



---

*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 7 • Number 4 • FALL 1998

---

Philosophers have had an infinite number of conjectures about God, the soul, and future life; but all have been doubtful without the Word of God. Now that we do have the Word, we despise it, according to the proverb: *Malum, malum dicit omnis possessor* (Bad! Bad! says everyone who has). We are disdainful of present possessions. Later, when the Word has been taken away, we search for God again with futile devotions and superstitions. We must become wise at our own expense.

—WHAT LUTHER SAYS, 1047

For Luther the self-interpretation of Scripture through the Spirit which speaks in it means that Scripture interprets itself in terms of Christ as its center, that is christocentrically. . . . What is really at stake here is the meaning of this one principle. One can do as Erasmus or the late medieval radicals in their own way did, and understand Christ as the teacher of virtue or as an ethical prophet and lawgiver. For Luther "Christ" means the gospel of that free mercy of God in Christ on which alone man's salvation depends. . . . He was certain that the on-going development of the entire Scripture was on his side and that he had not therefore forced an alien hermeneutical principle on Scripture but rather had followed the one which Scripture itself offered. One can formulate Luther's principle thus: Scripture is always to be interpreted according to the analogy of the gospel. Christocentric interpretation for Luther thus means gospel-centered interpretation, understood in terms of the gospel of justification by faith alone.

—PAUL ALTHAUS, *THE THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER* (PHILADELPHIA: FORTRESS, 1966), 79

## INTRODUCING MARTIN LUTHER

---

*James Edward McGoldrick*

### THE REFORMER'S PREPARATION

By the dawn of the sixteenth century the Roman Catholic Church had endured scandals and heresies within, and schismatics had attacked it from without. Catholic humanist scholars had criticized the ignorance of the priesthood, the moral laxity and incompetence of bishops and popes, and hostile relations between church and state had punctuated the Middle Ages. Earlier efforts to reform the church had brought no lasting results, and laymen had no voice in doctrinal matters, very little in papal policy. General councils of the church had sought to address specific abuses, but Renaissance popes prohibited further conciliar meetings and reigned as ecclesiastical monarchs.

When the Protestant Reformation began, it included complaints about ignorance, corruptions and abuses of power, but it did not stop there. Under the leadership of Martin Luther (1483-1546), Protestants proposed a radical departure from tradition on the matter of sin and salvation, and in doing so, they defied the whole structure of church authority. *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone—became their slogan, as they reexamined the entire content of the medieval church in the light of the Bible.

Germany became the birthplace of the Reformation, at least in part, because, in the providence of God, political conditions there allowed considerable freedom from the

control of the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. Germany was the birthplace of the printing press, without which the Reformation might have failed, and the German expression of Catholicism featured an evident discontent with the formal character of traditional worship. Among the Rhineland mystics, for example, there was a pronounced refusal to regard true religion as the proper performance of prescribed rituals. German merchants often decried the financial exactions of Rome, and German scholars resented ecclesiastical interference with their academic freedom.

The time was ripe for the birth of . . . the Reformation, but [its] principles had to be experienced in the soul of some forceful personality before they could become dynamic for subsequent ages. In its main features the Reformation was the experience, not of an individual, but of the Church. Luther was the forceful personality chosen to precipitate the move and give it its substance.<sup>1</sup>

When reform came to Germany, it was an effort to restore New Testament principles in doctrine and practice. The major influences upon this endeavor came from the apostle Paul and the church father Augustine of Hippo (354-430). The content of the reform was truly *catholic* in substance in the sense of being the doctrine of the early church which had been subverted and eclipsed by Pelagianism and medieval Scholasticism. Luther took delight in affirming ancient formulations such as the Creed of Nicea (325), and as long as he led the Protestant movement, the goal was reform of the existing church. His church therefore retained more Catholic forms than most other Protestant bodies because he believed that there was much in the Catholic tradition that was good and true.

Although Luther's form of Protestantism was conserva-

tive, it contradicted the heart of late medieval theology, for Luther demanded theocentric religion in which the glory of God, not human salvation, is paramount. This clashed with the egocentric belief of most medieval Catholics who sought salvation through works of righteousness made possible by grace dispensed through the sacraments of the church.

Martin Luther was born in the Saxon town of Eisleben November 10, 1483, which was the feast of St. Martin, whose name Hans and Margareta Luther bestowed upon their son at his baptism. Although the family had roots in the peasantry, Hans Luther was a moderately prosperous copper miner at the time of Martin's birth.

Home life for the Luthers featured a mixture of typical medieval piety and Teutonic superstitions which led people to believe that demons and witches infested the atmosphere. Martin all of his life regarded Satan as a vicious enemy who sought to destroy him.

Martin's formal education included study at the Mansfeld Latin School, a year under the instruction of the Brethren of the Common Life at Magdeburg, and a period at the town school in Eisenach. In 1501 he enrolled at the University of Erfurt, from which he received the Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees in preparation for the study of law. Erfurt was Germany's foremost university, especially renowned for the teaching of law. The undergraduate curriculum of liberal arts and the Master of Arts program in philosophy prepared Luther well for his professional education, but he suddenly abandoned the study of law and became a monk in July 1505.

