

Humanist Theologians



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Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (c.1460–1536)

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Faber Stapulensis, Jacques Lefèvre, was born about 1460 in Étaples in Picardy, the northern French province from which came Farel and Calvin. Though a priest, he was never a doctor of theology, a point that his theologian adversaries such as Noël Beda would not hesitate to emphasize. Nevertheless, he rightly deserves to be ranked among the theologians of his time, especially because of the influence he exercised upon his contemporaries, due perhaps as much to his person or center of interest than to his specific ideas.

We know him by his writings, which were widespread during his time, but which after his death were for all practical purposes not well known and of little influence. In distinction from Erasmus, we have very little of his correspondence, although the numerous dedications addressed and received permit the drawing of a sufficiently complete portrait of him.¹

This serene and peaceful man, friend of cloisters and books, had an eventful enough life, and its evolution knew numerous stages, reflected by the different circles of his entourage. This is why it is essential to begin by tracing the influences upon his theological thinking and the different periods of his life. After this, we shall examine his hermeneutics and some themes of his theology.

The Four Circles of Lefèvre d'Étaples

Lefèvre is one of the most precocious and most famous figures of French humanism, studiously applying himself to return *ad fontes!* The return to the sources, in his case, may appear eclectic but it is unified by a vision of spiritual theology. In fact, Lefèvre found himself at the confluence of divers interests that were like successive stages in his intellectual itinerary: first philosophy, then medieval spirituality and patristics, and finally Holy Scripture. At each stage he was at first surrounded by teachers but soon by friends and disciples. It has been noted that the devotion Lefèvre aroused throughout the course of his career was so extensive that Erasmus appeared jealous at times

of those “Fabristae.” His disciples came from far – Hungary and Poland – and near, and were true friends in spite of age differences.

Paris

Lefèvre was a student and then a professor at the Collège du Cardinal-Lemoine in Paris. During his visit to Italy in 1492, he encountered the Aristotelian Barbaro, the Platonist Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola, who was attempting a synthesis of the two traditions. On his return, Lefèvre became the “restorer” of Aristotle, annotating the whole of the latter’s work, but he also was interested in the hermetic writings and in Pseudo-Dionysius. He retained the most mystical writings of the Middle Ages, for example those of Richard of Saint Victor, Ramon Lull, Ruysbroeck, and Hildegard of Bingen. As for patristics, although he himself edited *The Pastor* of Hermas, he had a circle of disciples working for him. These books, published by the first Parisian printers (W. Hopyl, J. Higman, H. Estienne, and Josse Bade), are characterized by a labor of editing, translation when needed, and annotations according to a pedagogical method he maintained to the end of his life. His works are further unified by his concern for the communication of his Christian convictions. According to a comment in his 1505 Preface to Ramon Lull’s *Contemplations*, this editorial activity was a vocation that substituted for the call to the monastic life for which his health made him unfit. His work as editor culminated with three volumes of the works of Nicholas of Cusa in 1514, of which he was the chief architect, supported by a veritable team of scholars including Reuchlin and Beatus Rhenanus.

Lefèvre gradually abandoned this sphere of interests in order to devote himself exclusively to the Bible. He did so in three stages, comparable to three “conversions,” becoming commentator, translator, and, with his disciples, preacher. From 1509, when he was in contact with Josse Clichtove – his earliest disciple – Charles de Bovelles, Alain de Varènes – who later kept their distance – and François Vatable, Lefèvre resided at the abby of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, where he had been called by Guillaume Briçonnet. There he presented in synoptic form five Latin versions of the Psalter, the *Quincuplex Psalterium*, a work whose annotations by both Luther and Zwingli we know.² This work, wonderfully printed by Henri Estienne, was re-edited by Lefèvre in 1513. The year before, he had published a commentary on the Pauline epistles that certainly constituted a turn in his theological thinking and which was read as a work announcing the intuitions of the Protestant Reformation. This work is of major importance for dealing with his theology.

In the second edition, curiously antedated to 1515, he responded to Erasmus’s comments in the *Annotationes* of the *Novum Instrumentum* of 1516, that gave rise to a dispute over interpretation.³ The error of the publication date was probably only the printer’s mistake, but the importance of this controversy may not be underestimated to the extent that, as we shall see, Erasmus, outraged by this public contradiction, was able to detect and reveal certain weaknesses of the Parisian humanist’s exegesis. Another controversy centered on who was right concerning the liturgy that made Mary Magdalene into one person whereas the Gospels, Lefèvre maintained in terms of the tradition, apparently distinguished three Marys.⁴

In any case, these disputes between humanists – and it was also one of the arguments of Erasmus – became a card in the hand of the professional theologians who were on the alert for divisions among the partisans of belles-lettres, and attentive to their mistakes. To protect himself from these attacks, Lefèvre left Saint-Germain-des-Prés, but remained fully at the service and under the protection of his former student, Guillaume Briçonnet, who invited him to follow him to Meaux where he became the bishop.

