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EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

MARCH / APRIL

No. 16 - 2017

MARTIN LUTHER



THE GERMAN REFORMATION



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500

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YEARS OF

REFORMATION

ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

THE PREACHING *of the* REFORMATION

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

In his classic book entitled *Lectures on the History of Preaching*, noted scholar John Broadus distinguishes four characteristics of preaching in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. As we are entering the 500-year anniversary of this momentous movement, it would do us well to be reminded of the key features of preaching during that prolific era which shaped the world for centuries to come.

First, Broadus notes that the Reformation was *a revival of preaching*. During the Middle Ages, as with every age,



there was a remnant of preachers, but they were exceptions to the rule. Ministers, by and large, did not preach before the Reformation, but instead administered the sacraments and read moral dissertations in the pulpit. But with the Reformation, Broadus notes, there came “a great outburst of preaching, such as had not been seen since the early Christian centuries.” This is precisely what must occur today if we are to witness a new Reformation. Forms of entertainment and trivialities in church must vanish, and once again the primacy of preaching must be reestablished.

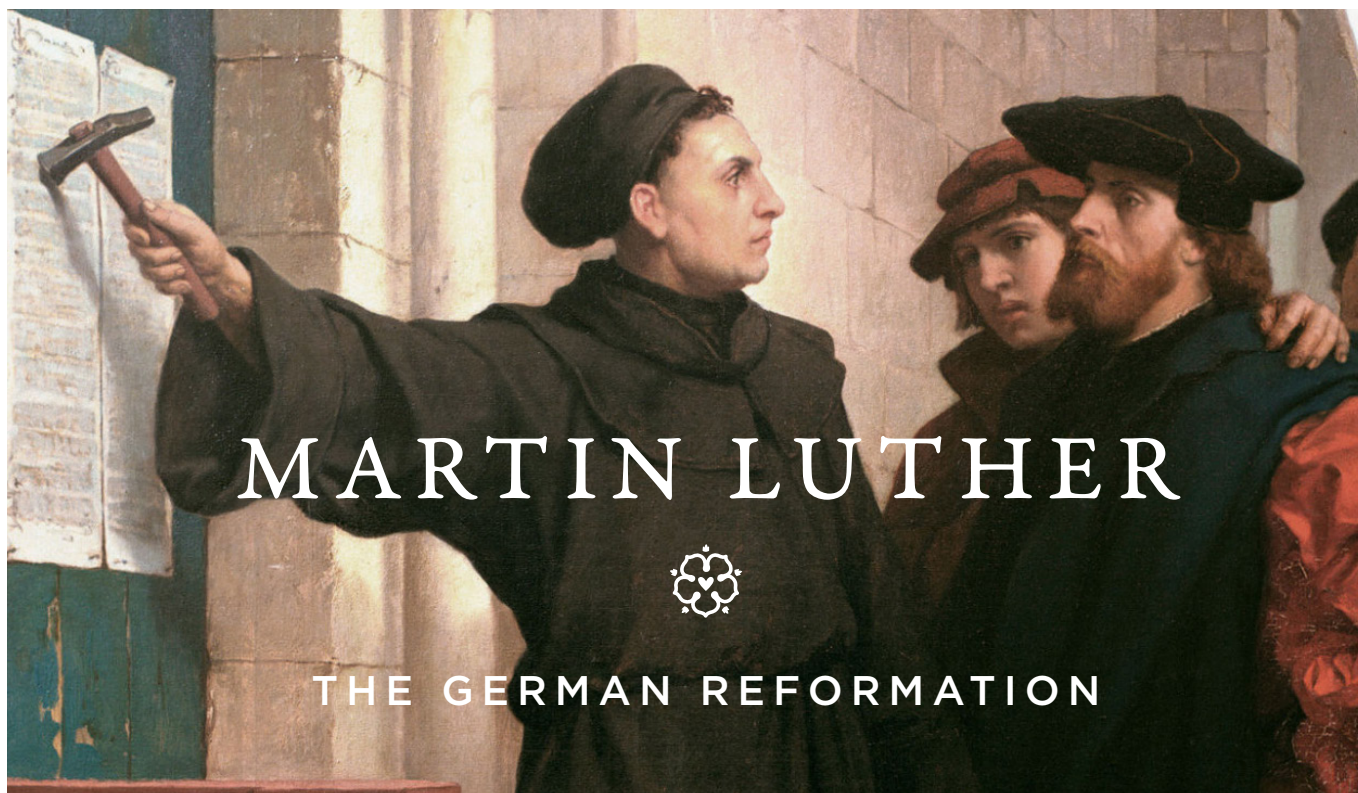
Second, Broadus states that the Reformation involved *a revival of biblical preaching*. Prior to this pivotal time, pulpits were filled with mythical stories about saints and martyrs. Sermons hailed legendary accounts of supposed miracles. Discourses were full of quotations from ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Seneca. Preachers, if you could call them that, were more concerned with

what the pope and the church fathers said than what the Bible said. But with the Reformation, there was a decisive return to preaching the Word of God. This new preaching was expository preaching, in which ministers studied the Bible in the original languages and explained its meaning to the congregation with compelling application. Based upon sound exegesis, the Reformers restored the Word of God to the pulpit and, thus, to the life of the church. Even so, it is not merely more preaching that is needed today, but more of a certain kind of preaching—biblical preaching.

Third, Broadus states that the Reformation ushered in *a revival of controversial preaching*. This became a defining virtue of the Reformed pulpit. The preaching of these men brought great controversy that shook the status quo. As Broadus asserts, “Religious controversy is inevitable where living faith in definite truth is dwelling side by side with ruinous error and practical evils.” So it will be in our day.

Fourth, Broadus observes that the Reformation brought *a revival of preaching the doctrines of grace*. Luther emphasized justification by faith, but also the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human salvation. These truths were openly proclaimed by all the Reformers. The great doctrines of salvation by sovereign grace were the steady diet that these powerful expositors served to their congregations. In like manner, such a revival of preaching the doctrines of grace must occur in our own day, and it must spread far and wide.

In this issue of *Expositor*, we will observe the preaching of the German Reformation that was a defining aspect of this Protestant movement. Led by Martin Luther and his powerful preaching from his pulpit in Wittenberg, developments in Germany proved to be a deciding factor in the birth of the Reformation. This issue should be read with great care and implemented in pulpit ministries around the world. May God do again in this hour what He did 500 years ago. ♦



MARTIN LUTHER



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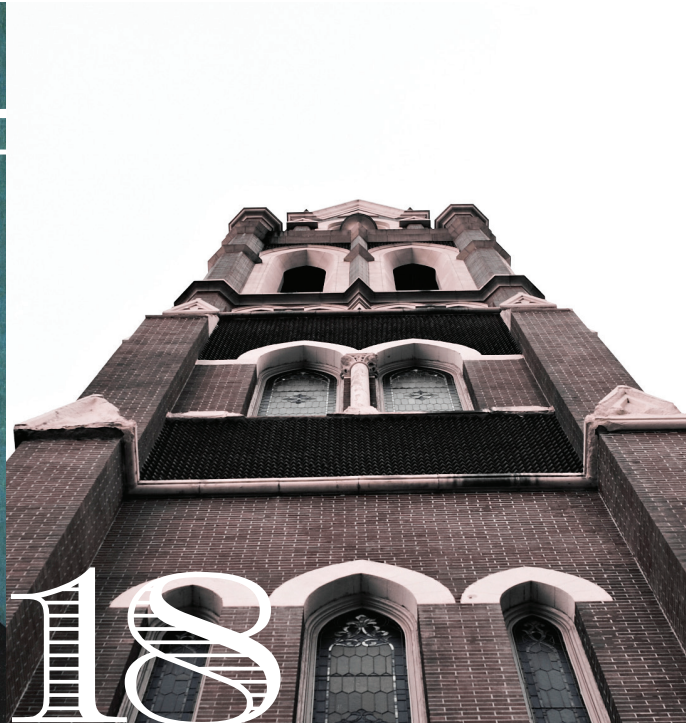
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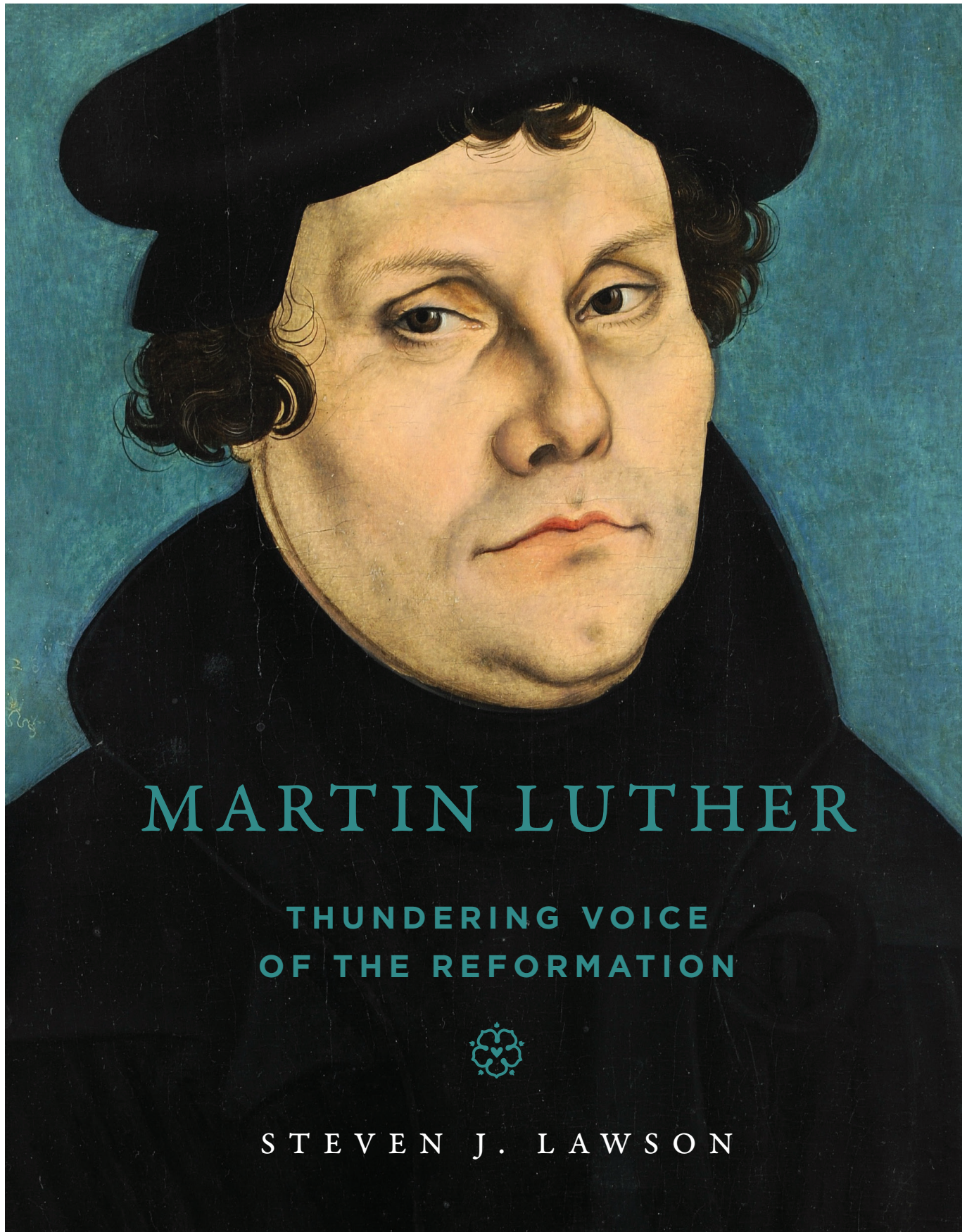
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MARTIN LUTHER

THUNDERING VOICE
OF THE REFORMATION



STEVEN J. LAWSON

As the pulpit goes, so goes the church. This timeless principle has proven to be true in every generation of church history. The most prolific periods of its growth have been those seasons when the preaching of the Word has been the strongest. Not since the birth of the church in the first century has there been a more dynamic movement of authentic Christianity than what occurred during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Likewise, there was never a stronger resurgence of biblical preaching than what occurred in that history-altering epoch. As the pulpit goes, so goes the church.

The underlying genius of the Reformation was *sola Scriptura*, Latin for “Scripture alone.” This fundamental principle was responsible for igniting in the Reformers the decisive return to expository preaching. These two elements—the return to the Word of God and the recovery of biblical preaching—most directly led to the explosion known as the Protestant movement that spread the recovery of the true gospel around the world.

Noted church historian Philip Schaff documents this recovery of biblical truth in the Reformation when he writes,

The Reformers went back to the sacred Scriptures in the original languages and revived the spirit of apostolic Christianity. The Bible, heretofore a book of priests only, was now translated anew and better than ever into the vernacular tongues of Europe, and made a book of the people.

In its far-reaching effect, Schaff added, “The Protestant Bible societies circulated more Bibles in one year than were copied during the fifteen centuries before the Reformation.” Never has there been a more prolific Bible movement than this landmark period. In like manner, never has the pulpit been so revived and awakened from its slumber than by this course of events.

Reformation historian Harold Grimm underscores the importance of biblical preaching in the Protestant movement when he writes, “The Protestant Reformation would not have been possible without the sermon. . . . [T]he reformers . . . used the sermon to bring the doctrines directly to their followers in the vernacular and to apply those doctrines to the immediate and practical religious needs of the people.” Grimm notes, “The pulpit was one of the most important means of communicating information in the sixteenth century.” Therefore, “The role of the sermon can scarcely be overstated.”



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Luther: The Reformer-Expositor

In this pivotal century, the first magisterial Reformer who burst onto the world scene and preached the Word with extraordinary power was the former Augustinian monk and professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, Martin Luther (1483–1546). When this dynamic figure nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the front door of the Castle Church on October 31, 1517, he became the formidable force spearheading this gospel-proclaiming movement. He was many things—a learned doctor of theology, respected author, Bible translator, dynamic leader, hymn writer, catechism writer, and theological debater—but, first and foremost, Luther was a preacher of the Word of God. Martin Lloyd-Jones notably called him “preeminently a great preacher.” Virtually all the Reformers were preachers, and Luther was no exception.

On any given Sunday, Luther would preach the Bible two times, and frequently multiple times throughout the week as well. Every quarter of the year he would teach a two-week series on doctrine using a catechism. Wherever he traveled, he was expected to preach the Word, as pulpits immediately opened to him. Wherever he was, and whatever the occasion, Luther always found himself preaching. Even in the aftermath of the Black Plague of 1528, and despite his severe headaches and dizzy spells, Luther nevertheless preached some two hundred times that year, an average of four times a week. The following year, in 1529, he preached eighteen times in eleven days surrounding Easter. Luther confided, “Often I preached four sermons on one day.” It is estimated that in his lifetime, Luther preached some 4,000 sermons, all while conducting his many other demanding duties. Of those numerous expositions, some 2,300 have

survived in some type of written form.

Given this foundational role that expository preaching played in the Reformation, it is important for us to recognize the distinguishing marks of the preaching of Martin Luther. What were the notable marks of his pulpit ministry? What kind of preaching did this leading Reformer give that started such a movement? As we note these characteristics, it is with the prayer that they will be as true today in all who stand behind the sacred desk as they were when Luther first raised his voice in his preaching ministry.

A Bible-Believing Preacher

The cornerstone commitment of the preaching of Luther was his deep conviction concerning the Bible itself. This Wittenberg expositor was fully convinced that the Bible was and is the written Word of God. Luther proved to be the very embodiment of what is referred to as the formal principle of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*. He believed that Scripture alone was the formal principle that gave “form” to all that the church believed and practiced. Luther was confident that the Bible was exactly what it claimed to be—divinely inspired, perfectly inerrant, supremely authoritative, and supernaturally powerful, unlike any other book in the world. This is precisely why he was so committed to be an expositor.

With unshakable confidence, Luther asserted the superiority of the Bible over all other books of mere human origin: “We must make a great difference between God’s Word and the word of man. A man’s word is a little sound, that flies into the air, and soon vanishes; but the Word of God is greater than heaven and earth, yea, greater than death and hell, for it forms part of the power of God, and endures everlastingly.” Luther believed that when he preached the Word of God, it came with the explosive power of God Himself, who alone can save and sanctify souls.

