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THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS

Four essays on Martin Luther



MARTIN
LUTHER



REDISCOVERING THE GOSPEL TRUTH

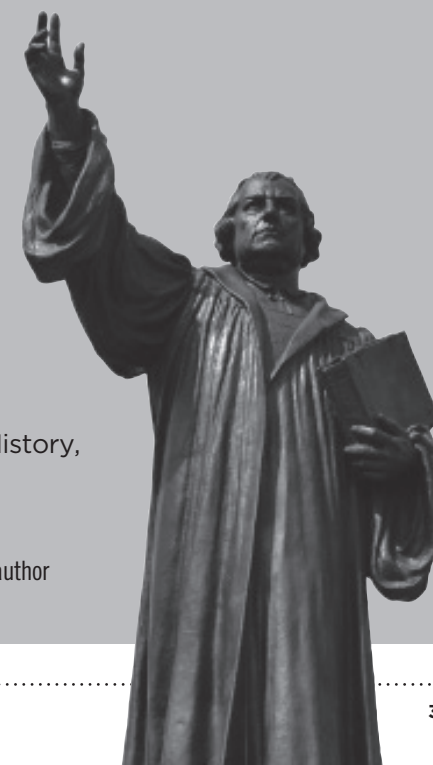
“The Law proves to us that we cannot stand before God in our own righteousness, and that drives us to the Gospel - **MARTIN LUTHER**

1 THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS

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THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS



Martin Luther, the man who should perhaps shoulder more responsibility for the rupturing of the western church in the Reformation, came from a relatively humble background which gave no hint of the controversial stature he was later to achieve.

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.

THE BEGINNING

He was born on November 10, 1483, to Hans and Margaret Luther in the town of Eisleben. Ironically, while this town played little role in his life as a whole, he was to die there in 1546, shortly after preaching his last sermon in the local church.

Hans Luther was a son of the soil but, in accordance with medieval inheritance laws, he did not inherit the family farm. Instead, as the oldest son, was expected to make his own way in the world. This he did, first as a miner and then as a mine manager. The need for work meant that the Luther family had to leave Eisleben for Mansfeld just a few weeks after Luther's birth but Hans was ultimately to do well and to rise to the level of a mine manager.

EDUCATION

Like many parents who have worked hard and enjoyed social mobility, Hans Luther had greater hopes for his son. Thus, he decided that the young Martin would not have to work at the physically hard labour which had marked his own early life but would go to university to study for a career in law. And so it was in 1501 that Martin left home and matriculated¹ at the University of Erfurt.

Studies at the University of Erfurt were typical of late medieval institutions. Law was one of the three higher faculties, along with medicine and theology, and in order to qualify to study it, the student first had to pass through the general arts curriculum, which is what Luther did. Thus, Luther was typical of his age in pursuing an unexceptional education. This ordinary start, however, was to be dramatically disrupted.

¹ Matriculated or registered

A DRAMATIC THUNDERBOLT

It was in 1505 aged 22, while returning to university after a visit to his parents, that Luther found himself in a situation which changed his life forever. Caught in a thunderstorm, he was almost killed when a bolt of lightning came crashing down at his side. Today, we regard such things as natural phenomena, the result of massive ionic imbalances in the atmosphere created by the collision of ice crystals at high altitude; in Luther's day, such things were supernatural acts of God, intimations of divine judgment. Consequently, as the lightning bolt earthed beside him, Luther threw himself to the ground and screamed, 'St Anne, save me and I will become a monk!' St. Anne being the patron saint of miners, it was quite probably instinctive to Luther to call upon the saint who was presumably central to the piety of the household in which he had grown up.

PERSONALITY

All the evidence suggests that Luther was rather an earnest and intense young man. Such a vow to God, even when made in panic at what he must have thought could be his moment of death, was to him a very serious matter and, within a few days, he presented himself at the door of the Augustinian cloister in Erfurt. Here he was to live and study as a monk for some years.

DR LUTHER'S CAREER

In 1508, Luther was transferred from Erfurt to the relatively new university of Wittenberg. Founded in 1502 by Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, this was to be Luther's home, with brief exceptions, for the rest of his days. It was a relatively new foundation and, as such, its founder was eager for it to make its name. When Luther became infamous in 1517 and beyond, it is thus not so surprising that Frederick would exert his influence to protect his controversial professor. Then, as now, there is a sense that all publicity can at least be made into good publicity, if the time is right.

THE COST OF GRACE

Luther assumed that his life was to be lived out in the relative obscurity of a university and a monastery in a small town in Saxony. However, events in the wider European scene conspired to bring him to a much wider audience than might fit into the lecture hall at the University of Wittenberg or the parish church.

ROME'S DEBT

Pope Leo X was presiding over a Roman church which had exhausted its finances in wars and then in the massive building project of St. Peter's and the Vatican. Then, in the German lands to the north, an ambitious cleric, Albrecht of Brandenburg, was looking to add a third bishopric to his tally. Bishoprics brought revenue and were thus desirable; but the canon law of the church prevented anyone from holding three simultaneously without a license from the Pope. Thus, there was a happy confluence of interest at this point between the financial needs of the Papacy and the ecclesiastical aspirations of Albrecht. In short, the Pope granted Albrecht permission to take the third bishopric and Albrecht paid the Pope a handsome sum for the privilege. To finance the deal, Albrecht borrowed a significant sum of money from the Fuggers bank and the Pope allowed Albrecht to raise an indulgence, half of the proceeds of which could be used to pay down the loan, half of which would go straight into the Papal coffers.