The dominant philosophic position at Erfurt was Occamism, a teaching derived from a fourteenth-century Franciscan, William of Occam (d. 1349). Adherents to Occam's philosophy contended that the doctrines of Christianity are all products of revelation to be received by faith.

They denigrated the Aristotelian teaching of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-74) with its emphasis upon the authority of reason. Luther adopted this view and maintained it steadfastly, as his espousal of *sola Scriptura* bears witness.

Luther's decision to enter the monastery of the Augustinian Hermits at Erfurt seems to have been due to deep anxiety about death. Bubonic plague appeared in Erfurt that year, so Luther witnessed the carnage. To add to the terror of that experience, he encountered a severe lightning storm in which he thought he would perish. In anguish he appealed to St. Anne, the patroness of miners, to intercede with God, and he promised that he would reciprocate by becoming a monk. Much to the dismay of his parents, Martin passed through the gates of the Black Cloister to become a friar. In doing so, he had chosen the lifestyle which his church extolled as the best means to obtain salvation.

Study in the cloister included the Bible, the church fathers, and medieval theologians. Life in the monastery emphasized humility and obedience, and monks had to beg as a means to encourage their submission to the rules of the order. Luther devoted himself to such duties with a rigor that exceeded the requirements, and prolonged fasting and sleepless nights in prayer seem to have injured his health.

Although the medieval church portrayed monasticism as the zenith of holiness, the regimen of the cloister led Luther deeper into spiritual distress. He endured *Anfechtungen*, times of anxiety which brought him to the brink of despair. He regarded these experiences as attacks from Satan, and he refused to allow them to keep him from prodigious work. The *Anfechtungen* bothered him all his life, but the times of such afflictions were some of the most productive periods of his life. Luther suffered from several physical ailments, but attempts to explain the *Anfechtungen*

by connecting them with specific bodily ills have failed.

The major source of Luther's anxiety about sin and salvation may have been the theology he learned as a monk. Medieval teachers, especially Gabriel Biel (c. 1420-95), held that one must earn the grace of God by doing *quod in se est*, what is within him, that is, exerting oneself to love God perfectly, which Luther found impossible to do.

Luther's unusually sensitive conscience led him to confess his sins frequently to Johann Staupitz (d. 1524), his monastic superior. Staupitz advised the troubled friar to cease trying to transform self-love into perfect love for God, as Biel had taught. While his superior was sympathetic with Luther's plight, he did not have the profound sense of personal sin that perplexed Luther. He counseled his distraught monk to concentrate on the love of God rather than upon the divine wrath against sinners. Still Luther found that impossible to do, and the sight of the crucifix frightened him. He was especially disturbed by Bible passages which proclaim the righteousness of God and demand righteousness from humans. Later, as he reflected upon his time as a monk, Luther exclaimed: "I was . . . more than once driven to the very abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him."<sup>2</sup> The observation of historian Philip Schaff is appropriate in this regard.

He [Luther] could not point to any particular transgression; it was sin as a corruption of nature, sin as a state of alienation from and hostility to God that weighed on his mind like an incubus and brought him at times to the brink of despair.<sup>3</sup>

Martin Luther always maintained an admiration and affection from Johann Staupitz, even though the latter did not support him in contentions with Rome. From Staupitz

Luther learned that, when Jesus Christ calls people to Himself, he requires that they *repent* for their sins (Mark 1:15). The Latin Vulgate Bible, which Luther had been studying, however, rendered the verb *do penance*, which most Catholics construed to be a demand for penitential good works to atone for sin. While this discovery did not immediately transform Luther's thinking about God, sin, and salvation, Staupitz' insight proved very beneficial, as Luther developed his understanding of the gospel. In a tribute to his adviser, Luther wrote:

If I did not praise Staupitz, I would be a damned papistical ass, . . . for he was my first father in this teaching, and he bore me in Christ. If Staupitz had not helped me, I would have been swallowed and left in hell.<sup>4</sup>

Luther became a priest in 1507, and the awesome responsibilities of that office increased his uncertainty. He remained fearful in his relations with God, and officiating at the holy sacrifice of the mass brought no relief. A journey to Rome on business for the Augustinian order in 1510 led to further distress, for there he witnessed some of the flagrant worldliness of the Renaissance church. In 1511 Staupitz assigned Luther to a teaching position at the new University of Wittenberg, and that institution conferred the Doctor of Theology degree upon him the next year. As a professor of biblical studies Luther lectured on Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, and during these years he formed his own basic theology.