Luther knew that the empty opinions of men would come and go. The values of cultures change, but he was certain that the truth of Scripture endures forever. Therefore, he must preach the unchanging message of the written Word. He maintained, “The Word must stand, for God cannot lie; and heaven and earth must go to ruins before the most insignificant letter or tittle of His Word remains unfulfilled.” He insisted that the infallible Bible must be

Expository preaching, Luther believed, must occupy the preeminent place in the church because of the unrivaled authority of Scripture itself.

preached instead of all church traditions, ecclesiastical councils, and even papal edicts that arise contrary to the Word of God. He stressed, “Any teaching which does not square with Scripture is to be rejected, even if it snows miracles every day.” This being so, Luther resolutely stated, “A good preacher invests everything in the Word.” Otherwise, his pulpit ministry is doomed to fail from the outset.

Expository preaching, Luther believed, must occupy the preeminent place in the church because of the unrivaled authority of Scripture itself. Again, he affirmed, “The pulpit is the throne for the Word of God. The only perpetual and infallible mark of the church was always the Word.” In other words, one ounce of what God says in His Word is worth more than ten thousand tons of what the pope and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Rome espouse. So committed was Luther to the sole authority of the Bible that he maintained, “Every time the church gathers, God’s Word needs to be preached, or Christians should not even come together.” Simply put, there is no reason for the church to ever assemble if the Word is not preached.

A Text-Driven Preacher

Whenever this noted German preacher stepped into the pulpit, it was solely to expound the Bible. Luther scholar Fred Meuser notes, “With Luther came what many interpreters call a totally new form of the sermon: the expository sermon.” This is to say, Luther almost singlehandedly resurrected biblical preaching from the grave, making plain

the teaching of Scripture and applying it to the lives of the hearers. Preaching historian Hughes Oliphant Old concurs, “Luther is always an expository preacher.” Throughout his preaching ministry, this magisterial reformer relentlessly expounded the Scripture for his own congregation and broader audiences.

In describing Luther’s approach to the pulpit, Meuser explains: “Luther’s method is to take a given segment of Scripture, find the key thought within it, and make that unmistakably clear. The text is to control the sermon.” In this regard, Luther stated, “I take pains to treat a verse, to stick to it, and so instruct the people that they can say, ‘This is what the sermon was about.’” Again, he explained, “In my sermons, I bury myself to take just one passage, and there I stay so the hearers may say, ‘that was the sermon.’” What Luther practiced as an expositor, he likewise demanded of other preachers. Issuing a strong call for biblical preaching, he exclaimed, “Give me Scripture, Scripture, Scripture. Do you hear me? Scripture!” In his own estimation, the preacher must preach the Word, or he has nothing of any eternal importance to say.

Therefore, Luther the preacher started in a text, stayed in the text, and never strayed from that text. He stated, “It is disgraceful for the lawyer to desert his brief; it is even more disgraceful for the preacher to desert his text.” The moment any preacher departs from expounding a text of Scripture, he is moving away from the truth. Luther made it clear: “This is the sum of the matter: Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule.”

As Luther weighed the importance of the various parts of the worship service, he prioritized the preaching of the Word. Expository preaching, he believed, is the pinnacle of worship: “The highest worship of God is the preaching of the Word.” He succinctly stated, “We can spare everything except the Word.” When comparing this proclamatory ministry with every other, he elevated the preaching of Scripture above all else. He surmised, “We profit by nothing as much as by the Word.” Old concludes, “For Luther, the most important reform needed in the worship of the Church of his day was to reestablish the centrality of the reading and preaching of the Word in public worship.” By this fundamental conviction, Luther helped restore the primacy of biblical preaching in the church. He understood that in the life of the church, biblical preaching must come first.

A Well-Studied Preacher

Luther was a brilliant man with an extraordinary mental acuity who applied himself to the rigorous study of the

Scripture in order to effectively preach it. As a student at the University of Erfurt, he earned a bachelor’s and master’s degree (1505). This was followed by a doctorate in theology from the University of Wittenberg (1512). Armed with this academic training, Luther then taught in the classroom as a professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg for the remainder of his life. Further, he was a prolific author who was continually reading, researching, studying, and writing.

Possessing a commanding intellect, Luther used his steel-trap mind in searching the Scripture in stringent sermon preparation. Luther confessed, “For a number of years I have now annually read through the Bible twice. If the Bible were a large, mighty tree and all its words were little branches, I have tapped at all the branches, eager to know what was there and what it had to offer.” Luther added, “First I shake the whole tree, that the ripest may fall. Then I climb the tree and shake each limb, and then each branch and then each twig, and then I look under each leaf.” By this exhaustive exploration of Scripture, Luther sought to plumb its depths and probe its heights in every doctrinal truth and promise.

Finding the precise understanding of a biblical text was the first priority for Luther. He noted, “He who is well acquainted with the text of Scripture is a distinguished theologian. For a Bible passage or text is of more value than the comments of four authors.” Though he studied the various commentaries of multiple scholars, he remained in his study primarily focused upon the Scripture itself. Luther further commented:

Some pastors and preachers are lazy and no good. They do not pray; they do not study; they do not read; they do not search the Scripture. . . . The call is: watch, study, attend to reading. . . . [Y]ou cannot read too much in Scripture, what you read you cannot read too carefully, what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, what you understand well you cannot teach too well, what you teach well you cannot live too well. . . . Therefore dear . . . pastors and preachers, pray, read, study, be diligent . . . This evil, shameful time is no season for being lazy, for sleeping, and snoring.

This kind of penetrating study required hard work. Luther knew it was an all-consuming pursuit to capture the meaning of the text and to shape it into an expository sermon. He stated that exerting such concentrated brainpower is more demanding than any physical labor by common worker in a field or stable. He concluded:

Sure, it would be hard for me to sit in the saddle [as

horsemen do]. But I would like to see the horseman who could sit still for a whole day and gaze at a book without . . . thinking about anything else. Ask a sermon writer . . . how much work it is to speak and preach . . . three fingers do it all . . . but the whole body and soul have to work at it.

In this assessment, Luther recognized that the heaviest object in the world was the pen that Luther and other preachers picked up to write their sermon notes. Heavier than the blacksmith's anvil and weightier than the farmer's plow is the preacher's quill. This writing instrument requires such intense focus and analysis that nothing compares with the all-encompassing effort required to lift it. This work is more exhausting than any other endeavor because it involves eternal matters for those who hear its truths.

An Exegetically-Precise Preacher

Luther was also an exegetical preacher who studied the original languages in which the Bible was written to delve into his text and grasp its meaning. His penetrating study in sermon preparation was enhanced by his working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. This ability to operate in the biblical languages allowed him to gain a more accurate understanding of the intended meaning of the biblical authors. Luther's knowledge of the biblical languages was like putting on reading glasses that gave him a clearer perception of the passage.

In the providence of God, one year before Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, in 1516, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, the leading humanist scholar of the day, finished collecting and collating various Greek manuscripts that he had gathered from monasteries throughout Europe and Cambridge, England. From these copies, he produced a Greek New Testament, a monumental project that required nearly ten years to complete.

Prior to this compilation, a Greek New Testament did not exist for preachers to study. All that was available to them was a Latin text of the Bible known as the Vulgate. When Erasmus published his Greek New Testament in Basel, which is known today as the "Textus Receptus," pastors and scholars could suddenly study the New Testament in its original language. This Greek text produced by Erasmus proved to be the fuse of dynamite that, when lit by Luther, caused the explosion of gospel truth in the Reformation.

As Luther studied Erasmus's Greek New Testament, it gave him a more accurate understanding of the biblical message. By immersing himself in the original language of the text, he was able to go *ad fontes*, Latin for "to the founts"

or "to the source." This linguistic study of a passage was the proper basis for his exegesis and gave him a more lucid insight into its proper meaning.

Whatever the text before him, Luther gave strictest attention to its words, grammar, syntax, and verb tenses in the original language. So closely acquainted was Luther with the Greek New Testament that after he was kidnapped by his supporters and hid in the Wartburg Castle (1521–1522), he translated it into the German language for his native countrymen. This would be among his greatest achievements, as the German people now possessed a Bible they could read and study for themselves.

Stressing the importance of exegesis in the original languages, Luther asserted, "Languages are the scabbard that contains the sword of the Spirit; they are the [case] which contains the priceless jewels of antique thought; they are the vessel that holds the wine." By this, Luther proposed that a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew were fundamentally essential to the preacher. He added: "We shall not long preserve the gospel without the [original] languages. The languages are the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained." It has been said that Erasmus laid the egg, namely, the Greek New Testament, but Luther hatched it with his exegesis, translation, and preaching.

Moreover, Luther believed that the study of a biblical text in the original language would lead to a deeper conviction in the preacher when expounding any passage in the pulpit. He noted:

Though the faith and the Gospel may be proclaimed by simple preachers without the languages, such preaching is flat and tame, men grow at last wearied and disgusted and it falls to the ground. But when the preacher is versed in the languages, his discourse has freshness and force, the whole of Scripture is treated, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and works.

But conversely, Luther rebuked those preachers who chose not to delve into the text in the original language. He reproved them for being limited to a surface handling of Scripture. Such neglect, he concluded, led to superficial preaching in a flat, boring manner:

It is a sin and shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God; it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be

an open book.

Luther insisted that the preacher must study the biblical text in the original languages, as best he can, if he is to preach with precision and power. Precision in the text, in large measure, determines the power of its presentation.

A Hermeneutically-Sound Preacher


As an expository preacher, Luther sought to secure the exact meaning of the biblical text by using the grammatical and historical method of interpretation. This straightforward approach to hermeneutics marked a new day in ascertaining what the Bible means by what it says. Over the previous centuries, an allegorical method of imposing a contrived meaning upon a text was the product of the fantasies of preachers and theologians. In Luther's day, those who stood in pulpits were obsessed with looking for hidden meanings in the Scripture that, simply put, did not exist. Their approach to finding the meaning of a biblical text was more the result of their imagination than interpretation. Luther rejected this reckless handling of Scripture and, instead, sought to discover its literal meaning unless a figure of speech dictated otherwise. He purposed to capture the plain meaning of words and phrases according to the authorial intent of the passage. This legacy would be a guiding example for faithful expositors to this present day.

Before he was converted, Luther had been entrapped in pursuing the allegorical meaning of a passage. But once he was born again, this superficial method of interpretation was no longer acceptable in attempting to understand the Bible. He confessed: "When I was young, and especially before I was acquainted with theology, I dealt largely in allegories, and tropes, and a quantity of idle craft; but now I have let all that slip, and my best craft is to give the Scripture, with its plain meaning; for the plain meaning is learning and life." Once coming to saving faith in Christ, the manner in which Luther studied, taught, and preached the Bible was dramatically altered. Having received the mind of Christ, he understood that the plain meaning of a text is its true meaning. He immediately advanced from twisting Scripture by speculative allegories to honoring it with sound interpretation.

Reflecting upon his unconverted days, Luther confided,

"When I was a monk I was a master in the use of allegories. I allegorized everything. Afterward through the Epistle to the Romans, I came to some knowledge of Christ. I recognized then that allegories are nothing, that it is not what Christ signifies but what Christ is that counts." Regeneration gave him new eyes with which to see the text and a new mind to grasp its true meaning. Conversion changed everything in his approach to the text.

As a defender of the faith, Luther resisted any unlawful handling of the Scripture. He lamented, "To allegorize is to juggle the Scripture." That is, the one who manipulates the Bible corrupts its true meaning. Such a preacher twists it, like the proverbial wax nose, to say whatever he wants it



Luther insisted that the preacher must study the biblical text in the original languages, as best he can, if he is to preach with precision and power.

to say. This approach minimizes what the passage plainly says. Luther had no patience for those who practiced such a mishandling of Scripture. He excoriated the church father Origen, who played fast and loose with the Bible and distorted its true meaning: "Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt." By this, he condemned all allegorizing of the Bible and claimed it was not even worth filth.

Luther further denounced this abuse of Scripture when he noted, "Allegories are empty speculations and as it were, the scum of Holy Scripture." Such abuses in handling the Bible prevented preachers from discovering its true meaning. He maintained, "Allegories are awkward, absurd, invented, obsolete, loose rags." Luther saw this harmful practice as distorting the truth and turning its pursuit into a mere sport. He asserted, "Allegorizing may degenerate into



a mere monkey game.” Even worse, he saw this careless hermeneutic much like the allure of a destructive prostitute, enticing interpreters into deadly error. He claimed, “Allegory is a sort of beautiful harlot, who proves herself specially seductive to idle men.” Lazy preachers, he chided, fall prey to this fatal flirtation and are easily induced to twist the Scripture to say whatever one’s own pre-conceived notions want it to say. Luther argued, “The Bible treated allegorically becomes putty in the hand of the exegete.” This subjective handling of the Bible caused him to reject this forbidden practice.

Luther maintained that the proper understanding of the Bible is to be found in its normal meaning. He insisted, “The Scriptures are to be retained in their simplest meaning whenever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids.” In order to realize the proper meaning of the passage, he believed that the preacher must use Scripture to interpret Scripture. He reasserted, “This is the true method of interpretation, which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture.” In this regard, it has been noted of his preaching: “Seldom did he strain the meaning of a passage or indulge in allegory. He regarded the context of a passage as important to the meaning of a text and sought to discover the original intent of the biblical author.” He believed the proper interpretation is usually the one that lays most obvious before the interpreter.

Luther believed the Bible should be plainly interpreted because it is a plainly written book intended for plain peo-

ple: “There is not on earth a book more lucidly written than the Holy Scripture.” This firm belief in the perspicuity of Scripture marked the approach of Luther and the other Reformers. He believed in the clarity of the Bible in matters of salvation and sanctification. Here is a book that was intended to be understood by the common person. To the contrary, Rome claimed that the laity was too ignorant to understand the Bible. However, Luther maintained the total opposite. He stressed that when the Word of God is preached, the most important matters of the Christian faith can be clearly understood.

A Spirit-Illuminated Preacher

In the pulpit, Luther was aware that he was entirely dependent upon the illumination of the Holy Spirit to grant the correct understanding of Scripture. The Bible is a Spirit-breathed book and can only be understood by the insight He provides. Every preacher must be divinely enlightened if he is to understand it rightly and preach it faithfully. The One who authored the Bible must also teach it to preachers. Luther believed that a right understanding of the Bible requires far more than being well studied in the text. Luther stressed, “That the Holy Scriptures cannot be penetrated by study and talent is most certain.” That is, the Bible is like no other book in the world. The sacred Scripture is of divine origin and requires the illumination of the indwelling Spirit.

Therefore, Luther stressed that every expositor must pray for God-given enlightenment. He said to other preachers, “Therefore, your first duty is to begin to pray, and to pray to this effect, that if it please God to accomplish something for His glory—not for yours or any other person’s—He may very graciously grant you a true understanding of His words.” In studying the Bible, Luther maintained that a lowly posture of prayerful submission is essential in discerning its true meaning. The primary Author of all truth, God Himself, must be its primary Instructor. He wrote, “For no master of the divine words exists except the Author of these words, as He says: ‘They shall be all taught of God’ (John 6:45). You must, therefore, completely despair of your own industry and ability and rely solely on the inspiration of the Spirit.” Quite simply, the preacher must be instructed in the school of the Spirit.

Beyond his towering intellect and academic credentials,

Luther believed that he must be taught by God. Even his university education could not give him a full apprehension of the Scripture. Only God can impart this penetrating insight. He stated, “Be assured that no one will make a doctor of the Holy Scripture save only the Holy Ghost from heaven.” Any real doctor of theology must be one who is taught by the Spirit. In the Scripture, this teacher must be taught by the Teacher. He asserted, “The Word comes first, and with the Word the Spirit breathes upon my heart so that I believe.” This internal teaching ministry of the Spirit, Luther contended, was absolutely essential in discerning and discovering the true meaning of the biblical text.

Even the most foundational doctrines, such as justification by faith, required this divine instruction. Luther wrote, “This doctrine is not learned or gotten by any study, diligence, or wisdom of man, but it is revealed by God Himself.” Luther avowed, “The great men and the doctors understand not the word of God, but it is revealed to the humble and to children, as is testified by the Savior in the Gospel according to St. Matthew 11:25: ‘O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.’” He acknowledged that God had removed the veil from his eyes and revealed this truth to him. This was his ongoing experience in his study to understand any doctrine of Scripture. There can be no true preaching apart from this inward ministry of the Spirit.