INDULGENCES

Indulgences were certificates sold by the church which guaranteed the purchaser, or the designated beneficiary, relief from a stipulated period of time in purgatory. In medieval Catholic eschatology, when a person died they might either go to hell, to heaven or, more likely, to purgatory, a place where the godly might be purged of their remaining impurities before being translated into paradise. The concept found its origin in the Apocrypha² and was present in the work of numerous early church fathers, including Augustine. In the early church, however, the doctrine had functioned merely as part of individual eschatology³; by the late Middle Ages it had been connected to the penitential system of the church. Two papal bulls⁴ in particular are of relevance to this: *Unigenitus* (1343) and *Salvator noster* (1476). The former established the dogma of the treasury of merits which consisted of the merits of Christ, and those which the church claimed were earned by the Virgin Mary and all the great saints of the church, which could then be distributed to others by the Pope. The latter connected the treasury of merits to financial gifts to the church, such that those giving such money might enjoy eschatological benefit in the form of reduced time in purgatory. Thus, the dogmatic foundation of indulgences was established.

The sale of Albrecht's indulgence was entrusted to a Dominican friar, Johann Tetzel. A profane man but a brilliant salesman, his jingles (according to Luther's Ninety-Five Theses) included such gems as 'Every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul for purgatory springs' and the assertion that, even if one had raped the Virgin Mary, one of his indulgences would be sufficient to make cover for the sin.

While Tetzel was not allowed to sell his indulgences in Electoral Saxony (the Elector having his own collection of sacred relics which he did not want eclipsed by some rival object of piety), the issue was one of some pastoral urgency for Luther. Having come to the conclusion that God's grace was so costly that only the death and resurrection of the Son of God himself was sufficient to deal with the human dilemma of death in sin, and only total despair of oneself and consequent humility before God was sufficient to meet the conditions of the *pactum*, Luther inevitably saw the cash transactions of a Tetzel as cheapening grace. More than that, Tetzel was selling false security to people; and as Luther's parishioners crossed the river into the neighbouring territory of Ducal Saxony where the Dominican salesman was plying his trade, it was inevitable that Luther would have to take a stand.

95 THESES AND HEIDELBERG

Luther preached on indulgences at Easter 1517 and then was strangely silent on the matter. In September 1517, he delivered his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* which, of all the writings of the year, was the most radical in its full orbited attack on late medieval theological method; but it was

2 The Roman Catholic Church believe the Apocrypha is part of scripture while Protestants it does not. Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1 Section 3 "The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the Canon of Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings."

3 Eschatology is the doctrine of 'last things' this not limited to the Lord's return but also includes judgment and the eternal state.

4 A Papal Bull is an official letter issued by the Pope bearing his 'Bulla' or seal.

not directly aimed at the indulgence issue and it stirred up no significant controversy. Then, on October 31, 1517, in accordance with standard academic protocol for announcing a debate, he nailed ninety five theses against the practice of the sale of indulgences to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

While the *Ninety-Five Theses* rapidly became a popular tract and a rallying point for protest, the church was slow to act. Indeed, in April, 1518, Luther travelled to the city of Heidelberg for a regular chapter meeting of the Augustinian Order. It was here that he presided over what is now the famous Heidelberg Disputation, when Augustinian friar, Leonhard Beier, presented a set of theses which Luther had prepared on philosophy and theology. Here Luther made his famous claim that the true theologian was the one who built his theology, not on what he thought God should be like, but on how God had revealed himself actually to be in the crucified body of the Lord Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross at Calvary. Power was revealed in weakness; holiness in the death of one condemned as a sinner.

EXCOMMUNICATION

By late 1520, Luther was excommunicated and the church had now exhausted its options for handling him. Excommunication was the final sanction, and yet he was still free to write and preach with impunity in Wittenberg. As a result a new strategy had to be devised.

THE DIET OF WORMS

The Emperor, Charles V, was convening an imperial diet (council meeting) in the city of Worms in April, 1521 and it was decided to summon Luther to appear there. This was a controversial decision. First, the fact that Luther was excommunicated meant that he was a non-person, and the technical question of how one issues a summons to a non-person was a problem. Second, the growing popularity of Luther as the people's champion against a corrupt and moribund Church meant that such a move was potentially dangerous. Ultimately, however, the pragmatic need to deal with Luther overrode these concerns and Luther was summoned. Thus, in April, 1521, Luther arrived in the city to face his greatest challenge so far.

SUMMONED TO WORMS

The hearing itself would have been an impressive affair. At the front sat the youthful Emperor Charles V, coming face-to-face with the troublemaking monk whose religious innovations would ruin his rule and ultimately drive him to abdication. Around the hall would have stood the most powerful politicians of the day. On a table before the Emperor were laid all of Luther's books. And there would have stood Luther himself, apparently surrounded by his enemies and dangerously exposed.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The man leading the questioning of Luther was John Eck, though not the John Eck of Leipzig fame. This John Eck was an employee in the household of the Archbishop of Trier. At the start of the proceedings on April 17, Eck asked two simple questions, whether the books on display were Luther's, and whether he would recant their content? These were obvious questions which Luther must have expected. His answer, however, was anything but what one might have anticipated: he declared that, because the matters concerned salvation, he needed time to think about his response.

No-one knows why he gave this response. Perhaps it was part of a strategy which the team from Electoral Saxony had designed to surprise their opponents. A more prosaic explanation might be that Luther was simply scared at what must have been a moment of intense personal pressure. We shall never know. In any event, the assembly recessed and reconvened on the following day. Then, faced with the same questions, Luther offered a trenchant response: some of the works dealt with piety and morals which even his opponents had liked, and thus he should not be the only one to retract their contents; some criticised the papacy, but the Papacy was notoriously corrupt and destroyed many souls so he could not retract those; and some attacked individuals who defended Roman tyranny which, while occasionally excessive in language used, were fundamentally sound and could not be retracted.

