Martin Luther on God as a Father

by Birgit Stolt

"Enough has been written in books, yes; but it has not been driven home to the hearts."1

LUTHERANISM HAS SOMETIMES been accused of being an intellectualized religion, more concerned with the mind than with the heart. If this is so, the fault definitely does not lie with Martin Luther. For him there existed no true belief in God without a profound involvement of the whole person. It is the aim of this paper to illuminate the importance Luther attached to the role the "heart" plays in the relationship between the human being and God. The stress is not placed on Luther's formal theology but on his devotional life. Theology and devotion are different parts of religion, one dealing foremost with theory and the mind, the other, with practice and the "heart." "To be sure, the saints understood the Word of God and could also speak about it, but their practice did not keep pace with it. Here one forever remains a learner," Luther is reported to have said in the early 1530s.2 The focus for this study is this learning-process, the relationship between theory and practice in Luther's life, specifically regarding the concept of God as a Father.

In the Bible the heart is the center of the personality and seat for all human faculties: intelligence, feeling, will, desires, and so forth.3 Today we have assigned thinking solely to the brain and feeling only to the heart. In such a view, emotions are apt to hamper clear reasoning. The biblical "heart" is a difficult problem for today's translators of the Bible. If they keep the word "heart," the text is easily sentimentalized or considered "poetic" by modern readers. If they replace it by, for example, "mind" or "thoughts," they intellectualize it, since feeling is then left out, contrary to the meaning of the original. I give only one example, from Isaiah 6:10, where according to the King James version understanding is an act of the heart: "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and
hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." A modern translation reads instead: "understand with their wits." This is correct inasmuch as "understanding" is a work of the mind. But in the Bible the mind was never shut off from the other faculties of the heart but was imbibed by them. Our modern way of separating thinking from those faculties makes us believe that Isaiah, in the modern translation, deals with an intellectual process only, while the biblical concept of the heart means so much more. In the heart, as the center of human personality, seat of reason, understanding, decision-making, emotionality, and so forth, the human being meets God. It is our modern separation of thinking ("cool," in the head) and feeling ("warm," in the heart), that leads to a foreshortened understanding of the biblical text and turns conversion and healing in the Isaiah text into a result of (cool) intellectual reasoning alone. In the parable of the sower the seed is sown in the heart (Luke 8:12-15). When the Bible says that somebody was "thinking in his heart" this is no metaphor for emotional thinking. It could on occasion refer to hidden thoughts that are only apparent to God and Christ (Matthew 9:4; Mark 2:8). From the heart proceed evil thoughts (Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21). Even the New English Bible reads: "the faith that leads to righteousness is in the heart" (Romans 10:10).

Since Martin Luther translated the Bible so that everybody would be able to understand it, and because of the stress he put on preaching and teaching, we are easily led to regard Lutheranism as a religion primarily for the mind. The Catechism, too, so intimately connected with Martin Luther's name, could remind some of a schoolroom. But, regarding the human heart and its part in religion, Martin Luther shared the biblical view of Augustine. Some examples must suffice to illustrate this point. The intimate connection between thoughts and emotions is amply demonstrated in Luther's Preface to the Psalter. The heart is first pictured as a ship on a wild sea, driven by storm winds from the four corners of the world. Here the heart is the seat of emotions. Luther names them: grief and sadness, hope and joy. Speaking to God means "to open the heart and pour out what lies at the bottom of it." The Psalter places before us "their [i.e., the saints'] very hearts and inmost treasure of their souls, so we can look down to the foundation and source of their words and deeds. We can look into their hearts and see what kind of thoughts they had, how their hearts were disposed, and
how they acted in all kinds of situations, in danger and in need.” We can see “how their hearts were toward God.” These hearts are also compared to beautiful gardens, where fair and happy thoughts toward God spring up like “fine and pleasant flowers.” Thoughts and feelings are thus interdependent, they engender each other.

The importance of the concept of “heart” for Christian faith is most impressively illustrated in Luther’s “house sermon” on the Apostles’ Creed (1537). In the third part, dealing with the Holy Spirit, the heart is named no less than fifteen times. There is no belief in God without feeling it “in the heart.” Just hearing and knowing is not enough: “a human being might be redeemed, but as long as he or she does not believe it, does not feel it, it is not in his or her heart.” “A lazy, cold soul may speak with its mouth: ‘I believe in God,’ but in its heart neither knows nor feels what it is saying.” “The Pope and his followers may have it in their books, but because they do not feel it in their hearts, they despise it.” It is the work of the Holy Spirit, poured by God into the heart, who enables the heart to grasp the gospel, “for in those who hear it a flame is kindled so that their heart says: That is really true, even if I should die a hundred times over for it.” This describes what Luther means by “to believe with the heart,” when he writes in his German Mass and Order of Service (1526): “What does it mean to believe in God? Answer: It means to trust in him with all your heart and confidently to expect all grace, favor, help, and comfort from him, now and forever. What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ his Son? Answer: It means to believe with the heart that we would all be eternally lost if Christ had not died for us, etc.”

