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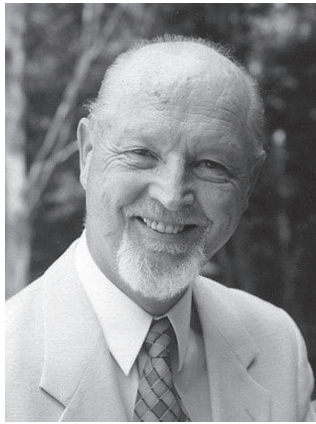
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Martin Luther's Legacy: Inspiring for 500 Years and Counting



by Jack R. Van Der Slik

Anniversaries are observed to celebrate events of great magnitude—sometimes to an individual, a family, a body of people such as a congregation, even a nation. Usually these are favorably remembered events regarding birth, marriage, or longevity. The event recognized is not necessarily a joyous one. It may solemnize a death or an occasion of consequential harm. Such a remembrance of harm can mark a nation, as does 9/11, 2001 for contemporary Americans. Christians faithfully make Christmas and Easter occasions for spiritual renewal and refreshment. The joy associated with these great days is shared among the old, the young, and everyone between. The jubilee I want

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to mark is the Reformation of the 16th century and the widely recalled event of Martin Luther posting of his 95 theses from Wittenberg, a small town in Saxony, Germany. The political rule at the time was by an elector, one of seven princes of the Holy Roman Empire. The incumbent when Luther took up residence there (briefly in 1508; on a continuing basis in 1511 and after) was Friedrich III, known as Friedrich the Wise. Likely it was irrelevant to Luther when he joined the university at Wittenberg that Friedrich, its founder, shared in the power of seven electors, or princes, of the empire and that they were entitled to choose the emperor in an occasion of vacancy.¹

Whether the posting of those theses on the Wittenberg church door on October 31 is apocryphal or not, it is thoroughly confirmed that on the date mentioned, Luther sent those theses with a cover letter to Albert of Brandenburg, Archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg.² Unlike today's M. A. thesis for completing an advanced degree, these theses were brief, provocative statements from an academic, seeking, really inviting, debate about them. Luther was not shy about disseminating his challenges. Copies were sent to friends, and multiple printings were made in Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Basel. According to Pettegree, "With this pamphlet [the Basel version] Luther's theses entered the bloodstream of the European intellectual community. It was this edition that, in March 1518, a curious Desiderius Erasmus sent to his great friend, Thomas More, in England."³ In Nuremberg a press

published a German version of the theses.

Luther's early objective was to transform the Church's instruction for a right relationship with God by means of works of penance into forgiveness through faith alone. He recognized that good works are a response by the believer, who, by faith, is forgiven by God because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. What stirred Luther to raise his challenge to the Church establishment was that its teachings about works of penance were counter to Scripture. Works of penance imposed by the Church included "religious actions such as giving alms, saying prayers, visiting shrines, viewing relics and fasting. Performing those actions paid the penalty for sin even though the guilt incurred had been removed by the death of Christ. An indulgence, therefore, did not forgive sin or its guilt but exempted the sinner from some or all of the penalty."⁴ These works could not obtain forgiveness of sin for the sinner. Moreover, if they did, the sale of indulgences to suspend the necessity of such works could certainly not do away with the guilt of sin.

In practice, the most egregious matter regarding the sale of indulgences derives from what was done with the revenues. The money raised did not benefit the needy or simply build cathedrals. Some of it repaid debts incurred in procuring church offices and paid for relics for dubious merit. Of particular relevance to Luther was the salesmanship of John Tetzel. Albert of Brandenburg was the beneficiary of Tetzel's success. He used part of the revenues from indulgences to settle a loan that enabled him "to pay the Roman curia for elevating him to the archbishopric of Mainz."⁵ Another beneficiary of indulgences was Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, who used such funds to accumulate a famous collection of relics: "At the risk of displeasing Frederick, Luther finally prepared ninety-five theses 'on the power and efficacy of indulgences' and sent them to Archbishop Albert.... Because, he wrote, people were being given the false assurance that indulgences would save them—and those in-