Eck refused to accept these arguments and then, at the end of a vigorous exchange, Luther made his famous speech (which probably did not end with the claim 'Here I stand! I can do no other.):

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.

KIDNAPPED

After this dramatic stand, Luther was ushered from the hall, amidst cries from the Spanish delegation that he should be burned at the stake. It was not to be, however. As he left Worms to return to Wittenberg, he was surrounded by a group of armed men and kidnapped. After nearly four years as the center of attention for both Church and Empire, Luther was to vanish from the public eye for the best part of a year.

Luther was to spend the rest of 1521 incognito in the Wartburg, the medieval castle which stands atop the mountain over the town of Eisenach. Growing a beard and dressing as a knight, he enjoyed a brief but relatively peaceful time, although it was here that he first developed the chronic constipation which was to stay with him, and prove to be something of an obsession.

WARTBURG WRITING

While in the Wartburg, he engaged in numerous theological writings which indicated the way his mind was moving. This he addressed the issue of religious vows as well as responding to the significant criticisms of the Catholic theologian, Latomus. The former of these was triggered by the fact that in May, 1521, priests started to marry, which demanded that the Reformation leadership clarify its position on the matter. Luther also wrote a defence of oral confession at this time. The need to balance established practice with new Reformation content was acute.

Perhaps most significant, however, was his translation of the New Testament into German. As his Reformation theology developed and placed an increasing emphasis upon the objective Word of God, in sermon and in sacrament, as the means of salvation, so the need for scripture in the vernacular became

acute. As with the King James Version in English, and Calvin's *Institutes* in French, the Luther Bible was to prove foundational in the development of the modern German language.

THEOLOGY

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.

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 common place book. In Lutheranism, that honour 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.

1525: THE YEAR OF GENIUS, LOVE AND HATRED

After 1522, Luther's position in Wittenberg was relatively secure. Further, after the exuberance of his early theological breakthroughs, he settled into a routine of teaching, preaching and pastoring which, with a couple of exceptions, meant that his life was never to have quite the same level of drama again. Nevertheless, the year 1525 was, in its own way, to be as significant for his theology and for his reputation, as the years 1520-21. Indeed, it was marked by three major events: his clash with Erasmus; his marriage to Katie; and his ill-fated intervention in the Peasants' War.

LUTHER VERSUS ERASMUS

In retrospect, the clash with Erasmus was inevitable, if not in 1525 then at some point. Erasmus was the man who had produced a Greek New Testament and had thus laid the textual foundation for the Reformation. He was also the man whose dazzling scholarship and wit had made him an implacable critic of the Renaissance Church. Yet his personality was that of the supercilious satirist who will criticise

and mock the Church but will ultimately remain within its bounds. Erasmus had no intention of risking life or even career for the cause of Reformation.

At one point in the early Lutheran Reformation, Frederick the Wise had asked Erasmus his opinion of the troublesome monk. His response was that Luther had committed two sins: he had criticised the Pope's power and the monks' bellies. These comments, given confidentially to Frederick, had been leaked to the public and, from that time on Erasmus had been under pressure to declare himself relative to the Wittenberg Reformation. Finally, in 1525 he did so, in his *Diatribes on Free Choice*, in which he argued for the basic opacity of scripture on the issue of the role of the human will in salvation. Whether one characterises his position as agnostic, semi-Pelagian or semi-Augustinian depends on how charitable one wishes to be; what is certain is that he had placed his finger on the conceptual underpinnings of Luther's whole theology: the basic clarity of scripture and the need for salvation to be all of God.

When the book arrived in Wittenberg, it was met with enthusiasm by Melancthon. When Luther read it, however, his heart fell: not only did he see the devastating implications of denying scriptural clarity and the bondage of the will; he also knew that Erasmus was too big a critic to ignore. The result was *The Bondage of the Will*, a veritable sledge-hammer of a book, which contains Luther's most brilliant defence of his doctrines of scripture, of the human will, and of the divine initiative in salvation. Along with his Catechisms, it was one of few books which he himself considered worthy of outliving him.

MARRIAGE

The second great event of 1525 was his marriage to Katharine von Bora, also known as 'my Lord Katie' and 'the Chain.' She was one of a group of Cistercian nuns who had escaped from the cloister in Nimbschen in 1523 and arrived in Wittenberg in April of that year. Luther arranged for the nuns to be married off, but Katy proved a problem. Initially she had been placed in the household of the artist, Lucas Cranach. After various abortive attempts to marry her off, Katie expressed her desire either to marry Luther or his colleague, Nicholas von Amsdorf. Having had the idea of marriage placed in his mind by the redoubtable female reformer, Argula von Grumbach, Luther finally acceded to the idea in 1525 and married Katie on June 13 that year.

The marriage was to be one filled with love and laughter. Luther constantly referred to 'my Lord Katie' in his correspondence and clearly valued her companionship and, indeed, her faithful support for his ministry. There was also some pain. They were to bury two of their children, something which marked them both deeply.