A *Lectio-Continua* Preacher

As he entered the pulpit, Luther was committed to sequential exposition through entire books in the Bible. Virtually all of his preaching took the form of verse-by-verse preaching through books in the Old and New Testaments. This system was known as the *lectio-continua* method, which comes from the Latin words meaning “continuous reading.” Covering the whole spectrum of Scripture, he preached from every portion and genre of the written Word. This included narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, parable, discourse, and epistle. From the Old Testament, Luther preached consecutively through lengthy series on Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 2 Samuel, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi, Habakkuk, Zechariah. In the New Testament, Luther also preached through Matthew 5–7, 11–15, 18–24, 27–28, Mark, Luke 15–16, John 1–4, 6–8, 16–20, Acts, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 Timothy, 1 John, 1 Peter, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews. By this diversified approach, Luther eventually preached from every section of the Bible.

The editors of *Luther’s Works* (Volume 51) commented on this manner of Luther’s preaching as follows: “His preaching is expository, not thematic or topical; instead of a theme, the basis is a text . . . and the aim of the sermon is to help his listeners thoroughly to understand this text.” In order to achieve this goal, “Luther announces the text, makes a connection with the last sermon he has preached . . . and comments on the theological importance of the [text], or discusses its meaning in order to get it clear from the start.” Further, they noted, “Sometimes he begins by pointing out the pastoral and practical implications . . . or by summarizing its content in a proposition.” In this expositional approach, Luther reads a text of Scripture and then explains, applies, and exhorts with it.

This was the verse-by-verse pattern that Luther followed throughout his pulpit ministry. The editors of his *Works* state, “The goal is always that God may speak His Word to the congregation through the sermon.” This was based upon Luther’s fundamental belief that when the Bible speaks, God speaks. The editors explain, “[In] all of his sermons, the development follows the text, verse by verse, and deals with its parts in a simple, direct flow of speech . . . Everything he sees serves to expound and proclaim the text, always keeping in mind the basic thought and thrust of the text.” This is to say, Luther was always addressing a specific text of Scripture and, most often, as he was preaching through a book in the Bible.

A Christ-Centered Preacher

Further, Luther was relentlessly Christ-centered in his exposition of Scripture. He continually sought to magnify the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as he expounded the Word of God. To this end, Luther based a large portion of his preaching upon the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four books most clearly and consistently set forth the sinless life and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. Admittedly, Luther is most identified with the epistle to the Romans and, specifically, with the text that brought him to faith in Christ, “the just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17). However, Luther preached only thirty sermons on Romans in the entirety of his ministry, a relatively small number out of the 4,000 sermons he gave in his lifetime. The emphasis of his pulpit remained in another portion of Scripture.

As Luther practiced expositional preaching, he delivered more than 1,000 sermons on the three synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which narrowly focus upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. In addition, Luther preached hundreds more sermons by expositing the Gospel of John. In 1531–1532, Luther spent almost a year and a half expounding only three chapters of the fourth Gospel,

John chapters six through eight. The truth is, he preached more on the Gospel of John in just one year than on Romans in his entire life.

This steady pulpit emphasis upon the four Gospels enabled him to highlight the Lord Jesus Christ. To this end, Luther exclaimed, “A good preacher must be committed to this, that nothing is dearer to him than Christ and the life to come.” His greatest delight was to proclaim the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ. He further explained, “It is the glory of God in Jesus Christ. We preach always Him, the true God and man who died for our sins, and rose again for our justification. This may seem a limited and monotonous subject, likely to be soon exhausted, but we are never at the end of it.” As he stood in his pulpit, Luther was ever extolling the Lord Jesus Christ week by week.

In his preaching, this mighty Reformer revered Jesus Christ as his chief subject. The Savior of sinners occupied the primary focus in his pulpit ministry. Luther said, “The preachers have no other office than to preach the clear sun, Christ. Let them take care that they preach thus, or let them be silent.” His preaching never shined brighter than when he was magnifying his Lord and Savior. For Luther, the preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified was a matter of constant urgency. He stated, “I preach as though Christ were crucified yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is coming back to earth again tomorrow!” The Lord Jesus, who is primary in the Scripture, was ever predominant in his preaching.

A Cross-Focused Preacher

As Luther preached Christ, he did so by presenting Him as the Savior of sinners who lived and died to rescue them from divine wrath. Luther exclaimed, “Preach one thing: the wisdom of the cross.” Explaining this emphasis, he exclaimed, “The gospel is not the preaching of Christ as example, but proclaiming Him as a gift. Whether a man stands or falls, he is a Christian only if he has Christ. . . . He [the preacher] should lead them to the well that is the cross of Christ.” Thus, as Luther preached to his Wittenberg congregation, he was ever proclaiming Christ as more than merely our pattern for living. This magisterial Reformer exclaimed Christ as the propitiation of the wrath of God toward guilty sinners in His work of salvation.

In the pulpit, nothing else captured Luther’s focus more than Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He maintained this cross-centered focus until the very end of his life and ministry. The last sermon that Luther ever delivered was preached in Eisleben, Germany, on February 14, 1546, and was an exposition of Matthew 11:25–30. In this final exposition, Luther preached as he always did, extolling Jesus

Christ:

True preachers must carefully and faithfully teach only God’s Word and must seek its honor and praise alone. In like manner, the hearers must say: “We do not believe our pastor; [unless] he tells us of another Master, One named Christ. To Christ he directs us; what Christ’s lips say we shall heed. And we shall heed our pastor insofar as he directs us to this true Master and Teacher, the Son of God.”

Faithful to the end, Luther directed his hearers to Jesus Christ, who died for sinners upon the cross. He did not preach the traditions of the church handed from the fathers. He was not an empty echo of the pope’s dictums. Neither did he espouse his own personal opinions. To the contrary, the center of gravity in his pulpit ministry was always Jesus Christ, the crucified Savior of sinners.

A Plain-Spoken Preacher

Moreover, Luther was a plain-spoken preacher, who sought to be easily understood by the common person. He refused to preach over the heads of everyday people, which he easily could have done. Instead, he delivered his sermons in the simplest language, desiring to be comprehended by all who heard him. Despite possessing a brilliant intellect, Luther never lost sight of the fact that he must speak plainly and clearly in the pulpit. Old states, “He taught the preachers of the Reformation to preach in the language of the people.”

Luther’s goal was not to impress the elite or only connect with the educated. Rather, his stated purpose was to reach the common person from everyday walks of life. Old notes that “Luther was a popular preacher” who could not only appeal to intellectuals, but also relate to ordinary people. Old summarizes, “He was a reformer of the language of preaching as well as its content.” In this manner, Luther not only reformed the gospel message, but he transformed its very mode of delivery from the pulpit.

One way Luther achieved this goal was to reject the use of highbrow language to impress the relatively few from high up in society. Instead, he favored easily accessible statements of truth for the many in everyday life. Regarding this vernacular preaching style, Luther maintained, “To preach plain and simply is a great art.” For this reason, he preached in an uncomplicated fashion so that those who worked in the field or stable could easily receive the truth. He asserted, “When I preach . . . I regard neither doctors nor masters, of which there are in the church above forty. But I have an eye for the multitude of young people, children, and servants, of which there are more than two



LUTHER BURNS THE PAPAL BULL IN THE SQUARE OF WITTEBERG, 1520

thousand. I preach to them, I direct my discourse to those that have need of it.”

With this approach, Luther was easily heard by even the most unlearned person. He believed that the best preacher is the simplest preacher. He stated: “[He] who teaches most simply . . . is the best preacher. I like it to be easy and earthy.” Otherwise, he believed that he would negate his calling to preach to all people. Luther declared:

Cursed be every preacher who aims at lofty topics in the church, looking for his own glory and selfishly desiring to please one individual or another. When I preach here, I adapt myself to the circumstances of the common people. . . . We preach in public for the sake of plain people. Christ could have taught in a profound way, but He wished to deliver His message with the utmost simplicity in order that common people might understand. Good God, there are sixteen-year-old girls, women, and farmers in the church, and they don’t understand lofty matters.

Though learned men wanted him to address the minutest nuances of theology in the pulpit, Luther flatly refused. Instead, he retorted, “If it is debate you are looking for, come into my classroom. I will give it to you plenty sharp and you will get your answer, however fancy your questions.” With biting sarcasm, Luther chided those who wanted him to untie complicated philosophical knots in the pulpit that were unrelated to everyday life, “complicated thoughts and issues

we should discuss in private with the eggheads.” He refused to play mind games in his preaching, addressing the “eggheads” at a level that few could grasp. Those who disagreed with his common approach, he maintained, could leave: “If the more refined and exacting of the congregation do not wish to listen—the door stands open.” He flatly refused to cater to erudite people at the expense of being incomprehensible to the average person.

In other words, Luther intentionally aimed at feeding babes the milk

of the Word. He purposed, “In the pulpit, we are to bare the breast and nourish the people with milk.” The German Reformer was called to be a champion of this grassroots movement, and to this mission he must remain true. In large measure, this explains why the Reformation was not limited to the learned on the university campus. Instead, it was a populist movement that included every area of society, including those peasants involved in the most menial tasks in society.

This easy-to-understand manner of speech was present even when Luther was disputing with learned men. When he appeared at the Leipzig disputation in 1520, a distinguished Catholic humanist scholar, Peter Mosellanus, chaired the debate. This acclaimed Latin scholar gave the following portrait of Luther concerning his effective communication skills:

His voice is clear and beautiful. His learning, and his knowledge of Scripture, are so extraordinary, that he can quote anything perfectly from memory. He understands Greek and Hebrew well enough to give his own judgment on what words and phrases mean. When he speaks, he has a rich store of subjects at his command, and a huge forest of thoughts and words at his disposal. There is nothing lofty or proud about him; he knows how to adapt himself to different people and circumstances. He is always fresh, cheerful and relaxed, with a pleasant expression on his face, no matter how hard

his enemies press him—you just cannot help believing that heaven is with him in his mighty labor.

Given this appraisal, it should not be any wonder that such a gifted preacher as Luther made such a wide impact upon so many people. He was a popular preacher who could be understood by all, perfectly suited to launch the Reformation with its far-reaching impact.

A Passion-Ignited Preacher

Further, Luther possessed a fire in his bones and was fervently passionate in his preaching delivery. As Luther opened up a biblical text in the pulpit and delivered his message, he was a soul enflamed for the glory of God. This glowing fervor in preaching was fueled by his holy enthusiasm and contagious zeal for God. Martin Lloyd-Jones called Luther “a volcano, spewing out fiery ideas in all directions.” In his expositions, his strong convictions captured his hearers’ attention and enflamed their hearts. Concerning this passion, Luther maintained: “The gospel should not be written, but screamed.” Luther meant that the message must be proclaimed with a glowing intensity and fiery fervency in order to qualify as true preaching.

Luther explained his ardent pulpit demeanor this way: “I am rough, boisterous, stormy, and altogether warlike, fighting against innumerable monsters and devils. I am born for the removing of stumps and stones, cutting away thistles and thorns, and clearing wild forests.” In this way, Luther roared like a lion as he preached with heroic boldness. He wrote: “He must admonish and rouse up the lazy.” That is to say, he recognized that a boring preacher allows apathetic listeners to remain drowsy in their inattentive slumber. The preacher, he believed, must be ignited with holy passion if he is to arouse and awaken his distracted hearers. A man in the pulpit must be alert if he is to wake up and capture the attention of his listeners.

In *Lectures on the History of Preaching*, noted scholar John Broadus points out that this fervor was on the front burner of Luther’s preaching. His pulpit delivery was marked by “swelling passion” and “manly vigor.” Broadus comments that Luther was an “intense personality in preaching,” with “an imperial personality of rich endowments, varied sympathies, and manifold experiences.” Broadus observes, “They who heard him were not only listening to truth, but they felt the man. Those who merely read his writings, in foreign lands and languages, felt the man, were drawn to him, and thus drawn to his gospel.” Such a warmhearted pulpit presence gained Luther a wide reception with many.

In order to spark his passionate delivery, Luther never brought a sermon manuscript into the pulpit. He chose,

instead, to preach from a thin outline in order to facilitate a spontaneous and energetic delivery. At this time, it was common for those who preached—if such homilies can even be called preaching—to simply read their manuscript verbatim before the congregation in a monotone, boring fashion. But Luther burst onto the scene with the full force of preaching in a lively manner that few had heard. This extemporaneous style lent an exhorting dynamic to his delivery. His students at the University of Wittenberg called this approach to preaching “the heroic method,” because it required an element of faith in God to guide his thoughts and direct his words in the pulpit.

The intent in this kind of impromptu preaching was to create a greater dependence upon God. Luther explained, “Preaching is not a work of man,” but a divine work within the human messenger. This makes preaching a mystery that can only be explained by the inward empowering of the Holy Spirit. Luther acknowledged, “The pastor must be sure that God speaks through his mouth. Otherwise it is time for him to be quiet.” He believed that God would best speak through him in a lively fashion if he preached without a manuscript or extensive notes. Consequently, Meuser notes that he spoke with “great vigor” that “had a moving effect upon the hearers.” Derek Thomas explains that Luther insisted upon using a “free delivery” in his sermons that “were extemporaneous rather than read from a manuscript.” James Mackinnon notes that this produced in Luther “torrential speech” that was “alive with prophetic fire.” This passionate delivery burned its way into the hearts of his listeners.

A Will-Summoning Preacher

With this engaging delivery, Luther sought to win over his listeners to pursue and embrace the truth. He was a master at presenting a biblical case and arguing his point in a most convincing fashion. The goal was for his listeners to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. When standing in the pulpit, he used cogent logic, sound reasoning, inductive and deductive arguments, as well as cohesive thinking to challenge the will of his listeners in the God-intended path. His powers of persuasion in the pulpit were compelling and hard to resist.

Luther was an imposing figure as he stood before an open Bible. He has been described as a broad-shouldered, burly-framed, strong-faced German, who was an indomitable personality when projecting his convictions. Fueled with boundless strength and zeal for God, he had an energetic nature that drew his listeners to the truth. Broadus notes he was a “conquering soul” and “born leader.” Gifted with a larger-than-life persona, Luther was a man’s man, aggressive and

compelling as he preached. Broadus describes his masculine preaching, “He wills and men bow.” This reveals how overpowering his pulpit ministry was. Broadus notes further, “His words were half battles.” This was Luther, the preacher, who brought this convincing appeal with him into the pulpit.

Meuser describes the commanding nature of Luther’s preaching this way: “He preached as if the sermon was not a classroom but a battleground! Every sermon was a battle for the souls of the people, an apocalyptic event that set the doors of heaven and hell in motion, part of the continuing conflict between the Lord and Satan. The Word is God’s sword in this cosmic warfare through which the power of Christ invades life today.” In his pulpit expositions, Luther fought for the souls of men as one in the midst of spiritual warfare. He spoke in such a way as to conquer and compel even the strongest of men to follow Christ.

A God-Fearing Preacher

As he stood in the pulpit, Luther so feared God that it displaced any lesser fear of man. This high reverence for God made his preaching bold and dauntless. Few men in history ever preached with more audacious courage than did this German Reformer. Luther scholar Emanuel Harris writes, “The boldness with which Paul speaks of his preaching office in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 comes to life again in Luther.” When standing in the pulpit, he spared no one with his strong words. Whether it be polemics against the false gospel of Catholic doctrine, the abusive authority of the pope, or the fanatical mysticism of the Anabaptists, Luther preached in a direct, straightforward manner that confronted error wherever he found it. He held no private convictions that went unspoken in the pulpit. It was this fearlessness that gave him such a commanding presence as he stood before the people.

In expositing Matthew 5:1–25, Luther addressed the preaching of Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount and made a challenging application to all preachers. Luther asserted that those who preach must speak as fearlessly as did Jesus when He addressed the multitudes. Luther explained:

[The preacher] should open his mouth vigorously and confidently, to preach the truth that has been entrusted to him. He should not be silent or mumble but should testify without being frightened or bashful. He should speak out candidly without regarding or sparing anyone, let it strike whomever or whatever it will. It is a great hindrance to a preacher if he looks around and worries about what people like or do not like to hear, or what might make him unpopular or bring harm or

danger upon him. As he stands high on a mountain in a public place and looks around freely, so he should also speak freely and fear no one, though he sees many kinds of people and faces. He should not hold a leaf in front of his mouth.

That the preacher “should not hold a leaf in front of his mouth” meant that the word he proclaims must not be censored or tethered. No truth should be held back, and the teaching of strong doctrine must be openly declared for all to hear. Such instruction must never be muffled or muted and, instead, the voice of the preacher must be heard loud and clear. This was unquestionably the case with the bold preaching of this Protestant firebrand.

