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# The Reformation

*Past Voices, Current Implications*

*edited by*

STEVEN M. STUDEBAKER AND GORDON L. HEATH

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THE REFORMATION  
Past Voices, Current Implications

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## 2

# Martin Luther and the Origins of the Reformation

VICTOR A. SHEPHERD

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IT IS MARCH 1545. Luther has eleven months to live. He is not terminally ill. He has, however, been convicted of high treason, a capital offence. Anyone assisting him will also be deemed treasonous and, if caught, executed. Condemned by the Pope as a heretic since 1520, he has been an outlaw of the Holy Roman Empire since 1521. Anyone who assassinates him will be rewarded. He can never forget that life is short and death is sure. Now he is reviewing his vast written output, fine-tuning theological expositions that have convulsed Europe, infuriated church authorities, provoked academic debate, and above all comforted millions as they found themselves newly assured that the arms of the crucified Savior held them securely in a grip on them that would always be stronger than their grip on him.

At this time—March 1545—Luther is revisiting the complete edition of his Latin writings. While his Latin writings span decades, the preface to them is new, and one of the last items he will pen. Listen to him as he takes us back to an earlier moment in his life and theological career:

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans . . . a single word in chapter 1[:17], 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed' . . . had stood in my way. For I hated that word 'righteousness of God,' which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had

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been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes sinners. . . . I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly . . . I was angry with God . . . the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath. . . . Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words . . . 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God . . . by which the righteous lives, is a gift of God, namely faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. . . . Thereupon . . . I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise.<sup>1</sup>

What had been Luther's experience prior to this moment when the righteousness of God, so far from being that gift of God, owned in faith, which renders sinners rightly related to him, had instead been understood to be unrelieved condemnation that God, righteous in himself, visited upon hopelessly guilty sinners forever unrighteous in themselves?

## HIS EARLY YEARS

Luther's experience, circumstantially his alone, inwardly appeared no different from the experience of humankind. For instance, death looms for everyone. One hundred-and-fifty years before Luther's era, the Black Death (bubonic plague) had carried off 40 percent to 45 percent of Europe. Three of Luther's friends had recently succumbed to a fresh outbreak. Only days ago one of his best friends died suddenly. Hunting one day with a companion, Luther accidentally fell on his dagger, severing an artery. He pressed his hand in his groin to stem the haemorrhage while his companion procured help, aware that he had come within a hair's breadth of death. Later, when Luther was walking near the town of Stotternheim, a thunderstorm overtook him. A lightning-bolt's near miss found him exclaiming, "St. Anne (she was the patron saint of miners, and Luther's father was a mine-owner), help me. I will become a monk."

1. *LW* 34:337.

In July 1505 Luther entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. Monastic life appeared to agree with him, at least initially. Twenty years later, looking back on this period of his life, Luther smiled at the spiritual self-confidence he and others enjoyed at that time: “The greatest holiness one could imagine drew us into the cloister . . . we considered ourselves holy from head to toe.”<sup>2</sup> Soon he found himself immersed in the study of scripture and church doctrine. Assigned to probe the academic question, “How does one find a gracious God?,” the exercise quickly became a personal preoccupation whose anxiety no medieval discussion could relieve.

Ordained to the priesthood in 1507, Luther continued his work in scripture. An able Hebraist, Luther quarried in the book of Psalms, initially; unlike many contemporary Christians, he found the gospel on every page. Listen to him as he exulted as early as 1515 in Ps 119, whose 147th verse exclaims, “I came before the dawn and I cried, because I very much hoped in your words.” Now lit up by this passage Luther enthused, “Indeed I come before the dawn . . . because you, God, promised to forgive me. . . . I come early and cry because I have hoped in your words. Your mercy, the mercy of a God who promises, has made me bold to pray out of season, as it were, *before I have any merits.*”<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Luther’s schooling in Renaissance Humanism at Erfurt University (the pre-eminent locus of humanist scholarship in Germany) contributed to his nascent theological formation and remained a major ingredient in his theological understanding (although less widely recognized than the humanist contribution of other Reformers such as Zwingli and Melancthon and Calvin). “I am convinced,” wrote Luther as early 1523, “that without humanist studies untainted theology cannot exist, and that has proved true. . . . There has never been a great revolution of God’s word unless God has first prepared the way by the rise and flourishing of languages and learning.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, his exposure to humanism heightened his distaste for theological speculation and rendered him averse to any theological articulation that assumed an Aristotelian underlay. For Luther was convinced that Aristotle, the dominant philosopher the medieval church had co-opted, had obscured and denatured the gospel for centuries.

2. Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe*, 17.1:309. Hereinafter WA 17.1:309.

3. LW 11:51 (emphasis added).

4. LW 4:34.

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In 1510 the Augustinian Order sent Luther to Rome. He walked (1500 kilometres), every step heightening his anticipation of the glories that awaited him in the city. Arriving in Rome, he was disillusioned by the *ingloriousness that met him everywhere: the shabbiness of the environs, the poverty of the people, and not least, the throngs of prostitutes*. Still, he managed to ascend the *Scala Sancta*, the sacred staircase, repeating the Lord's Prayer on each step. Told that such an undertaking would earn heavenly bliss for anyone the religious devotee named, he whiffed superstition. He walked home, having completed the only trip outside Germany he was to make.

Notwithstanding the theological misgivings his trip to Rome had aroused, Luther remained fixed in a theological meritocracy; namely, God accepts those *whose goodness merits their acceptance; or at least God accepts those whose confession of sin is equal to the nature, depth and scope of their sin*. Luther, profounder than most, knew he could confess only the sin he was aware of, and even then, would never grasp sin's enormity to God. He was inconsolable not because he was psychologically bizarre but because he was spiritually perceptive. Then how did Luther escape the cyclical trap of sin, misery, and condemnation before God?

## INKLINGS OF REFORM

The way out, as mentioned earlier, was delivered to him through his study of the Psalms. He began lecturing on the Psalter in 1513. He would steep himself in it for the rest of his life. In it he found the gospel everywhere. Seeds were sown in his Psalms-studies that would bear fruit abundantly ever after. In no time Luther heard and rejoiced in the throb of that bass note which reverberates throughout the Bible and establishes the rhythm of the Christian life; namely, the truth and reality (not the mere idea) that what God declares, God effects. God's utterance brings forth the reality it announces, the all-determining truth and reality of the believer's life, as undeniable to the kingdom-sighted as it is incomprehensible to the kingdom-blind. To say the same thing in more biblical vocabulary, when God declares humans to be rightly-related to him not on the basis of what they do but on the basis of what he has done on their behalf in his Son—namely he has borne their sin and borne it away—then they *are* rightly-related to him. There is nothing they should do or can do to ingratiate themselves with him. Humans are as much a child of God right now (*rightly* now) as they can ever be. By faith they are bound so closely to that Son with whom

the Father is pleased that when the Father looks upon the Son he sees them included in the Son and therefore pleased with them as well. At once Luther's tormented questions—What must I do? Have I done enough? Is my doing good enough? And how would I ever know?—each evaporated.

Years later Luther was to write a tract, *Two Kinds of Righteousness*.<sup>5</sup> The two kinds are “alien righteousness” and “proper righteousness.” Alien righteousness is alien only (but crucially) in the sense that it comes from outside of oneself, comes from Christ—specifically from the Son's ‘right’ standing with the Father—and is always his gift, never one's own achievement. Proper righteousness, on the other hand, is the Christian, already rendered such by having “clothed” herself or himself in Christ's alien righteousness; proper righteousness is the Christian now repudiating the arrears of sin that still cling to her, zealously repudiating the old man or woman of sin who has already been slain at the cross, to be sure yet who refuses to die quietly. Paradoxically Luther exclaims that Christ's alien righteousness “swallows up all sins in a moment,” even as by one's proper righteousness they aspire to distance themselves from Adam.

Put simply, because Christ's righteousness is one's own, they are forgiven by God and know it; because their old man/woman has already been slain at the cross, they may and must now put him to death. At all times, one must remember, the foundation and stable basis of the Christian life is what Christ has accomplished *for* humanity and forever vouchsafes *to* humanity: a new standing before God wherein one comes before him as the son or daughter accepted by him and at home on his knee.