Martin Luther’s concept of anthropology can be called “holistic.” Nowadays we tend more and more to return to a holistic view of ourselves. The modern way of separating feeling from thinking is wholly artificial and can very often not stand up to scrutiny. Most of the seven deadly sins of the Middle Ages were what we today would class as feelings: hate, envy, greed, lust, pride. The confession of sin names “thoughts, words and deeds,” but the most important of all commandments prescribes a “feeling” in the modern sense of the word: the loving of God and one’s neighbors. The difficulty for us to understand Luther today when he speaks of the heart does not arise so much out of his expressing himself in terms of the late Middle Ages, but from our own anthropology and our limited view of human contact with
divinity. Having stressed the importance of feeling for Luther we need to underline that this is not to be mistaken for sentimentality. For him, feeling was never devoid of thinking, and the “heart” is not only warm and intense but also clever. As a last example of Luther’s concept of the heart, consider his “Open letter on Translating” (1530). Having dealt with difficult problems of Bible translation he exclaims: “Ah, translating is not every man’s skill . . . . It requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart.”

We now turn to the part emotion plays in Luther’s devotional practice, where he pronounced himself to be a lifelong learner. The greatest commandment in the Bible requests: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). We will here concentrate on the concept of God as the Father. The word “father” arouses feelings (in linguistics called “connotations”) which in everybody’s life are necessarily colored by personal experience. Martin Luther’s parents seem to have been austere, stern, and demanding. A painting by Lukas Cranach from 1527 portrays them as grim and awe-inspiring, the mother even more so than the father. In later years Luther told his friends how severely he had been punished as a boy for minor offences, both by his mother and by his father. He even said that it was the austerity of his parents that had driven him to enter the monastery. Some biographers feel that Luther had not been treated worse than what was the custom in those days. That may be the case, but it does not alter the fact that memories of their sternness were never forgotten and in later years colored his childhood remembrances. The conception of God as a Father, and the feelings aroused by the word “father,” were bound to be influenced by his experience as a child. At least one psychologist has interpreted the young monk’s struggle and anguish in the monastery and despair of God’s grace along the lines of his memories from early childhood. The release Martin found in Romans 1:17, abolishing once and for all the aspiration towards righteousness by human efforts and putting all faith in Christ and the grace of God alone, has been interpreted and explained in terms of this context.

This evangelical breakthrough was a result of exegetical studies, and was of tremendous importance for Luther’s theology. But to change the old connotations of the word “father” “in his heart” was another matter. It stands to reason that this could not be ac-
complished overnight. Theory is one thing, practice another. "Here one forever remains a learner." It is reasonable to assume that the image of God the Father was softened by Luther's new understanding, but we cannot be sure that this was the case. For Lutherans of the following generations there was a risk that one kind of human effort and uneasiness was replaced by another: is my faith really strong and heartfelt enough?

We have access to Luther's expressions about God as a Father in his Table Talk, his biblical commentaries, and occasionally his letters. It will be shown in the following that the Luther of later years had a far more endearing image of God the Father than the young theologian. An explanation for this change in the connotation of the word "father" will be sought not foremost in abstract theology but in Luther's life experience. Martin Luther was a man of strong emotions and was exceptionally gifted in their expression. There is a strong emotional undercurrent to his Bible translation. His aim was a language that spoke to the reader's heart. Accordingly he took great care to find appropriate and moving German equivalents for the feelings expressed in the original: love, grief and, particularly, joy. When he gave an explanation for his choice of words we get an insight not only into his work as a translator but also into his own religious life. One of these instances concerns Psalm 54:6. David is asking God for help against his enemies and promises him a sacrifice. "I will offer thee a willing sacrifice" is the translation of the New English Bible. Modern German and Swedish versions all stress the willingness of the one who prays. But Luther has another view of the matter and translates, "I will offer thee a sacrifice of joy" (ein Freudenopfer). He explains this choice of words: "To offer a sacrifice of laughter and joy, because our God likes it when we rejoice in Him, because He is so good, kind, comforting, fills the heart with joy..." 17

This description from 1531 pictures quite another God than the grim image the young monk was wrestling with in the monastery. This is the kind of God Luther felt he met in his prayers during the 1530s and onward: kind, loving, comforting, joygiving. The new understanding of his mind is matched by the feelings of his heart. What happened to Luther in the latter 1520s, and must profoundly have affected his feelings concerning the concept of fatherhood as such, was the momentous experience of becoming a father himself. Before that, his concept of a "father" had been
formed from his perspective as a child. For the first time he now learned what it meant and how it felt to have a child of one's own. He was forty-two years old when he became a father for the first time. Hans was born in 1526, and Martin the father was deeply moved by the event. Then they came one after the other: Elizabeth in 1527, Magdalena (his favorite "Lenichen") in 1529, Martin in 1531, Paul in 1533, Margaretha in 1534. There are ample proofs that Luther was a dedicated and loving father. "A child, as they say, is the best wool that one can shear from the sheep," he is reported to have said in the fall of 1532.