PEASANTS WAR

When the marriage took place, however, it was at the time a public relations disaster. The issue of a monk marrying had long been resolved in Wittenberg. It was because the nuptials occurred at the time of the Peasants' War, a major outbreak of rebellions across the German territories of the Holy Roman Empire. The rebels were united by a set of economic grievances, many of which focused on the corruption

of the Church. Thus, it was natural that they used Lutheran-style rhetoric of freedom and that many of them (though not all) expected Luther to speak for them. After initial sympathy for their cause, Luther, ever fearful of chaos and anarchy, swung hard against them and published one of his most notorious treatises, *An Admonition to Peace, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* which was a call to the nobles to suppress the rebellion in as ferocious a way as was necessary. This work tarnished Luther's reputation in a way which was only matched by his later attacks on the Jews. The peasants were ultimately crushed at the Battle of Frankenhausen, with their leaders such as Thomas Müntzer, being put to death. That Luther was celebrating his marriage as the Peasants' War moved to its bloody conclusion was deemed profoundly insensitive.

LATER YEARS: A MIX OF BITTERNESS AND FAITH

The last fifteen years of Luther's life were in many ways far less exciting than the period 1517-31. With Lutheranism secure at least temporarily thanks to the League, Luther was free to continue his Reformation with a great level of security. Financial worries continued to dog the Luther household. He and Katie took in student lodgers and also worked at times as gardeners in the town. It is perhaps good to remember that being a Reformer was not necessarily a lucrative career move and that Luther was not immune to the routine economic hardships that afflict most ministers at various points.

DISAPPOINTMENT

What is perhaps saddest about this period of time are the notes of bitterness that creep in to Luther's works. Luther, of course, had had high hopes for the Reformation at its inception. Standing in the late medieval tradition of eschatological expectation, he had assumed that the Reformation was part of the great revival which was to come at the end of time and to herald the second coming of Christ. By the 1530s, however, these hopes were dying. Rome had not fallen and, indeed, Roman Catholicism was beginning to show early signs of the fight-back which was to mark the century from the 1540s onwards. The Protestants were divided among themselves, not simply Lutherans versus Reformed but also the growth of sectarian elements.

THE JEWISH ISSUE

One issue which still (rightly) impacts Luther's reputation was his growing animosity towards the Jews. In 1523, he had written what was, for the time, was a very progressive treatise, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*. In this work, Luther broke with the dominant attitudes of the age and encouraged Christians to be good, loving neighbours to the Jews, so as to build bridges for the gospel.

By the early 1540s, however, the Jews were becoming for Luther a constant and bitter obsession. Notoriously, he wrote another major treatise on them, *On the Jews and their Lies* which represented a repudiation of his earlier work and a return to the standards of the day, only in an even more violent and hateful way than was typical. This latter work advocated murder and went on to enjoy a notorious future career, not least as a staple of Nazi propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s, and as a common feature on anti-semitic websites today. That it represented Luther's mature opinion can be in no doubt: his final sermon in Eisleben in 1546 included an anti-Jewish appendix.⁵

FINAL SERMON

This sermon was preached while Luther was visiting the town to mediate in a dispute between local counts, much to the consternation of Katie who was concerned about his health --- rightly so, as it turned out. While at Eisleben, he preached four times, latterly on either February 14 (when he also ordained two priests) or 15. The assistant accompanying him, John Aurifaber, copied a slip of paper on February 16 which contained Luther's last written statement, ending in the famous phrase, 'We are beggars. That is true.' The first clause was in German, the second in Latin.

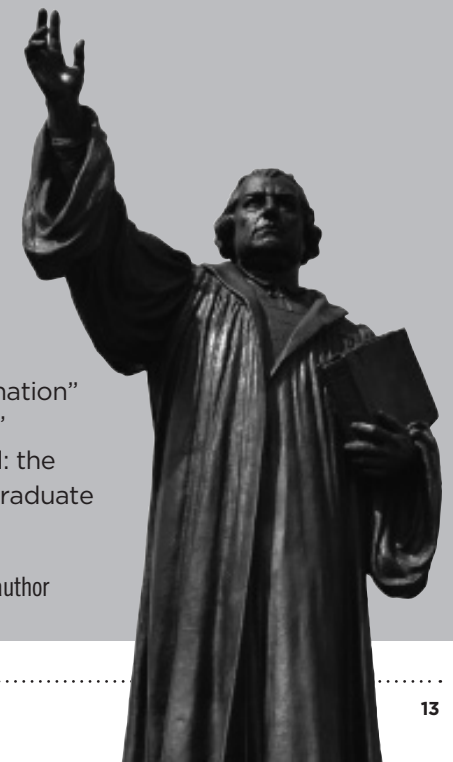
LUTHER'S LAST WORDS: "WE ARE BEGGARS. THAT IS TRUE."

On February 17, he was feeling unwell and unable to transact any business that day. He was to die the following day, in the presence of a number of friends. Having reaffirmed his confidence in the gospel his very last words were a threefold repetition of Ps. 31:5, 'Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.' It was a quintessential Protestant end: faith in the Word, no final unction, last rites or final communion. Luther had communicated the previous Sunday and that was quite enough. Indeed, his own way of dying exemplified how he had himself transformed pastoral care and, indeed, the piety of dying.

As a last, sad postscript, though, the greatest personal trophy of his Protestantism, the beloved woman he had broken his monastic vows to marry, was not there to comfort him. Katie was broken hearted when the news reached her, distraught that she could not have been there to comfort him in his final moments. Yet he died, as she was to die, safe in the knowledge that they were united in Christ and would be reunited in the hereafter, when they would attend a greater wedding feast than their own so many years ago.

⁵ This topic is covered more fully in 'Histories and Fallacies'. Trueman, C. (2010). *Histories and Fallacies: problems faced in the writing of history*. Wheaton: Crossway.

2 HOW SHALL WE REMEMBER?



by Robert Campbell

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HOW SHALL WE REMEMBER?

