

**LUTHER'S TABLE
TALK: A CRITICAL
STUDY, PP. 133-261**

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Luther's Table Talk: A Critical Study, pp. 133-261 by Preserved Smith

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LUTHER'S TABLE TALK

A Critical Study

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CHAPTER I

LUTHER AND HIS GUESTS

IN the old town of Wittenberg the traveler may still see Luther's house looking much as it did three hundred and eighty years ago when he moved into it after his marriage. The veneration of posterity has restored it to the style of Luther's time and filled it with memorials of its famous occupant; pictures of Martin and Käthe on the walls; the old *cathedra* in the *aula* or lecture room; the bench on which Luther often used to sit with his wife, looking out on the neat garden in front.

The house had once been the Augustinian Monastery, and as such Luther's home for several years while he was a member of the order; but the progress of the reformed teaching had left it without occupants for some time before it became the dwelling of the ex-monk and his wife with their numerous dependents and guests. Here the reformer spent the happiest and most peaceful part of his career. The storm and stress of the previous years had given place to a period of comparative calm which was to last the rest of his life. The awful struggle in his own soul, the fierce revolt against the abuse of indulgences, the brave stand at Augsburg, the heroism of Worms, the imprisonment in the Wartburg and the perturbations of the Peasants' Revolt, all had passed. When Luther and his bride took possession of their home in June, 1525, they had before them twenty busy, useful years, years of comparative quiet and domestic happiness.

One cannot say years of domestic privacy. The Luthers kept open house and entertained not only their poor relatives such as old "Muhme Lehne" and their nieces, but many students as well, to say nothing of the distinguished strangers who visited Wittenberg. The table was always full. At the head the large form and strong face of the master would be conspicuous. He was a man of many moods, and his strong personality forced them on his guests, who took their cue from him, maintaining silence or talking seriously or jocosely as he set the example. At times he was lost in thought over some weighty problem of theology, or the vexatious attacks of the "Papists" or "Ranters," and again he was "happy in mind, joking with his friends." Near him we see the staid and dignified Schiefer, or the mournful Schlaginhausen, intent upon his sins, or the irascible countenance of Cordatus. A strongly built woman, comely¹ in spite of her snub nose, serves the meal with the assistance of her female relatives, frequently participating in the conversation, occasionally the butt of an innocent joke from her husband, and sometimes quarrelling with the students who kept Luther from his dinner with their interminable questions. Let us hear from one of those present what a meal was like at Luther's table:²

As our Doctor often took weighty and deep thoughts with him to table, sometimes during the whole meal he would maintain the silence of the cloister, so that no word was spoken; nevertheless at suitable times he let himself be very merry, so that we were accustomed to call his sayings the con-

¹ Luther once thought her "wunderhübsch." Köstlin, *Martin Luther*, i, 264.

² Mathesius, *Luther Histories*, xii, 133a, quoted by Kroker, *Luthers Tischreden in der Mathesischen Sammlung*, Einleitung, p. 11. Cf. Köstlin, ii, 488, Anm. 1.

diments of the meal, which were pleasanter to us than all spices and delicate food.

If he wished to get us to speak he would make a beginning: What's the news? The first time we let the remark pass, but if he said again: Ye Prelates, what's the news in the land? then the old men would begin to talk. Doctor Wolf Severus [Schiefer] a travelled man of the world who had been the preceptor of his Roman Majesty's children, often was the first to introduce a subject, unless there was a stranger present.

If the conversation was animated, it was nevertheless conducted with decent propriety and courtesy, and the others would not take their turn at it until the Doctor spoke. Often good questions on the Bible would be propounded, which he solved finely, satisfactorily and concisely, and if any one took exception to any part, he would even suffer that and refute him with a proper answer. Often honorable people from the University were present, and then fine things were said and stories told.

Occasionally Luther would dictate something to one of the disciples. This was usually "some precious material in the interpretation of the Bible," such as the exegesis of the twenty-third Psalm which Rörer recorded one evening and had printed.¹

Cordatus claims the honor of being the first to conceive

¹Seckendorf, *Comment. Hist. de Lutherismo*, iii, 134. Seidemann, *Lauterbachs Tagebuch von 1538*, p. xiii. That this practice was common among the other disciples may be seen from Aurifaber's Introduction to his edition of the sermons: "These sermons have never been printed but by me, John Aurifaber, from the written books of honorable and blessed persons, such as M. Vitus Dietrich of Nürnberg, Item M. Georgius Rorarius, M. Antonius Lauterbach, and Herr Philip Fabricius (who took them from the holy mouth of Luther as he preached)." Quoted by Seidemann from the Eiselen edition of the *Sämmtliche Werke*, II, 148b. These sermons were largely expositions of Scripture. Cf. also Seidemann, *ibid.*, p. 165; Bindseil's *Colloquia*, iii, 158.

the brilliant idea, so fruitful in later results, of taking down not only special pieces, but the general run of Luther's conversation. At first he had some compunctions about the propriety of making notes at his host's table, but habit overcame them. He says:

I was also aware that it was an audacious offence for me to write down everything I heard whenever I stood before the table or sat at it as a guest, but the advantage of the thing overcame my shame. Moreover the Doctor never showed, even by a word, that what I did displeased him. Nay more, I made the way for others, who dared to do the same thing, especially M. Vitus Dietrich and J. Turbicida [Schlaginhausen] whose crumbs, as I hope, I shall join to mine, for the whole collection of pious sayings will be pleasing to me.¹

The same reporter speaks of a notebook in which he kept the precious sayings, and Dietrich says that the notes were taken on the spot, just as if the disciples had been in the classroom.² Still more explicitly Schlaginhausen observes: "I took this down while we were eating, after a funeral."³

Little discrimination was shown by the students who sat around notebook in hand, eager to catch and transmit to posterity the gems which dropped from their master's lips, "which they esteemed more highly than the oracles of Apollo."⁴ Nothing was too trivial for them, and occasionally the humor of the situation would strike Luther.

¹ Wrampelmeyer, *Cordatus Tagebuch*, no. 133a. The Latin at the end is incorrect, but this seems to be the sense; it is "M. Vitus Dietrich et J. Turbicida quorum micae (ut spero) illis meis conjunxero, omnis multitudo piorum gratis mihi erit."

² Dietrich, p. 165b. "Sequuntur anno 1533 excerpta inter colloquendum." Quoted by Preger, *Luthers Tischreden aus den Jahren 1531 und 1532 nach den Aufzeichnungen von Joh. Schlaginhausen*, Einl., xiv.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 465.

⁴ Wrampelmeyer, *op. cit.*, Einl., p. 24, quoting Cordatus.