Meaux

In 1521, after arriving in Meaux, Lefèvre, who became a sort of episcopal vicar to Briçonnet, began his commentary on the four Gospels. A circle of disciples formed around him composed of François Vatable, one of the best Hebraists of his day; Gérard Roussel; Michel d'Arande, an itinerant preacher supported at the Court by the sister of the king, Marguerite d'Alençon; Martial Masurier, a doctor of the Sorbonne; and at certain times, Guillaume Farel. It can be said that this circle constituted a laboratory of preaching. Lefèvre and his disciples composed a collection of homilies on the pericopes for Sundays and the major festivals that by its simple, pastoral style and unique recourse to Scripture broke with the contemporary sermonic style of inexhaustible divisions, taken from scholastic usage, or occasional ludicrous anecdotes and exempla. In place of such homiletic pedantry, Lefèvre and his colleagues concentrated on the proclamation of the Christian faith and its mysteries. Lefèvre also translated the New Testament into French in order to facilitate its reading by the people.

In a second stage that began in April 1523, the circle of disciples was modified. Though Roussel, d'Arande, and Masurier remained, there were now present more radical figures such as Matthieu Saunier or Jacques Pauvan, who was burned at the stake in Paris in 1525. There was also Pierre Caroli, a doctor of the Sorbonne, who oscillated between Rome and Geneva. This is why, in the context of the penetration of Lutheran ideas into France, the attacks of the Paris Theology Faculty became incessant, and Lefèvre's commentary on the Gospels was subjected to examination. Briçonnet, as early as October 1523, forbade his diocesan priests to possess Luther's works. This is the time frame for dating two letters by Lefèvre to Guillaume Farel, then in Basel, which affirm his sympathy "for that which comes from Germany," and his admiration for the Reformation theses of Breslau composed in April 1524 by Johannes Hess, which he found "consonant with the Spirit."⁵

Meanwhile, King Francis I, taken prisoner at Pavia and imprisoned in Madrid, who through his sister, Marguerite, was the protector of Lefèvre, was no longer able to act. Thus Lefèvre and some members of his circle at Meaux considered they had to leave the diocese and find a refuge in Strasbourg.

Strasbourg

In Strasbourg, which he reached at the end of October 1525, Lefèvre composed his commentary on the "Catholic Epistles," published in 1527, the last work signed by

his name. But above all, he pursued the French translation of the Vulgate Bible that would lead to a complete version of the Bible in French. It was printed in Antwerp in 1530. This translation, at least the New Testament part, largely inspired the celebrated translation by Pierre Olivétan, Calvin's cousin, requested by the Waldensians at their Synod of Chanforan in 1532. Lefèvre's translation would also influence future generations of Catholic translations at Louvain. Francis I, now released from captivity, recalled Lefèvre to France, to where he returned in April 1526. He had spent about six months in Strasbourg, a city engaged in a relatively peaceful transition to the Reformation, even though the reforming preachers had to overcome tensions due to both the prudence of the civil authorities and the more radical ideas of the numerous German refugees from the Peasants' War. It is known that during this time profound liturgical innovations had been introduced under the pressure of this reforming group.

Strasbourg bordered on another milieu to Lefèvre, even though he was accompanied by Gérard Roussel and Michel d'Arande of the Meaux group and Guillaume Farel was already present there. The city was at least marked, if not dominated, by Martin Bucer, who had arrived in May 1523, left his Dominican order, married, and already manifested the power and ingenuity of his theology. The circle Lefèvre found there included Matthias Zell, the Cathedral preacher; Wolfgang Capito, who had arrived from Basel and in whose home Lefèvre found lodging; and also François Lambert of Avignon and Caspar Hedio. At this time, when Bucer was preparing his commentaries on the Synoptic Gospels, there was a veritable exegetical school in Strasbourg whose members devoted themselves to editing, translating, writing commentaries, and also teaching. Discussions on the Bible and theology were not lacking, as witnessed by Bucer's remembrance in a letter to Boniface Wolfhart, future Reformer of Augsburg: "You remember, Boniface, that discussion I had with you in Capito's large house, opposite the Saint-Pierre-le-Jeune graveyard, in front of the windows of the heated room where Lefèvre was."⁶

If we believe a letter written in December 1525 by Gérard Roussel to a correspondent in Meaux, the French were enthusiastic about what they saw in Strasbourg "where Christ alone is worshipped."⁷ However, judging by the disappointed remarks of Pierre Toussain, former canon of Metz, written to Oecolampadius in July 1526, neither Lefèvre nor Roussel was apparently ready to take steps to transport this development back to France. According to Toussain, the two men, once they had returned to France, considered that "the hour [had] not yet arrived."⁸ Lefèvre, being able once again to benefit from royal protection, had indeed returned to France.