Luther's lectures on Romans show that he regarded egoism as the root of sin. Very slowly the methodical study of Scripture enabled him to overcome his deep fear of God as a grim judge. The instrumental cause of Luther's conversion was his careful exegesis of the New Testament. While studying Romans 1:17 he learned that the righteousness

God requires He actually confers as a gift, *sola gratia*, by grace alone. Luther likened this discovery to a new birth, an experience of paradise on earth. Writing about his exegetical detection, the Reformer asserted:

. . . a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. . . . Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where . . . I found that he too interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us.<sup>5</sup>

---

*The doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone became the material principle of the Reformation, the article by which, in Luther's view, the church would stand or fall. The exact date of this Turmerlebnis—tower experience—is not clear, but it is evident that Luther had reached his understanding of justification sola fide—through faith alone—sometime before he became involved in controversy with the papacy.*



The doctrine of justification by grace alone, through

faith alone, in Christ alone became the material principle of the Reformation, the article by which, in Luther's view, the church would stand or fall. The exact date of this *Turmerlebnis*—tower experience—is not clear, but it is evident that Luther had reached his understanding of justification *sola fide*—through faith alone—sometime before he became involved in controversy with the papacy.

### THE REFORMER'S WORK

Diligent study of Scripture and the writings of St. Augustine led Martin Luther gradually away from approved doctrines and practices of his church, although he did not perceive that a drift was occurring. He nevertheless was developing serious disagreements with such traditional authorities as Peter Lombard (d. 1160), Thomas Aquinas, and Gabriel Biel, and he was able to convince some of his professorial colleagues to accept his understanding. Luther boldly proposed a reform of university education to dispense with traditional Scholastic theology in favor of more direct Bible study and more attention to the works of Augustine.

Luther's first public dispute with his church occurred in October 1517, when Dominican friar Johann Tetzel (1470-1519) appeared on the border of Saxony selling certificates of indulgence, and some of Luther's parishioners at St. Mary's Church, where he had been preaching, informed him they did not need the repentance he had been proclaiming. This led Dr. Luther to compose the *Ninety-five Theses* as a formal protest and a call for an academic disputation about the sale. The theses appeared in Latin, which shows that Luther intended them only for fellow scholars. His students, however, translated them into German and circulated them widely, which quickly made the matter a subject of public discussion.

Indulgences had a long history, and they were original-

ly an instrument of church discipline, as authorities imposed earthly penalties upon errant church members. In order to evade such strictures (for example, the requirement to undertake a pilgrimage to a distant shrine), one might make a financial contribution to the church and thereby obtain an indulgence, a commutation of the penalty. At first indulgences had no application beyond the remission of temporal penalties, but in the thirteenth century Paris theologian Alexander of Hales (d. 1245) formulated the concept of a Treasury of Merit of which the pope was custodian. According to this teaching, the great saints of history, by their good deeds, earned more than enough merit for salvation. God has entrusted the excess merit to the pope, who may dispense it to needy souls. Pope Clement VI (1342-52) gave official approval to this doctrine in 1343, and Pope Sixtus IV (1471-84) extended coverage to souls in purgatory. Thereafter the sale of certificates of indulgence became a lucrative practice, and one-third of the proceeds went into the papal treasury, although purchasers did not know it.

The specific sale of indulgences that aroused Luther was due to an agreement between Pope Leo X (1513-21) and Albrecht von Brandenburg (1490-1545). Albrecht had accumulated a large debt to the banking firm of Fugger, loans with which he purchased a papal dispensation that allowed him to become an archbishop prior to reaching the canonical age and to hold several bishoprics concurrently. Leo X sought funds to build St. Peter's basilica in Rome as a monument to his role as a Renaissance pontiff. The pope therefore agreed to the sale, and Tetzel became the vendor of indulgences. The pope and the archbishop were to divide the income between them.

When the Dominican friar appeared near Saxony, he took advantage of public credulity by leading people to believe that his certificates would assure them of salvation

and obtain immediate release of their loved ones from purgatory. To promote the sale he recited a jingle: *so bald der Pfennig im Kasten klingt, die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt!* "As soon as the coin in the coffer klings, the soul out of purgatory springs!"

---

*Meetings with papal emissaries did not move Luther, and he began in private to express the suspicion that the pope was Antichrist. In a public debate with Scholastic theologian Johan Eck (1486-1543) at Leipzig in 1519, Dr. Luther insisted upon the supremacy of Scripture over the papacy, and in doing so he enunciated what became the formal principle of the Protestant Reformation—*sola Scriptura*.*



When Luther issued his *Ninety-five Theses*, he thought naively that the pope would appreciate his effort to combat a scandalous corruption. He said, "If the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built with the skins, flesh, and bones of his sheep."<sup>6</sup> The *Ninety-five Theses* did not call for the abolition of indulgences but for

an end to abuses. Luther did deny that the church could remit guilt for sin and that indulgences could benefit the dead. His first thesis actually subverted the whole concept of indulgences, though Luther did not realize it. He wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said *repent*, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."<sup>7</sup> Thesis thirty-six affirms: "Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters."<sup>8</sup>

When the sale of indulgences declined as a result of Luther's complaint, Tetzel and the Dominicans accused the Wittenberg theologian of heresy, and Leo X ordered the Augustinians to silence Luther. His order, however, took no action against him, and Prince Frederick of Saxony insisted that the controversial monk receive a hearing in Germany, not in Rome. There was much public acclaim for Luther, but Rome sought to stop him. In the year 1517 Leo X created thirty-nine new cardinals for which he collected the sum of 500,000 ducats; so the pope had a large financial stake in the indulgence controversy as well. The entire faculty at the University of Wittenberg supported Luther's stand.