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dulgences were being offered under Albert's name."⁶

Derek Wilson takes particular note of Luther's first and second theses:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.⁷

Wilson then itemizes the theses that deny the efficacy of indulgences (36-37), the necessity for real contrition (39-41, 49, 53), the better use of money for charity rather than indulgences (43-44), the falseness of promises by the indulgence sellers (32-33, 35, 54, 71-78) and that indulgences could not remit penalties in purgatory. Wilson infers that

Luther's intentions, though honest, were at once both "naïve and ... canny." Luther had chosen to "lance the boil" by encouraging "debate among the Church's scholars so that the abuses would be stopped, erroneous theology reformed, and the truth clearly set forth."⁸

Sadly for the Church at that time, the debate Luther invited and the possible responses to it never took place. As Roper reminds her readers, instead "the opening insistence on the importance of penance and repentance postulated a whole new religious outlook, not an academic debate, mounting to a crescendo indicting the entire system of devotion based on the calculus of indulgences."⁹ It is noteworthy that the hitherto unknown Luder then altered the spelling of his family name: "He no longer signed himself as Luder, his father's name, but took on a new Greek name Eleutherius—the freed one—which he continued to use for several months.... Even when he stopped signing himself as Eleutherius, he kept the kernel of the name and from then on called himself 'Luther.'"¹⁰ The new Luther went through what Roper sees as a "powerful streak of meditative mysticism," and his theology "was capacious enough to encompass a spiritualizing, inward looking mysticism as well as the

rational argument of the Ninety-five Theses”; but then came a change of direction toward intellectual engagement with the Bible, such that the “side of Luther that was more concerned with action, scriptural exegesis and authority won out. This would shape the character of Lutheranism and of Protestantism itself for centuries to come.”¹¹

A disappointed Luther, the substance of whose theses were ignored by his Church, was required to present himself at Augsburg to submit to the Church and repent before Cardinal Thomas Cajetan. With a safe conduct for protection, Luther did appear but would not retract his criticisms; nor would he pledge to make no more disturbing arguments. Cajetan wanted Luther sent to Rome, but Elector Friedrich would not comply. In the aftermath, Luther returned to writing critical tracts. Among other publications, Luther produced three especially notable ones during 1520. One, printed in German, called upon the Christian nobles of Germany to impose reforms on the Church. A second, circulated in Latin, attacked the Church hierarchy for denying the bread and wine, the body and blood of the Savior, to the people in the celebration of the mass. A third, in German, articulated the doctrine of justification of the believer through faith alone in Christ alone. As Roper notes, it was “not so much a sermon as a comforting devotional tract,” relatively brief and accessible in a format of thirty pages.¹² When Pope Leo X responded with a papal bull threatening excommunication, Luther publicly burned it before a friendly Wittenberg crowd in December 1520. Nonetheless, the unfulfilled demands of the papal bull led to Luther’s official excommunication on January 3, 1521.

Luther’s excommunication did not rest upon him alone. The interconnectedness of Church and State enlarged the scope of the conflict between Luther and Pope Leo. As Hendrix points out, “Anyone who protected him [Luther], for example, Elector Frederick, was also a heretic, and any place those protectors lived, such as Electoral Saxony, was deprived of the sacraments. Clergy were encouraged to preach and write against Luther and his followers.... If needed, the emperor’s assistance could be sought to enforce the penalties but, strictly speaking, Luther’s own case did not have to come before the emperor or the imperial diet.”¹³ Elector