This lattermost point requires amplification. Justification by faith had not been taught by any theologian Luther had read, especially by Gabriel Biel, or by anyone Luther had read about in Biel. Biel, the representative spokesperson for late medieval nominalist theology, had maintained that moral aspiration is in truth a seeking after God that God recognizes and rewards. At life's end, sinners can hope that his or her aspiration, “topped up,” as it were, by God's grace, will suffice for their acquittal before God, their justification.

Reading scripture attentively, Luther saw that sinners, whose moral achievement is indisputable, wield their achievement as a bargaining point before God wherein they insist that their right-conduct in terms of a code is tantamount to that right-relatedness to God-in-person of which scripture

5. *LW* 31:293–306. All references to righteousness in this paragraph come from Luther's tract.

speaks. Sinners, Luther insisted, were dead *coram Deo*; not ill, not deficient, not defective, not lame, but dead. As such they achieve nothing and can claim nothing with respect to their predicament *coram Deo*. They need a new standing before God that a corpse cannot acquire. Therefore, justification *has* to be utterly gratuitous, sheer gift of God. In addition, such justification is the sure foundation and stable basis of the Christian life now, not an unsure, wished-for, wait-and-see outcome at life's end.

It was Luther's experience first. "Justification by faith" (shorthand for 'justification by grace through faith on account of Christ) became and remained the foundation of the Reformation. In his commentary on the Psalms, Luther extolled, "If this article stands, the church stands; if it falls, the church falls."<sup>6</sup> Reinforcing his point, Luther later added, "Without this article the world is nothing but death and darkness."<sup>7</sup> It was upheld thereafter as the bedrock and stable basis of the Christian life. Luther's position as a Reformer was established. From this position, he would think and write and preach for the next four years, all of it coming to a head when the Pope summoned him to a hearing in the city of Worms. As he came upon the city (he had travelled from eastern to western Germany) he wrote a friend, "All the way from Eisenach to here I have been sick. I am still sick. . . . But Christ lives, and we shall enter Worms in spite of all the gates of hell and the powers in the air." Days later he would find himself saying, with unparalleled courage in the face of the mightiest institution in Europe, "Here I stand. I can't do anything else. God help me."

Courage? We ought never underestimate the courage Luther's stand would require. Erasmus, possessing Luther's horror at abuses in the church yet lacking Luther's apprehension of the gospel; Erasmus, always ready to ridicule but forever reluctant to reform; Erasmus knew what courage was required, and knew just as surely that he did not have it. In his feeble self-extenuation he wrote, "mine was never the spirit to risk my life for the truth. . . . Popes and emperors when they make right decisions I follow, which is godly; if they decide wrongly, I tolerate them, which is safe."<sup>8</sup> Erasmus, Luther knew by 1530, "was not concerned for the cross but for peace."<sup>9</sup>

6. WA 40:III, 352-53.

7. WA 39:I, 205. *Sine hoc articulo mundus est plane mors et tenebrae.*

8. Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, 218, as quoted in Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 231.

9. Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe Briefwechsel*, II:387-89. Quoted in Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 231.

Years later, saddened and annoyed at Erasmus' cowardice and shallowness, Luther would conclude, "Everything is a laughing matter for him."<sup>10</sup>

### THE REFORMATION BEGINS

Constrained by the living Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword, Luther was aware that much needed reforming, not least the matter of indulgences. Upset initially by the traffic surrounding indulgences, and soon offended by the logic of them, Luther penned his *Ninety-Five Theses* and hung them from the door of the church in Wittenberg. Hallowe'en—All Hallows' Eve—would never be the same after 1517. What was the indulgence traffic in Luther's day? Whom did it profit? Why was Luther vehement?

