

Reformation 500 -
Martin Luther: Monk, Pastor, Prophet, and Harbinger
October 29, 2017
Roman 1:16-17

Preached with lots of slides and pictures of people & places

Today, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 Thesis being posted on the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church on October 31, 1517. Every 500 years, a pastor gets a bit of leniency and clemency, and, together with Robert Frost, takes the road less traveled on a Sunday morning.

So today, I want to take a little bit different approach than most sermons. Because today I want to tell a story. I want to tell a tale, I want to weave a story about the monk, the pastor, the prophet, and the harbinger of the future that was Martin Luther. And by telling the tale, I hope you understand a few precious biblical truths -- which are based on the Word of God -- but have become refracted to us through the prism of the Protestant Reformation.

In understanding the prism, the light of the *scriptures often burns brighter*.

In understanding the story, the shadow side of *missing the truth* often comes sharper into focus.

In illustrating biblical truth through the story of a life well-lived to the glory of God, your story and my story -- stories still yet incomplete -- may be pulled and prodded towards a **deeper faith, deeper trust** in the Scriptures, and **deeper commitment** to the God of Glory and Grace.

So I tell the story of Luther -- not because he is without his warts -- but precisely because his warts and his doubts and his nagging questions lead again and again and again to the fountain of the Word of God where -- by grace -- Luther was clothed with Christ through faith.

And so today, instead of deductive teaching (*tell 'em what you're going to say, say it, and tell 'em what you just said*) today will be more inductive, more subtle. That is, I will try and clothe biblical principles in and through and under the life of ole Martin Luther. Principles like justification by faith, principles like Sola Scriptura (God's Word Alone -- the rallying cry of the Reformation), principles like the priesthood of all believers, and principles like the one which begins our story -- the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

I pick up the story *en medias res* (in the middle of things) in 1505 when the 21-year old Martin Luther, newly graduated with a *magister atrium*, the Master of Liberal Arts, is making the 53 mile trip from his home town of Mansfeld to Erfurt, Germany to study law when an a blast of lightning struck perilously close to young Martin. And with a medieval terror of the elements -- the wind and the rain and the lightening -- that is difficult for modern minds to fathom, he dismounted his horse, collapsed into the wind and the rain and shouted the words that would dramatically change the course of his life and re-shape the world: "Help me, Saint Ann. I will become a monk". Luther was appealing, in a curious irony of modern history given Luther's later faith, to Saint Ann, "the Holy Mother of the Holy Mother of a Holy God": to Jesus' apocryphal grandmother.

Martin Luther the monk would arise at 2:00 am, participate in the first of seven "hours" prayed in monasteries across the world. He would pray the *Salve Regina* (Save us, O Queen) to Mary: "Save o Queen, our Mother of Mercy, our delight and our hope. To thee we exiled sons of Eve lift up our cry....Be Thou our advocate, sweet Virgin Mary, pray for us, Thou holy Mother of God." He would say the *Ava Maria* ("Hail Mary") and the *Pater Noster* ("our Father").

And he would confess. Oh, how would he confess his sins!! Luther confessed his impatience, his pride, his poor attitude of prayer, and his sins of wayward thoughts against other monks. Martin Luther confessed his sins so seriously that he often drove his confessor Staupitz as the head of the order – half-mad. Luther probed “every nook and cranny of every conceivable sin and then every nook and cranny within each nook and cranny” according to his recent biography Eric Metaxas.¹ Once, he confessed for six consecutive hours, never content to leave **any minute trace** in his own consciousness of his own sinfulness against a Holy God. At this point, Luther believed, along with other Medieval Christians at the time, that Saint Paul and the rest of the saints proved it possible to live holy lives, to say your prayers, to confess your sins, to work the system, as it were, in order for a sinner to redeem himself! Yet as much as Luther worked the program, he always had nagging thoughts: “What if he had gotten sloppy in his prayers? What if a sin from 2, 3 or 4 days ago remained unconfessed? What if he died before experiencing last rites and therefore died “in his sins” – would it be all for naught? How could a man live a holy life before a righteous God?

As Metaxas puts it, “Luther seemed some kind of unprecedented moral madman on a never-ending treadmill of confession.” And so when he was (finally) done confessing, he would need to return -- to confess his pride at having confessed all of his sin! **The rabbit hole of sin never bottoms out.** Or, as Paul says in Romans chapter 3: “None is righteous, no, not one.”

Luther knew the result of his own unrighteousness all too well, for he felt it in his bones – even in the midst of his prayers and confessions like few had ever felt it before: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness” (Rom. 3:18).

Luther might be imagined to sing the great children’s carol to a different ending:

“Deep and wide, deep and wide, you better confess your sins because God won’t let you slide.

Deep and wide, deep and wide, there’s a holy and righteous God awaiting you on the other side.”