Nérac

In May 1530, after having been for a while the tutor to the children of Francis I in Blois and royal librarian, Lefèvre requested permission to retire. The hardening of religious policy, symbolized by the execution of Louis de Berquin in April 1529, but also the age of the old humanist, were probably the reasons for this request. Lefèvre finished his life in Nérac, at the court of Marguerite, who in 1547 became Queen of Navarre. He was there in the company of his faithful friends Michel d'Arande and Gérard Roussel, no doubt because a common affection and admiration linked them to the poetically talented sister of Francis I, "Marguerite of the princesses," as she

was called in his 1547 collection of works. It was the Queen of Navarre who there played the principal role at that time when she published *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul*. Clément Marot arrived in December 1534 after the affair of the placards, and remained there until March 1535. It seems that when Bonaventure des Périers entered the service of Marguerite and arrived in Navarre at the end of 1536, Lefèvre had already been dead for some months; perhaps he died in March.⁹

Lefèvre made no declaration of a break with the Roman Church, but neither did he make any statements of retraction or conformity to the doctrines of the Church as apparently Rome requested of him. It appears, moreover, that in 1525 Erasmus had intervened in his favor with the Roman proceedings, if one may judge by a sufficiently cryptic phrase by Gian-Matteo Giberti, datary of Pope Clement VII, in a letter of November 27, 1525.¹⁰

Only a close reading of Lefèvre's works may provide the keys of a very nuanced thinking that strove for balance in pursuit of concord and harmony. One must take into account, of course, the last ten years of his life, during which he did not publish much beyond his complete translation of the Bible into French. One can understand, then, how his case – and particularly his silence – has been made the object of divergent interpretations encountered in his historiography.¹¹ In considering Lefèvre as a theologian, it is advisable to take into account not only the evolution of his thought but also its constant elements, such as the Apostolic Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, Christian Cabbala, the mystics, and also Nicholas of Cusa, in his endeavor to reconcile thought for a “Catholic Concordance.”

The Biblical Hermeneutic

Lefèvre's *Prefaces* to his biblical works trace a path toward an increasingly Christocentric interpretation of Scripture. As early as his *Quincuplex Psalterium* (1509), Lefèvre proposed a hermeneutic based on the coincidence of the literal meaning and the spiritual sense becoming the “true” literal sense of Scripture. “We call literal the sense that agrees with Spirit and that the Holy Spirit reveals to us.”¹² Similarly, in his teaching of Aristotle, Lefèvre distanced himself from the medieval commentaries and glosses; he rejected the traditional fourfold sense of Scripture: “Thus the literal sense and the spiritual sense coincide, [so that the true sense is] not that which is called allegorical or tropological, but that which the Holy Spirit certifies speaking through the prophet.”¹³ He maintained this even if in the second edition of 1513, an incidental clause, sounding like a weak contradiction, opportunely specifies that he does not want to deny “the other allegorical, tropological, or anagogical senses, especially there where the subject requires it.” In the previous year, in the commentary on the Pauline epistles, he declared that the four senses dear to the Middle Ages should not be looked for anywhere in the Scriptures, but may be useful for the comprehension of certain passages (on Gal. 4:24). It may be seen that he opposes, not without reason, the systematic and, hence, artificial usage of the plurality of senses that gives a mechanical aspect to the late medieval biblical commentaries. In fact, if the traditional terminology is retained, Lefèvre, especially in his commentaries on the Gospels, often slides toward allegory.

However, Lefèvre's biblical hermeneutic clearly achieves a sort of theological recentering that may claim originality, even with regard to his reading of the Church Fathers. He proposed a search for a unified sense of Scripture, at once literal and spiritual, that would lead to a strictly Christological reading of the Bible. In his 1524 Preface to a Latin Psalter that he enriched by Hebrew readings, Lefèvre wrote with pious enthusiasm: "Christ is the Spirit of the entire Scripture. And Scripture without Christ is only writing and the letter that kills." He deduced a kind of history of salvation by a deep comprehension of the secrets of Holy Scripture. "The Holy Spirit leaves absolutely nothing in the shadows for the world, and preaches all the mysteries of Christ."¹⁴ An interpretation that will not be Christological is not possible since Christ the Savior is "the only truth."¹⁵

Nevertheless, in its turn, by its systematization, this biblical hermeneutic, by always searching for "the most divine" sense, does not avoid narrowing meaning, though it desires to return to the center of theology. Indeed, even if the perspective that looks to Christ is in fact the key to Scripture, it appears in Lefèvre's usage to be too narrow to take account of the rich abundance of Scripture; it is as if he desired to twist the interpretation, and if he confused movement toward unity and uniformity. An example may make this understandable. When, in the 1515 edition of the *Quincuplex Psalterium*, Lefèvre wants to interpret the Psalm *Miserere* (Psalm 50 in the Vulgate), he renounces the expression of David's repentance, one of the most celebrated phrases in the liturgical and spiritual tradition, declaring that he "has not found prophecy there, and that there is no worthwhile explanation to seek there." The reason is that this Psalm makes allusion to the sin of him [Christ] whom it declares, and Lefèvre's interpretive key prevents him from being able fully and entirely to hear of Christ who was made man "in all things except sin."