At this time the Pope needed to finance the remodeling of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. He issued an indulgence, a certificate authorizing the remission of the temporal punishment of sin in return for payment. In Wittenberg the master-hawker was Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar famed for his salesmanship. A slogan was said to accompany his sales pitch: "When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory to heaven springs." In case poetry was ineffective in having hearers part with their coin, Tetzel supplemented his rhetoric with grisly pictures of deceased persons alive and writhing in purgatory, crying out to relatives to purchase their release. And if neither poetry nor terror moved them, Tetzel was aware that fervent devotion might. In this regard Tetzel announced that when indulgences are offered *and* cross-plus-papal-coat-of-arms are displayed, the cumulative effect is equal to the cross of Christ. Such a steroidal indulgence, Tetzel insisted, would pardon even someone who had violated the Virgin Mary.<sup>11</sup>

Luther was appalled. He assumed that the new archbishop of his territory, Albrecht of Mainz, would surely want to be informed of religious abuses occurring within his territory. Luther was aware of the immense power Albrecht wielded. Albrecht was, after all, not only archbishop and cardinal, he was also archchancellor of Germany and the most powerful political figure after Emperor Charles V.<sup>12</sup> Not least, Albrecht was one of

10. *LW* 54:81. The debate continues as to the place of Erasmus in the Reformation. Should he be regarded as a Reformer, albeit as one with more pointedly Humanist presuppositions and expectations, or does he fail to grasp the logic of the Reformers' gospel? For an approach to Erasmus markedly different from Luther's, see Küng, *Theology for the New Millennium*.

11. Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 58.

12. Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 136.

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only seven men charged with electing the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Luther sent a copy of his protest to Albrecht of Mainz, together with a covering letter. The covering letter was unambiguous. "Once they acquire indulgence letters, the poor souls believe they can be sure of their salvation," Luther pressed; "Good God! Souls that are being instructed under your care are being sent to their death, and it will be harder and harder for you to account for all this. Therefore I could keep quiet no longer."<sup>13</sup> Four years later, when he was sequestered at the Wartburg, Luther would write to Philip Melancthon, "I curse the hardness of heart that prevents me from drowning in the tears I should weep for the slain of my poor people."<sup>14</sup> Again, Luther's courage here is noteworthy. Years earlier Dr. Dietrich Morung, a priest in Würzburg, had preached from the city-church pulpit a sermon that questioned the entire indulgence mentality. Cardinal Raimudi Peraudi, papal commissioner for indulgences and papal legate to Germany, had had Morung excommunicated and then incarcerated for ten years. Luther knew what he was risking.<sup>15</sup>

And then Luther attached a second copy of his *Theses* to the door of the church in Wittenberg.<sup>16</sup> (He did not nail it, we might note in passing, since in the sixteenth century papers were affixed to doors with wax.)<sup>17</sup> It was customary in university towns to post topics inviting debate on public bulletin boards, since academic debate in those days was a civic event. All Luther had in mind was a public discussion of the theology underlying the indulgence practice and the finances floating it.

In Luther's era, when a major church position opened up, it was sold to the highest bidder. This practice was called "simony." Few clergy, however, were wealthy enough to bid on the position. Therefore, the church, seeking to maximize pecuniary gain, opened up the bidding to wealthy laypersons whose wealth ensured the topmost bid. Once the layperson had gained a church office meant only for clergy, he recovered his bidding-war costs through ecclesiastical taxation and monies otherwise pertaining to the office. Then and only then was the officeholder consecrated.

13. LW 48:46.

14. LW 48:215.

15. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 61.

16. In addition to sending a copy of the *Ninety-Five Theses* and an accompanying letter, *Letter of Martin Luther to Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz* (LW 48:43–49) Luther also subsequently preached and published in German his sermon, *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* (WA 1:239–46).

17. See Wengert, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses*, ix.

Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz had done exactly this. When Albrecht had indicated his interest in the position, officials in Rome set him up with the Fuggers, a major banking enterprise in Europe. Now there was a three-party constellation: Albrecht, the papacy, and the Fuggers. Each party anticipated benefiting hugely. Tetzl was recruited to raise the money.

What theological understanding attended indulgences? Indulgences never purported to alter eternal punishment for sin. (Only God could.) They merely affected temporal punishment, which temporal punishment the church *could* rescind, since the church had imposed it in the first place. Here is how indulgences worked. One sins, repents before God, and is forgiven. Still, one needs to make reparation and receive temporal punishment for their sins, whereupon the church, through its clergy, assigns penance. It is possible, in this economy, for one to arrive at life's end and have temporal punishment still owing, insufficient penance having been assigned. The punishment owing is a debt that is "paid" (paid off) by means of "doing time" painfully in purgatory following one's death. A papally-authored indulgence, acquired through a cash payment, remits the debt and releases someone from purgatory.