A Truth-Defending Preacher

As a faithful shepherd, Luther understood that he must protect his flock from the deadly wolves who sought to devour them with false doctrine. In his preaching, Luther knew that he must expose the devil’s lies and resist his sinister attacks. He was persuaded that he must mount an aggressive defense against all the enemies of the cross, for those who corrupted the gospel and thereby damned souls must be refuted. He stated:

An upright shepherd and minister must improve his flock by edification, and also resist and defend it; otherwise, if resisting be absent, the wolf devours the sheep: the rather where they be fat and well fed. Therefore St. Paul presses it home upon Titus, that a bishop by sound doctrine should be able both to exhort and to convince gainsayers; that is, to resist false doctrine. A preacher must be both soldier and shepherd. He must nourish, defend, and teach; he must have teeth in his mouth, and be able to bite and to fight.

In his expositions, Luther knew he must both feed the sheep and fend off the wolves. Drawing upon a biblical analogy, Luther saw himself much like Nehemiah on the wall with a trowel in one hand, building up the wall, and a sword in the other, fending off the enemies of God. Luther put it this way, “A preacher must be both soldier and shepherd.” This two-fold ministry must mark every man who steps into the pulpit. In active duty as a frontline warrior, Luther fought the good fight, even putting his own life at risk. He remarked:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except that point which the world and the devil are at that mo-

ment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefields besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

Luther asserted, “When I preach a sermon, I take an antithesis.” This meant that he must preach both positive assertions and negative denials. He must both exposit the truth and expose error. As a preacher, he both tore down and built up, uprooted and planted. To this end, he proclaimed both law and grace, condemnation and justification, damnation and salvation.

In the war for the truth, Luther looked beyond the mere human personalities who opposed the true gospel and their deviant lifestyles. Instead, he went to the jugular and attacked their false doctrine. This was certainly the case in his ongoing conflict with the church in Rome. Luther spared no words, as his following assessment shows:

Wycliffe and Hus assailed the immoral conduct of papists; but I chiefly oppose and resist their doctrine; I affirm roundly and plainly, that they preach not the truth. To this am I called; I take the goose by the neck, and set the knife to its throat. When I can show that the papist’s doctrine is false, which I have shown, then I can easily prove that their manner of life is evil. For when the word remains pure, the manner of life, though something therein be amiss, will be pure also. The pope has taken away the pure word and doctrine, and brought in another word and doctrine, which he has hanged upon the church. I shook all Popedom with this one point, that I teach uprightly, and mix up nothing else. We must press the doctrine onwards, for that breaks the neck of the pope.

This was and is the good fight of faith, which all God’s preachers are called to join. Luther had been sovereignly chosen by God and enlisted in the Lord’s army of preachers. He was serving in active duty on the frontlines and to this calling he must remain true.

An Error-Refuting Preacher

In the pulpit, Luther’s unwavering beliefs caused him to denounce all who departed from the truth. His open rebuke began with the pope himself. He said, “The pope and his proud prelates do not believe. We must not hold our peace but must confess the truth and say that the papacy is accursed; yea, the Emperor is accursed; for according to Paul, whatsoever is without the promise and faith of

Abraham, is accursed.” In his preaching, he never sought popularity or the approval of men. Like a prophet of old, Luther denounced the apostate religion and false teaching of Rome that threatened the spiritual health and vitality of the church.

At the Diet of Worms, in 1521, Luther issued his now-famous words, revealing his firmly anchored commitment to the Word of God. This bold confession of faith exposes his unflinching resolve as a preacher. With the threat of his life being taken, Luther declared:

Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted [convinced] of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning, I stand convicted [convinced] by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God’s word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me.

Despite whatever threats arose against this titan of the faith, nothing could silence his outspokenness. Fearlessly, he contended for the truth in the midst of swirling conflict. He boasted, “From the year of our Lord 1518, to the present time, every Maundy Thursday, at Rome, I have been by the pope excommunicated and cast into hell; yet I still live. For every year on Maundy Thursday, all heretics are excommunicated at Rome, among whom I am always put first and chief.” Luther wore such papal threats as a badge of honor: “This is the honor and crown we must expect and have in this world.” Rather than silencing him, such heated persecution only deepened his resolve to preach the truth with greater boldness.

No matter what the opposition, Luther persevered in his preaching. He confided, “I bear upon me the malice of the whole world, the hatred of the emperor, of the pope, and of all their retinue. Well, on in God’s name; seeing I am come into the lists, I will fight it out. I know my quarrel and cause are upright and just.” Nothing would constrain this loyal soldier as he fearlessly proclaimed the truth.

A World-Rejected Preacher

Finally, as Luther preached the Word, he paid a high price for his outspokenness. He was a straight-talking preacher who suffered much rejection for the cause of Jesus Christ.

This ill-treatment came with the territory of having a forthright pulpit ministry. Luther asserted: “Preachers must be endued with a great spirit, to serve people in body and soul, in wealth and honor, and yet, nevertheless, suffer and endure the greatest danger and unthankfulness.” No matter what affliction was thrown at him, this persistent pulpiteer remained unwavering in proclaiming the full counsel of Scripture. He stated, “Even if I were to lose my body and my life on account of it, I cannot depart from the true Word of God.” Such unshakable courage amid mounting persecution was continually needed in the face of many challenges in his preaching ministry.

Whatever suffering Luther endured for preaching the truth, he knew that it was necessary to become a good theologian. It is through the fires of adversity that a better understanding of the Scripture inevitably comes. He stated:

I want you to know how to study theology in the right way. I have practiced this method myself. . . . Here you will find three rules. They are frequently proposed throughout Psalm [119] and run thus: *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio* (prayer, meditation, tribulation). . . . For as soon as God’s Word becomes known through you, the devil will afflict you, will make a real [theological] doctor of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God’s Word. For I myself. . . . owe my papists many thanks for so beating, pressing, and frightening me through the devil’s raging that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to a goal I should never have reached.

Luther understood that suffering for what he preached drove him deeper into the Scripture and caused him to cling to it more tightly. So great was this opposition that Luther believed if any knew how difficult this task was, none would dare enter the ministry. He lamented, “If I were to write about the burdens of the preacher as I have experienced them and as I know them, I would scare everybody off.”

Despite this high cost for preaching the truth, Luther remained fearless in the pulpit. He challenged his many opponents, declaring they would have to take his life to stop his preaching. He persisted, “Burn me if you can and dare. Here I am; do your worst upon me. Scatter my ashes to all the winds—spread them through all seas. My spirit shall pursue you still. . . . Luther shall leave you neither

“I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word . . .”

- MARTIN LUTHER

peace nor rest till he has crushed in your brows of brass and dashed out your iron brains.” In other words, his listeners must deal with the truth he preached even if they did not believe it.

Luther understood that, ultimately, his preaching ministry was under the protective care of the sovereign God. He affirmed, “This is Christ’s commission: ‘just go on preaching; do not worry about who will listen; let Me worry about that. The world will be against you; do not let that trouble you. Nevertheless, there will be those who will listen to you and follow. You do not know them now, but I know them already. You preach, and let Me manage.’” This is the confidence Luther had as he preached in the face of mounting opposition. He proclaimed the truth and left the results in the omnipotent hands of the One who appointed him to preach, Jesus Christ. He believed the Lord had gone before him and prepared the hearts and wills of his hearers, and any success would be from Him alone.

“I Simply Preached”

When the Reformation first began to gain momentum, Luther was approached and asked how he had accomplished such an enormous task. He gave a simple testimony to the power of the Word of God preached. It would serve us well to read it again. Luther replied:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept. . . . the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.

Nothing has changed over the last five centuries. The primacy of preaching the Word must continue to occupy the central place in the church. The exposition of Scripture will still be the primary means by which God ushers in a new Reformation in this day. May the same be said of our pulpit ministries: we did nothing—the Word accomplished it all. ♦

LUTHER

AND THE LIFE OF THE PASTOR-THEOLOGIAN



R . C . S P R O U L



Augustine . . . Anselm . . . Athanasius . . . Martin Luther . . . John Calvin . . . Jonathan Edwards. These are some of the titans, the veritable giants of church history. Each had his own personality, his own emphasis, his own vocation. They differed in disposition, style, and even in points of doctrine. Yet there is one point of similarity that they shared. They were all scholars and pastors. All were world-class academicians who, at the same time, served the church as pastors.

There is no disgrace in being a full-time scholar working exclusively in the academy. Such labor can be an enormous benefit to the church. Sound research adds vital knowledge to our understanding of Scripture and the things of God. For most scholars, however, it is an either/or situation. Either we keep exclusively to the ivory tower or we devote our labors full time to the pastoral work of the church. Rare are those who can be both scholars and pastors.

As a young seminary student, I pondered the ghastly situation of the church in the United States. The influence of liberalism had an iron grip on the mainline churches. It seemed a hopeless task to see any recovery from this malaise. As I studied the writings and the work of the great teachers mentioned above, I saw a pattern emerge, especially from the ministries of Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. I saw that these men were “battlefield theologians.” They not only engaged with their scholar-opponents as Luther versus Rome and Erasmus of Rotterdam, or Calvin versus



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Pigius et al., or Edwards versus the Unitarian and Arminian opponents of his day, but they all took their case to the people. In this regard, they were following in the footsteps of the two greatest theologians who ever walked the earth: the Apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

This I saw as a strategy that God in His providence has used over the ages to nurture, protect, and defend His church. It was the strategy I longed to adopt as my own. John Piper has said that it is necessary for the Christian not only to believe the truth, but also to defend the truth, and finally to contend for the truth. For Paul, the battlefield started in the public square and then extended to the ends

As I studied the writings and the work of the great teachers . . . I saw a pattern emerge, especially from the ministries of Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. I saw that these men were “battlefield theologians.”

Luther's chief pastoral concern was that his people would know Christ and His gospel. To this end, Luther carried on a profoundly deep practice of intercessory prayer.

of the earth.

When we recall the issues that developed into the greatest theological conflict in the history of Christendom, the debates that culminated in the sixteenth century, we see that initially these matters grew out of a profoundly pastoral concern. To be sure, the Ninety-Five Theses posted on the church door at Wittenberg were penned in Latin as a request for theological discussion among the faculty members of the university. But what provoked Luther to request such a discussion? Simply put, it was pastoral concern.

Luther had received word of the indulgences that were being sold by Johann Tetzel, who was laboring both for Rome and for the interests of the Fugger banking clan. Tetzel's traveling indulgence show had the markings of a circus and drew thousands of people. Flush with commissions and bonuses, Tetzel claimed that he had saved more souls through indulgences than St. Peter had through the gospel.

Tetzel's work was carried on outside of Wittenberg. The sale of indulgences became so popular that throngs of people from Wittenberg (including many from Luther's own congregation) joined the multitude that crossed the Elbe River to avail themselves of the newly available indulgences. Impenitent members of his congregation boldly displayed their letters of indulgence to their neighbors and even to their pastor.

This travesty of false forgiveness forced Luther not only to question the matter of indulgences but the whole salvific system of the church, including the treasury of merit itself. Hence, the Ninety-Five Theses were intended for a handful of scholars. Students, however, without Luther's knowledge

or permission, took it upon themselves to translate the theses into German, and they distributed them to every city and hamlet in Germany within two weeks. The Reformation was now afoot.

One of the deepest ongoing concerns Luther had as a pastor was to liberate his congregation from the chains of superstition. As people began to leave the Roman Catholic system, they did not expunge from their lives all of their former convictions. This was particularly evident with respect to relics.

The town of Wittenberg boasted one of the largest reliquaries in Germany, amassed by Luther's protector, Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony. Frederick had spent a fortune to gather precious relics from around the world in the hopes of making Wittenberg a mecca for Christian pilgrims, thus enhancing the town as a spiritual and commercial center in Germany. From 1509 to 1518, Frederick's collection of relics had grown to 17,443 pieces with an indulgence value of 127,799 years and 116 days' release from purgatory.

Luther risked the wrath of Frederick by challenging the validity of the use of relics. In the last sermon Luther preached before he died, he stressed the impotence of relics in contrast to the potency of the gospel:

After all, there is preaching every day, often many times every day, so that we grow weary of it. . . . Alright, go ahead, dear brother, if you don't want God to speak to you every day at home and in your parish church, then be wise and look for something else: in Trier is our Lord God's coat, in Aachen are Joseph's

pants and our blessed Lady's chemise; go there and squander your money, buy indulgences and the pope's secondhand junk.

Luther wanted his flock to be fed by the gospel, not the pope's secondhand junk.

As a pastor, Luther was concerned to minister to the souls of his people. He ministered to their grief in this world. He understood the pain of the loss of loved ones as his own soul was wounded by the death of his young daughter. He bore the physical pains of a host of maladies in his own body and thus exuded empathy for the physical suffering of others.

But Luther's chief pastoral concern was that his people would know Christ and His gospel. To this end, Luther carried on a profoundly deep practice of intercessory prayer. He said:

Open your eyes and look into your life and the life of all Christians, particularly the spiritual estate, and you will find that faith, hope, love . . . are languishing. . . . Then you will see that there is need to pray throughout the world, every hour, without ceasing, with tears of blood.

Luther's pastoral heart is seen not only in his prayers but most notably in his preaching. He was a doctor of the church, a professor, and an academic. In his role as a

professor, his primary task was to teach. There is a clear difference between teaching and preaching. The teacher instructs; he imparts information to his students. But a theologian/preacher can never sever the two roles of teacher and preacher. The great teacher/preachers of history never taught as mere isolated spectators of the past. They combined exhortation with instruction—inspiration with education. In a word, at times their teaching turned to preaching. In like manner, the scholar/pastor mixes teaching with his preaching.

Luther mirrored this method in his preaching. He was concerned to inform his congregation as well as to exhort it. He insisted that his messages should be clear and simple enough that the unlearned could understand them. He said:

Infinite and unutterable is the majesty of the Word of God. . . . These words of God are not words of Plato or Aristotle, but God himself is speaking. And those preachers are the most suitable who very simply and plainly, without any airs or subtlety, teach the common people and youth, just as Christ taught the people with homespun parables.