Until one has a child of one's own, it is difficult to imagine how deeply parental love is felt. Luther was amazed by the intensity of this emotion. "Never before would I have believed that a father's heart could have such tender feelings for his children," he writes in a letter of 1528 to Nicholas Hausmann. He had just lost his young daughter Elizabeth at the age of eight months. The letter tells of his profound grief. "It is amazing what a sick, almost woman-like heart she has left to me, so much has grief for her overcome me." In the Town Church at Wittenberg one can today still find a small gravestone with the girl's name: "Elizabeth Luther." In a Table Talk from the same time, Luther counts as the most poignant event in human life the loss of a loving spouse and, next to this, the loss of a child. "How much this hurts I have myself experienced," is his heartfelt comment on the latter. He was later to lose even his favorite "Lenichen" when she was thirteen. His grief is documented in the Table Talk from 1542.

From 1526 onwards we can note how Martin Luther's concept of fatherhood undergoes a change. The memory of his own father is now colored over by his own experience of having children—small children! His life went on in close proximity with his rapidly growing family. Luther engaged himself in the education of his children and enjoyed their childish thoughts about God, the angels, and heaven. He noted their baby talk and compared their deficiency in speech with the adult's deficiency in Christian belief. In a Table Talk from 1531 he mentions that he daily teaches his Hans and little Leni and prays with them. They were then five and two years old, respectively. This is reflected in an addition to the Small Catechism during the same year. Five years earlier, in 1526, he had written: "What is meant when you say: Our Father in Heaven? Answer: That God is not an earthly, but a heavenly Father who
would make us rich and blessed in heaven.” In 1531 he revises his Catechism and adds this answer: “By these words God will call us to believe that he is our real father and we his real children, so that we may turn to him in our prayer with every trust and faith, as dear children to their dear father.” This is what Hans and little Leni were taught. The difference in warmth and simplicity is striking.

Luther learned how it feels when a parent lovingly bends down to lift up a small child, only to find with dismay that he or she is in urgent need of a change of diapers. You do not love the child less on this account, but you have to do something about the diapers! It seems that for Luther this part in child care is one of the most distinctive features of parental love. “Mother love is stronger than the filth and scableness on a child,” he once remarked. I suppose he was watching while Katie took care of a soiled infant, comforting it the while. But Luther would not have been Luther, and the remark would not have been noted down by his onlookers, if he had stopped there. In a characteristic turn of mind he went on: “and so the love of God toward us is stronger than the dirt that clings to us. Accordingly, although we are sinners, we do not lose our filial relation on account of our filthiness.” Here we can grasp the close affinity between Luther’s family life with its down-to-earth, everyday experience and strong feelings on the one hand and his theological thinking on the other. In Luther’s German, sins are said to be “stinking.” Das stinkt zum Himmel (“that stinks to high heaven”) is a way to express indignation over an offence. The association between the stench from soiled diapers and the sins of grown-ups was therefore not so far-fetched. Luther made it repeatedly. “God the Father has to bear much worse stench from human beings than a father and a mother from their children,” and “How our Lord God has to put up with many a murmur and stink from us, worse than a mother must endure from her child.”

Notably, it is not only the human father’s love towards his children that is compared to the love of God towards humankind, but explicitly also the love of a mother. The model is Luther’s wife Katie. In November 1531 a new-born son was also christened “Martin.” Talking to him his mother used the endearing form Martinchen, “little Martin.” When his son and namesake was a few weeks old, Luther is reported to have said: “God must be much friendlier to me and speak to me in friendlier fashion even than my Katie to
little Martin."" In his prayers the voice of God thus takes on the sound of his wife's voice when caressing and talking to the infant in her lap. The words in Matthew 18:3 ("Unless you become like children . . .") were in Luther's life thus illuminated by tangible, deep-felt experience; and the category of "children" included even the smallest, most helpless infants.