In the popular understanding, however, some of the aforementioned subtleties were unknown. While according to Canon Law indulgences remitted sin's temporal punishment but did not forgive sin's guilt, Archbishop Albrecht's book *Instructio Summaria* left the matter ambiguous, with the result that the public understandably read "indulgence" as "forgiveness of all sins." Luther knew that when people purchased indulgences, they did so believing that they thereby ensured their salvation.<sup>18</sup>

Luther objected to the practice on several grounds. First, there was the crass materialism of it all, the "thingification" of the Christian life. Whereas the Christian life, Luther insisted, was the most intimate, personal relation between believers and their Lord, now it was a business or banking or institutional transaction. In his tract *Two Kinds of Righteousness* Luther was to insist that when one is rightly related to God through faith in Jesus Christ, such faith, so far from an abstract, cold, one-sidedly forensic transaction; such faith, rather, is an encounter in which Christ (the bridegroom) is heard saying, "I am yours," and the believer (the bride) is constrained to say at the same moment, "And I am yours." Justification is not a *hollow* declaration; it is an *effective* word from the Lord who is present, in person, in his utterance; justification, then, is a mutual embrace and mutual pledge of utmost

18. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 101.

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warmth and intimacy as Christ and his disciple encounter each other and embrace each other and are fused to each other. Indulgences, on the other hand, were utterly sub-personal and could only depersonalise participants.

In the second place, Luther opposed the church's usurping God's prerogative. The church of his era understood the "power of the keys" (Matt 16:19) to reside in institutional authority vested in it by Christ, enabling the church (i.e., the clergy) to remit temporal punishment or retain it. Luther, and all the Reformers following him, upheld the "power of the keys" as the efficacy of the gospel preached. The church proclaims the gospel, which gospel is nothing less than Jesus Christ in his presence and power. As the church attests the gospel, the Lord whose gospel it is, the Lord who ever remains Lord and judge of his body, the church, so as not to inhere it; this Lord acts in the power of the Spirit and forgives penitent believers. Plainly there is the most intimate relation between Christ and his people, head and body. Luther liked to speak of the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ. To have Christ at all is to have Christ entire, head and body. Nonetheless, the head is never buried in the body. Never does the Lord of the church collapse himself into the church or transfer his authority to it.

In the third place, Luther objected to the confusion between the penalty for sin and the consequences of sin. The penalty for sin is alienation from God arising from God's judgement. The consequences of sin are the "after-shocks" reverberating through perpetrators' lives and the lives of those they touch. The penalty for sin is cancelled, as penitent sinners own God's mercy. The consequences of sin—dismemberment or death, for instance, following the impaired driver's collision—remain as long as life lasts, spreading relentlessly like ripples from a stone dropped once into water.

In the fourth place, Luther deplored the flagrant commercialization of it all. Make no mistake: the indulgence traffic was hugely rich. Between 1486 and 1503 Cardinal Peraudi, a masterful indulgence-pusher, had raised over 500,000 guilders through the popular vehicle.<sup>19</sup> In the village of Voraú, an Austrian municipality so very small that by 2009 its population numbered only 1496, Peraudi was reputed to have sold 50,000 letters of indulgence.<sup>20</sup> Not only was the invention of the printing press to enter into its glory in the dissemination of Reformation tracts, treatises, tomes, and translations of the Bible; the invention of the printing press, double-edged

19. Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 57.

20. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 61.

like every human invention in a fallen world, had already inked hundreds of thousands indulgence certificates. While Luther opposed indulgences for theological reasons (one of which was affording financial protection to exploited people), the indulgence traffic made millionaires out of printers as surely as it did church bureaucrats. Different persons from diverse spheres now fused their fury concerning Luther, as surely as Pilate and Herod became friends the day Jesus Christ was condemned.

In the letter to Albrecht that accompanied the *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther underlined his conviction that “indulgences confer upon souls nothing of benefit for salvation or holiness.” And then in the same letter he tersely reminded Albrecht, “it is the first and sole office of bishops that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

Luther followed up both the *Theses* (Latin) and the *Letter* (Latin) with his vastly more popular sermon in German, *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*.<sup>22</sup> It was the sermon in German, reprinted at least twenty-four times between 1518 and 1520, rather than the *Theses* in Latin, that made Luther a household name overnight. Tetzel, apoplectic at Luther’s renown, riposted six months later (April 1518) with one hundred and six theses denouncing Luther’s “errors.”<sup>23</sup> Tetzel’s retort was never reprinted.