The Reformation was a unique moment in Church history, a time when some of the greatest minds, linguistic experts and pious Christians lived. Although they came from various parts of Europe, they all possessed the same deep love for Jesus. They had the message of the Gospel burning in their hearts. As the events took place some 500 years ago it becomes easier to elevate style over substance. The Reformation then turns into a tale of “daring-do” achieved by spiritual supermen. However this thinking devalues the very event we hold dear and seek to remember.

A Pharisee called Nicodemus once came to Jesus in the anonymity of night. As an important religious teacher in Israel, he knew the Scriptures, so Jesus took him to familiar lessons from the past. Jesus reminded Nicodemus:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” John 3:14-15

POISONOUS SNAKES AND A BRASS SNAKE

Jesus quoted Scripture to Nicodemus, made application, and then brought him to the heart of the Gospel – the cross. But let’s head back to the wilderness to understand what is happening. As the children of Israel journeyed in the wilderness they began to reminisce about the good old days in Egypt. As far as they were concerned God had brought them into the wilderness to kill them. This thinking led to a bitter spirit and consequently they complained about both Moses and the Lord.

Suddenly the whole situation became grave as poisonous snakes appeared, moving through the camp, striking out, sinking their venomous fangs into whoever crossed their path – people were dying. In their hopeless panic the people confessed their sin and cried out in prayer for help. God heard and answered their prayers by giving Moses a rather strange command:

And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. 9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.” Numbers 21:8-9

These hopeless and helpless people were given a very simple command. Look by faith to what God had provided. They had no other hope, they had no other way and there was nothing they could do for themselves. Naturally this brass snake became very important to the people because of its association with their deliverance.

WHAT HAPPENED THE SNAKE?

Years later this great piece of antiquity and cultural importance was smashed! But who smashed it? It was not destroyed by some pagan invader but by the godly King Hezekiah. At the beginning of his reign he set about a reformation of religion. Things needed to change and certain objects needed to go:

“He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.” 2 Kings 18:4

Somehow with the passage of time the people had changed the meaning of the ‘brass snake’ from being a memorial to an object of worship. It had become significant in its own right; the original meaning of looking by faith to what God had provided had been lost. We have no idea how this happened, but given the events and passage of time, people now placed more confidence in what appeared to bring deliverance rather than in who brought deliverance – the LORD God.

WHAT HAS THIS TO DO WITH MARTIN LUTHER & 1517?

Why are these three references to a brass snake important to us as we remember the Reformation?

- The Reformation was a real event.
- The Reformation had hugely significant people.
- The Reformation centred on faith and forgiveness of sin.
- The Reformation brought the people back to the cross.

Martin Luther’s great struggle was with sin, how a sinner could be forgiven; the great realisation that, “the just shall live by faith.” This brought about huge personal change but also led to revival and reformation. The Bible, the Gospel, the centrality of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and the preaching of these great truths brought transformation. The importance of the cross flows through the Bible.

Nicodemus knew the substance of this historical event and that made Jesus’ application valuable to him. However, in the time of Hezekiah the substance had been erased and only a godless narrative of God’s deliverance remained, evidenced by the worship made to the brass snake.

So what was the substance of the Reformation?

SCRIPTURE

The Reformation was all about a return to the Bible. The Bible was translated into the language of the people and into words they could understand. The Bible became central to the church as it was read and preached. The Bible was printed, distributed and made accessible even to the poorest people.

PREACHING

The expository and systematic preaching of the Word was the norm. The simple method of explanation and application accompanied by the power of God the Holy Spirit changed people, and as a result countries

were also dramatically altered . For all the political and ecclesiastical changes it was predominantly a revival. To make the Reformation anything less diminishes what happened.

PERSONALITIES

There were great personalities during the Reformation but they were only men, flawed and all too human. There were no Protestant superheroes! In their preaching, teaching and writing they pointed away from themselves and to the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Reformation forefathers joined with John the Baptist by fearlessly preaching, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

The Reformers faced persecution from without and divisions within, but still they pressed forward preaching the Gospel. Kings, kingdoms and nations were changed. Some gladly embraced the Reformation while others fiercely opposed it. The Reformers were not spiritual anarchists. They did not believe every man could do what was right in his own eyes. They believed in the authority of Scripture. The Bible was to be the rule and guide of our faith and practice. The reformers were not rebels building up their own little kingdoms. Rather their great desire was to build God’s kingdom.

WHAT SHOULD WE BEWARE OF?

Over the years the brass serpent became an object of worship. How did this happen? The reason why it was needed, the One who gave it, and the deliverance it brought had been eclipsed by the physical gift. The real story had slipped from memory and was replaced by something distorted.

It is sobering that we can make people, events, revivals and deliverances into idols we worship! This happens when we remove an event from its context. The ‘brass snake’ was made at God’s command because the people had sinned, were in terrible danger, and could do nothing to save themselves. They had neither power nor a plan but God in His mercy provided a way of escape. The people needed to trust God’s provision and look to it by faith alone.

