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## REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

## INFORMATION

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The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: WHY LUTHER?

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*John H. Armstrong*

No one seriously questions it—at least among historians anyway. Martin Luther was the human torch that lit the fire of the Protestant revolt against the Church of Rome in the sixteenth century. And the fire he lit has never gone out, now nearly five centuries later. But who was Martin Luther? What did he actually believe? Why did he respond to the church in the manner that he did? And why did the Roman Catholic Church respond to him as it did? Are his life and work really that important to us so far removed from his world and work?

Martin Luther was, and still is, a controversial figure, often misunderstood by friend and foe alike. Born November 10, 1483, Luther lived to the age of sixty-two, dying on February 18, 1546. During this relatively short life, by modern standards at least, he accomplished more, under God, than most moderns could accomplish in three times the life span. Intriguing, enigmatic, straightforward, opinionated, sometimes coarse, always down-to-earth, Martin Luther was a man profoundly and deeply moved by the free grace of God. But he certainly did not appear to be inclined toward becoming a Reformer in his early life.

A brief glimpse from his early life reveals just how much Martin trusted in the teaching of his church. On a very hot day in July, in the year 1505, a twenty-one-year old university student and the devoted son of the church, Martin walked along a road just outside the Saxon village of Stotternheim. As he neared the city a rainstorm interrupted his journey. A flash of lightning knocked him to the ground. Rising from his near-death experience he cried out, in sheer "terror" as historian Roland Bainton put it: "St. Anne help me! I will become a monk."<sup>1</sup>

Bainton notes that the man who cried out to a saint on that day in 1505 would later repudiate the cult of the saints. The man who vowed to become a monk would eventually renounce monasticism. And this man was to be used by God to virtually shatter the centuries-old structure of medieval Catholicism. Even the Roman Catholic Church would never be the same once Luther embarked upon his protest.

But just who is this controversial man? Roland Bainton writes:

The multitudinous portrayals fall into certain broad types already delineated in his own generation. His followers hailed him as the prophet of the Lord and the deliverer of Germany. His opponents on the Catholic side called him the son of perdition and the demolisher of Christendom. The agrarian agitators branded him as a sycophant of the princes, and the radical sectaries compared him to Moses, who led the children of Israel out of Germany and left them to perish in the wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

Biographers are almost all agreed that Luther battled severe depression during these early years. This became quite evident when he entered the priesthood in fulfillment of his earlier made vow. Various theories have been offered to explain his melancholic disposition, especially in our therapeutic century. One thing is sure. Any theory that does not take seriously that the personal struggles Luther endured were *directly* related to the intense religious questions he struggled with, plainly misses the mark.

Born at Eisleben, the son of a prosperous miner, Luther was educated at Erfurt and Magdeburg. His father pressed him to pursue a career in the law. But young Martin, as noted, was "obsessed by concern for his eternal destiny."<sup>3</sup> So unlike our modern Western age, and following the time of

the Black Death, Luther's time was one preoccupied by concerns for death and one's eternal destiny. What young Martin feared, along with many in this time, was not so much death as the judgment that he believed was certain to follow. He believed what few in our day actually believe, even within the church. He understood that eternal damnation awaited those who were not truly reconciled to God. And he understood that no amount of effort on his part could reconcile God to himself. It was not as if the church offered nothing to the people of this time. Men and women were urged to ensure their salvation, to receive the blessed sacraments of the church and to perfect righteousness, by the grace of God. This initial righteousness was poured into one's soul by and through baptism. The truly penitent must spend his lifetime making sure that he completed what God had begun. The church was there to help make it possible.

Luther began his search for peace with God shortly after the 1505 incident. He studied all that the church provided to satisfy his guilty and tormented soul. He finally tried the one thing the church seemed to offer—the penitential system of the time. The famous accounts of Staupitz counseling Luther's distressed soul stand as abiding testimony to how distressed he actually was. What he ultimately discovered was that he couldn't remember all of the sins he had committed. He couldn't even recognize all of his sins clearly enough to adequately admit them before his confessor. But why? Because God, as Luther understood Him, was a righteous and holy Judge who would never clear the guilty on the basis of anything they could offer to Him.