Pope Leo X (the last non-priest to be made Pope) supported Tetzel and Albrecht. Leo labelled Luther “a wild boar in the Lord’s vineyard” (i.e., purely destructive). Leo had become a cardinal at age 13 and Pope at 37. He allegedly remarked, “God has given us the papacy; now let us enjoy it.” He spent colossal sums of money, and relished parading around Rome on Hanno, his albino elephant. (The elephant, admittedly, cost him little, since it was a gift of King Manuel I of Portugal.)<sup>24</sup> Leo pronounced Luther a heretic and excommunicated him.<sup>25</sup>

21. LW 48:44.

22. WA 1:239–46.

23. For an English version, see *Johann Tetzel’s Rebuttal against Luther’s Sermon Indulgences and Grace*, translated by Dewey Weiss Kramer.

24. Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 67.

25. The matter of indulgences remains current. As the year 2000 approached and a new millennium loomed, Pope John Paul II issued a Jubilee Indulgence. See his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente (As the Third Millennium Approaches)* on 10 November 1994.

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### THE CLASH WITH THE CHURCH

The *Ninety-Five Theses* were posted in 1517. Much thereafter poured from Luther's pen. In 1520 there appeared three more unforgettable tracts: *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*,<sup>26</sup> *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*,<sup>27</sup> and *The Freedom of the Christian*.<sup>28</sup> The lattermost remains the most widely read item in all of Luther's writings. Not only is this tract moving on account of its understanding and expression; it is also comprehensive in its discussion as few other tracts are. Luther himself wrote of it, "Unless I am mistaken . . . it contains the whole of the Christian life in a brief form."

Before we probe Luther's tract we must be sure we understand "freedom" in conformity to scripture. In popular parlance, freedom is the capacity to choose among alternatives. Yet when Paul reminds the Christians in Galatia, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1), he cannot mean that Christ has set humans free so that they may choose to obey Christ or disobey him. (Such freedom, so-called, is nothing less than the bondage of sin.) The apostle can only mean that Christ has set humans free to obey him—and this only. In other words, freedom is having Jesus Christ remove all impediments to obeying him; to say the same thing differently, freedom is the absence of any impediment to acting in accord—and *only* in accord—with one's true nature. Christ has freed his people to act in accordance with their true nature; namely, a child of God. In other words, Christ simultaneously frees humans *from* all claims upon one's faith and obedience that contradict one's nature as child of God and frees humans *for* everything that reflects one's nature as child of God. It is human nature as a child of God to love God and neighbor in utter self-abandonment. Luther succinctly sets out the theme of the tract:

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>29</sup>

Expanding on this statement Luther writes,

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour. Otherwise he is not a Christian.

26. LW 44:123–217.

27. LW 36:11–57.

28. LW 31:327–78.

29. All references to Luther's tract for the remainder of this section are from LW 31:327–78.

He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbour through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbour.

Christians, *freed* by Christ for their true nature—*bound* to Christ by faith and *bound* to the neighbor by love—live henceforth in radical self-forgetfulness. Taken out of themselves, their self-absorption shrivels and their anxiety evaporates. The gospel effects this, and can effect it just because the gospel, as all the Reformers after Luther insisted, is not chiefly idea but rather power. The Reformers everywhere reflected Paul's conviction that the gospel is the *power* of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16).