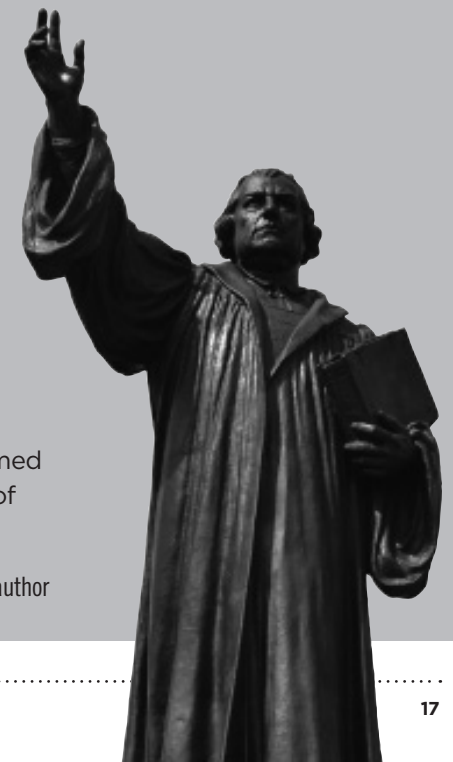
The event and the brass serpent were not forgotten. However, God had been forgotten, along with the people’s sin, their prayers for mercy and their repentance. Each generation was now being taught that salvation was in the brass serpent. Therefore for the good of the people Hezekiah had to destroy it.

THE BRASS SERPENT REMEMBERED

The real story survived in Scripture. The question is not whether people should remember or not, but how they should remember. When we retell the story of the Reformation do we emphasise God’s Grace and man’s inability? Is our focus on Jesus, the cross, grace, sin and salvation? Are we willing to tell and listen to the personal application that talking about Jesus brings, and then effect change in our lives? Or do we feel more comfortable with tales of personalities, events and transformation in church and state - recounting events that have no personal application to us? Which story do we want to tell and which story do we want to hear?

Forgetting the Reformation would be a tragedy. A far greater tragedy would be to make the Reformation an idol that we worship. So how shall you remember?

3 WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED



by **Rev Dr William J Malcolmson**

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WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Luther did not view himself as the founder of a new church body. Following his conversion he devoted his life to reforming the church and restoring the Biblical doctrine of ‘justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to its central position in true Christian theology.

REDEMPTION THROUGH CHRIST

This ‘Redemptive Theology’ grew out of his conversion experience: *“I entered the priesthood to find peace for my soul but it all availed me nothing. I was terrified, given over to create despair until Christ showed me the light of the Gospel (Romans 1:16-17) that ‘the just shall live by faith.’”*

He had come to realise that the righteousness of God meant God’s undeserved mercy and compassion in the person and work of Christ supremely revealed in the Cross of Calvary. From that point on Luther followed the Apostle Paul’s theology – *“we preach Christ crucified”* 1 Corinthians 1:23.

WITTENBERG AND THE BIBLE

Having been appointed as a theological lecturer at the new University of Wittenberg by Duke Frederick, he devoted himself to the earnest study of the Bible, teaching from the Psalms and Paul’s letter to the Romans. Later, at the Diet of Worms in 1521 when pressurised to recant, he replied, *“I am bound by the scriptures, and my conscience is held captive by the Word of God...”*

Luther had become a biblical theologian and his preaching, lecturing, and writing centred on the cross – the heart and core of Scripture. Among his greatest works were a German translation of the Bible, the Augsburg confession, the *Freedom of the Christian Man*, *The Bondage of the Will*, and his exposition of the *Psalms*, *Romans*, *Galatians*, *First and Second Peter*, and *Jude*. He also gave Germany its first Protestant hymn book. His work changed the entire course of theological and intellectual thinking – few men have influenced Christendom as deeply as Martin Luther.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

Professor Alister McGrath gives us a good introduction to Luther’s theology: *“for Luther the cross is at the centre of the Christian faith. The haunting image of the crucified Christ is the crucible in which all our thinking about God is forged. Luther expresses the centrality of the cross in a series of terse statements, such as ‘the cross alone is our theology’ and ‘the cross puts everything to the test.’ Luther draws a now famous distinction between the ‘theologian of glory,’ who seeks God apart from Jesus Christ, and ‘the theologian of the cross,’ who knows that God is revealed in and through the cross of Christ.”*

Luther taught that through the suffering, weakness and shame of the cross we come to know who God is, and what He is like. It was under the shadow of Calvary that our Lord said to Philip, *“he that hath seen me hath seen the Father”* (John 14:9).

THE BOTTOM-LINE OF LUTHER’S THEOLOGY

The death of Christ on the cross demonstrated the full amount of God’s wrath against sin and exposed it for the dreadful thing it really is. Until, like Martin Luther, we come to a full awareness of our sin, and the terrible separation it creates between ourselves and God, we cannot really appreciate the joy and wonder of the gospel of pardon and forgiveness which is found by faith in Christ alone. Therefore our standing before God is something which is graciously given, and not achieved by human merit. We can never earn our salvation. This is the bottom-line of Luther’s theology: *“that we recognise that God has done all that is necessary for our salvation in the person and finished work of his eternal son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”*

First Peter 1:3: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has begotten us again onto a lively hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”*

Luther commented: *“Whoever now believes his preaching, namely that Christ died for our sins, and by his resurrection on the third day has brought us life, righteousness, and salvation, is truly born-again of God the holy spirit and has become a righteous and saved person.”*

HIS ONLY HOPE ‘THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH’

Luther was not only an excellent biblical theologian, he was also a great preacher of the cross of Jesus. His theology of the cross began with that recurring problem when in the Augustinian monastery he kept asking the question, *“how can I be right with God? How can I know assurance that my sins are forgiven? How can I find peace in my heart?”* He found the answer in the Bible in Paul’s epistle to the Romans 1:16-17 *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”*

He wrote, he preached, and he lectured on this foundational doctrine of salvation: *“When I understood this, I felt born-again like a new man, I entered through open doors into the paradise of God. Hence forward I saw the beloved scriptures with new eyes, ‘the just shall live by faith’ became the gate of heaven to my soul.”*