The gospel, the gospel . . . all for the gospel. This is the love, the task, the vocation of all who wear the robes of the theologian and all who wear the gowns of the preacher. Luther was equally comfortable attired in either. ♦



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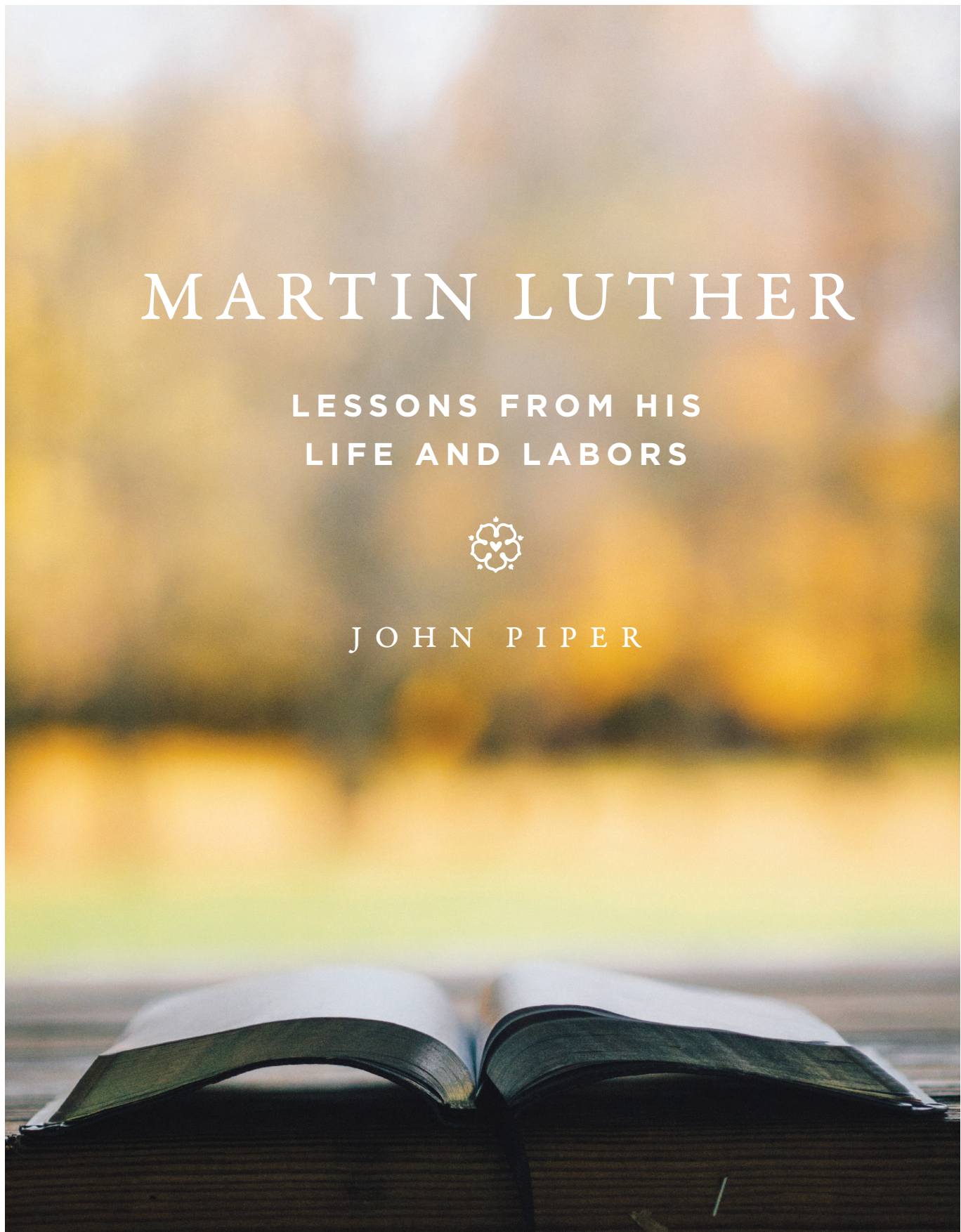
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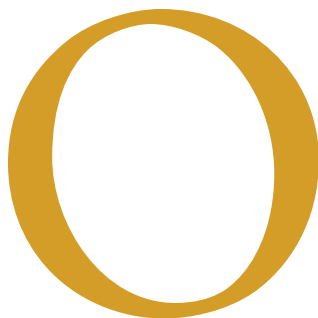
MARTIN LUTHER

LESSONS FROM HIS
LIFE AND LABORS



JOHN PIPER





ne of the great rediscoveries of the Reformation—especially of Martin Luther—was that the Word of God comes to us in a form of a Book. In other words, Luther grasped this powerful fact: God preserves the experience of salvation and holiness from generation to generation by means of a Book of revelation, not a bishop in Rome, and not the ecstasies of Thomas Muenzer and the Zwickau prophets. The Word of God comes to us in a Book. That rediscovery shaped Luther and the Reformation.

One of Luther's arch-opponents in the Roman Church, Sylvester Prierias, wrote in response to Luther's 95 Theses: "He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic." In other words, the Church and the pope are the authoritative deposit of salvation and the Word of God, and the Book is derivative and secondary. "What is new in Luther," Heiko Oberman says, "is the notion of absolute obedience to the Scriptures against any authorities; be they popes or councils." That is, the saving, sanctifying, authoritative Word of God comes to us in a Book. The implications of this simple observation are tremendous.

In 1539, commenting on Psalm 119, Luther wrote, "In this psalm, David always says that he will speak, think, talk, hear, read, day and night constantly—but about nothing else than God's Word and Commandments. *For God wants to give you His Spirit only through the external Word.*" This phrase is extremely important. The "external Word" is the Book. And the saving, sanctifying, illuminating Spirit of God, he says, comes to us *through* this "external Word."

Luther calls it the "external Word" to emphasize that it is objective, fixed, outside ourselves, and therefore unchanging. It is a Book. Neither ecclesiastical hierarchy nor fanatical ecstasy can replace it or shape it. It is "external," like God. You can take or leave it. But you can't make it other than what it is. It is a book with fixed letters and words and sentences.

The year before he died, in 1545, Luther said with resounding forcefulness, "Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scripture." Earlier he had said in his lectures on Genesis, "The Holy Spirit himself and God, the Creator of all things, is the Author of this book." The Word of God that saves and sanctifies, from generation to generation, is preserved in a Book. And therefore, at the heart



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of every pastor's work is book-work. Call it reading, meditation, reflection, cogitation, study, exegesis, or whatever you will—a large and central part of our work is to wrestle God's meaning from a Book, and proclaim it in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luther knew that some would stumble over the sheer conservatism of this simple, unchangeable fact. God's Word is fixed in a Book. He knew then, as we know today, that many say this assertion nullifies or minimizes the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in giving life and light. Luther would, I think, say, "Yes, that might happen." One might argue that emphasizing the brightness of the sun nullifies the surgeon who takes away blindness. But most people would not agree with that. Luther certainly would not agree.

Luther said in 1520, "Be assured that no one will make a doctor of the Holy Scripture save only the Holy Ghost from heaven." Luther was a great lover of the Holy Spirit. And his exaltation of the Book as the "external Word" did not belittle the Spirit. On the contrary, it elevated the Spirit's great gift to Christendom. In 1533, he said, "The Word of God is the greatest, most necessary, and most important thing in Christendom." Without the "external Word" we would not know one spirit from the other, and the objective personality of the Holy Spirit Himself would be lost in a blur of subjective expressions. Cherishing the Book implied to Luther that the Holy Spirit is a beautiful person to be known and loved, not a buzz to be felt.

Another objection to Luther's emphasis on the Book is that it minimizes the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ Himself. Luther says the opposite is true. To the degree that the

Word of God is disconnected from the objective, “external Word,” to that degree the incarnate Word, the historical Jesus, becomes a wax nose for the preferences of every generation. Luther had one weapon with which to rescue the incarnate Word from being sold in the markets of Wittenberg. He drove out the money changers—the indulgence sellers—with the whip of the “external Word,” the Book.

When Luther posted the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517, his 45th proposition read, “Christians should be taught that he who sees someone needy but looks past him, and buys an indulgence instead, receives not the pope’s remission but God’s wrath.” That blow fell from the Book—from the story of the Good Samaritan and from the second great commandment in the Book, the “external Word.” Without the Book there would be no blow. The incarnate Word would simply be everybody’s clay toy. So, precisely *for the sake of* the incarnate Word, Luther exalts the written Word, the “external Word.”

It is true that the church needs to *see* the Lord in His earthly talking and walking on the earth. Our faith is rooted in that decisive revelation in history. But Luther reasserted that this *seeing* happens through a written record. The incarnate Word is revealed to us in a Book. Is it not remarkable that the Spirit in Luther’s day, and in our day, is virtually silent about the incarnate Lord—except in amplifying the glory of the Lord through the written record of the incarnate Word?

Neither the Roman Church nor charismatic prophets claimed that the Spirit of the Lord narrated to them untold events of the historical Jesus. This is astonishing. Of all the claims to authority *over* the “external Word” (by the pope) and *alongside* the “external Word” (by the prophets), none of them brings forth new information about the incarnate life and ministry of Jesus. Rome will dare to add facts to the life of Mary (for example, the immaculate conception), but not to the life of Jesus. Charismatic prophets will announce new movements of the Lord in the sixteenth century, and in our day, but none seems to report a new parable or a new miracle of the incarnate Word omitted from the Gospels. Neither Roman authority nor prophetic ecstasy adds to or deletes from the external record of the incarnate Word.

Why is the Spirit so silent about the incarnate Word—even among those who encroach on the authority of the Book? The answer seems to be that it pleased God to reveal the incarnate Word to all succeeding generations *through a*

Pastors are essentially brokers of the Word of God transmitted in a Book.

Book, especially the Gospels. Luther put it like this:

The apostles themselves considered it necessary to put the New Testament into Greek and to bind it fast to that language, doubtless in order to preserve it for us safe and sound as in a sacred ark. For they foresaw all that was to come and now has come to pass, and knew that if it were contained only in one’s heads, wild and fearful disorder and confusion, and many various interpretations, fancies and doctrines would arise in the Church, which could be prevented and from which the plain man could be protected only by committing the New Testament to writing the language.

The ministry of the internal Spirit does not nullify the ministry of the “external Word.” He does not duplicate what it was designed to do. The Spirit glorifies the incarnate Word of the Gospels, but He does not re-narrate His words and deeds for the illiterate people or negligent pastors.

The immense implication of this for the pastoral ministry is that *we pastors are essentially brokers of the Word of God transmitted in a Book*. We are fundamentally readers, and teachers, and proclaimers of the message of the Book. All of this is done for the glory of the incarnate Word and by the power of the indwelling Spirit. But neither the indwelling Spirit nor the incarnate Word leads us away from the Book that Luther called “the external Word.” Christ stands forth for our *worship* and our *fellowship* and our *obedience* from the “external Word.” This is where we see the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). It is for the sake of Christ that the Spirit broods over the Book where Christ is clear, not over trances where he is obscure.

The central question I would like to answer here is, what difference did the discovery of the Book make in Luther’s ministry of the Word? What can we learn from Luther at

study? Since Luther's entire professional life was lived as a professor in the University of Wittenberg, it will be helpful to trace his life up to that point and then ask how a professor can be a helpful model for pastors.

The Pathway to the Professorship

Luther was born November 10, 1483, in Eisleben. His father, who was a copper miner, wanted him to enter the legal profession. While still a teenager, Luther was already well on his way to that vocation via his studies at the University. However, according to Heiko Oberman, "There is hardly any authenticated information about those first eighteen years which led Luther to the threshold of the University of Erfurt."

In 1502, at the age of 19, Luther received his Bachelor's degree, ranking, unimpressively, thirtieth out of 57 in his class. In January of 1505, he received his Master of Arts at Erfurt and ranked second among 17 candidates. That summer, the providential Damascus-like experience happened. On July 2, on the way home from law school, he was caught in a thunderstorm and hurled to the ground by lightning. He cried out, "Help me, St. Anne; I will become a monk." He feared for his soul and did not know how to find safety in the gospel. So, he took the next best thing, the monastery.

Fifteen days later, to his father's dismay, he kept his vow. On July 17, 1505, he knocked at the gate of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt and asked the prior to accept him into the order. Later, he would say that this choice was a flagrant sin—"not worth a farthing"—because it was made against his father and out of fear. Yet, he added, "But how much good the merciful Lord has allowed to come of it!" We see this kind of merciful providence over and over again in the history of the church, and it should protect us from the paralyzing effects of bad decisions in our past. God is not hindered in His sovereign designs from leading us, as He did Luther, out of blunders into fruitful lives of joy.

Luther was 21 years old when he became an Augustinian monk. It would be twenty more years until he married Katharina von Bora on June 13, 1525. This means that there were twenty more years of wrestling with the temptations of a single man who had very powerful drives. But "in the monastery," he said, "I did not think about women, money, or possessions; instead, my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow His grace on me . . . for I had strayed from faith and could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works." There was no theological gamesmanship in Luther's early studies. He said, "If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy."

On Easter in 1507, Luther was ordained to the priesthood, and on May 2, he celebrated his first Mass. He was so overwhelmed at the thought of God's majesty, he says, that he almost ran away. The prior persuaded him to continue. Oberman says that this incident is not isolated.

A sense of the *mysterium tremendum*, of the holiness of God, was to be characteristic of Luther throughout his life. It prevented pious routine from creeping into his relations with God and kept his Bible studies, prayers, or reading of the Mass from declining into a mechanical matter of course: his ultimate concern in all these is the encounter with the living God.

For two years, Luther taught aspects of philosophy to the younger monks. He said later that teaching philosophy was like waiting for the real thing. In 1509, the real thing came, and his beloved superior and counselor and friend, Johannes von Staupitz, admitted Luther to the Bible, that is, he allowed Luther to teach Bible instead of moral philosophy—Paul instead of Aristotle. Three years later, on October 19, 1512, at the age of 28, Luther received his doctorate in theology, and Staupitz turned over to him the chair in Biblical Theology at the University of Wittenberg, a position that Luther held the rest of his life.

Luther was a university theology professor all of his professional life. This causes us to raise the question whether he can really serve as any kind of model for pastors, or even understand what we pastors face in our kind of ministry. But that would be a mistake. At least three things unite him to our calling.

Why Should Pastors Listen to Luther?

1. He was more a preacher than any of us pastors.

Luther knew the burden and the pressure of weekly preaching. There were two churches in Wittenberg, the town church and the castle church. Luther was a regular preacher at the town church. He once said, "If I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher." He was driven by a passion for the exaltation of God in the Word. In one of his prayers, he says, "Dear Lord God, I want to preach so that you are glorified. I want to speak of you, praise you, praise your name. Although I probably cannot make it turn out well, won't you make it turn out well?"

To feel the force of this commitment, you have to realize that in the church in Wittenberg in those days there were no programs, but only worship and preaching; Sunday 5:00 a.m. worship with a sermon on the Epistle, 10:00 a.m. with a sermon on the Gospel, and an afternoon message on the Old Testament or catechism. Monday and Tuesday sermons were on the Catechism; Wednesdays on Matthew;

Thursdays and Fridays on the apostolic letters; and Saturday on John.

Luther was not the pastor of the town church. His friend Johannes Bugenhagen was from 1521 to 1558. But Luther shared the preaching virtually every week he was in town. He preached because the people of the town wanted to hear him and because he and his contemporaries understood his doctorate in theology to be a call to teach the Word of God to the whole church. Thus, Luther would often preach twice on Sunday and once during the week. Walther von Loewenich said in his biography, “Luther was one of the greatest preachers in the history of Christendom. . . . Between 1510 and 1546, Luther preached approximately 3,000 sermons. Frequently he preached several times a week, often two or more times a day.”

For example, in 1522 he preached 117 sermons in Wittenberg and 137 sermons the next year. In 1528, he preached almost 200 times, and from 1529 we have 121 sermons. This means that the average in those four years was one sermon every two-and-a-half days. As Fred Meuser says in his book on Luther’s preaching, “Never a weekend off—he knows all about that. Never even a weekday off. Never any respite at all from preaching, teaching, private study, production, writing, counseling.” That’s Luther’s first link with us pastors. He knows the burden of preaching.

2. Like most pastors, Luther was a family man—at least from age 41 until his death at 62.

Luther knew the pressure and the heartache of having and rearing and losing children. Katie bore him six children in quick succession: Johannes (1526), Elisabeth (1527), Magdalena (1529), Martin (1531), Paul (1533), and Margaret (1534). A little computing reveals that the year between Elizabeth and Magdalena was the year he preached 200 times (more than once every other day). Add to this that Elizabeth died that year at eight months old, yet he kept on going under that pain.

And lest we think that Luther neglected the children, consider that on Sunday afternoons, often after preaching twice, Luther led the household devotions, which were virtually another hour-long worship service and included the guests as well as the children. Luther knew the pressures of being a public and pressured family man.

3. Luther was a churchman, not an ivory tower theological scholar.

Luther was not only part of almost all the controversies and conferences of his day; he was usually the leader. There was the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), the encounter with Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg (1518), the Leipzig Dispu-

tation, with John Eck and Andrew Karlstadt (1519), and the Diet of Augsburg (1513, though he was not there in person).

Besides active personal involvement in church conferences, there was the unbelievable stream of publications that are all related to the guidance of the church. For example, in 1520, he wrote 133 works; in 1522, 130; in 1523, 183 (one every other day!), and just as many in 1524. He was the lightning rod for every criticism against the Reformation. W. Carlos Martyn wrote in *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, “All flock to him, besieging his door hourly, trooped citizens, doctors, princes. Diplomatic enigmas were to be solved, knotty theological points were to be settled, the ethics of social life were to be laid down.”

With the breakdown of the medieval system of church life, a whole new way of thinking about church and the Christian life had to be developed. And in Germany, the task fell in large measure to Martin Luther. It is astonishing how he threw himself into the mundane matters of parish life. For example, when it was decided that “Visitors” from the state and university would be sent to each parish to assess the condition of the church and make suggestions for church life, Luther took it upon himself to write the guidelines: “Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony.” He addressed a broad array of practical issues. When he came to the education of children, he went so far as to dictate how the lower grades should be divided into three groups: pre-readers, readers, and advanced readers. Then he made suggestions for how to teach them:

They shall first learn to read the primer in which are found the alphabet, the Lord’s prayer, the Creed, and other prayers. When they have learned this they shall be given Donatus and Cato, to read Donatus and to expound Cato. The schoolmaster is to expound one or two verses at a time, and the children are to repeat these at a later time, so that they thereby build up a vocabulary.

I mention this simply to show that this university professor was intensely involved in trying to solve the most practical ministry problems from the cradle to the grave. He did not do his studying in the uninterrupted leisure of sabbaticals and long summers. He was constantly besieged and constantly at work.