He has the opposite issue in the interpretation of the Cabbala, where philology and theology meet and mingle; where the words, by the slant of the Hebrew letters, express by themselves the divine. Lefèvre devoted himself to long passages on the names of God, as did Reuchlin and other Christian Cabbalists.¹⁶

Lefèvre desired to deploy in all its breadth the interpretive sense that would reconcile the letter and the spirit, and provide a unifying role. He used it therefore for "the concord of the Scriptures." "It is the accord, the concord of the Scriptures, with which we are concerned, which guides us."¹⁷ The play of cross-references, of echoes throughout the Bible, of concordances, became a hermeneutical principle. One can understand that the Reformers would have seen this as implementing *sola Scriptura*, the reading of Scripture by Scripture; but Lefèvre's approach is much more Neoplatonist, by an affinity to Pseudo-Dionysius, Nicholas of Cusa, and Pico della Mirandola. This concord makes comprehensible the articulation of the two divine covenants, the old and the new, by passing from the veiled to the unveiled, from the closed to the open, by means of the "key of David," the Christ.

Christ the Mediator, our reconciliation, is He who opens the Scriptures to us as the principle of concord. The unity of the Bible is formed around the Word, and the harmony of interpretation becomes the image of celestial harmony. If this vision is grandiose and proves to be necessary in the midst of the controversies at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the implementation of the Parisian humanist's exegesis could have appeared too audacious for the scholastic theologians but also

too one-sided for his humanist friends. The latter is evident in his dispute with Erasmus.

When, in his Latin translation of Hebrews 2:7, Lefèvre cited Psalm 8:6, following a rare reading in the manuscripts that he considered more faithful to the Hebrew, he did so not primarily as an exegete but according to his Christological vision. He preferred *minuisti eum paulominus a Deo* (you have made him a little less than a God) to the received text *minuisti . . . ab angelis* (you have placed him below the level of the angels). Lefèvre's textual choice had a decisive importance for him that Erasmus, who criticized him in 1516, apparently did not comprehend. Erasmus realized that in Lefèvre's reading Lefèvre did not hesitate to accuse him of impiety because he wrote things "unworthy" of Christ. Lefèvre had the impression that the traditional reading of the text posited that God had made Christ lower than the angels, but that did violence to Christ's transcendence or to the divine nature of Christ – since the Psalm was used Christologically. In his *Apologia ad Fabrum Stapulensem* (1517),¹⁸ Erasmus indicated he was deeply wounded by this accusation that clearly was close to the charge of heresy. He then cruelly enumerated the weaknesses of Lefèvre's knowledge of Greek, highlighting certain contrary meanings and many naivetés, which he had already pointed out in the translation of Paul. What is more, he emphasized equally the gaps in the substance of Lefèvre's patristic interpretation, and especially the error of perspective in subordinating the understanding of Scripture to a vision, that if not docetic, at least tends toward a certain monophysitism. Erasmus affirmed that in fact Christ had been put below the angels, but that this does not contravene Lefèvre's "principle of dignity" since the Passion, sufferings, and death of Christ are in fact humiliation and abasement; but it is precisely by the humiliation of the Cross that our salvation arises.

Thus, Lefèvre's hermeneutic of the "principle of dignity" was the source of his piety and spirituality, but also his limitation. It is encountered again in the dispute over the "Three Marys" in which, against John Fisher and others, Lefèvre refused the oneness of the personage of Mary Magdalene, popularized by the liturgy and popular devotion. If Lefèvre in this case had good exegetical reasons for his argument, his motivations were primarily spiritual: a sinner could not be given the honor of being the first witness to the Resurrection. Lefèvre therefore insisted on a unitive vision, sensitive to the harmony of contemplation, against a more Augustinian view, sensitive to the paradoxes of grace; even though at the same time he had formulas close to the Reformers on *sola gratia*.

Justification, Faith, and Works

The doctrines of justification, faith, and works were profoundly divisive issues of the Reformation period among Protestants as well as Catholics. Lefèvre's understanding of these doctrines appears on the one hand in his commentaries on the Epistles of Paul of 1512 – thus well before the eruption caused by Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*, and, on the other hand, in his commentaries on the so-called Catholic Epistles composed in 1525 and published in 1527, by which time theologians were in complete turmoil over these subjects. When those texts are chosen, one finds some of the

matters in the commentaries on the four Gospels (1522). The literary genre of the biblical commentary, the genre of annotations and paraphrase, like that of Erasmus, does not lend itself to an organized and synthetic presentation of the theological thought of Lefèvre, which ought not be excessively systematized.

That is why, for example, one finds different approaches when he speaks of justification. Lefèvre stated that there are two justifications.¹⁹ In the 1512 commentary on Romans 3:19–20, he distinguished in dialectical terms between the justification of the law and that of faith. The former operated by works; the latter by grace. But he added that it is necessary to seek both, but above all the second, which is favored by the gospel, whereas the former is advocated by the philosophers. But in 1522, on John 1:29, Lefèvre distinguished a universal justification and another particular and personal one which are as inseparable as heat is from light.