Through the preaching of the cross he organised the emerging Protestant churches according to the scriptures. The five extra sacraments established by Rome were abolished. The worship of relics ceased. The intercession of the saints was no longer observed and ‘the priesthood of all believers’ was established. In *The Bondage of the Will* Luther emphasised: *“this article that faith alone can justify us before God shall never be overthrown, not by the Pope nor all the devils in hell, this firm and certain truth that Christ has redeemed us from our sins, I shall teach, and in this will I abide.”*

Martin Luther came to the painful realisation that for about 1000 years, known as the dark ages, the church had all but lost the Gospel. During this time the gospel light still shone here and there, but at the reformation it burst forth. Luther held Bernard of Clairvaux in high regard. While men like John Wycliffe and John Hus helped prepare the ground for reformation. However, Luther was used of God to restore the

Gospel: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; 4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

REFORMATION THROUGH THE PREACHED WORD

James Atkinson comments: “he offered re-formation to that which had suffered de-formation.” Luther was a brilliant redemptive theologian in the cloister and in the classroom. He was also gifted to be a great redemptive preacher in the pulpit: “The common people heard him gladly.” By preaching the cross of Christ, relics, idols, holy water, and crucifixes were no longer needed. To von Staupitz, his superior in the Augustinian Order he said, “I will give them Christ, man needs only Jesus Christ.”

Luther would stand before his students in Wittenberg University and lecture from Scripture on the “once for all sacrifice of the Cross”. He would mount the pulpit in the local parish church and “preach Christ crucified” in the plain language of the people. He stated plainly, “the cross teaches us to believe in hope, even when there is no apparent hope, humanly speaking.” Further, “the wisdom of the cross is a profound mystery and there is no other way to heaven except by it.” “On account of this,” cried Luther, “we must beware of the active life with its good works, and the contemplative life with its speculations, do not lead us astray. Both are most active and because of that very reason they hide real dangers, lest people see them as ways of salvation.”

Again, “the cross alone is the sure path, salvation is God’s free gift, in Christ, it is not our own religious work.” “Learn Christ, and Him crucified, to despair of your own efforts.” “This one thing do: keep your eyes fixed on that which He hath done for you – that you could never do for yourself.”

Atkinson in *The Darkness of Faith* held that, “Luther’s whole concern was to preach Christ and no other activity should be allowed to obscure this.”

Luther wrote in the preface to his lectures in *Galatians*: “the one doctrine which I have supremely at heart is that of faith in Christ, from whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forward day and night.”

Atkinson further declared, “Luther’s God-given mission was to preach Christ.” And Luther did “preach Christ crucified” to the glory of God, the salvation of sinners, the consolidation of believers, and the reforming of churches.

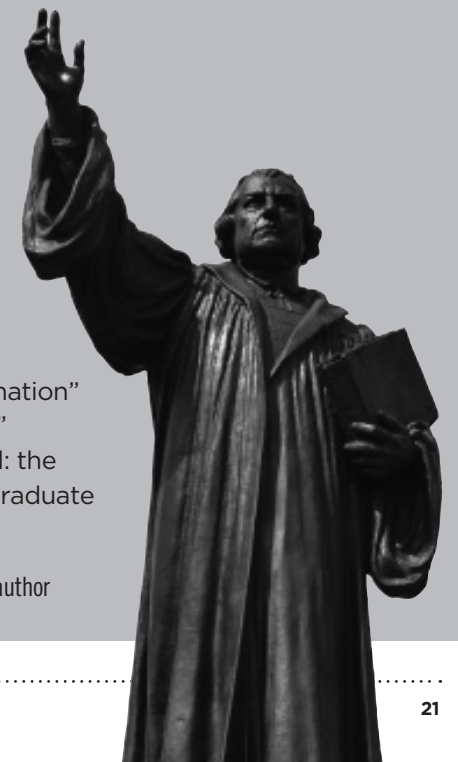
LUTHER’S LEGACY

Luther is not with us today, but Luther’s sovereign God is still with His people, now, to the end of time, and beyond time. The gospel he preached will prevail because “*the word of the Lord endureth forever.*” 1 Peter 1:25.

A final word from this preacher of the cross: “No greater mischief can happen to a nation, than to have God’s word taken from them, or falsified, so that they no longer have it pure and clean; God grant that we and our descendants be not witnesses of such a calamity!”

4

LUTHER’S ROSE A PROTESTANT EMBLEM



by Robert Campbell

Author of from “Revolution to Reformation” and “Take 5: a new look at old truths.”

Producer of “Ulster Forgotten Revival: the Sixmilewater Revival (1625)” He is a graduate of the Whitefield College of the Bible.

The following essay is used with permission of the author

LUTHER'S ROSE: A PROTESTANT EMBLEM



Today, logos are everywhere, football teams, fast food companies, clothing brands, cars, and even churches. The best logos don't only look good, they also have meaning. They are attractive, they communicate instantly. They often tell a story.

The emblems of the Loyal Orders also tell stories, communicating our faith, principles and traditions down through the generations.

As well as writing many important books, Martin Luther also left us a logo - a fine piece of heraldry - telling not only his story, but the story of the gospel that changed his life completely.

THE GOSPEL IN PICTURE

In 1520 Luther adopted a white rose as his personal emblem. Then in 1530 a seal based on the rose was designed for him at the behest of Prince John Frederick. This seal explained Martin Luther's beliefs. It consisted of five parts: A cross at the centre, a natural coloured heart, a white rose, a sky blue field, and a golden ring. Writing in 1530 Luther explained the significance of each part of this emblem: "[I will tell] you my...thoughts and reasons about why my seal is a symbol of my theology."