Meetings with papal emissaries did not move Luther, and he began in private to express the suspicion that the pope was Antichrist. In a public debate with Scholastic theologian Johan Eck (1486-1543) at Leipzig in 1519, Dr. Luther insisted upon the supremacy of Scripture over the papacy, and in doing so he enunciated what became the formal principle of the Protestant Reformation—*sola Scriptura*.

The year 1520 was very productive for Luther as an author. Among his publications were *The Liberty of a Christian* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, two of his most important works.

In the treatise on Christian liberty, Luther extolled the role of faith as a gift from God by which believing sinners

receive right standing with their Creator on the basis of Christ's death for their sins. Saving faith brings freedom from condemnation and sin's tyranny. How then are Christians to use their liberty? In the Reformer's words, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>9</sup> He based this on 1 Corinthians 9:19, where Paul wrote, "Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all." Luther took this to mean "love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved."<sup>10</sup> Christian liberty does not lead to license but to eagerness to love one's neighbors and to serve them accordingly. Luther had a profound understanding of the social responsibilities which accompany genuine faith. Faith binds Christians to God, and love binds them to their neighbors.

Luther addressed *The Liberty of a Christian* to Leo X in a sincere attempt to conciliate the pope. There is no evidence that Leo read it, and conciliation was by then impossible, so long as Luther insisted upon *sola Scriptura*.

*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* is not at all conciliatory in character. It is an assault upon the sacramental system by which, Luther claimed, Rome kept people in bondage to fear. The Wittenberg scholar rejected five of the seven sacraments because he could find a biblical basis for only two, baptism and the eucharist. He denied that priests in the sacrament of penance could remit sins, and he rejected transubstantiation, the doctrine that the mass is a reenactment of Calvary in which priests change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Luther held that Christ is present in the eucharist "in, with, and under the bread and wine," but there is no change in the substance of those elements. He argued that laymen as well as pastors are entitled to drink from the sacramental cup.

On the subject of baptism Luther held tenaciously to the view that infants are proper recipients of the sacrament

and that baptism imparts regeneration. He did not attribute any miraculous power to the water, but he held that the Word of God, which is applied with the water, makes it a "washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup> He taught that faith makes baptism effectual—faith in the promise of salvation which the sacrament signifies. Infants as well as adults may possess faith, since it is a gift from God which He may impart sovereignly regardless of one's age. Luther cited the example of John the Baptist, whose prenatal faith caused him to leap in his mother's womb when she received her cousin Mary and realized "the mother of my Lord" had come to visit her (Luke 1:39-45).

Publication of Luther's treatises in 1520 led to a threat of excommunication from the pope. The Reformer responded by burning the papal document. Luther had become a heretic in the eyes of the church and an outlaw in the eyes of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1519-58), who in 1521 summoned his professorial subject to appear before the Diet of Worms, the imperial assembly of ecclesiastical and secular lords. Since Charles, a Spaniard, did not have a secure position in Germany, he was anxious to enhance his prestige by obtaining a recantation from Luther. A common religion was the only basis for unity in his empire, so Charles regarded the healing of the schism as a necessity.

Luther saw the summons to Worms as providing a forum in which he could expound the gospel, but the emperor would not allow that. Luther was not to expostulate but to answer an interrogation from the archbishop of Trier, who demanded an unequivocal recantation. Luther rose to the challenge with the greatest speech of his career. He said:

Since your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: 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 will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me.<sup>12</sup>

Emperor Charles addressed the princes after Luther spoke. "I am determined to proceed against him as a notorious heretic, requesting you to conduct yourselves in this matter as good Christians, as you have promised."<sup>13</sup> The Edict of Worms then declared Luther a menace to the state, even though he had loudly professed his loyalty to the empire.

Charles V honored his promise by allowing the dissident theologian to leave Worms in peace, but for the rest of his life the emperor remained an implacable enemy of the Reformation. He told his council of state that he wanted to destroy heresy "so that historians writing that it started in my reign, should be able to state that, with my help and industry, it came to an end."<sup>14</sup> In the emperor's retirement he urged his son Philip II (1556-98) to burn Protestants in the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup>

While Luther was returning from Worms, agents of Prince Frederick of Saxony seized him and sequestered him at the Wartburg Castle, where he remained for almost a year. It seems that Frederick wanted to remove him from the arena of controversy in the hope that his absence would reduce tensions. The prince meanwhile sought to arrange a general council of the church to give his monk a fair hearing.