Frederick, Luther’s continuing protector, had what closely resembles what contemporaneous politicians call political clout. Frederick possessed a vote, and with it he supported Charles to become emperor in 1520. Although the Holy Roman Empire was tied to the papacy by many strands of relationship, Charles “had promised the electors, as a condition of his election [as emperor], that no German would be condemned without a fair trial. However, his position made orthodoxy imperative.”¹⁴ Thus, with the first Imperial Diet of Charles’ reign set to take place in Germany (Worms) in 1521, Elector Frederick, a significant ruling authority in his own right, made his appeal to the imperial court. Roper reports that “Frederick and his advisers argued that Luther should not be condemned ‘unless he were heard first... so that the truth... could be brought to light.’ If he were shown to err ‘by the Holy Scripture,’ Luther would ‘humbly allow himself to be instructed,’ they assured Charles.”¹⁵ Luther had been denied such a hearing by the Church. This was Luther’s chance to appeal to a higher authority—the governing one: “This was consistent with his [Luther’s] complaint about the ‘encroachment’ by the papacy on the judicial preserves of the secular power which he had made in his *Address to the Christian Nobility* and he knew that several members of the imperial council were sympathetic towards it.”¹⁶

Popular opinion in behalf of Luther’s call for reforms in the Church received a huge boost from the improving technology of printing. Andrew Pettegree observes about Luther’s writings in 1520, “In the space of one year Luther had written twenty-eight different works, which ranged across the gamut of pastoral instruction, pungent works of polemic, appeals for reform, and fundamental works of theology.... Once again Germany’s printers were the beneficiaries, turning out over three hundred editions of Luther’s works along with a considerable number written by others drawn into the controversies on either side.”¹⁷ The books and tracts by Luther were everywhere in Germany, in the hands of intellectuals, students, monks and ordinary people. Wilson avers that “in the period leading up to and following the Diet of Worms Luther was at the zenith of his fame. He was a national figurehead, a popular hero, a charismatic focus of various as-

pirations, most of which were but vaguely understood.... Every man could assume that Luther was fighting his battles for him. Whatever oppression a person might feel himself to be suffering, Luther was his liberator.”¹⁸

The Imperial Diet convened at Worms on January 27, 1521. It continued its business into the spring. On February 13, Ash Wednesday, the papal nuncio, Jerome Aleander, serving as Pope Leo’s legate to the Diet, proposed in a three-hour speech to the members that Luther be summarily condemned for his heresies.¹⁹ Elector Frederick and his allies insisted on the propriety that Luther be able to respond. In March, Emperor Charles summoned Luther to the Diet, “but only for the purpose of recanting his writings. No debate was scheduled.”²⁰ Emperor Charles pledged a safe conduct for Luther’s 300-mile trip and his stay in Worms. Despite warnings from his friends, Luther chose to respond to the emperor’s demand.

In April when Luther arrived in Worms, he was popularly received by the people: “When his wagon, preceded by the emperor’s liveried herald and a contingent of imperial troops, was still several miles from the city, a large crowd surged out to greet the man of the hour. Thousands more people lined the streets to cheer him.... And trumpets blared the welcome from the tower of the Cathedral.”²¹ Wilson contrasts the excitement of the Diet members and onlookers to the strategy of Luther’s accusers. The accusers wanted no debate, just a straight yes or no answer to the big question—do you recant what you have written? What Luther had written constituted “a huge pile of books and pamphlets whose titles were read.”²² Hendrix reports that “The list contained the Latin names of twenty-two works: twelve of them under the heading ‘Books of Martin Luther, German,’ and ten books designated as ‘Latin’”; Emperor Charles granted Luther a day to prepare his response.²³ On that next day in a large, overcrowded hall, Luther appeared at four o’clock in the afternoon. With a restless, overflowing crowd, Luther waited for the emperor, who with his retinue, arrived at six. As

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Wilson records, Luther did present a detailed response in both German and Latin: “He began with a humble submission to the assembled rulers of the people, presenting himself as a loyal subject.... Those who wished to silence him had condemned *all* his works but, as he pointed out, some dealt with issues of Christian faith and morals and even his worst enemies could not take issue with them. For the rest, they came into two categories: denunciation of papal doctrine and practice, and attacks on individuals who had taken issue with him. For the latter, Luther conceded that he might occasionally have exceeded the bounds of propriety but that in doing so, he had been impelled only by his passion for truth.”²⁴

