



The Pilgrim

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

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1527 + 450

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I have been reading about, and participating in, some of the observances of the 450th year since an Augustinian monk walked down the narrow streets of Wittenberg through the fallen leaves to the Schlosskirche in order to nail a document on the heavy oak door. He knew that on the next day — the day of the Feast of All Saints — the farmers from the surrounding villages would head for Wittenberg for a beer, a mass, and the latest news. These holiday crowds would surely see the unusually large sheet of paper on the door and wonder what it was all about. Someone would be around to translate the scholarly Latin into German — probably not all ninety-five of the statements which he had written in an agony of rebellion and love for the truth, but enough of them to get his protest across to these people who were members of the flock which he had been called to shepherd. Actually, if they grasped the meaning of only the first five of his statements they would know what the shooting was all about. So the monk nailed his scrawled notice on the door, whispered a prayer, and turned to the setting sun.

Now, after 450 years (four and a half centuries), many millions of us on a much later pilgrimage are trying to remember what the monk had on his mind. At this time and distance from the little German town and its fledgling university trying so hard to compete with prestigious Erfurt this will be an enormous task. Now in 1967 many of the hundreds of millions of words that will be said and written will be irrelevant, blind and hurt by the slow dark stain of the centuries. We shall attempt to see Martin Luther through twentieth century eyes, and we shall surely fail to understand him. He can be seen clearly only through the timeless eyes of God.

Perhaps it is this which has worried me about the preparations for the 450th anniversary of the lonely walk of the hesitant monk. Our plans for remembering have been so complete, so brilliantly organized, so thoroughly worked out that we could not possibly have failed. We have garnered a gratifying number of headlines. We have gotten some prime radio time.

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Even the great god Television has taken notice of the lowly monk and his spiritual descendants.

One should be grateful, of course, for whatever opportunity such “exposure” gives us to remind ourselves and the world around us of the Gospel which Luther was concerned to defend against the abuses of the indulgence racket. Nevertheless, I feel somewhat uneasy about it all. Are these momentary things a modern echo of the kingdoms of this world which our Lord saw, and rejected, during His forty days in the desert? I really do not know, but I cannot quite escape the suspicion that the Evil One, when he has no other recourse, persuades the children of Light to organize these things. Once they have been organized, certain results seem to follow almost inevitably. The Committee on Arrangements will quarrel with the Program Committee; the Committee on Music will get into a hassle with the choir director; and the clergy will become embroiled in a heated dispute on the choice of a speaker. He must, many will insist, be “safe,” a follower of Erasmus rather than a disciple of the belligerent and uncouth monk.

By the way, a few months ago I got stuck on a paragraph in a Roman Catholic journal which has some striking relevance to our time and to all that I have been trying to say in these lines. The author describes the beginnings of the Reformation. He is, of course, especially interested in the approach of Roman Catholic theologians to the controversy with the young Augustinian. ⁱ The following paragraph is, I think, not only relevant but a very accurate reflection of what was going on:

Men made ready for debate with lists of errors. John Eck, a theologian (by no means a negligible one) and a champion of Catholicism at the beginning of the Reformation, came in 1530 to the Diet of Augsburg at which the Emperor was hoping to unite the two contending parties. Master Eck brought a list of 404 errors which he had found in Luther’s teachings. But men did even better later on. The lists grew longer. There was that good Franciscan of the sixteenth century who called himself “Ardent Flame” who had discovered not merely 400 errors in Martin Luther but 1400! On the opposite side, of course, similar lists were compiled; indeed, there were whole books of lists. Nobody wondered about what Luther was really trying to say or what had inspired the Reformation, the internal coherence of the spiritual import of the movement; no, they simply made lists of all the errors — partial, real, and supposed.

THE CRESSET

Inevitably the results were fatal: both sides could only harden their opposition. Argument with anyone simply to win finally culminates in upholding indefensible positions, if the matter is closely examined. The positions are defended because one has begun to argue, and that is all there is to it. Contemporary journals, please copy.