Eventually Luther found help in the study of the Holy Scriptures. A chair for biblical study was established at the University of Wittenberg, and Luther was appointed to this position. He lectured on Psalms, Romans, and finally Galatians. What Luther saw in the text was that God had already

performed the one thing required. He had revealed His mercy in the cross of Christ whereby all those who trusted in Him would be declared righteous by God Himself. And this trust in the dying One, which brought the sinner into a right relationship with the thrice Holy God, was itself the gift of God, received solely on the basis of faith. By virtue of Christ's death the believing person is justified, even though he is not yet just. Bainton concludes helpfully:

Man must of course believe that God has done what God has done, but mere belief is not sufficient. The devils also believe and tremble. Faith is more than belief. It is surrender, acceptance, commitment, saturation with the love of Christ. Man must for himself believe, respond, accept—all of this Luther found already formulated in the writings of the apostle Paul.<sup>4</sup>

But was Luther purely a product of an age—an age that frankly has precious little to do with us living at the dawn of a new millennium? Many seem to think so. Better yet, did Luther's understanding of the gospel come from some kind of personal identity crisis, a type of psychosis that would be treated so differently by the church in our generation? Or was it an understanding rooted in Scripture alone? And did he, toward the end of his life, become a disillusioned man who gave up his early principles, so strongly stated in his earlier doctrinal and polemical writings? These are the kinds of questions that will interest students and scholars for decades to come.

But what is Luther's real contribution to us, living so far removed from the world of his time? His life clearly came at the end of the old world, at the end of the medieval way, thus at the dawn of the modern age. And these changes in society itself would have undoubtedly come, Luther or not. The Renaissance assured this, at least to some cultural

extent. So why does Luther have any enduring significance for the work of reformation in our time? Why should we devote two issues of this journal to the person and thought of Martin Luther? I think James Atkinson, professor of biblical history and literature at the University of Sheffield, answers my question quite well.

Because he sought to re-form Christianity nearer to the mind and intent of its Founder, he is continually significant for Christianity in any subsequent age for the simple reason that Christianity at any given time is always in need of re-formation. He is a constant challenge to Christianity as it is today, no matter whether it is the Catholic or Reformed version of it. In common with many doctors and fathers and saints of the Church, he restores our vision of what a true Christian is and what the true Church might be. He is a powerful and creative thinker on how a Christian is related to the body politic, what involvement in society means, and what criticism of society is. His thinking on the basic secular realities of work, marriage, civic and political activity, and all our common everyday life, challenges everybody to a true understanding of these things. He shows how clean and wholesome, good and worthwhile, these things are intrinsically, and at the same time reveals how secularized, how shortsightedly human so many Christians live out their lives. He was also involved in the care and education of the young, and did more for schools and universities perhaps than any other, saving perhaps Melancthon, who lived to put Luther's ideas into practice.<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther is, simply put, a towering figure, anyway you consider him. His life has left an indelible mark upon us all. Most of us know something of him. Much of what we know, popularly, is wrong. I am personally convinced that this preacher, theologian, and faithful pastor made the kind of difference that "still speaks," *especially* in times like

these. His response to his own notoriety as a Reformer might help us all if we take heed. Said he, in 1522, shortly after his official condemnation by the Roman Catholic Church:

I ask that men make no reference to my name; let them [followers] call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone (1 Cor. 1:13). St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3, would not allow the Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I—poor stinking maggot-fodder that I am—come to have men call the children of Christ by my wretched name? Not so, my dear friends, let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians, after him whose teaching we hold.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Luther accomplished more than any ten of us today. He led a busy life—teaching, writing, preaching, praying, counseling, singing, and playing with his family almost every day. And much of this was done without the benefit of good health since he suffered from frequent kidney stone attacks and various other illnesses. His industrious habits, joined with his courage and common sense, made him a role model for those who would set about the work of reformation in our time. It has been properly noted that he accomplished in his own time a work which took the work of five, or more, Reformers in England. Cranmer gave England a prayer book. Tyndale and Coverdale labored to produce a fresh, readable Bible translation. The Westminster divines produced a useful and thoughtful catechism. And Hugh Latimer gave the people and the ministers a body of evangelical sermons.

Furthermore, Luther understood the import of music as well, even noting once that music “deserves the highest praise, next to the word of God [because] she serves to cast

out Satan.”<sup>7</sup> He was also a wordsmith who could outargue, outwit and outreason the best of his critics. Contra the wrong opinions of many, even to this day, Luther was no radical. He had a keen desire to preserve, protect and build the church. He opposed the radicals who sought social destruction and national upheaval. He understood the society of his time and sought consistently to introduce reformation without revolution. Many can learn from this example as well.

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*But in all of this prodigious effort for the reform of the church, Luther's greatest work clearly lay in his preaching. He was an expert biblical scholar who understood the proper distinction between the Word of God and human authority, especially ecclesiastical authority. And out of all of this learning he lifted up Christ crucified as the singular focus of the Sacred Scriptures.*



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authority, especially ecclesiastical authority. And out of all of this learning he lifted up Christ crucified as the singular focus of the Sacred Scriptures. In 1516 he told a fellow friar:

Learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, "Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what I was not." Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners.<sup>8</sup>

If the Reformation accomplished anything at all it accomplished the great recovery of preaching. The pulpit was placed higher than the altar in Protestant churches for good reason. Luther believed that salvation was through the Word, and the elements of the sacrament were sterile without the preaching of the Word of God. Bainton notes:

... the Reformation did exalt the sermon. All educational devices ... found their highest utilization in the pulpit. The reformers at Wittenberg undertook an extensive campaign of religious instruction through the sermon. There were three public services on Sunday: from five to six in the morning on the Pauline epistles, from nine to ten on the Gospels, and in the afternoon at a variable hour on a continuation of the theme of the morning or on the catechism. The church was not locked during the week, but on Mondays and Tuesdays there were sermons on the catechism, Wednesdays on the Gospel of Matthew, Thursdays and Fridays on the apostolic letters, and Saturday evening on John's Gospel. No one man carried the entire load. There was a staff of the clergy, but Luther's share was prodigious. Including family devotions he spoke often four times on Sundays and quarterly undertook a two-week series four days a week on the catechism.<sup>9</sup>

Luther created no theological system. He left a large body of writings. But beyond doubt the greatest gift he gave to the world was the recovery of a Christocentric faith which restored the message of the gospel to its proper place. And he rediscovered the view that the church must always be reforming if it is to be faithful to Christ. He did not accomplish all he set out to do. He clearly made mistakes. He often overreacted. And, in the words of professor Eric Gritsch: "... knowing him better may alert contemporary Christians to the enduring need of renewal for the sake of a faithful mission to the world."<sup>10</sup>

#### Notes

1. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 21.
2. *Ibid.*, 22.
3. *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Julius Bodensiech, ed., 3 volumes (Philadelphia: Augsburg, 1965), 2:1351.
4. *Ibid.*, 2:1352.
5. James Atkinson, *Martin Luther and the Birth of Protestantism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), iv.
6. *Luther's Works*, Walther I. Brandt, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress: 1962), 45: 70-71.
7. *Luther's Works*, Ulrich S. Leupold, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 53:323.
8. *Luther's Works*, Gottfried G. Krodel, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 48:12-13.
9. Bainton, 348-49.
10. Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther: Faith in Christ and the Gospel* (New York: New City Press, 1996), 24.