During his stay at Wartburg, Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German in eleven weeks! There had been earlier German versions, but they were dialectical renderings of only local usefulness. Luther's mastery of lan-

guage enabled him to produce a Bible for all Germans, and in the process he became the father of *Hochdeutsch*—High German—the national tongue.

While in seclusion at the castle, Luther wrote sermons as patterns for other preachers and treatises on issues of current debate. One such issue was the extent of changes to be initiated at Wittenberg and the speed with which to enact them. Conditions were favorable to implement reforms that would bring the church at Wittenberg more closely into conformity with biblical patterns, but in Luther's absence leadership fell into the hands of radicals, and Andrew Karlstadt (1480-1541), senior professor of theology at the university, allowed himself to be enticed into endorsing sweeping changes accompanied by violent demonstrations. Angry mobs abused priests and nuns and destroyed Roman Catholic church buildings. Similar outbreaks occurred at Erfurt. Three self-appointed "prophets" from Zwickau claimed divine revelation through visions, and the agitators threatened to destroy public order. Luther quickly returned to Wittenberg and denounced social revolution and all use of force to compel changes in religion. He took the lead in organizing a conservative reformation which sought only such changes as Scripture required. He espoused the *normative* principle of worship, which meant the abolition of all practices that contradicted the gospel but allowed retention of traditional ceremonies which did not. Soon sympathetic princes in other German states endorsed Luther's conception of reform, and thereby they promoted the extension of the evangelical movement. They especially appreciated Luther's efforts to prevent social upheaval when the country erupted in the Peasants' War (1524-25), a conflict Luther denounced as due to demonic inspiration.

Most German peasants were very poor, and their landlords were, in general, unsympathetic toward them. When Luther learned about the peasant revolt, he made a plea for

conciliation by issuing a treatise titled *An Admonition to Peace*. Therein he denied that the gospel promises social equality, and he denounced violence, while he asked the princes to improve the lot of the poor. Luther preached in troubled areas at the risk of his life, but he could not stop the destruction. In desperation he wrote *Against the Thieving, Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, in which he called upon the princes to smash the rebels, who plundered over 150 monasteries, raped nuns, burned castles, and stole their landlords' possessions. By the time the civil rulers had restored order, at least 50,000 people had died. Critics of Luther have ever since that tragedy blamed him for the cruelty which the princes inflicted, but he did not apologize for his position. With or without his advice, the authorities were bound to crush the rebels, and Luther's intemperate expressions had little effect upon the outcome. Contrary to Luther's counsel, the landlords increased their demands upon the defeated peasants.

As a consequence of the war, many peasants lost confidence in Luther and became Anabaptists, although thousands remained supportive toward the Wittenberg Reformer. Luther relied increasingly upon the princes for protection, and they assumed growing authority over the evangelical churches.

Throughout the infancy of the German Reformation, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V desired to crush the dissidents, but wars with the French and the Turks preempted his attention. By 1529, however, Charles was victorious over the French and therefore ready to deal forcefully with the Lutherans. At a meeting of the imperial diet in Speyer in 1529 his council revoked earlier concessions and forbade further extension of the reform. Five princes and representatives of fourteen cities filed a formal protest against that action, and ever after the evangelicals were known as *Protestants*. They justified opposition to imperial policy as

their duty to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Charles announced that he would appear in person to take charge of the matter.

Rather than initiate military action against the Protestants, the emperor convened a meeting of the diet at Augsburg in 1530, and there he allowed each side in the dispute to present its case. Philipp Melancthon spoke for the Lutheran side by reading a theological statement which emphasized areas in which Catholics and Lutherans agreed, although it did not minimize the distinctive doctrines of the Wittenberg Reformers. His presentation, now known as the *Augsburg Confession of Faith*, became the most broadly accepted expression of Lutheran theology, and it remains the classical statement of Lutheran orthodoxy.

---

*Despite the opposition of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Catholic princes, the Reformation spread rapidly across Germany and soon penetrated non-German lands as well. Geographic extension alone could not, however, assure success. Luther learned early that the numbers of people who adhered to his cause did not, in some cases, indicate an informed commitment to his doctrine.*

---



A Catholic theologian read the *Roman Confutation*, and Emperor Charles slept through the entire proceeding. He nevertheless decreed that the evangelical position had been refuted, and he threatened to move against the “heretics” with force. Luther did not attend the diet because he was under the ban of the empire with a price upon his head. He remained a distance away at Coburg Castle, where he received reports about the gathering. He became frustrated by what he learned, and he feared that Melancthon had been too conciliatory. Luther exclaimed:

I would sooner fall with Christ than stand with the emperor.  
 . . . In God’s name I free you from this diet; go home again!  
 If the emperor wants to send out an edict, let him do it. . . .  
 We take the emperor as emperor and nothing more, nothing  
 further! Home, home—the Lord protect you!<sup>16</sup>

After Augsburg tension between Catholics and Protestants became severe, and Germany divided into two armed camps. Fighting erupted in 1546, soon after Luther died. Several times, when the imperial forces were at the threshold of victory, the Turkish threat in Eastern Europe distracted the emperor and relieved pressure on the German Protestants. By 1555 the two sides were exhausted, and the princes forged a settlement without the emperor’s participation. Catholics and Lutherans granted toleration to one another because neither side could win militarily.