Roland Bainton writes: “The meaning of Luther’s entry into the monastery is simply this: that the great revolt against the Medieval Church arose from a desperate attempt to follow the way by her prescribed.” As a monk, Luther knocked on heaven’s door, *trying to find a way in by human effort, as few had ever done before!*

So, perhaps precisely because Luther worked the program like so few had ever worked the program -- *that he swallowed so readily and so feverishly and so thoroughly the prescription of the late Medieval Church’s receipt for sin*, that Luther was also in the a perfect position to see the limitations of the program like few had done before.

Perhaps Luther’s grasp of the exceedingly sinfulness of his own sin – the bad news – paved the way for him to discover God and the good news of the gospel with such **force** and **power** and **strength**. Perhaps walking wakefully through the exceedingly sinfulness of sin is the only way to see the brightness of the gospel.

Luther the PASTOR

But Luther was more than a monk, he was also a pastor.

After six years of mortifying the flesh, his superior Staupitz – perhaps to keep Luther’s mind off his constant need for confession – sent him to study for his Doctorate at 29 years of age with a promise: You can study only the Bible. It was a time in the church, and a time in history, where the curriculum of even monks and priests

¹ Eric Metaxas, Luther, 47

consisted principally of the 12th century work entitled *Sentences* by Peter Lombard – a commentary on portions of the Scriptures or Dun Scotus’ explanation of Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* and, of course, Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

In other words, not even other monks in the Augustinian cloister where Martin Luther lived, worked, and prayed – all the while trying to live a holy life -- were reading or interacting with the Scriptures. In this, Luther was an anomaly. So Luther departed the cloister at Erfurt for the University at Wittenberg in 1512.

For the next four years, Luther lectured at the University of Wittenberg teaching on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, laying the scriptural foundations that would later shake Christendom to its core and set a new due north for the future of the late Medieval world.

It was at Wittenberg that Frederick, the Duke of Saxony one of the 7 electors of the Holy Roman Emperor was building Wittenberg into a seat of tremendous political power. For late Medieval Europe, Frederick’s political ambitions necessarily went hand-in-glove with religious aspirations. The relics of Frederick the Wise of Wittenberg eventually rivaled Rome itself – the **tooth** of Saint Jerome, **bones** from Saint Augustine, a piece of the very **gold** brought to Jesus by the Magi, a piece of **swaddling cloth** from baby Jesus, 35 splinters from Calvary’s **Cross**, the list goes on and on and on; in fact, the summit of the collection contained the very feather of none other than an angel from heaven. (Yes, Medieval Angels had feathers, just in case you were wondering. No harp, however, was reported.) And so in 1509, 9,000 masses were held in the Castle Church of Wittenberg so people could see the relics *and work the system*, as it were, to take nearly an astounding 2 million years off their time in purgatory if they viewed the relics and if they paid all the fees.

Yet what would really bring Luther’s blood to a boil was the racketeering of indulgences by the golden-tongued Dominican friar Johannes Tetzel. Tetzel’s famous marketing jingle was: “**As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.**” “If you needed to raise what was then the equivalent of billions of dollars from the back of a wagon, Tetzel was your man,” indicates Metaxas.² What were indulgences? Well, when coins were deposited, an indulgence –a paper certificate – was given, and the souls of relatives could be released from purgatory. *Indulgences were the Medieval equivalent of late-night infomercials*, except that **these** infomercials had the backing of the Vicar of Christ himself, Pope Leo X, who was part Machavellian, part College Frat Boy Hedonist, and part Medici Godfather – nothing like the epitome of Catholic 20th century piety as embodied by Mother Teresa. Instead of repentance from sin, you could purchase an indulgence paper which forgave your sin or the sins of your dead relatives in purgatory. [In fact, if you’ve never fretted about Purgatory – *this is because you live on the other side of Luther*, who sifted Purgatory through the sieve of scripture where it was found wanting!]

And so by February 1517, Luther was a pastor with a pulpit, a pastor who felt called to protect the sheep under his care. Which he did by preaching his first sermon against indulgences. In March he did so again. The “get out of jail indulgence card” means nothing, declared Luther, **if you are not repentant of your sins.** You will not pass go. You will not earn \$200 heavenly dollars!

And so it came to be: October 31, 1517 – the 95 theses posted on the Castle Church of Wittenberg.

Thesis 1: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance”

Or Thesis 27: “They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.”

² Metaxas, 100.

Or thesis 62: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy **gospel** of the glory and grace of God.”

You might say that the 95 Theses *became history's first hot take that went viral*. And nobody on earth had ever lived through a viral moment before! But when a humanist printer from Nuremberg liked what he read, he decided to take it upon himself to print and circulate copies of the 95 theses. Remember, this was too early for copyright laws – the printing press was just coming of age.