Luther goes on to say that there is only one way of living in Christ by faith. There are, however, three ways of living in the neighbor by love. Firstly, one lives in the neighbor by love as they share our neighbor's material scarcity, and do so out of our material abundance, even material superfluity. Luther admits this costs little. If one has five shirts, giving one to a shirtless neighbor exacts little. Luther notes too that when one does this they also gain social recognition (today, we would say an income tax receipt for "gift in kind"). Secondly, one lives in the neighbor by love as they share the neighbor's suffering. Luther maintains this is costlier in that proximity to suffering in others engenders suffering in oneself. Painful though it is, however, we feel good about it; and if we do it well, we are rewarded for it (as the Order of Canada or the Lions' Club Humanitarian Award accorded Mother Teresa). Finally, says Luther not in his *Christian Freedom* tract but in a later one, one lives in the neighbor as they share the neighbor's disgrace, the neighbor's shame. This is by far the costliest way of living in the neighbor. Here there is no reward; here there is no social recognition. Here, on the other hand, there is nothing but social contempt and ostracism. Here one profoundly knows what it is to be "numbered among the transgressors," for was not our Lord before us publicly labelled with a disgrace he did not deserve? In concluding his discussion of this matter Luther insists that our service "takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. . . . [the Christian] most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has"—including his reputation.

### IMPLICATIONS OF HIS REFORMS

One more medieval tradition Luther overturned was clergy celibacy. His rejection of clergy celibacy was one instance of his rejection of sacerdotalism. Sacerdotalism is the notion that the clergy have spiritual powers

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invested in them by virtue of their ordination. The notion that the sacraments can be administered effectively only by clergy, for instance, is one aspect of sacerdotalism. Another notion is that the pronouncement of absolution following confession will leave the penitent forgiven by God only if absolution is pronounced by a clergyperson.

Luther insisted that Jesus Christ, our “great high priest,” has fulfilled the priestly line of the Older Testament. For this reason, there is not, and there cannot be, a priestly class in the church. All Christians are priests before God. To be sure, Luther maintained, for the sake of order at Sunday worship, only someone whom the congregation has recognized and authorized is to preach and administer the sacraments, lest chaos overtake the congregation. Nevertheless, the distinction between clergy and laity *with respect to spiritual powers* has been eliminated.

Luther reinforced his understanding here by having congregants receive Holy Communion in both kinds, bread and wine, whereas lay people, to this point, had been given bread only (wine, along with bread, being consumed by the clergy only). While giving wine to lay people may seem a small point to us, in Luther’s day it was huge: from now on the church was to be defined not in terms of a clergy hierarchy (priest, bishop, Pope) who had unique powers; the church was to be defined as the people of God, a “kingdom of priests,” a “holy nation,” in the words of the apostle Peter (2 Pet 2:9). Luther eliminated the clergy/laity distinction.

Marriage among the Reformation clergy was another sign of its disappearance. The medieval church had forbidden the clergy to marry (beginning in the tenth century) inasmuch as marriage was inferior to celibacy. Luther’s contemporaries believed marriage was vitiated by the depravity of women. Women, it was said, had been the downfall of Adam, Samson, David, and Solomon. In the Aristotelian mindset that underlay much of the medieval church, women were said to be botched males: if copulation were error-free, a male would result every time.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, Luther faulted the church fathers, in particular Jerome, Cyprian, Gregory, and Augustine. Had not Cyprian, a giant in the Patristic era, written, “If you hear a woman speak, flee from her as if she were a hissing snake?”<sup>31</sup> The medieval church had expatiated on the various ways

30. For an amplification of this matter see Shepherd, *Interpreting Martin Luther*, 301 and Ozment, *Protestants*, 152–53.

31. *LW* 54:357.

in which marriage was fraught with sin, the last way being marital sex undertaken for the sheer pleasure of it.

Luther and his followers inverted the late medieval understanding by transferring the praise of monastic life to marriage. In no sense was marriage second-best. In the fourth century, Jerome had assigned numerical values to marriage and celibacy. On a scale of 0 to 100, Jerome assigned 100 to virginity, 60 to widowhood, and 30 to marriage. Marriage was last in this scheme because it was a concession to inferior persons who would derail spiritually and psychologically without the institution. Inverting all such calculations, Johann Bugenhagen, Luther's friend and pastor of the city church in Wittenberg, exclaimed, "It is faith, and not virginity, that fills paradise." (In this regard it is worth noting that while Pope John Paul II had canonized or beatified almost 300 people as of 1997, he had elevated no woman who was not a virgin.)<sup>32</sup>

Luther was not naïve in this matter. Always looking to scripture, he knew Jesus to have said that some men are born eunuchs, some become eunuchs for the kingdom of God, and some become eunuchs thanks to the violence of other men (Matt 19). Roughly, then, there are people who, for many different reasons (not least psychological difficulties) are incapable of sustaining a lifelong union; in addition, there are those who forgo marriage because of a vocation to celibacy; and there are those who, through sheer misfortune, are denied the opportunity to marry. None of this, however, undoes God's *mandate* to marry following God's pronouncement that it is not good to be alone. And needless to say, Luther, as Hebraist, was aware that marriage is the commonest metaphor everywhere in scripture for God's covenant relationship with his people. This fact alone guarantees that marriage ought never be slighted.