Luther went on to invite “anyone at all who is able, either high or low, [to] bear witness, expose my errors, overthrowing them by the writings of the prophets and the evangelists. Once I have been taught I shall be quite ready to renounce every error, and I shall be the first to cast my books into the fire.”²⁵ Luther’s arguments from Scripture, which contrasted with the pope’s idolatry and tyranny, concluded with the following: “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.”²⁶

Obviously, Luther had not given the emperor the answer he desired. Still, Luther’s safe conduct was extended so that he could depart the city. Nevertheless, Elector Frederick sent men to “capture” Luther, not for punishment but to ensure his safety by secretly hiding him in Frederick’s castle at Wartburg. On May 26 after the Diet had concluded its business, the emperor signed the Edict of Worms, “which declared Luther an outlaw, forbade anyone to house him or eat with him, and banned the sale, reading, possession or printing of his works.”²⁷ As Luther was popular with the German people and under Frederick’s protection, the imperial threats were largely ignored.

In the lonely safety of the Wartburg Castle on the margin of the Thuringian Forest and overlook-

ing the modest size city of Eisenach (4000-5000 residents), Luther went undercover as Junker Jorg—Knight George. His friends supplied him with books, so he studied Scriptures, wrote essays, letters and sermons, the latter published later as a Wartburg postil. Most remarkable was his dedication to the Scriptures. With encouragement from his younger protégé, Philip Melanchthon, a skilled translator of Greek, Luther took hold of a newly available Greek translation of the New Testament prepared and published by Desiderius Erasmus. Its first edition came out in 1516; then revised, a new edition appeared in 1519. Using the later edition, Luther “threw himself wholly into the task, completing the project in a remarkably short span of eleven weeks, just before leaving the Wartburg for good.”²⁸ By September 1522, Luther’s New Testament, written for Germans in an understandable vernacular, was available in print. According to Roper, “what sets Luther’s translation apart is his sense of the music of language. His style is direct and unadorned, using alliteration and the rhythms of everyday speech. He writes in populist German, not in Latinate prose.”²⁹ Of course, it was forbidden by the Church, but a first printing of 3000 copies promptly sold out; “[b]etween 1522 and 1533 Luther’s New Testament saw a total of eighty-five editions,”³⁰ and an uncounted number of copies were circulated.

The thirst for the Bible, so evident by the popularity and broad demand for the New Testament, led Luther and his colleagues to produce a German edition of the entire Bible. Luther, now back in Wittenberg with continuing responsibility for teaching and preaching, brought together colleagues, including mainly Melanchthon and Mathias Aurogallus, to tackle the job. Over a period of years Luther’s team produced the Pentateuch, the historical books, and the poetic books. As Luther lectured about the Minor Prophets, he worked at their translation. The work was challenging: “Luther remarked that Job would be as unhappy with the translation as he was with his friends! Luther, Melanchthon and Aurogallus admitted that they had once been able to translate only three lines in four days.”³¹ As work continued into the 1530s, Luther, having worked over Daniel’s prophecies, observed that the world might end before the

huge translation task was finished.³² Luther kept at it, conscious that “Satan tries his best to make me desert my valuable work and chase after matters of no substance.”³³ But the work came to fruition, and Hans Lufft, who became famous and rich thereby, published the work in September of 1534. Luther, by the way, was paid no royalties. Reportedly a half-million “Luther Bibles” had been sold by the time of Luther’s death in 1546.³⁴

Commentators on Luther and his extraordinarily productive work ethic remark about the significance of what had become known as the Luther Bible. It was illustrated with woodcuts from Lucas Cranach and commentaries and glosses from Luther: “Each book of the Bible was prefaced with a short and brilliantly clear introductory exegesis, so that the reader encountered the text through Luther’s understanding of it.”³⁵ The controversies between Luther and the Church over indulgences had fixed in Luther’s profession of faith “that his loyalty to scripture was higher than his loyalty to the pope.”³⁶ As a result, “Making the Bible available to all in vernacular languages was Luther’s most enduring legacy, a legacy that was both rich and powerful. The open Bible was a revolutionary document.”³⁷ It is suitable to cite Luther himself on the point: “Infinite and unutterable is the majesty of the Word of God.... These words of God are not words of Plato or Aristotle, but God himself is speaking. And those preachers are the most suitable who very simply and plainly, without any airs or subtlety, teach the common people and the youth, just as Christ taught the people with homespun parables.”³⁸