And so **soon** these 95 theses **which were originally posted in Latin for an intramural pick-up game** – for an academic debate between priests and monks and archbishops – soon found their way to the common man, translated into German for the common people, and eventually by March of 1518, the viral posting had circulated throughout much of western Christendom, even reaching King Henry VIII in faraway England!

The viral gauntlet had been set, and Luther would be forced to run it.

And so what was the lynchpin – what was the defining doctrine of the Reformation, what was the crux of the matter? “***If this article stands, the church stands, if this article collapses, the church collapses.***” (Luther) What was this great article of Luther the Reformer? Justification by faith:

Romans 1:16-17: For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

For many years -- even as a monk -- Luther had understood the phrase “the righteousness of God” that you bump and bang your head against, primarily as an attribute of God, the righteousness of God that punishes sinners, a chasm which kept sinners motivated on the never-ending treadmill of religious and moral improvement. So as Luther would later say, “***I hated the righteousness of God...by which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unrighteous. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with a most disturbed conscience....I did not love, indeed, I hated the righteousness God who punishes sinners. I was angry with God. Yet I clung to dear Paul.***”

Thank God that Luther clung to dear Paul!

“For in it (the gospel), the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, the “righteous shall live by faith.” What did Paul mean, asked Luther, that the righteous shall live by faith?

Luther began to understand that Paul was speaking of a righteousness *that through the gift of grace, makes a sinner righteous and reconciled to a holy God on the basis of faith*. Not through **actively** “working the system”. Not through moral improvement. Not through works righteousness, even if those works are religious works! And certainly not through a medieval paper tiger – through buying pieces of paper indulgences to remit sins – but through **passively** accepting through faith the righteousness gift of another, namely, the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

A linguistic sleight of hand was also at play in placing the doctrine of justification at a level of prominence that it never before enjoyed or assumed prior to the 16th century. And it was this: the latin for justification was *justificare*, which can be broken down into *Justus* – meaning justice or righteousness and *facare* – which signifies to make. **So the Latin text naturally pushed the Medieval Church towards a “works righteousness”**: that the good works, the sacraments, the viewing of relics, the constant confession -- these good religious works -- **makes** unrighteous people righteous. But nobody could ever really get there, nobody could ever work the system, except perhaps the saints, which is why Purgatory became a kind of release valve for everybody else.

But the cry of Renaissance Humanism was “**Ad Fontes! Ad Fontes!** “Back to the sources, back to the sources”! The Humanists had re-discovered Aristotle. *But for Luther* this primarily meant a re-discovery of the original **Greek** text of the New Testament. And in the Greek, *diakosune* doesn’t mean “to **make** righteous” but has a *judicial* or *forensic* aspect – it is a righteousness that is **from God**. God declares righteous or counts as righteous or reckons as righteous a sinner through simple faith and trust in Christ. So we receive an “alien righteousness” - a *righteousness that comes wholly outside of ourselves* whereby we are reconciled by God’s grace to a holy God.

This was Luther the spiritual seeker, this was Luther the pastor-theologian who rediscovered, *through the Word of God alone*, that salvation is by God’s *grace alone through faith alone by believing in Christ alone to the glory of God alone*.

So Luther says that when he discovered this – the exegetical and Scriptural breakthrough of the Reformation – “that I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

And so as Roland Bainton put it, “[Luther] had found the hermeneutical level with which the whole world could be raised to the height of heaven.” Heaven is always a gift to receive, rather than a ladder to climb.

Luther as Prophet and Harbinger

But Luther was not only a Monk. Not only was Luther a Pastor. Luther was also a Prophet and Harbinger of the Future. And like the Old Testament prophets of ‘ole, he bore a hole of truth into the political facade of Rome that supported the precarious religious scaffolding. For four years after the posting of the 95 theses, he prophetically kept pleading with Rome: “just refute my arguments with Scripture alone. That will be enough for me! Show me where I have erred!” For some time, even after the 95 Theses, he saw himself principally as a Reformer within the Great Catholic Church that had raised him.

But ultimately, Luther and Rome were like two ships passing in the night. One ship argued for Scripture alone. The other ship trotted out church councils. One ship desperately longed for the final authority to be based on the Word of God – even the practices of the one and holy Catholic Church. The other ship appealed to the final and seemingly limitless medieval authority of the Pope.

As Luther would later declare: “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.”

And so in April of 1521, Luther departed Wittenberg for the city of Worms on the Rhine river, some 316 miles away. Luther’s life was in jeopardy – would he finally meet his Maker there? Ever since Pope Leo X’s bull of excommunication, Rome was determined to show – once and for all – this German hick a thing or two about who wielded the political and religious power in the late medieval age! Yet a curious thing happened! On the trip – in every German village where he stayed – he was welcomed as a German hero because through the system of indulgences and relics, *Germany money* was building St. Peter’s Basilica *in faraway Italy*.