I conclude that, though he was a university professor, there is reason we pastors should look at his work and listen to his words, in order to learn and be inspired for the ministry of the Word—the “external Word,” the Book. ♦



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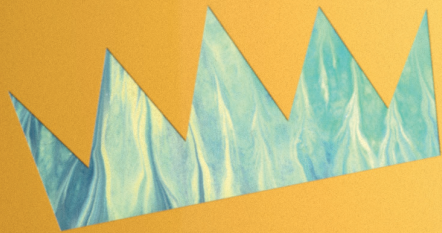
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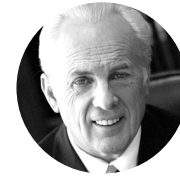
I once visited an isolated eastern city in the former Soviet Union, where I met with fifteen hundred impoverished Christians. They were the descendants of exiles, and they and their ancestors had suffered terribly under Soviet oppression for three quarters of a century. Their poverty was so severe that they had to work hard every day just to put food on the table. The subject that was most on their heart was their future in the glory of heaven. I had the privilege of teaching them about that from Scripture for several hours, and many were so overcome that they wept with joy.

Their response was strikingly different from that of many Christians in the West, who have things so good that they do not know what it is to long for heaven. As a result, they live as if going to heaven would be an unwelcome intrusion into their busy schedules—an interruption of their career goals, or vacation plans. They do not want to see heaven until they have enjoyed all the pleasures the world has to offer. When they have seen it all and done it all, or when age or sickness hinder their ability to enjoy those pleasures, then they will be ready for heaven. While it is true that, as the old spiritual put it, “Everybody talkin’ ’bout heaven ain’t goin’ there,” it is also true that everybody going to heaven is not talking about it.

When the church loses its focus on heaven, it becomes self-indulgent and self-centered, materialistic and worldly, spiritually weak and lethargic. The pleasures and comforts of this present world consume too much of its time and energy. Believers forget that this world is not their true home, that they are “aliens and strangers” (1 Peter 2:11) here, that their “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20). The church is increasingly in danger not of being so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good, but rather of being so earthly minded that it is no heavenly good.

All Christians should long for heaven, since everything precious to them is there. Their Father is there. Their fellow believers who have died are there. Their names are recorded there. Their inheritance is there. Their eternal reward is there.

Most important of all, their Savior is there: He has gone there to prepare a place for them so that they can be with Him forever, sharing rich fellowship with Him and worshipping Him. Jesus Himself is the glory of heaven. The reality that believers will be reunited in heaven with Christ and each other is the subject of the last part of the Lord’s High Priestly Prayer. Verses 24–26 describe the fellowship of future glory, the focus of future glory, and the foretaste of future glory.



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The Fellowship of Future Glory

This passionate plea that those whom the Father has given to Him might be with Him in His eternal glory in heaven is the final petition of Christ’s prayer. Humanly speaking, there is nothing to warrant such a staggering, overwhelming privilege. But the marvelous truth of redemption is that not only does God forgive repentant sinners, but He also adopts them as His children. Thus, the glorification of believers in heaven is the ultimate goal of the plan of salvation.

Jesus’ request was in perfect harmony with God’s purpose in choosing believers before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), inscribing their names in the Book of Life, and giving them to the Son as gifts of His love (John 6:37, 39).

It is not difficult to understand believers wanting to be with Him; but it staggers the imagination to realize that He wants them to be with Him. Christ’s specific request for those given Him by the Father, that they might be with Me where I am, further expressed His desire for eternal fellowship with them. He wants all of those chosen for Him in eternity past to be with Him where He now is—heaven. In John 14:3, Jesus revealed His purpose in bringing believers to heaven: “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” In John 12:26 He promised, “If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.”

The Lord’s use of the present tense, where I am, obviously does not refer to His location in Jerusalem on the way

to Gethsemane. Such a request would have been pointless, since the disciples were already with Him. Further, in this section of His prayer, Christ looked beyond the eleven disciples to all who would believe in Him in the future through their ministry. Jesus was not speaking of where He was at that moment, but where He would soon be. He was so certain that He would be returning to heaven that He spoke of that future event in the present tense, as if it had already happened (cf. v. 11).

What will make heaven so glorious for believers is not its gates of pearl, or streets of gold, but the presence of the Lamb. Their supreme joy will be to “dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps 23:6), experiencing perfect, intimate, holy fellowship with Him and all the saints forever.

The Focus of Future Glory

Jesus also asked the Father that His followers might see His glory which the Father had given Him. It is true that in Christ’s incarnation “we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father” (John 1:14). But that glory was veiled in His flesh (Phil 2:5–8). Only in heaven will it be fully manifested to His people when they “see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

In God’s gracious plan, believers will not only see Christ’s glory, but also share it: “For our citizenship is in heaven,” Paul wrote to the Philippians, “from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil 3:20–21).

Throughout all eternity, the song of the redeemed as they behold the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ will be, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing . . . To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev 5:12–13).

This request complements the statement the Lord made back in verse 22: “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them.” In the incarnation, Christ had manifested “His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father” (John 1:14; cf. 2:11). Believers also receive Christ’s glory through His indwelling of them through the Holy Spirit (vv. 23, 26; 14:20, 23). In that sense they have His glory—His attributes and essence—within them.

But the glory of which Christ speaks here is the visible manifestation of the fullness of His glory that believers will one day see in heaven. In the incarnation, Christ’s glory was partially veiled (cf. Phil 2:7). But when Jesus returned to heaven, the Father restored that fullness of glory to Him, as He had requested in verse 5: “Now, Father, glorify Me

together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” Believers will enter the fullness of Christ’s glorious presence when they die (or at the rapture, if they are alive at that time). To see God after death has always been the hope of the saints. In Psalm 11:7, David expressed his confidence that “the upright will behold His face,” while in Psalm 17:15 he wrote, “As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake.” Jesus pronounced the pure in heart “blessed . . . for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8).

John wrote that one day believers “will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2), while Revelation 22:3–4 reveals that in heaven, “There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.” So overwhelming will the manifestation of Christ’s glory be that the only possible response will be praise: All of the blessings believers will one day experience in heaven flow from the reality that the Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world. From all eternity the Father and Son enjoyed perfect fellowship (John 1:1), love, and shared glory (17:5). As indicated throughout this prayer, based on that mutual love, the Father chose a people (Eph 1:4), gave them to the Son, and prepared an eternal kingdom for them (Matt 25:34) where they will behold His glory forever.

The Foretaste of Future Glory

The closing verses of this magnificent prayer exude Christ’s confidence that the righteous Father will grant His requests. God is righteous in everything He does; His judgments, deeds, ordinances, and Word are righteous. Jesus reiterated the point He had made earlier in verse 9. His requests were not for the world, which has not known the Father and hence has no right to receive His special care or the Son’s intercession. Apart from faith in Jesus Christ, sinners face only eternal judgment. In John 3:18 Jesus warned, “He who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God,” while in 3:36 John the Baptist added, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Not only had Jesus perfectly known the Father from all eternity, but He had also made His name known to His followers, who had known that the Father had sent Him. The Lord’s mission was to lead lost sinners into a personal relationship with God (Luke 19:10), which comes only through the knowledge of Him (John 17:3, cf. 14:6). Jesus initially makes the Father known at the moment of salvation, continues to make Him known to believers through

the process of sanctification, and finally ushers them into the Father's heavenly presence at their glorification. His goal is that even now they might experience the love with which the Father loved Christ, and by knowing "the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that [they might] be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). God's love is poured out on believers at salvation (Rom 5:5), continues in them as Christ indwells them, and is fulfilled perfectly in them in heaven.

Christ's requests in this greatest prayer ever prayed may

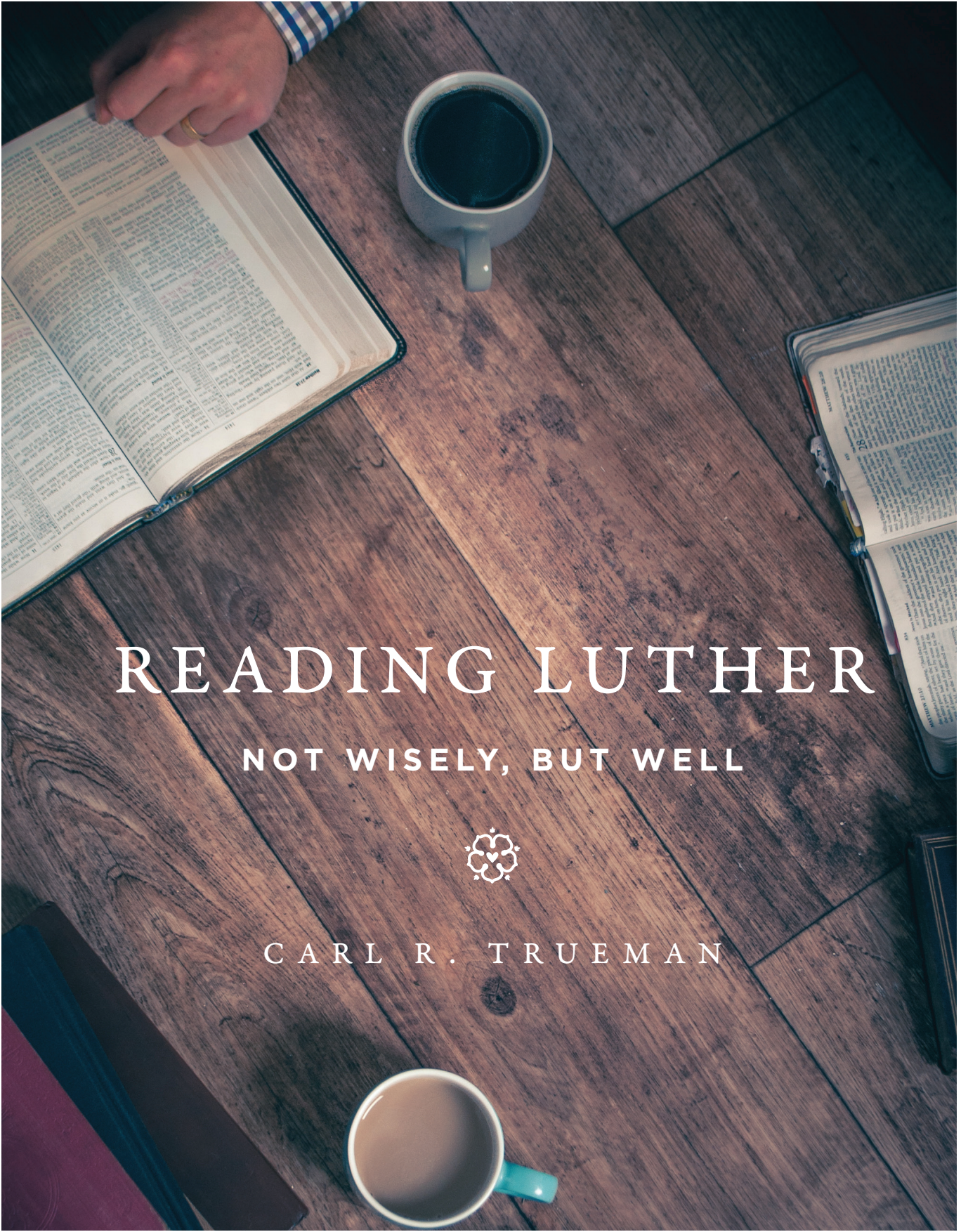
be summed up in seven words. The Lord prayed for believers' preservation ("Holy Father, keep them in Your name," v. 11); jubilation ("that they may have My joy made full in themselves," v. 13); liberation ("keep them from the evil one," v. 15); sanctification ("sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth," v. 17); unification ("that they may all be one," v. 21); association ("Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am," v. 24); and glorification ("that they may see My glory," v. 24). ♦



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READING LUTHER

NOT WISELY, BUT WELL



CARL R. TRUEMAN

Martin Luther is perhaps the single most important thinker for Protestants. Not that he is the greatest theologian, exegete, or even role model. There are other, more qualified candidates for each of those titles. He is, however, the original agenda setter for Protestantism: his focus on justification by faith, his critique of papal authority, and his prioritizing of Word over sacrament have all set basic trajectories for subsequent generations.

Nevertheless, Luther is a complex thinker whose writings in the hands of the inept enthusiast fulfill a function analogous to that of a cut-throat razor in the hands of a child who wants to emulate his father's morning routine "so as to be just like daddy." The result can be messy and sometimes dangerous. After all, Luther is a man who can be quoted positively by godly Lutheran pastors, shaven-headed neo-Nazi sociopaths, and forty-something representatives of the Beautiful People. Luther is indeed more easily quoted than actually understood.

I have heard it said that Luther was not a systematic theologian. This statement is both true and false. Often it is used to imply that Luther's thinking was not systematic in the sense that it was somewhat jumbled or contained a lot of loose ends or that he had no patience with system as such, but reveled in theology as internally incoherent kerygma. In this sense, the claim is not true. Luther was a remarkably systematic thinker in several ways. Thus, his emphases and interests (e.g., righteousness, sacraments, incarnation, authority) are remarkably consistent throughout his career. Further, while his thought did develop over his long career (and on certain points in quite dramatic ways), these developments were generally very consistent and comprehensible when set within the context of his biography.

For example, modern evangelicals are often confused by his break with Zwingli over the Real Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper in 1529. Yet this should not really be a surprise. In 1520, Luther attacked the Mass for being a sacrifice but saw transubstantiation merely as an error, and that not because it affirmed the Real Presence but because it denied the continuation of bread and wine in the substance of the elements. Luther certainly shifted his emphasis from promise to presence between 1520 and 1529; but his position in 1529 represents an elaboration of, not a fundamental change in, the substance (sorry) of his view in 1520.



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Nevertheless, Luther is not systematic in the sense that all his theological writings are occasional, called forth by specific situations: pedagogical, polemical, pastoral, political. He did not write a systematic theology or even produce a theological commonplace book. In Lutheranism, that honor went first to Melancthon. This means that, when we quote Luther, we need to be sensitive to context.

Thus, a knowledge of Luther's biography is crucial for understanding his theology. Given the dramatic developments in his thinking, from late medieval monk to elder statesman of a Protestant movement, and the fact that he writes in such a personally engaged manner, his theology must be read against the background of his life story. Of course, even those with minimal acquaintance with Luther know that Luther's thinking undergoes a dramatic shift between 1515 and 1520 and that this must shape how we use his writings; but he lived for a further twenty-six action-packed years, during which he wrote rather a lot. Other events—the clash with Erasmus, the Peasants' War, marriage, the Diets of Speyer, the Marburg Colloquy, the Augsburg Confession, the formation of the Schmalkaldic League, the conflict with the Antinomians—these and many more exerted important influence on the shape and development of Luther's thought. Those who wish to read Luther thoughtfully and who also wish to use him in contemporary theological construction need to have some knowledge of his fast life and turbulent times.

Obviously, I cannot here cover all the relevant aspects of Luther's biography; but I will offer four specific areas in which knowledge of his life and times is vital to correct understanding: his central role in the ecclesiastical paradigm

shift that was the Reformation; his premodern cultural sensibility; his existential suffering; and his eschatological confidence.

Regarding the first, I remember one famous theological writer confidently declaring that the emerging/ent church movement was the kind of paradigm-shifting movement that comes along only every five hundred years or so. Sadly, such hyperbole comes along rather more frequently. Does it not seem only yesterday that Mel Gibson's film *The Passion* was being trumpeted by evangelicals as "the greatest outreach opportunity of the century"? In retrospect, *The Passion* surely stands somewhere between *A Muppet Christmas Carol* and *Dave and the Giant Pickle* in the honor roll of celluloid contributions to world evangelization.

Thus it was with the Great Emergence: for all the bombast, it really shifted no paradigms but merely engendered massive quantities of those ridiculous Bono-style sunglasses and silly pork-pie hats. It raised no really challenging questions beyond the obvious theodicy issue of how a God of love could allow a language as potentially beautiful as English to be permanently defiled by the addition of ugly and unnecessary terminological gibberish like "missional," "attractional," and "pastor of creative arts ministries," along with its various cognates.

The self-importance of postmodernists aside, there have on occasion been some truly important periods in church history which have really changed things. The fourth century, the Aristotelian renaissance of the late Middle Ages, and the Reformation are three more likely contenders. Luther, however, was the genuine article, one of the greatest paradigm breakers of them all.