The breadth and significance of Luther’s work and the compelling Reformation that it prompted continue to shape and reshape contemporary lives. Luther’s works are vast, and that immensity is a challenge to any serious scholar. He is said to have had great influence upon John Calvin’s *Institutes*. William Bouwsma cites Richard Stauffer for pointing out that “Calvin’s organization of topics [in the *Institutes*] follows that of Luther’s Short Catechism,” and that “Calvin both acknowledged him as the father of the movement with which he [Calvin] had now identified himself and admired his [Luther’s] theological insight. He always preferred Luther to Zwingli.” Moreover, despite differences with

Luther on many specifics, Calvin explicitly said that he would honor Luther and “acknowledge him to be a distinguished servant of God.”³⁹

To conclude, allow me to recommend each of three recent biographies already cited above. Luther’s life was full of drama, challenge, change, spiritual maturation, and inspiration. A passionate man, he had contended with anger and joy, courage and faith, love and hatred. His fulsome story, only highlighted here, is worth serious consideration and study. Wilson’s smoothly written *Out of the Storm* begins on a humanistic note by acknowledging, “We live in a secularized age and for most people these [Luther’s] theological issues are incomprehensible and probably irrelevant.” Still, urges for redemption prompt even spiritually uncommitted people of our time to search for fulfillment; “Luther is significant in this situation because he was bent on a similar quest. His overpowering spiritual longings were not being met by conventional religion. Step by painful step he set out on his own pilgrimage towards an individual understanding of eternal truths. His story, therefore, is relevant in a new way to a new age.”⁴⁰

Scott H. Hendrix, author of *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, is a scholar’s treasure. His detailed notes and index fill more than 50 pages of small font printing. He has sought to unveil Luther’s human side as both a saint and a sinner. Luther did his work with and against a broad cast of characters that must be explained to comprehend the give-and-take of Luther’s life. Hendrix has written to “present the characters and events as they were in the sixteenth century and not judge them by modern criteria.” He adds, “I remain fascinated by that story [of Luther’s life] and wish I could know the man and the people in his life better than intensive investigation allows. The past can be studied but not relived.”⁴¹ With that modesty expressed, Hendrix provides a deep dive into the huge literature and history that centered upon Martin Luther.

Linda Roper, author of *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, writes, “Luther has been part of my life longer than I care to admit. He was a feature of my childhood....”⁴² Her aim, she says, is “to understand Luther himself. I want to know how a sixteenth-century individual perceived the world

around him, and why he viewed it in this way. I want to explore his inner landscapes so as to better understand his ideas about flesh and spirit, formed in a time before our modern separation of mind and body. In particular, I am interested in Luther’s contradictions” (xvii). Moreover, she adds, “It was Luther’s friendships and enmities that convinced me that he had to be understood through his relationships, and not as the lone hero of Reformation myth” (xxxii).

These are three rich and different treatments of the life and times of a world-shaking figure who half a millennium ago brought the reality of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice and all God’s Scriptures to bear upon the salvation of sinners – of whom I am one. Luther’s life and work constitute a towering rendition of God’s grace. Each of these three biographical studies provides an uplifting read, so I commend them to every Christian for consideration.

Endnotes

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33. Hendrix, 240.
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35. Roper, 409.
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37. Wilson, 358.
38. Quoted by R. C. Sproul, in *The Legacy of Luther*, eds. R. C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols (2016), see note 28 above.
39. William J. Bousma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18 and 241, note 46).
40. Wilson, x.
41. Hendrix, xii.
42. Roper, xxi.