologians and ecclesiastics, with many consolatory letters, opinions, narratives, replies, etc., never before made public.’ The dedication ‘to the Council of Rauschemberg,’ dated 24th March, 1568, intimates that the editor, John Fink, had derived his new materials from various books and writings of Martin Luther. The Prophecies, it is added, were due to the research of George Walther, preacher at Hallé.

Fabricius (*Centifolium Lutheranium*, p. 301) mentions two other editions in folio, Eisleben, 1569 and 1577, but no copies of these editions are at present known.

The next editor of the *Tischreden* was Andrew Stangwald, a Prussian, the



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continuator of the *Centuries of Magdeburg*, who, in his preface, complains of the previous editions as very defective in their matter, and full of flagrant errors of typography. He states that his own corrected and enlarged edition had been prepared from various manuscript conversations in his possession, aided by ample marginal notes to a copy of the original edition, formerly belonging to one of Luther's intimate associates, Dr. Joachim Merlinus. Stangwald's compilation, which appeared in 1571 (Frankfurt), was reprinted in 1590, with a dedication to the council of Mulhausen, and a preface, wherein the editor announces a supplementary volume of colloquies and sayings, which, however, was never produced. The same text, but with Aurifaber's preface in lieu of Stangwald's, was reprinted in 1603 (Jena), and again in 1621 (Leipzig), and once more, after an interval of 80 years, in 1700 (Leipzig), when Stangwald's preface was given as well as Aurifaber's, and Walther's collection of Prophecies appended. This arrangement was re-produced in 1723 (Dresden and Leipzig).



Another contemporary with Luther, Nicholas Selneuer, had also applied himself to the task of arranging his master's Table-Talk, and the result of his labours, prefaced by a Life of the great Reformer, appeared in 1577, and again in 1580, folio. This edition, however, does not materially depart from the text of Stangwald.



The Tischreden, which had been hitherto excluded from the various collective editions of Luther's German works, were incorporated by Walch in the ponderous edition of 1743 (Hallé), but they were never inserted in the folio editions of the Reformer's Latin works. A selection from them, indeed, appeared in Latin, immediately after their first publication in German. This selection (Frankfurt, 1566, 8vo.) is entitled '*Silvula Sententiarum, exemplarum, Historiarum, allegiarum, similitudinum, facetiarum, parting ex reverendi Viri D. Martini Lutheri ac Philippi Melancthonis cum privatis tum publicis relationibus, partim ex aliorum veterum atque recentium doctorum monumentis observata.*' The translator, Dr. Ericius, however, while making extracts only from Aurifaber, gives a number of articles omitted by the German editor. Next, in 1558–1571, Dr. Henry Peter Rebenstok, pastor of Eschersheim, sent forth in two volumes (Frankfurt-on-the-Maine, 8vo.): '*Colloquia, Meditationes, Consolationes, Consilia, judicia, sententiae, narrationes, responsa, facetiae, D. Martini Lutheri, piae et sanctae memorise in mens prandiiâ et caenae et in peregrinationibus observata et fideliter transcripta.*' Dr. Rebenstok informs us that his version was rendered not from Aurifaber, but from later editors. It was from this translation, couched in the most barbarous Latin, and replete with blunders of every description, that



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Bayle criticised the '*Colloquia Xensalia*'. The edition itself, now excessively rare, is described by the Marquis du Roure, in his '*Analecta-biblion*' (Techener, 1840).

Of the English translation, by Captain Bell, an account has already been given.

In preparing that translation, the captain appears to have been animated by the same closely scrupulous and somewhat indiscriminating fidelity which characterized the labours of those who compiled the original work. Some of the more impossible *facetiae*, indeed, which escaped the plain-spoken German in the elasticity of post-prandial converse, the translator has omitted or modified, but the infinite repetitions of 'Meditationes, Consolationes, consilia, judicia, narrationes, responsa', in the same or closely similar words, he has reproduced with the most provoking pertinacity.

It is by the omission – carefully considered – of these repetitions, that I have been enabled in the present version, and its companion volume of the 'EUROPEAN LIBRARY', the Life of Luther, to give, not merely the contents of Aurifaber's collection, but large additions from the various other editors above specified. The chapters, in particular, of Antichrist, of the Devil and his Works, and of the Turks (which Michelet specifies as peculiarly interesting) have all been materially enlarged in this way. The ample index now given is an entirely new feature.

W. HAZLITT
Middle Temple