Already in the *Quincuplex Psalterium*, the expression *sola gratia* frequently arises, notably in relation to Psalms 6, 12, and 24; but at that time the accent is put more on the believer's acceptance of God's mercy than on faith properly so-called, without anything evidently opposing them. In any case, blessedness does not come from works but from God himself (on Ps. 127:2). Thus the Reformers' intuition was indeed present by the way Lefèvre read Holy Scripture and it is understandable how, in annotating the *Quincuplex*, the Doctor of Wittenberg was already able to formulate his own theology.²⁰

Nevertheless, Lefèvre insisted on the salvific importance of works in the Christian life in a way that Luther could not accept.²¹ In fact, the Parisian humanist regarded works to be necessary for the preparation, retention, and augmentation of justification.²² Without works we can lose the grace of justification (on Rom. 3:28). At the same time, Lefèvre affirmed in a very Lutheran manner that works done outside of faith, even inspired by human love, in spite of appearances are not good works (on Jas. 2:18). Therefore, everything gravitates around faith, but it can be seen that Lefèvre chose a difficult balance of faith and works.

It appears to me that the explanation is again to be found in Lefèvre's hermeneutic. Lefèvre found both perspectives in the New Testament, that of Paul in Romans and Galatians, and that of James. Nothing is more strange to his thought than to introduce "a canon within the canon of the Scriptures." He took Scripture as a whole that cannot be inconsistent. In this sense his attitude is profoundly Catholic. If there seems to be opposition, it can only be apparent. It is necessary to affirm *sola gratia* like Paul, and the necessity of works like James. His ideal of a vocation of reconciliation and unity required of him that he hold both positions, explicating that Paul opposed those who considered themselves justified by works, and that James opposed those who believed they were saved without works. In fact, one must not put his confidence either in faith or in works, but solely in God (on Rom. 4:2).

This is why, in his commentary on James in 1525, Lefèvre multiplied the expressions indicating the concordance, speaking of "the work of faith," "the works of faith," "faith living and working." In other words, he insisted on the reciprocal inclusion of faith and works, indicating in some way that faith without works is not faith, and that works without faith are not works. A similar paradoxical tension can also be found in Lefèvre's affirmed refusal of a theology of merit and the affirmation of free will (on Rom. 11:11).

The Sacraments

In the area of the sacraments it would also be rash to want to find in Lefèvre a discursive treatise on the medieval seven sacraments which would be confirmed by the Council of Trent 30 years after his commentaries. In the meanwhile, Lefèvre formulated some notations in dependence upon the biblical texts.

Lefèvre nearly always named baptism the *lavacrum regeneratis*, the bath of regeneration, according to the passage of Titus 3:5 that insists on the gratuitousness of salvation. Lefèvre never ceased to emphasize that baptism is there not only for the pardon of sins, but for the sanctification that is none other than filial adoption in Christ, our reconciliation with God in Him (on 2 Cor. 5:18). The Church is the “communion of the regenerate,” in the proper sense of the second birth (on Ps. 132). If the ceremony of baptism requires a triple immersion, this symbolizes the role of the Trinity, but also the three days of Christ in the tomb before the Resurrection (on Rom. 6:4). This trinitarian reality is recalled by Lefèvre when he commented that the baptism of Christ is itself “our purification, our justification, and our sanctification” (on Mt. 3:16–17).

In the *Quincuplex Psalterium*, the Eucharist is qualified as the provisions for life eternal (*viaticum vitae aeternae*) (on Ps. 4:8), it gives nourishment for the voyage, for the crossing toward eternal life. The Psalms which make allusion to the manna given by God in the desert are therefore accounts of the Eucharist (on Ps. 22:5). In his exposition of Psalm 110, Lefèvre qualified the Eucharist as the very holy, very august sacrament and memorial of redemption. A more extensive reflection can be found in his commentary on Hebrews 5. The Eucharist is a memorial and remembrance (*memoria et recordatio*) of the unique sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, but it would be difficult to deduce from this that Lefèvre denies the sacrificial aspect of the Mass. In 1509, he spoke likewise of the “new sacrifice” (Ps. 49:15), the sacrament of the Eucharist was defined as “memorial and confession (in the sense of recognition) of the benefit received” (Ps. 49:16). In 1512, he specified that the new rite was performed by virtue of a unique oblation that was symbolically imitated until the end of the world (Heb. 10:11). It does not seem that by the phrase “symbolic rite,” Lefèvre would have had to be thinking along the lines of Zwingli’s commemorative sacramental theology.²³ It is true that Lefèvre did not at all go into the question of transubstantiation, which is what a controversialist theologian of his time would have done. It can be imagined that having read Scripture by itself, Lefèvre did not encounter the idea in the Scripture passages on which he commented. He did not refuse to understand the Discourse on the Bread of Life in a sacramental sense, but recalled that it is not the receiving of the sacrament that counts, but the reality of the sacrament that alone enhances the grace that leads to faith (on Jn. 6:53).

One finds here and there an allusion to Confirmation (for example on Ps. 22:7) as that holy oil that introduces one into the realm of the priests, that is, as an allusion to the priesthood of the faithful. Whatever may be Lefèvre’s interpretations of Matthew 16:18–19, following that of Augustine, and of John 20:22–3, which he did not apply to the sacrament, he understood Hebrews 10:16 in relation to Matthew 18:18 as an allusion to penitence, to confession (in the sense of a sacramental) and to the

absolution by the priest. But he did not do so without recalling in solemn terms that the pardon received comes from the unique oblation of Christ who, in a superabundant manner, has made satisfaction for the sins of the entire world. This confession must be made to God in faith (on Jas. 5:16). But the astonishing importance Lefèvre gave to Purgatory must be noted, finding it in texts where the tradition had not seen it (such as Mt. 5:22–3, Mt. 18:23, Lk. 16:19–31), but not mentioning it in his comments on 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, one of the classical sources for the traditional doctrine.