Despite the opposition of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Catholic princes, the Reformation spread rapidly across Germany and soon penetrated non-German lands as well. Geographic extension alone could not, however, assure success. Luther learned early that the numbers of people who adhered to his cause did not, in some cases, indicate an informed commitment to his doctrine. A visitation of the parishes in Saxony revealed that the spiritual

condition of the people was often deplorable. Former priests led evangelical congregations, but neither pastors nor people had an adequate understanding of the faith. This dismal situation prompted Luther to compose his *Small Catechism* (1529) as a means to combat ignorance and to provide unlearned pastors with the tools to instruct their congregations in the elementary truths of Christianity. In a series of questions Luther expounded the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments.

---

*Martin Luther was primarily a Bible expositor and a writer about doctrinal themes, not a systematic theologian. He made faith the key work in his vocabulary, and in his reaction against the scholastic theology of the Catholic universities, he expressed intense dislike for those who relied upon Aristotle’s philosophy to explicate and defend their beliefs.*

---



Publication of the *Small Catechism* for laymen and the *Large Catechism* for pastors helped to spread the message of the Reformation widely and quickly. Evangelical princes assisted the work of the Reformers by ordering that worship

practices conform to biblical doctrine. They therefore prohibited masses for the dead, idolatrous use of images, and the sacrificial observance of the mass. Preaching became the central feature of worship, laymen regained access to the communion cup, and hymns and liturgies in the German language enabled common people to participate intelligently in worship on a plane of equality with their pastor. The Bible and the catechisms in German became spiritual staples in the homes of multitudes of people.

### THE REFORMER'S LEGACY

Luther's theology featured a leap across centuries of semi-Pelagianism to restore the primacy of teaching which magnified divine grace—*solī Deo gloria*. The Reformer's great problem with sin and guilt he blamed on egocentricity—self-centeredness. "To his egocentric question, . . . Luther received a theocentric answer, which became thenceforward his dominant all-embracing theme."<sup>17</sup> Luther came to despise man-centered religion.

Martin Luther was primarily a Bible expositor and a writer about doctrinal themes, not a systematic theologian. He made faith the key word in his vocabulary, and in his reaction against the scholastic theology of the Catholic universities, he expressed intense dislike for those who relied upon Aristotle's philosophy to explicate and defend their beliefs. In Luther's judgment, "virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace."<sup>18</sup>

Luther's disdain for Aristotle and those who regarded him as an authority for Christians reflects the Reformer's complete reliance upon God's grace for salvation. Religious intellectualism and mystical pietism he scorned in favor of entire trust in the gospel as God has revealed it, for faith alone can approach God and know Him savingly.<sup>19</sup>

For Luther the entire Bible was a Christocentric book, so "whoever does not find or receive God in Christ, shall at

no time and in no place find God outside of Christ."<sup>20</sup> Luther regarded Christ as true God and true man, as the ancient creeds of the church affirm. There was no evident dispute between Luther and Rome about the person of Christ, but the work of Christ was a bone of contention related to the doctrine of justification. Luther liked to refer to his conception of the Christian faith as his *theologia crucis*, theology of the cross. He believed the crucifixion of God's Son is the means of redemption, since "Christ . . . stands in our place and has taken all our sins upon his shoulders. . . . He is the eternal satisfaction for our sin and reconciles us with God the Father."<sup>21</sup>

Luther focused upon Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46), and he concluded that Christ went to hell at Calvary, where He lost the comfort and presence of God and suffered the terror and distress of condemned souls. In the Reformer's words, ". . . whatever sins I, you, and all of us have committed or may commit in the future, they are as much Christ's own, as if He Himself had committed them."<sup>22</sup>

The Christ who died is now triumphant Lord, as the resurrection attests. He has conquered sin, death, and hell, and through His Holy Spirit He empowers believers to triumph over temptation.

In contrast with traditional Roman doctrine, which encouraged the belief that sinners could make meritorious contributions to salvation, Luther ascribed the saving of souls entirely to God by the means of Christ's substitutionary atonement. In doing so, Dr. Luther returned to the Pauline and Augustinian teaching about the sufficiency of divine grace and the inability of sinners to satisfy divine justice. This, in his view, is genuine *Catholic* teaching.

As a biblical theologian Luther had to reject the popular Renaissance humanist confidence in man's innate goodness, and he denied the medieval semi-Pelagian idea

as well. Semi-Pelagians held that humans are sinful but not entirely corrupt. They therefore possess some ability to cooperate with grace and thereby to gain God's favor. The ancient church had rejected this doctrine when, in 529, the Synod of Orange condemned it as heresy. It gained popular acceptance across the Middle Ages nevertheless, and by the sixteenth century it had become the dominant view of salvation in the Roman Church. Synergism, the belief that salvation is a cooperative endeavor between God and sinners, was and remains the persuasion of most Roman Catholics.