THE CROSS

"First should be a black cross." This was placed at the very centre of his seal. It illustrates the centrality of the cross in the Bible, and in his theology and life.

The black represents the pain and agony that the Lord Jesus Christ suffered on the cross. "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust..." (1 Peter 3:18) Jesus received a punishment he did not deserve on behalf of others who deserved it. In a football match a substitute comes onto the field to take someone else's place. Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for other people.

THE HEART

Luther went on to explain the heart before completing his explanation of the cross. He said, "[it] retains its natural colour, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us."

Luther knew that, 'the matter of the heart is the heart of the matter.' The expression 'heart' isn't about the muscle that pumps blood round our bodies, but represents the inner man, his will. The entrance of sin into the world changed man's relationship with God. The Bible tells us, "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." (Isaiah 59:2)

THE CROSS AND THE HEART

Luther connected the importance of the cross with the condition of the heart: "Although it is indeed a black cross, which mortifies and which should also cause pain, it leaves the heart in its natural colour. It does not corrupt nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps alive. 'The just shall live by faith.'"

This echoes the sentiment of Ezekiel 36:26: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh."



THE WHITE ROSE

"Such a heart should stand in the middle of a white rose, to show that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace. In other words, it places the believer into a white, joyous rose, for this faith does not give peace and joy like the world gives."

Luther faced the real possibility of being killed because of his faith. Yet he spoke of his faith in Christ giving him joy, comfort, and peace. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27). This was the kind of peace that Luther knew, a peace that sustained him daily through all the challenges he had to face.

THE BLUE FIELD

"Such a rose should stand in a sky-blue field, symbolizing that such joy in spirit and faith is a beginning of the heavenly future joy, which begins already, but is grasped in hope, not yet revealed."

Luther had a faith that looked forward from time and into eternity. Hebrews 13:13-14 reminds us, "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come." Even the longest life is short. Life can also be very difficult. However we are always to remember that because of Jesus' death and resurrection there is hope - hope in life, and a far greater eternal hope when we die.

THE GOLD RING

Luther concluded his explanation, "...around this field is a golden ring, symbolizing that such blessedness in Heaven lasts forever and has no end. Such blessedness is exquisite, beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable, most precious and best metal."

In a world that seems to be in perpetual turmoil it is such a blessing to remember the security the believer has in Christ! “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” (John 6:37)

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT LUTHER’S ROSE?

Do you have the hope that Luther possessed? Do you enjoy a faith centred on the cross and Christ alone? Is your sin dealt with and your heart changed? Do you have a joy and peace in your salvation that enables you to face all the challenges and trials of life? Do you possess an eternal hope that is firm and sure, not because of what you have done but because of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for you? Is He the One you love, trust, serve, and anchor your faith on?

“...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 prioritising of Word over sacrament have all set basic trajectories for subsequent generations.”

THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS
REV DR CARL R TRUEMAN
SEE PAGE 4



LUTHER READING LIST

LUTHER'S OWN WRITING

- *95 Theses* (1517)
- *The Bondage of the Will* (1525)
- *Commentary on Galatians* (1535)

(Also see further reading list)

LUTHER'S THEOLOGY

- *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*
Carl Trueman (Crossway)
- *Histories and Fallacies: problems faced in the writing of history*. Carl Trueman (Crossway)
- *The Genius of Luther's Theology*
Robert Kolb & Charles P Arand (Baker Academic)
- *Reformation Thought an Introduction*
Alister McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing)
- *On being a theologian of the cross: reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (of 1518)*
Gerhard O Forde (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co.)

LUTHER'S LIFE

- *Martin Luther a Life*. Martin Marty (Penguin Books)
- *Martin Luther: the man who started the Reformation*.
Thomas Lindsay (Christian Focus)
- *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. Ronald Bainton
- *The Wit of Martin Luther*. Eric W Gritsch (Fortress Press)

FURTHER READING

An excellent reading list can be found here:

- <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/reading-luther-not-wisely-but-well-part-one.php>
- <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/reading-luther-not-wisely-but-well-part-two.php>

BOOKSHOPS

The following shops do not appear as adverts but as possible sources for books on this reading list. Other bookshops are also available.

BEULAH BOOKSHOP

25 Central Promenade, Newcastle, Co Down BT33 0AA
T: 028 4372 2629 www.beulahbooks.com

EVANGELICAL BOOKSHOP

15 College Square East, Belfast BT1 6DD
T: 028 9032 0529 www.evangelicalbookshop.co.uk

GOWAN BOOKS

Boho Rd, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74 8AS
T: 028 6634 1239 www.gowanbooks.com

ICM BOOKS

115 Dunkirk Road, Lurgan, Co Armagh BT66 7AR
T: 028 3832 1488 www.icmbooksdirect.co.uk

WESTMINSTER BOOKS (ONLINE)

www.wtsbooks.com

“There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor popular... because his conscience tells him it is right - MARTIN LUTHER

www.luther1517.org

On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther took a hammer and nailed his '95 Theses' to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. His stand for the Gospel was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

The long and tempestuous life of Martin Luther has filled the pages of many biographies. This is a series of essays detailing the life, ministry and influence of a godly yet flawed reformer.

Rev Dr Carl Trueman has produced a masterful overview of the German reformer's life. The centrality of the cross in Luther's life and ministry is considered.

A warning about how to remember is heralded.

FOUR OTHER BOOKLETS ARE ALSO AVAILABLE



The Luther 1517 project has been jointly published by the Imperial Grand Black Chapter and the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. It is our desire that this project will reaffirm for our members how central faith is to our two Institutions, will stir up faith within our memberships, and will be a Gospel witness to wider society.