Extreme Unction, the sacrament that was given to the dying on the basis of James 5:15, was criticized by Luther but apparently accepted by Lefèvre, whose goal was to correct the tradition. He considered that the presbyteroi must comprise, like the “elders,” the seniors of the church. In 1525, Lefèvre deplored that instead of holy persons one called on priests, no matter who they were, to anoint with oil those near death, whereas the text of the epistle makes clear allusion to the ill. But the times were so bad that one hesitated to appeal for help on this occasion of invoking the name of Jesus Christ. For him, the oil that is mentioned in the text of James is spiritual, not physical, even if this usage cannot be formally excluded. What counted for him, and what was lacking, is the faith of him who prays over the ill person, and the faith of the latter. Lefèvre then invited a reform of the practice of unction for the dying, which would also be denounced at the Council of Trent in 1547.

Lefèvre’s theology comes to light through discrete touches, little by little, as the occasion presents itself in the texts on which he comments. It is true that in Meaux he certainly had to deal with a pastoral practice that his activity as professor and as editor of texts did not permit him to be engaged in. The homilies composed in the group that he animated may provide another light, but one cannot approach these texts without some caution.

The Doctrine of the Epistles and Gospels

Most writers who treat the thought of Lefèvre d’Étapes put the works signed by his name on the same level with those which, from 1523 on, essentially his translations of the Bible into French, have been attributed to him. They draw arguments from the anonymous collection of homilies in French published first under the title *Épîtres et Évangiles pour les cinquante et deux semaines de l’an*, printed by Simon du Bois without place and date (but without doubt printed first in Paris in 1525/6 and then in Alençon between 1530 and 1533), then, under a title very slightly different and in a very interestingly enlarged form, printed by Pierre de Vingle, also without place and date, but very likely in Lyon in 1531 or 1532. This text was attributed by the Censor of the Paris Theology Faculty in 1525 to Meaux, and by inference to Jacques Lefèvre d’Étapes. External criticism, but above all internal criticism, that is to say, the doctrine found there, indicates without doubt that these homilies come from the disciples of Lefèvre, probably above all from Gérard Roussel, who had a major role in the composition of the short sermons that were perhaps conceived as models for the renewal of preaching that Bishop Briçonnet had desired to promote in his diocese. It is no less certain that even if the resemblance between these homilies and Lefèvre’s biblical commentaries is not striking, the inspiration of the

Parisian humanist remains undeniable. In order to be at the same time complete but also precise, it is advisable now to indicate the orientation of the composition independent of Lefèvre himself.

This collection that proposed a homily called “exhortation” for each of the liturgy’s Scripture passages, i.e., the Epistle, that is, the first reading, and the Gospel of the Mass, is one of the finest theological texts in the French language of that time. Without polemic, apart from some traits found more in the additions in the second edition, clear and centered on the edification of the faithful, these texts are a jewel of “evangelical” literature in French.

Though most of the biblical books are cited, often for the very reason of commenting on the text, a large part consists of the Psalms, and for the New Testament, the Epistle to the Romans, 1 Corinthians, and the Epistles of the Captivity (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon); the recourse to patristic or medieval sources is practically non-existent apart from some allusions to the Roman liturgy. Some rare references to the Church Fathers, essentially Augustine, are made in the additions to the second edition.

Since it concerns presenting to the Christian listeners the meaning of the Scripture passages that they just heard, the homilies consider that what matters above all is the search for the “secrets of God.”²⁴ It is the Holy Spirit who will illumine, not so much the preacher, but “all the hearers.” Yet curiosity must not be pushed too far. Certain secrets remain reserved to the wisdom of God,²⁵ such as the restoration of the kingdom of Israel or the Day of Judgment, when the dark secrets of consciences shall be revealed.

It is necessary then to strive for understanding Scripture by a spiritual intelligence that requires the rejection of that which is often too human in the interpretation given in commentaries or sermons. It is necessary to search for the pure wine and not that diluted by water, for the good grain without the tares, the expression that in the gospel refers to the “traditions, doctrines, and inventions of the scribes and the pharisees.”²⁶

The genuine door to Scripture is the Word of God itself. It is the proper key to itself, proposed to all, for “to each Christian full authority and irrevocable power is given to judge all human doctrine, all the commandments, all human decrees and statutes, to determine if they conform to the Word of God or not.”²⁷ There is the foundation of “the Church of the faithful.” The Christian is the one who is justified by faith, splendidly defined albeit censured by the Paris Theology Faculty in 1525: “If you believe that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead for your justification, his resurrection is yours and your justification, and you are truly justified.”²⁸

But then the homilies develop a theology of living faith, of faith that works by love. This is what must be understood by the wedding garment demanded of those invited to the marriage festivities (Mt. 22:2–14). That garment is faith active in love [*charité*].²⁹ We then find noticeably the same doctrine that Lefèvre developed in his contemporaneous commentary on the Epistle of James, and that he situated midway between the Reformation theology of justification by faith alone and the importance accorded to works.