Luther, like Augustine a millennium earlier, contended that human nature since the fall is wholly sinful, so there can be no human contribution to salvation, and every theological debate of the Reformation era reflected the controversy about the consequences of original sin. Luther viewed all human beings as image-bearers of God, and that image "dignifies the nature of man in . . . a glorious manner and distinguished it from all other creatures."<sup>23</sup> As man came first from the hand of the Creator, he had "an enlightened reason, a true knowledge of God, and a most sincere desire to love God and his neighbor."<sup>24</sup> The Fall ruined man's condition and alienated him from God. Luther therefore concluded:

I believe that I cannot by my own understanding and strength come to Jesus Christ, my Lord, but that the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel and illuminated me with his gifts and sanctified me in the true faith.<sup>25</sup>

By 1524-25 Luther's theocentric teaching had made a schism with Rome inevitable, and his belief in the impotence of fallen sinners was the issue that separated him irreparably from critics of Rome who sought only the correction of abuses and corruptions within the church. Because of his biblical understanding of God, man, sin,

and salvation, he would not be content with moral and procedural improvements. He sought the reform of theology, and that brought him into a collision with the foremost scholar in Christendom, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466-1536), the celebrated Prince of Humanists.

Under pressure from Catholic leaders, Erasmus attacked Luther by publishing *De Libero Arbitrio* (*Concerning the Freedom of the Will*) in 1524. Luther replied with *De Servo Arbitrio* (*Concerning the Bondage of the Will*) the following year. Erasmus denied the total depravity of sinful human nature and argued that divine law assumes human ability to meet its demands. Erasmus held that the fall left the human will free and unimpaired, so sinners still have the ability to cooperate with grace in a meritorious way and thereby to contribute to their salvation. The famed humanist dismissed the doctrine of election by God's sovereign choice and charged that Luther's God was unfair, for to be good, God must grant His grace to everyone.

In responding to Erasmus, Luther went to great lengths to refute him point-by-point and to show that the evangelical doctrine was not an innovation but a return to Pauline and Augustinian teaching about salvation. Luther's argument features the assertion that a person cannot be humble "till he realized that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will, and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure, and works of Another-God alone."<sup>26</sup>

The Luther-Erasmus debate clarified the issues which separated Wittenberg and Rome, and Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* became the classic Protestant statement which showed that the contest was one of theocentricity vs. anthropocentricity.

Congruent with his view of salvation, Martin Luther departed boldly from the medieval conception of the Christian life. As a champion of the priesthood of all

believers, he scorned the clergy-laity dichotomy in which a professional priesthood dispenses God's grace to dependent laymen. The Roman Church exalted priests, monks, and nuns as members of the spiritual estate and relegated laymen to the secular estate, a position of spiritual inferiority. His own experience as a monk had impressed this deeply upon Luther, and his experience of saving grace convinced him that it was a very harmful falsehood that he had to refute.

As one liberated through faith in Christ, Luther extolled the unity and wholeness of the Christian priesthood by arguing that all believers belong to a single sacred estate. Every form of toil performed for God's glory is a divine calling. To some people God has granted the gifts for the gospel ministry. To others he has imparted talents for ruling principalities, mending shoes, or raising potatoes. The Reformer expounded this theme in his treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* in 1520. There he showed that every station in life is a place where Christians can exercise their gifts in the ministry of their priesthood, and no one station is superior to another.<sup>27</sup> He and other Reformers would have been dismayed by the modern practice of identifying certain occupations only as full-time Christian service.

Since Christians need not work for their salvation, they are free to express their love for God by serving their neighbors. Love for one's neighbors comes from a right relationship with God. Rather than retreating to a monastery to win divine favor by self-denial, believers must follow Jesus' example of helping others. Good works are demonstrations of genuine faith, for faith is always active in love.

It finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith.<sup>28</sup>

Although good works do not merit salvation, Luther affirmed that they are necessary consequences of saving grace. He linked good works to the assurance of salvation by teaching that active love, expressing itself in good works, is the only reliable external index of faith. He warned that people who claim to believe in Christ but show no love for their neighbors maintain only an illusion of faith. The Reformer said that Christians must share their goods with needy neighbors. Just as Christ "emptied Himself" to become the Savior, so must His disciples give their possessions to others in need. When illness strikes, Christians must aid the sick, even at risk to themselves. When bubonic plague struck Wittenberg, Luther stayed there to minister to the sick and the dying. He saw clearly the social responsibilities of faith. He declared, "Our faith does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works."<sup>29</sup>

One area of life which, in Luther's view, provides an excellent context in which to put faith to work is marriage. It is ironic that the Roman Church in 1215 had declared marriage a sacrament, while it regarded celibacy as a more pious, meritorious estate. In 1075 Pope Gregory VII had imposed celibacy upon all clerics.