Through the river and through the woods, German money was heading over the Alps to Rome!

And so Germany had found their hero, a prophet-hero of staunch German descent:

This is how Mataxas describes the scene of Luther’s trip to the Assembly at Worms.

“When before now, in Germany or anywhere, **had there been a champion of the people**, someone who seemed to speak for them against the mighty, resplendent, fearsome and oppressive powers arrayed against them?”

“Here was a man who communicates to the common man” – the butchers, the bakers, and the candlestick makers!

“None of whom spoke Latin or had previously been invited into these important discussions about the world in which they lived, about the institutions that affected them and shaped their lives....It was [in a word] unprecedented.”

“Martin Luther was, to this extent, very much a new phenomenon in history. Because of Cranach’s (a famous artist’s)...widely distributed woodcut portraits of him, Luther’s countenance was known everywhere his publications were sold, and where were they not sold?

Except for royalty – for emperors and caesars and kings – **whose** face in history had ever been mass-produced so that it was recognized far and wide?

The hero of the people had been born, and so, in their way, had the people themselves. They strode onto the world’s stage for the first time, led by the monk from Wittenberg, and they would never go into the wings again. In this way too the future was now being born.”

And so Luther arrived at the Diet [Assembly] in the Germany town of Worms with the great Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, all seven electors of the Holy Roman Emperor, the Pope’s representatives, archbishops and princes and dukes. Fancy feathered hats. Lavish gold chains. This was the pinnacle, the zenith, the summit of worldly power assembled in one place! And for what? To hear the response of a simply clad Augustinian monk. How would Martin Luther respond?

“For I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation”. Was Luther fortified in his faith by his favorite verse? Luther’s life now hung in the balance. Would he or would he not recant his writings?

Luther’s response, as the kids say nowadays, was epic.

As Mataxas writes: “The 1066 Norman Conquest, the 1215 signing of the Magna Carta, the 1492 landing of Columbus in the New World. In its way, [Luther’s response] far outweighs all of those historic moments. If ever there was a moment where it can be said the modern world was born and where the future itself was born, surely it was in that room on April 18th at Worms”.³

What was Luther’s response? What was the response that – along with the 95 Theses – made Luther enemy #1 for the whole of Western Christendom? Luther’s response was a prophetic thunderbolt that still echoes through the chambers of history:

“Since then your serene majesties and your lordships seek a simply answer, I will give it in this manner, plain and unvarnished: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or clear reason – for I do not trust in the Pope or in the councils alone, since it is well know that they often err and contradict themselves, I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything....Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

And...what about you? When push comes to shove? Where is your final authority? When all the chips are in, where do you turn? Martin Luther turned – even in the midst of such pomp and circumstance – to the word of God alone!

As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

³ Mataxas, 218.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Yes, The Reformation was a *German* event – over and against distant and greedy Italian religious bosses.

Yes, The Reformation was a *Modern* Event – printing presses, ideas of religious freedom, the autonomy of the individual self against the state. All these were in play.

But the Reformation was also a *Word-centered* event. Texts matter. Words matter. And Luther staked his life that there was only one thing that was God-breathed – The Word of God. And therefore only one thing that was worth living and dying for – the Christ of the Scriptures.

After his excommunication at the Diet of Worms, Luther would hide away in Wartburg Castle, in isolation for the next year – translating the New and Old Testaments into German. Luther's German Bible would do as much for the German language as the King James Version of the Bible would do for the English language. Luther's translation would forge the identity and language of the German peoples in remarkable ways. It also freed the Bible from its Latin prison for the common people.

And Yes, finally, the Reformation was also an *Event* for the *butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker*.

Luther advocated for the priesthood of ALL believers – that we all stand and will stand before a Holy God.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).

Therefore, Luther advocated for both elements of the Lord's Supper – the bread AND the wine – to be given to the people. He saw no biblical reason why Priests alone should partake of the wine. There was no difference between the priest and the pew – everyone comes the same way to Jesus Christ.

We are all beggars in need of grace. We are all beggars in need of the gospel. We are all beggars needing to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

In fact, the last words penned by Martin Luther before his death in 1546 are a fitting axiom for the Reformation, a fitting axiom for his legacy, and a fitting axiom for you and me as well. So what were Luther's last words? Indeed, Luther's last words echo the first of his 95 theses – remember the one: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance”. So what were Luther's final words?

“We are beggars. This is true.”

We are beggars. This is true! May this be true for you because you understand, like Martin Luther, the exceedingly sinfulness of sin, the good news of the gospel and the righteousness of God, and the life-changing authority and sufficiency of the Word God alone to change self-centered sinners into God-glorifying saints!
Amen & Amen!