The homilies of Lefèvre and his disciples insisted on a traditional theme in medieval theology but which did not appear to have been well understood by the Parisian

theologians at the beginning of the sixteenth century: the unity of all three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love [*charité*]. “Since seeing that God is Wisdom, our works are done in faith; seeing that He is Power, they are accomplished in hope; seeing that He is Goodness, they are done by ardent love.”³⁰

These texts rarely speak of the sacraments, of the worship service, or of the invocation of the saints, nor do they speak much of the Church visible in its hierarchy and its rites. For the homilies of the diocese of Meaux, “the true house of God is the heart, the soul, and the mind of the Christian where God wills to be served by prayer and worship in spirit and truth.”³¹ The Christian Church is therefore composed of saints, of the elect who proclaim the secrets of the Word, that is to say, the coming of Christ in our flesh and of its redemption.

Thus to be sanctified consists of being and becoming an imitator of Christ. If we live according to the works of the Spirit, “we shall be true imitators of God and of Jesus Christ.”³² This signifies what is necessary to participate in the sufferings of Christ: “to be companions of his sorrows.” Finally, we are to conform to his death in dying to our sins and to our concupiscence, ready to give our life for our brothers through love because the entire life of the Christian is to endure suffering.”³³ Here one recognizes the theme of the *imitatio Christi*, so cherished at the end of the Middle Ages, and more precisely the conformity to Christ by which Lefèvre expressed his Christian anthropology.

Conformity to Christ

Beyond the imitation of Christ, beyond even the conformity to Christ in his activity, the Christian for Lefèvre is called to take the form of Christ, “Christiformity.” Inspired by Galatians 4:19, this term is found in the authors to whom Lefèvre was attached and whom he had edited, Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa. Lefèvre used the term in all of his Scriptural commentaries, above all in that on Paul.³⁴ It could be said that he rediscovers the Christological aspect of divinization so dear to the Greek Fathers.

As like is known by like, so the re-creation by Christ cannot be conceived except by comparison to him (on Jn. 13:35). In glory we shall be entirely conformed to Christ, but our glory in this world is to conform to Him in our whole person (on Rom. 8:26). The works of mortification that the Christ imposes aid in reproducing the interior Christiformity (on Col. 3:12). Likewise, prayer is the act of one who is trying to conform to Christ by the Spirit (on Rom. 8:23).

As in all bodies, there must be a certain proportion between the body and its members under penalty of having to deal with a monster. In the body of Christ this proportion, this harmony, is called Christiformity (on Col. 3:1). Lefèvre’s Christian anthropology thus takes the Pauline expression (Gal. 2:20): It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me. This is well expressed in the Preface written by Lefèvre to the second part of the French translation of the New Testament, dated from Meaux, November 6, 1523: “Let us go then to Jesus Christ in complete confidence. He must be our thought, our speech, our life and salvation, and our all.”³⁵

Lefèvre was indisputably a theologian, not because he was according to our modern categories an exegete, a dogmatician, or a moralist, but because he unified his reading

of Scripture by a spiritual, Christological vision. At times disconcerted in his choices and arguments, he appears nevertheless until 1527, the date of his last publication, and even up to 1532, if he is recognized in the second edition of the homilies for the diocese of Meaux, to adopt a middle position that appears to correspond to his temperament and to his ideal of concord, and in a time when the confessional frontiers in France were not yet well defined. He was the leader, discrete yet resolute, of the “evangelical” movement for whom a renewed and unified reading of the Bible ought to be enough for the needed reformation of the Church.