Although Luther denied that marriage is a sacrament, he regarded it as pleasing to God and beneficial to human beings. He exulted, "It is not an estate to be placed on a level with the others; it precedes and surpasses them all, whether those of emperor, princes, bishops, or anyone else."<sup>30</sup> Speaking about a godly husband, Luther wrote, "Cutting wood or heating a room is just as holy for him as praying . . . if for a monk, for all works of a pious man are good because of the Holy Spirit and his faith."<sup>31</sup> The same is true of a devout wife and mother for whom making beds and washing diapers are forms of Christian service. Luther

urged people to reject monasticism in favor of marriage, and he set a proper example when he married Katherine von Bora, a former nun, in 1525.

In rejecting the sacred-secular dichotomy, Dr. Luther denied that the Christian life should be ascetic. He maintained that God had created the world for His own glory, but for the enjoyment of His own people as well. Luther therefore encouraged Christians to participate in the visual and musical arts and to enjoy athletics. He had a special fondness for music, and his contribution to hymnody was huge.

---

*In contrast with the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, Luther believed that music merits inclusion in worship because it is a gift from God, a suitable vehicle by which believers may express their love and adoration. He composed thirty-seven hymns, all in the German language, which encouraged congregations to participate in worship rather than being spectators, as they had been during the Middle Ages.*




---

In contrast with the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, Luther believed that music merits inclusion in worship

because it is a gift from God, a suitable vehicle by which believers may express their love and adoration. He composed thirty-seven hymns, all in the German language, which encouraged congregations to participate in worship rather than being spectators, as they had been during the Middle Ages. Luther thus became the father of the singing Protestant church, and German Lutherans excelled all other Protestant bodies of the sixteenth century in the development of their hymnody. J. S. Bach (1685-1750) made music a means by which to proclaim the great themes of Reformation theology by arranging his music to correspond with the doctrines in Luther's catechisms. Jesuits complained that Luther had damned more souls with his hymns than with his sermons and writings.

Although Luther was a German and his conception of Reformation enjoyed its greatest success in his homeland, his influence has been international. During Luther's lifetime Wittenberg theologian Johann Bugenhagen (1485-1558) became a missionary to Scandinavia. Robert Barnes (1495-1540), a refugee theologian from England, transmitted Luther's teachings to his homeland through numerous writings, and Patrick Hamilton (c. 1503-28) helped to lay the foundation of Scottish Protestantism by promoting Luther's doctrines and by becoming Scotland's first Protestant martyr.<sup>32</sup>

From Martin Luther the church has received a rich legacy of theocentricity in belief and practice. In the providence of God he led the way to demolish the dichotomy which had kept common people from harmony with God and biblical fellowship with one another. Thanks to his endeavors to extol the grace of Christ, believers could enjoy the Christian life in its wholeness as a community of kings and priests who find their greatest satisfaction in loving and serving God and their neighbors. *Soli Deo gloria!*

*Author*

Dr. James E. McGoldrick is professor of history at Cedarville College, Cedarville, Ohio. He is a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal* and other periodicals. He is the author of several books, including *Baptist Successionism*, *Luther's Scottish Connection* and *Luther's English Connection*.

*Notes*

1. Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 1:318.
2. Quoted by Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: New American Library, 1950), 44; cf. *Luther's Works*, 34, ed., Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 336. Hereafter the abbreviation LW will signify *Luther's Works*.
3. Philip Schaff, *A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977 reprint of 1910 ed.), 8:117.
4. Quoted by E. G. Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 31.
5. LW, 34:337.
6. LW, 31:206.
7. *Ibid.*, 25.
8. *Ibid.*, 28.
9. *Ibid.*, 344.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication Board, 1874), 4:1-4.
12. LW, 32:112-13.
13. *Ibid.*, 115.
14. Quoted by Fernandez Alvarez, *Charles V* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 91.
15. *Ibid.*, 184.
16. LW, 34:7; this volume contains the full text of Luther's *Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg*.
17. Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), 14.
18. LW, 31:12.
19. For a penetrating examination of Luther's view of reason and faith, see Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982).
20. Quoted by Heick, *History of Christian Thought*, 1:332.
21. LW, 51:92.
22. LW, 26:278.
23. LW, 1:57.
24. *Ibid.*, 63.
25. Luther, *Small Catechism*, 2:3.
26. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, tr. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 100.
27. LW, 44:123-217; cf. James Edward McGoldrick, "Luther on Life With Dichotomy," *Grace Theological Journal* (Spring 1984), 5:3-11.
28. LW, 31:365; cf. Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, Robert C. Schultz, tr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).
29. LW, 31:344.
30. Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, T. G. Tappert, et al., ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1952), 393.
31. Quoted by William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 146.
32. James Edward McGoldrick, *Luther's English Connection* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1979) and *Luther's Scottish Connection* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989).