Luther exemplified his high view of marriage in his love for his wife, Katharina von Bora. She had been assigned to a convent at age six. Having appropriated Luther's understanding of the gospel as she matured, she had somehow conveyed word to Leonhard Koppe, a fish merchant, that she and others wanted to embrace the Reformation understanding of faith and life. In 1523, Koppe extricated twelve nuns from the convent in herring barrels. (This feat too required enormous courage. In Catholic Saxony, one year later, a man was beheaded for helping a nun escape.)<sup>33</sup> In 1525 Luther married Katharina. Together they had six children, and until he died he loved

32. Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleys*, 106–7.

33. Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 136.

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her in exemplary fashion. Listen to Luther extol his beloved Katie in his 1531 sermon *On the Estate of Marriage*:

God's word is actually inscribed on one's spouse. When a man looks at his wife as if she were the only woman on earth, and when a woman looks at her husband as if he were the only man on earth; yes, if . . . not even the sun itself sparkles any more brightly and lights up your eyes more than your own husband or wife, then right there you are face to face with God speaking.<sup>34</sup>

Luther delighted in his Katie as he delighted in nothing and no one else. He regarded husband and wife as God's gift to each other. And because the clergy and laity alike were God's people without spiritual distinction, the clergy should cherish the same gift—marriage—and thank God for it.

## CONCLUSION

Brother Martin had no idea, in 1517, that his *Ninety-Five Theses* would precipitate an earthquake. His reading of scripture, however, reminded him that when God spoke at Sinai, God's voice shook the earth (Heb 12:28). And his reading of scripture confirmed every day his conviction that when the gospel is announced, Jesus Christ acts and speaks, once more shaking the earth—and all of this for the sake of that kingdom, Luther grasped with iron fast certainty, which cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28).

Luther's favorite Psalm was 118. "Although the entire psalter and all of holy scripture are dear to me as my only comfort and source of life," revelled Luther, "I fell in love especially with this psalm. Therefore I call it my own. . . . Here you see how the right hand of God mightily lifts the heart and comforts it in the midst of death. . . . Is not this astounding? The dying live; the suffering rejoice; the fallen rise; the disgraced are honored."<sup>35</sup> It was crucial that the disgraced be honored, for whereas Luther the brash monk had earlier boasted "We considered ourselves holy from head to toe," the older Luther, only eighteen months from death, wrote his friend, Georg Spalatin, "Now join with us prodigious and hardened sinners lest you diminish Christ for us. . . . You can be a bogus sinner and have Christ for a fictitious savior. Instead, get used to the fact that Christ is a genuine savior and that you are a real sinner."<sup>36</sup>

34. *LW* 51:17–42.

35. *LW* 14:45; also 14 and 86.

36. *WA* 10:639.

While Luther maintained Ps 118 to be his favorite, his most frequently cited was Ps 50:15: “Call upon me in the day of trouble” (says the Lord); “I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” Luther, in trouble from the moment he was pronounced an outlaw (1521) until he died 25 years later, had called upon God relentlessly. Was he delivered? Certainly he believed he was. Did he glorify God? His theological legacy—450 treatises, 3,000 printed sermons, 2,600 extant letters—is largely a paean of praise to God.

Two weeks before his death (18 February 1546) Luther, now in Eisleben, learned that his wife Katharina, minding children in Wittenberg, was anxious concerning his illness. He wrote her telling her that her anxieties for him were groundless: “I have a caretaker who is better than you and all the angels; he lies in the cradle and rests on a virgin’s bosom, and yet, nevertheless, he sits at the right hand of God, the Father almighty. Therefore, be at peace.”<sup>37</sup> The clarion call for the church in a post-Christian context is to believe and proclaim that same message.

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