Notes

- 1 Eugene F. Rice, *The Prefatory Epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Related Texts* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1972).
 - 2 For Luther, see *Annotationes Quincuplici Fabri Stapulensis Psalterio manu adscriptae* (1513), WA 4:466–526; for Zwingli, see *Corpus Reformatorum* 99, *Sämtliche Werke* 12:280–91. Editor's note: Zwingli's “allusion to Lefèvre, whose *Psalterium quincuplex* Ulrich possessed and used. His copy, beautifully printed in 1513, with its wide margins in which is inserted here and there the fine hand of the reformer, is to be found at Zurich. . . .” Jean Rilliet, *Zwingli: Third Man of the Reformation*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 99.
 - 3 See Anne Reeve, ed., *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament. Galatians to the Apocalypse* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 706–13 for the developments concerning the note on Heb. 2:7.
 - 4 Editor's note: Lefèvre “contended, on the basis of the evidence of the New Testament and the patristic writings, that the Mary Magdalene celebrated in the church calendar was a figure compounded of three different women, namely, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha . . . , Mary Magdalene . . . , and the unnamed woman who had been forgiven much and had annointed Christ's feet. . . .” Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Lefèvre: Pioneer of Ecclesiastical Renewal in France* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 118.
 - 5 A. J. Herminjard, *Correspondance des Réformateurs de langue française*, I (Geneva and Paris: H. Georg and M. Lévy, 1866), letter 98, 206–9; letter 103, 219–31.
 - 6 It was concerning a discussion of the Lord's Supper that Bucer evoked in this letter of 1532. See J. V. Pollet, *Martin Bucer. Etudes sur sa correspondance* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), I:114.
 - 7 Herminjard, *Correspondance*, I, letter 168, 411.
 - 8 Herminjard, *Correspondance*, I, letter 181, 447.
 - 9 Herminjard, *Correspondance*, III, letter 544, 300–400.
 - 10 P. S. Allen, *Opus epistolarum Erasmi*, VI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), Ep. 1650a; 234–5, lines 14–18.
 - 11 While Renaudet has rightly seen Lefèvre d'Étaples as one of the principle actors of Parisian humanism, Protestant historiography has made him a proto-Reformer, even one of the first French-speaking Reformers. Bèze inscribed his portrait in his *Icons* in 1580. Such was the position of C. H. Graf (1842 and 1852) who based his position on the Pauline commentaries; by A.-L. Herminjard (1868); E. Doumergue (1899); J. Barnaud (1900 and 1936); N. Weiss (1919); H. Doerries (1925); K. Spiess (1930); J. Panier (1935); and F. Hahn (1938). It was contradicted by the Catholic historians E. Amann (1926) and P. Imbart de La Tour (1944). The question was, so to speak, “de-confessionalized” by Richard Stauffer in a 1967 article, “Lefèvre d'Étaples, artisan ou spectateur de la Réforme?,” reprinted in *Interprètes de la Bible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), 11–29. In 1970, Carlo Ginzburg tried to make him a “Nicodemite” (*Il Nicodemismo* [Torino: Einaudi, 1970]).
- It is necessary to distinguish numerous issues: Lefèvre's relations with the Reformers; the facts or legends which surrounding his final years; and the exact content of his thought. Lefèvre's letters of 1524 and 1525 to Farel, mentioned above, show an admiration for Oecolampadius and Zwingli, and mention the works of Melancthon, Myconius, and Brunfels. After the visit to Strasbourg, there is hardly any trace of his opinions, though they were probably close to those of Marguerite of Navarre

- who welcomed him. The visit of Calvin to Nérac in order to meet Lefèvre is mentioned only in the life of Nicolas Colladon (*Corpus Reformatorum* 49, *Opera Calvini* 21, col. 57). The opinion, spread about at the beginning of the seventeenth century, that late in life Lefèvre expressed regret at not having the courage to break with Rome seems scarcely probable. Bayle himself (*Dictionnaire* [Amsterdam, 1730, II, 469–70]) tends to doubt it.
- 12 Rice, *The Prefatory Epistles*, 194.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 194.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 473.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 437.
 - 16 François Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1964), 150–64.
 - 17 Rice, *The Prefatory Epistles*, 196.
 - 18 The critical edition by Andrea W. Steenbeek (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1994).
 - 19 In no case did it concern double justification, so to speak of one justification in two times, elaborated in the circles of Contarini, discussed at the interconfessional Colloquy of Ratisbon in 1541, and rejected by Luther as well as by the Council of Trent.
 - 20 Guy Bedouelle, *Le “Quincuplex Psalterium” de Lefèvre d’Etaples. Un guide de lecture* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), 233–40.
 - 21 “Even Stapulensis, a man otherwise spiritual and most sound – God knows – lacks spiritual understanding in interpreting divine Scripture; yet he definitely shows so much of it in the conduct of his own life and the encouragement of others.” Letter to Spalatin, October 19, 1516. *LW* 48:26; *WA* Br 1:90.
 - 22 Charles-Henri Graf, *Essai sur la vie et les écrits de Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples* (Strasbourg, 1842; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), 67; Hughes, *Lefèvre*, 87.
 - 23 As suggested by Hughes, *Lefèvre*, 87.
 - 24 “Evangile de la Pentecôte” in G. Bedouelle and F. Giaccone, eds., *Epistres et Evangiles pour les cinquante-deux dimanches de l’an* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 210.
 - 25 “Epistle for Ascension” in *ibid.*, 199.
 - 26 “Evangile du mardi de Pentecôte” in *ibid.*, 223.
 - 27 “Evangile du 8eme dimanche après la Pentecôte, ajout de 1531/1532” in *ibid.*, 269.
 - 28 “Evangile du 24eme dimanche après la Pentecôte” in *ibid.*, 269.
 - 29 “Evangile du 20eme dimanche après la Pentecôte” in *ibid.*, 337.
 - 30 “Epître du 11eme dimanche après Pâques” in *ibid.*, 193.
 - 31 “Evangile de Fête de la Dédicace, ajout de 1531/1532” in *ibid.*, 391.
 - 32 “Epître du 5eme dimanche après la Pentecôte” in *ibid.*, 251.
 - 33 “Epître du 16eme dimanche après la Pentecôte” in *ibid.*, 315.
 - 34 Hughes, *Lefèvre*, 192–7, has translated into English the most important texts where Lefèvre expresses this notion.
 - 35 Rice, *The Prefatory Epistles*, 461.

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