In the 1530s, Luther feels he is talking with this kind of a father in his prayers: a father not principally awe-inspiring but a source of trust and joy. After having discussed the difficulty for human beings to grasp in their hearts the meaning of the first words of the Creed, "I believe in God the Father . . . ," and the need of trusting in Him, he goes on: "Whenever I happen to [be] prevented by the press of duties from observing my hour of prayer I feel sick all day. Prayer helps us very much and fills the heart with joy, not on account of any merit in the work, but because we have spoken with God and left everything to his care."

We also find Luther drawing from everyday family experience when interpreting biblical passages. Sometimes this provides us with a vivid picture of his life during the early 1530s. We can see him sitting and writing at his table, while one or two children are playing around him. Now and then they are disturbing him and he needs to call out for less noise. From such an everyday situation Luther can catch an illuminating insight into an otherwise problematic Bible text. In the Table Talk we find a discussion of Psalm 2:11, where the problem is the combination of love and fear while serving God. It is here cited in Latin: *Servite ei in timore et exultate ei cum tremore* ("Serve the Lord with fear, and exult with trembling"). Luther ponders how it is possible to do both at the same time, namely to exult and to tremble. "My Hans can do it in relation to me, but I can't do it in relation to God. When I'm writing or doing something else, my Hans sings a little tune for me. If he becomes too noisy and I rebuke him a little for it, he continues to sing but does it more privately and with a certain awe and uneasiness. This is what God wishes: that we be always cheerful, but with reverence." "My Hans can do it, but I can't . . ." The fear of his own harsh and stern father had by far outstripped love in Luther's childhood. When he himself became a father, he repeatedly said that children ought not to be punished too hard. There was always to be "an apple beside the rod," meaning, of course, that love and comfort should never be far off.
This sound principle seems to have had its effect even with regard to religion: the child Hans can combine love with respect for his father and ought therefore to be able to identify with this verse from the Psalms which his father could not. Stating his own emotional shortcomings, Luther presents the childish attitude of his son towards him as his father as a model for how God wants us to be according to the Psalm. The problem is, of course, the combination of both trust and fear. In the utterances from the Table Talk cited above, the parent-child relationship is seen from the point of view of the grown-ups. There only love and care is mentioned, fear is absent. In the grappling with the Psalm quoted above, besides the obvious difference between the struggle for faith in the presence of God that is a constant for all believers, I think one also may find the limits of Luther’s victory over the lasting memories from his childhood fear of his own father. This emotion was too strong to allow for mitigation. If there is strong fear, no joy in the presence of this father is possible, even for the mature man. Perhaps there had never been “an apple beside the rod” for the boy Martin. It is this “apple”—one has to suppose—that enables Martin’s son to believe in the love even of a stern father and so combine love, trust and joy with reverence, as in that verse from the Psalm.

It is characteristic for Luther’s way of thinking that he can combine the most trivial with the sublime: the manifestation of parental love and care in the most unattractive business of child rearing, the changing of soiled diapers, with the sacred, forgiving love of God. In his emotional assessment of biblical texts, from the later 1520s on, his own experiences from everyday family life can be detected. It is not far-fetched to assume that these experiences colored his religious experience and outlook and so influenced his theological and biblical work. “For him, Christianity was no synthesis of learning and revelation, but man’s actual life with God,” writes Lewis W. Spitz. Given the emotional intensity that is a distinguishing feature in his character, given his intimate involvement with family life and the strong emotional undercurrent of his theology, it would in fact have been strange if Luther’s conception of God as a Father had not undergone a change and development during his later years. What we have witnessed is a part of the “learning process” of combining understanding of the mind with heartfelt practice. “Here one forever remains a learner.”


2. WA TR, no. 81; LW 54:9.


5. This is especially stressed by Maxsein, pp. 40-42.


8. WA 45:11-24, translated by the author.


12. WA TR, no. 3566 a+b; LW 54:234f. See also Ian Siggins, Luther and His Mother (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).


17. WA DB 3:56, Luther's annotations to the revision of the Psalter, 1531, translated by the author.

18. WA TR, no. 374; LW 54:59.


20. WA TR, no. 250; LW 54:33.


22. WA TR, no. 6569 translated by the author.

23. WA TR, no. 81; LW 54:19.


Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 346. I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this addition.

26. WA TR, no. 437; LW 54:70.
27. WA TR, no. 3203 a,b, translated by the author. WA TR, no. 1615; LW 54:158 f.
28. WA TR, no. 1237; LW 54:127.
29. WA TR, no. 122: “so ist mir den ganzen tag danach übel.” The translation in LW 54:17, “the entire day is bad for me,” is not adequate.
31. LW’s translation: “found everything to be in order” is not the correct one for “ihm alles haben heim gestellt.”
33. WA TR, no 3566 a+b (cf. also no. 1559); LW 54:234f., 157.
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