By moving the Word to the center of ecclesiastical life and faith to the center of salvation, Luther articulated a theology that demanded a new form of church, generated new experiential expectations, and thereby created new pastoral problems. The crucial thing for today's reader to realize is that Luther's initial theology demanded all this without necessarily providing the answers in an obvious form. Indeed, how could it do so? The development of Luther's thought and practice were therefore ongoing. Between 1520 and 1546, he had to develop new liturgies, catechisms, and forms of church government and pastoral practice not only to embody to his new theological insights but to inculcate them in the people and, most importantly, to handle the situations, questions, and difficulties that those same insights caused.

Regarding Luther's premodern cultural sensibility, there is no greater sign of this than the way he talks of the devil as a physical presence with whom he dialogues on a regular basis. Indeed, I have heard it said that until one realizes

that Luther lived in a universe full of devils and demons who made their presence physically felt, one cannot really understand how Luther looked at the world. Even in Luther's own day, this was not the universal outlook: his was the world of the rural medieval peasant, not that of the slick urban dweller of Geneva or Zurich. To read Luther well, one needs to imagine oneself into the kind of world to which he was responding.

Regarding Luther's existential struggles, the wild see-saw between law and gospel, the terrible anxieties (*Anfechtungen*) that he experienced—and probably experienced more severely as a Protestant than he did in the cloister—were determinative of his theology. Indeed, the terrors of Law and of God were really that for him: terrors.

I suspect that which was terror for him has lately become a marketing opportunity for others, that the closest some of his modern acolytes come to *Anfechtungen* is finding out that the release of the new iPhone has been delayed by a week. To adopt the aesthetics of the hipster or the stand-up comic and talk with glib confidence of the Law-Gospel dialectic or the "theology of the cross" is to make a mocking abstraction of what for Luther was life and death, real, personal, passionate, and deeply felt. Indeed, comparing Luther to the ways in which the new Luther pundits bandy such terms around reminds me of the lines of the poet:

*O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.*

"Hold them cheap" indeed do those whose care for Hollister clothes, Hilfiger frames, and Hollywoodesque orthodontics seems rather more obvious than their ever having hung helpless under the terrifying shadow of God's Law.

Finally, Luther's eschatological expectation is vital to understanding his biography, his theology, and even his hate. And it is much neglected by his evangelical fans. Luther is an example of late medieval expectation of the end of time. When the Reformation really started to move forward in 1519–20, Luther seems to have believed it was part of the final act of history prior to the return of Christ. This shaped his theology in numerous ways.

For example, in 1520, he seems to have been supremely confident that all that was needed was the preaching of God's Word and all would be well. People would turn to Christ. Christians would behave as Christians. Rulers would rule well. Servants would obey their masters. The years from 1525 to his death mark in many ways his slow and painful realization that the end was not nigh and the Word in and of itself was not enough: his later works wit-

Basic to reading Luther is . . . reading Luther. One cannot do better than to study the books and pamphlets he actually wrote.

ness to the fact that ecclesiastical structure was needed, as were moral imperatives. This shift in perspective also goes some way toward explaining his changing attitude to the Jews, from the generally positive (for his day) attitude of the 1523 treatise *The Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* to the vitriolic vomit of *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543.

Reading Luther is rewarding and important. We can learn from his strengths, from his sins, and from the sheer experience of wrestling with a great and exuberant mind in action. He is also a true paradigm shifter, who continues, for good or ill, to inform modern Christianity. But such reading must be done in a way that appreciates that he lived in a time before Twitter, when the great one-liners rested upon pages of elaborate argumentation and were first and foremost actions of their time.

Basic to reading Luther is . . . reading Luther. One cannot do better than to study the books and pamphlets that he actually wrote. The standard scholarly text of his works, in Latin and German, is the Weimar edition, which started publication in the nineteenth century and continues, I believe, to this day. For those who prefer English, the so-called Philadelphia edition (nearly sixty volumes and counting) provides excellent access to all the major works and much more. It is also available via Logos and is really quite excellent. There are also many one-volume selections: the best are those by John Dillenberger and by Timothy Lull. When teaching courses on Luther, I use the latter, which features a judicious selection of texts, clearly laid out, and wide margins for notes.

For those looking for ways in to his theology, the Catechisms, *The Freedom of the Christian Man*, and *The Bondage of the Will* may be the best places to start. In addition, every pastor should have on his bookshelf a copy of *The Book of Concord*, the confessional standards of Lutheran churches around the world. Theodore Tappert's translation is available for free online; the more recent and superior

edition by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert is available as a quality hardback from Concordia.

I mentioned last time that Luther's life is central to reading his theology. His thinking, while remarkably consistent, does develop over time. He nuances his positions on various issues as he faces challenges that his own Reformation theology generated. Thus, knowing what issues he is facing and when is important when reading him. The benchmark biography of Luther in English is the three volumes by the German historian, Martin Brecht. These look rather forbidding: nearly 1,400 pages of text, excluding notes. Nevertheless, the translation is very readable, and the narrative moves at a good pace, such that the reader's interest is maintained and the basic storyline remains very clear.

For those with less time to spare, there is the classic biography by Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*. This book was my first introduction to the Reformation and remains a favorite. Bainton was a radical thinker himself, not doctrinally sympathetic to Luther, but rather emotionally so: he knew what it was like to be a beleaguered outsider, a man at war with his times. Thus, he writes on Luther with considerable passion. A more recent short biography is that by the distinguished Lutheran historian, Martin Marty, in the Penguin Brief Lives series. This is fun too: well-written and peppered with little anecdotes from Luther's personal life. To these I would also add Robert Kolb's *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*, a relatively short but learned and extremely informative introduction to Luther's life and major theological contributions. Readers should also consult Heiko Oberman's *Luther: Man between God and Devil* for an example of a brilliant, if at times speculative, account of Luther's life by the most significant Reformation scholar of the last fifty years.

When it comes to Luther's theology, there are many volumes from which to choose. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of*



Martin Luther, is still useful. Philip S. Watson's *Let God Be God* and Gordon Rupp's *The Righteousness of God* are both classics from the mid-twentieth century (and, as a point of trivia, both authors happened to be Methodists). For me, the best overall summary of Luther's theology is Bernhard Lohse's *Martin Luther's Theology*. Anyone trying to produce a "theology of Luther" has to make a critical decision at the very outset: should his thought be arranged chronologically, so as to highlight its unity in development, or thematically, so as to highlight its internal coherence? Either way, the risk of interpretative distortion is significant. Lohse effectively sidesteps the issue by refusing to make such a choice and presenting instead a study of Luther's thought in which the first half of the book is a form of intellectual biography and the second of intellectual synthesis. The result is a very fine study of Luther.

There are a number of other treatments of Luther's theology with contemporary twists: Hans Martin Barth's *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment* is a very substantial recent addition to the literature. Similarly, Oswald Bayer's *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* is worth reading, as is Paul R. Hinlicky's *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom*.

Books on individual themes in Luther abound. Of particular note in the recent literature is Kolb's *Luther and the Stories of God*, a very thought-provoking study of Luther's exegesis and homiletic approach that draws positively on modern narrative theory. I might add at this point that Robert Kolb is a prolific Luther scholar, and just about everything he has written on Luther and Lutheranism is well worth reading.

On the cross, Walther von Loewenich's *Luther's Theology of the Cross* now enjoys the status of a classic. On the

same theme, Gerhard Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* is also very stimulating.

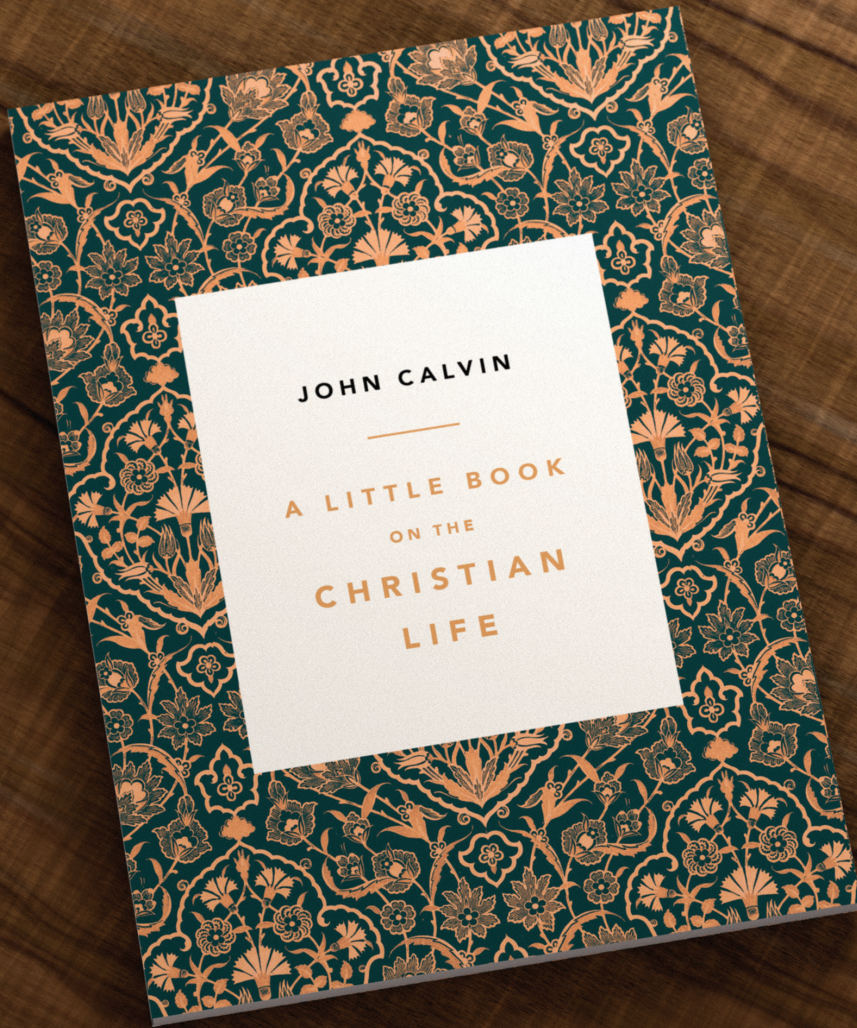
On baptism and the Lord's Supper, the point at which evangelicals and Reformed Protestants will likely find Dr. Martin most perplexing, perhaps the best starting place is the relevant section in Kolb's *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition*. Those wanting more should try Albrecht Peter's *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Baptism and Lord's Supper*.

The dark side of Luther is nowhere more evident than in his later writings on the Jews. This is a difficult subject, not simply because of the venom with which he writes but also because of the problems of writing about such from a post-Holocaust perspective. Three books in particular should be consulted. The first is Oberman's *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, a classic articulation of the Jewish issue as one of religion. Eric Gritsch's *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment* is also worth reading, in part because Gritsch himself was a member of the Hitler Youth. Finally, the recent volume by Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany*, deserves the widest possible readership, both for its brilliant analysis of how Luther was used by Nazi propagandists, and for the judicious questions it raises about Oberman's central thesis. Paul Althaus (whose work *The Ethics of Martin Luther* is still worth reading) does not emerge with any great honor, I am afraid.

Eerdmans also has a great series of books which draw the best from the *Luther Quarterly*. Kolb on the bondage of the will and the collection of essays gathered by Timothy J. Wengert under the title *The Pastoral Luther* are two real highlights.

Finally, two titles which are personal favorites: Eric Gritsch's *The Wit of Martin Luther* is a short, brilliant study of Luther's use of humor as a rhetorical and theological device. My only criticism is that the book could have been much, much longer. Charles P. Arand and Robert Kolb's *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* is a profoundly practical reflection on how Luther's theology can and should shape life in the church today. This is a book with useful implications well beyond the boundaries of confessional Lutheranism.

A list like this barely scratches the surface. But it is a start, and I hope it is of some small help to a few of you. ♦



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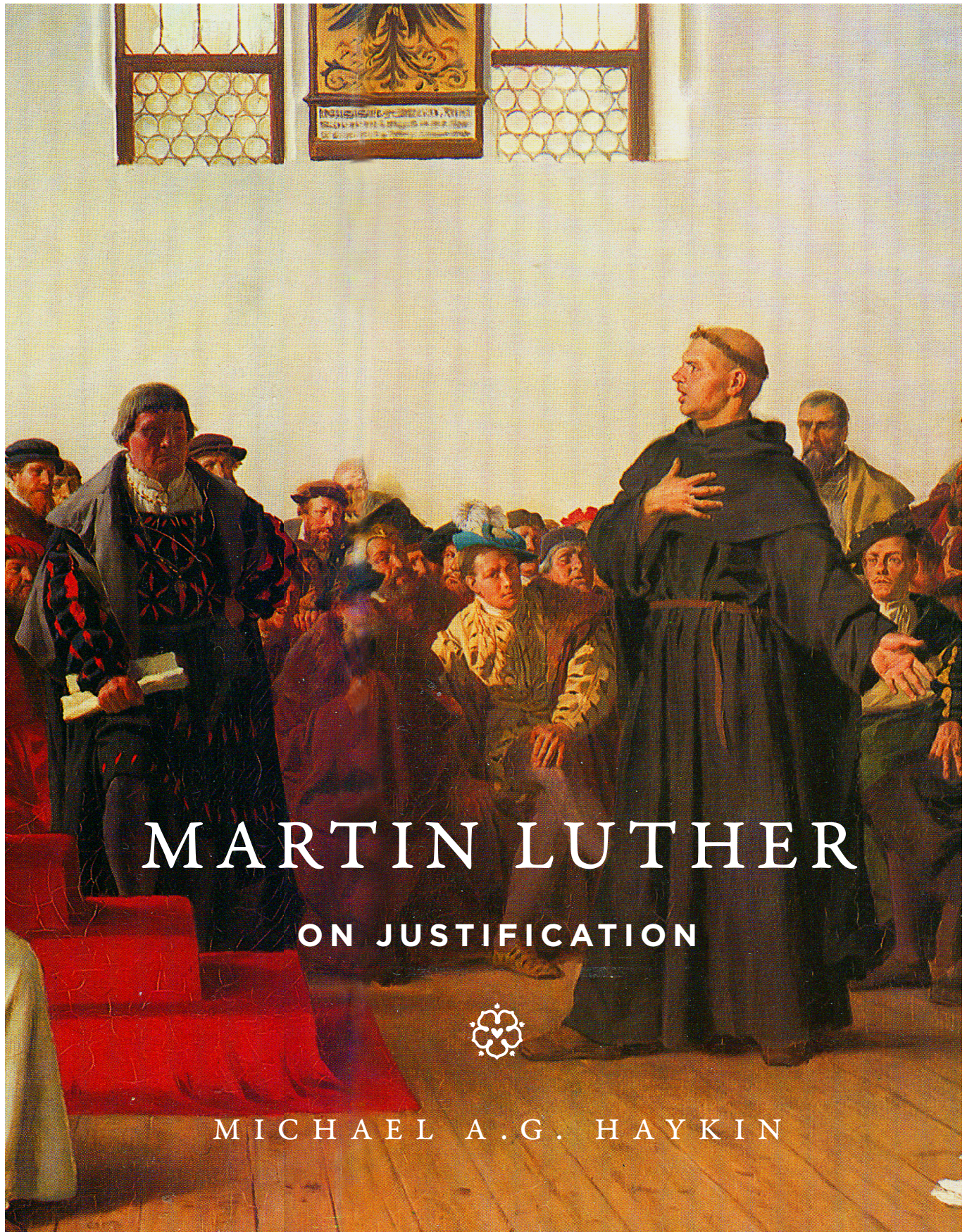
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MARTIN LUTHER

ON JUSTIFICATION



MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

It is the morning of February 12 in the year of our Lord 1554. We are in a room in the Tower of London, where the Lady Jane Grey (1537–1554), who had been Queen of England for nine days, is imprisoned. It is only a few hours before her execution at the behest of Mary I, the so-called “Bloody Mary,” persecutor of the English Protestants. Jane is writing in her prayer-book, which she will give to her jailer, Sir John Brydges, before she is taken out to the execution block. As we peer over her shoulder to see what she is writing, we read these words:

If justice be done with my body, my soul will find mercy with God. Death will give pain to my body for its sins, but the soul will be justified before God. . . . God . . . will show me favor.

Now, humanly speaking, these words of Jane would not have been written without the life and work of a man who has been rightly called the pathfinder of the Reformation, namely, Martin Luther (1483–1546), who died eight years before the scene described above. It was Luther who rediscovered that key doctrine of the New Testament, namely, justification by faith alone. If it had not been for Luther, this doctrine, which permeates the scene we have just looked at, might well have remained in obscurity, and Jane would have trusted in her good works and faithfulness as evidence of God’s acceptance of her. As it was, she trusted in Christ alone for her salvation.

But when we say Luther “rediscovered” this doctrine, we are implying that the doctrine had been lost or obscured before Luther came on the scene of church history. Luther rightly viewed the loss of this key doctrine as having had detrimental effects on the health of the church of his day. For Luther, justification by faith alone is “the principal doctrine of Christianity” and its opposite, the idea that one can be approved by God on the basis of one’s faith and good works, the “fundamental principle” of the world and the devil. “Whoever departs from the article of justification,” Luther plainly said, “does not know God.” And as he concluded more than twenty years after his experience of rediscovering the truth of justification by faith alone: “if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands, if it falls, the church falls.” Or, as later theologians put it: justification by faith alone is “the article upon which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).

In what follows, we want to first look at how the doctrine was obscured prior to Luther and the way in which this impacted the church in the era immediately preceding the



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life of Luther, namely, the medieval church. We then look at Luther’s rediscovery of it.

**“We trust in the blood of salvation”:
Justification in the Patristic Era**

The Reformers were well aware that the doctrine of justification by faith alone had been held by the key theologians of the church in the patristic era, the four centuries immediately following the end of the apostolic era. Listen, for instance, to the following passage from Clement of Rome’s letter to the Corinthians, which was written near the end of the first century AD. Upon the patriarchs and the kings that ruled Israel, he says,

great honor and renown were bestowed; yet not for their own sakes, or because of their own achievements, or for the good works they did, but by the will of God. Similarly we also, who by his will have been called in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves or our own wisdom or understanding or godliness, nor by such deeds as we have done in holiness of heart, but by that faith through which alone Almighty God has justified all men since the beginning of time. Glory be to him for ever and ever, Amen.

Or listen to this passage from the late second-century writing known as the *Letter to Diognetus*:

God . . . gave his own Son a ransom for us, the holy for the lawless, the pure for the evil, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his

righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us who are ungodly and lawless to have been justified except in the Son of God alone? Oh the sweet exchange! . . . Oh, the unexpected benefits! That the iniquity of many should be hidden in the One Righteous Man and that the righteousness of one should justify many who are godless!

Or consider this hymn-text from the second-century Christian hymnal known as the *Odes of Solomon*:

I was justified by my Lord, for my salvation is incorruptible.

I have been freed from vanities, and am not condemned.

My chains were cut off by His hands, I received the face and likeness of a new person, and I walked in Him and was saved.

The second-century apologist Justin Martyr sums up this patristic perspective well when he says, “We have trusted in the saving blood” (*haimati sōtēriō pepisteukamen*).

There is nothing in any of these texts that Luther many years later would not have rejoiced in. They are accurate renditions of the doctrine of justification by faith alone as Luther taught it. There is, however, evidence that some early Christian authors did not adequately grasp or express the biblical position found in these two statements that we have just cited. A key reason for this is the fact that Christian writers and authors of the first three centuries after the end of the apostolic era are basically wrestling with the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ. They focused upon these areas of theology because of controversies that had arisen with regard to them. When they did discuss issues relating to salvation, it was more in terms of the forgiveness of sins and the nature of eternal life, not justification. Up to the time of Augustine (354–430), justification was not an issue of theological debate. The lack of controversy about this issue thus contributed to the sometimes ill-defined nature of patristic teaching on justification.

Augustine and Justification

In the fifth century, however, such a controversy did occur. The principal figures involved in the controversy were Augustine, the brilliant and enormously influential theologian who lived in North Africa most of his life, and Pelagius (fl.400–420), a British monk who had come to live

in Rome in the first decade of the fifth century. According to Pelagius, while the grace of God may be of help toward achieving a right standing with God, it is not necessary for that end. He argued this way because he denied the doctrine of original sin and boldly asserted that human nature at its core is good and able to do all that God commands it to do. In other words, Pelagius taught that individual human beings have the capacity to save themselves. They are not in bondage to sin, but have the ability to do all that is necessary to be saved. Salvation is something that can thus be earned through good works.

Given this perspective, it is not surprising that Pelagius took deep offense at the following statement from Augustine’s *Confessions*, which Augustine wrote to glorify God for his salvation, that the British monk heard read at a dinner party in Rome. Augustine had written in a certain section of that book:

Give me the grace [O Lord] to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! . . . O holy God . . . when your commands are obeyed, it is from you that we receive the power to obey them.

Pelagius saw this as a massive assault on human goodness and human freedom.

In his response to Pelagius, Augustine insisted upon the priority of the grace of God at every stage in the Christian life, from its beginning to its end. As he meditated upon Scripture, and especially the book of Romans, he came to the conviction that human beings do not possess the necessary power or freedom to take any step at all toward salvation. Far from possessing any such “freedom of the will,” humans had a will that was corrupted and tainted by sin, one that bent them toward evil and away from God. Only the grace of God could counteract this in-built bias toward sin. Augustine’s response to Pelagius thus stresses the bondage of the human will and the need for God’s radical intervention in grace to save lost sinners:

Free choice is capable only of sinning, if the way of truth remains hidden. And when what we should do and the goal we strive for begins to be clear, unless we find delight in it and love it, we do not act, do not begin, do not live good lives. But so that we may love it, “the love of God” is poured out “in our hearts,” not by free choice which comes from ourselves, but “by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

For Augustine, then, redemption is possible only as a divine gift. It is not something that we can achieve ourselves.

Rather, it is something that has to be done for us. Augustine thus emphasizes that the resources of salvation are located outside of humanity, in the living God Himself. It is this God, who chooses to save some sinners, who initiates the process of salvation, not men or women. In his uncompromising commitment to election, Augustine thus safeguards his monergistic view of salvation. So, when Augustine discusses the meaning of justification by faith, he emphasizes that “justification is without antecedent merits and that works before faith are useless” with regard to salvation.

In one area, though, Augustine’s doctrine of justification may be somewhat faulted. This has to do with his understanding of the precise meaning of justification. Augustine understood the Latin verb *justifico* to mean “to make righteous” along the lines of verbs like *mortifico* (“put to death”) and *vivifico* (“make alive”), not “to declare or count as righteous.” Thus, for Augustine, although justification as a declarative event is not utterly absent from his theological horizon, he understands it primarily as a process of being made righteous. Yet, because of his biblical perspective on the sovereign grace of God as the sole cause of salvation, Augustine is careful never to argue that salvation is due to faith *and* the works that spring from it. Therefore, justification, for him, entails both the faith which is the free gift of God *and* the fruitful life of works that necessarily issue from such faith.

“Draw near to God”: Medieval Teaching on Justification

Given the fact that Latin is the language of medieval theology and that biblical literacy was not robust in the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that the interpretation of the Latin term *justifico* as making righteous was a dominant factor in shaping the medieval view of justification. While Augustine was also prevented by the meaning of this Latin term from developing to any great degree the declarative emphasis of justification, his passion for the sovereignty of God’s grace in the salvation of the sinner prevented the emergence of any works-righteousness in his theology. Augustine’s monergistic view of salvation, though, was largely ignored in the medieval period. In the words of Philip Edg-

cumbe Hughes:

Medieval theology as a whole tended to be semi-Pelagian in character—that is, in expression, it avoided the extremes of Pelagianism proper; it regarded man as partially capable, as sick rather than dead because of sin, and thus as able in some measure to help toward his own salvation. But in practice, the medieval Church walked along the edge of the Pelagian precipice. Its members were taught to go about to establish their own righteousness.

On the basis of such passages as James 4:8—“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you”—and Zechariah 1:3—“Return to me . . . and I will return to you”—a number of medieval theologians emphasized that a person who did his or her best on the basis of natural ability would be rewarded with grace by God. If that person then co-operated with this grace—which was given regularly through the sacraments of the church—he or she would eventually win the reward of eternal life. In this understanding of salvation, one could essentially initiate one’s own salvation.

“I would stand on my head for joy”: Luther’s Search for Salvation

There were various voices raised in protest at the spiritual darkness caused by the loss of the doctrine of justification by faith alone—John Wycliffe (c.1330–1384) and

the Lollards, for example, or Jan Hus (d.1415) and the Hussites—but a lasting Reformation did not occur until Martin Luther was raised up as a pathfinder of reform in the second decade of the sixteenth century.

Luther was born in Saxony in 1483, the eldest son of a fairly successful businessman, Hans Luther, who was the owner of several mine shafts and copper smelts. Hans wanted a better life for his son than he had had, so he sent him, when he was of age, to Erfurt University, where Martin graduated with a M.A. in 1505. His father encouraged him to go on to get a master’s degree in law, but on July 2, 1505, Martin had an experience that changed the entire course of not only his history, but also the history of the church. He had been home for the summer and was



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returning to Erfurt on foot, when, about half a mile from the city gates of Erfurt, a storm broke. In the words of John M. Todd:

Thunder clouds had built up, and suddenly the lightning flashed, a bolt striking right beside Martin, who was knocked to the ground, though unhurt. In terror he shouted out: “Beloved St. Anne! I will become a monk.” St. Anne was the patron saint of miners; Martin had heard prayers to her throughout his childhood, perhaps more than to any other saint . . . In later years he described himself at the moment when the lightning struck as “walled around with the terror and horror of sudden death.”

Twelve days later, on July 17, 1505, Luther knocked at the gate of the Augustinian order in Erfurt and asked to be accepted into their monastic ranks. When he later told his father of his decision, his father was quite angry that his son was not continuing with his studies. He asked Martin, “Do you not know that it is commanded to honor father and mother?” Luther’s response was that his terror in the thunderstorm had led him to become a monk. “I hope it was not the devil,” his father replied.

And so Luther became a monk, a member of the Order of Augustinian Eremites, one of the strictest monastic orders in Europe. He entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt to find spiritual peace and salvation. But for nearly ten years, genuine peace eluded Luther. He feared that God might have predestined him to destruction. He often imagined Christ sitting in judgment on him at the Last Day. In fact, at the monastery in Erfurt, where Luther was now studying, there was a stone carving of Christ as Judge with two swords coming out of his mouth. Because of its terrible severity, Luther could not bear to look at this image, and would hurry past it on his way to daily prayer, shielding his eyes with his hand.

To find peace with God, Luther zealously confessed every sin he could think of. He would confess every day, sometimes up to six hours a day. For every sin to be forgiven, there had to be confession. Luther had been taught that the moment the priest whispered in the confessional “I now absolve thee,” all of his sins were forgiven. But Luther was never certain that he had been fully forgiven. Always present was the fear: have I confessed every sin? Then came a discovery even more startling and distressing to Luther—there are sins which people do that are not even known to them. But how could these be confessed if they were not known? Luther re-doubled his efforts and threw himself into all-night vigils, great bouts of fasting—all to find forgiveness and peace with God. As he once said:

I was indeed a pious monk and kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say: If ever a monk gained heaven through monkery, it should have been I. All my monastic brethren who knew me will testify to this. I would have martyred myself to death with fasting, praying, reading, and other good works had I remained a monk much longer.

Luther sought to find peace with God through such works, but he was troubled by an overpowering fear of God’s judgment. Again, listen to his words:

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule . . . Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: “You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession.” Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it.

In plainer language Luther later stated of himself, “If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.”

***Sola fide*: Luther and the Reformation Discovery of Salvation**

By 1514, Luther had obtained a doctorate and had been installed as professor of biblical theology at the relatively young University of Wittenberg. During that year, the academic year 1514–1515, he was teaching a course on the Psalms. In his lectures and studies he came to Psalm 71, and was struck by the Psalmist’s cry in verse 2, “Deliver me in your righteousness, and cause me to escape.” Now, for Luther, the righteousness of God spoke of judgment, not deliverance. Baffled by the Psalmist’s language, Luther decided to study what the Scriptures have to say about the phrase “the righteousness of God.” He was thus led, in God’s providence, to Romans 1:16–17: “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’” Again, let us listen to his testimony:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to . . . the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who

Luther realized that salvation was not at all a matter of his attaining the perfect standard of righteousness which God demanded, but simply, by faith, clinging to and relying upon Christ's righteousness.

through faith is righteous shall live” [Romans 1:17]. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Now what was Luther's discovery? Namely, this: the righteousness of God in Romans 1:16–17 is not an attribute of God, but that righteousness, namely, the righteousness of Christ, which God imputes to the person who puts his or her trust (*fiducia*) in Christ. And it is on this basis of this imputed righteousness that God declares such a person to be righteous. In other words, the decisive discovery of the Reformation was “Christ our righteousness.”

Prior to this experience, Luther knew that he could never obtain the righteousness that God demanded in His law, and that one day he would be bound to face the withering wrath of God. By this experience, though, Luther realized that salvation was not at all a matter of his attaining the perfect standard of righteousness which God demanded, but simply, by faith, clinging to and relying upon Christ's righteousness. Christ alone among men and women has never sinned, He alone has lived a life of perfect righteousness, and He alone has perfectly fulfilled the law and its righteous demands. Luther's discovery was that salvation from God's wrath was to be found by simple trust in

Christ's death for sinners, that at the cross Christ takes all responsibility for the believer's sins—past, present, and future—and that to the one who truly believes this, God imputes, that is, reckons as the believer's own, Christ's righteousness.

In his spiritual gem *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), written not long after the beginning of the Reformation, Luther compares this relationship of Christ with the believer to that of a husband with his wife. Just as all that a man owns becomes the possession of his wife when he marries, and all that she owns becomes her husband's, so in the marriage of faith. All that the believer brings into this marriage, namely, his or her sins, becomes Christ's. And all that is Christ's, namely, His spotless righteousness, becomes the believer's. In Luther's words:

So it happens that the faithful soul, through the wedding ring of its faith in Christ, her bridegroom, is free from all sins, secure against death, protected from hell, and given the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of her bridegroom, Christ. . . . Who can even begin to appreciate this royal marriage? What can comprehend the riches of this glorious grace? Here, this rich, upstanding bridegroom, Christ, marries this poor, disloyal little prostitute, redeems her from all her evil and adorns her with all his goodness. For now it is impossible for her sins to destroy her, because they have been laid upon Christ and devoured by him.

Again, here is Luther describing what justification by faith alone means.

I, Dr. Martin Luther, the unworthy evangelist of the Lord Jesus Christ, thus think and thus affirm:—that this article, viz., that faith alone, without works, justifies before God, can never be overthrown, for . . . Christ alone, the Son of God, died for our sins, but if He alone takes away our sins, then men, with all their works, are to be excluded from all concurrence in procuring the pardon of sin and justification. Nor can I embrace Christ otherwise than by faith alone; He cannot be apprehended by works. But if faith, before works follow, apprehends the Redeemer, it is undoubtedly true that faith alone, before works, and without works, appropriates the benefits of redemption, which is no other than justification, or deliverance from sin. This is our doctrine; so the Holy Spirit teaches and the whole Christian Church. In this, by the grace of God, will we stand fast. Amen.

Notice what Luther is saying here: we are justified by faith alone, faith in Christ's death for sinners. Our works do not enter the picture at all when it comes to being made right with God. Thus "faith" itself is not to be considered "a work." The faith we exercise is itself a gift from God, a creation of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who enables sinners to accept God's justifying work on their behalf.

And in the final analysis, our faith only justifies because it lays hold of Christ, who is, in the words of Michael Horton, "inexhaustible in riches of righteousness." Our faith is often weak, but it is the unconquerable strength of Christ's righteousness, not the strength of our faith, that keeps us

in a right standing before God. Or put another way, for Luther, salvation "from first to last . . . is a gift of the grace of God, a gift actualized in the atoning work of Christ, applied individually by the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith."

It is often maintained that Luther's view of faith inevitably leads to indifference to good works. But this is a very unjust accusation. Luther's occasional unguarded utterances about good works must be understood in connection with his whole teaching and character. In his own forcible language, which expresses his true view:

What a living, creative, active powerful thing is faith! It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them. It is always active. Whoever doesn't do such works is without faith; he gropes and searches about him for faith and good works but doesn't know what faith or good works are . . . This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire.

Among the last words Luther wrote before his death in 1546 were the following, found in a note on his desk: "We are beggars! That is true." To the end Luther was aware that when it came to salvation he was a beggar: utterly and totally dependent on God's grace and mercy. And so are we. ♦



LUTHER AT THE DIET OF WORMS, 1521



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