

The much maligned Luther

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Introduction

Martin Luther, the man who through his writings and ideas launched the Reformation was a truly revolutionary man. His theological ideas still influence Protestants all across the world, and historians even argue that his translation of the New Testament into German helped form the modern version of that language. TIME magazine lists him as the 3rd most influential man of the 2nd millennium A.D. of among 100 people in its January 2000 issue. Martin Luther has many friends, but also many foes alike who wish to see his image tarnished.

In this work I would like to dispell some myths about Luther which some have used against the Reformer in order to call his character into question. It falls upon his believing brethren to come to his aid and defend his good name.

Some for example in the Roman church wish to call Luther's character into question, because if they do so, then they could add an argument against the Reformation by saying that it was all started by a man of dubious character, therefore the whole movement is also dubious. This tactic is wholly uncharitable and rather two-faced what with the ecumenical movement where Rome tries to siddle up to the Protestants in order to win them over to her fold. On the other hand they also wish to point to certain things that Luther wrote in order to show that Luther actually agreed with them, thereby trying to weaken the Protestant theological argument.

In the following we shall refute these arguments and show them to be faulty and baseless claims.

Did Martin Luther have psychological troubles?

Luther as an Augustinian monk sought with all his might to attain salvation. Flowing from his Romanist belief he thought that he could be saved by enduring sufferings he could thus have favour before God and get closer to him in such a way. In this way he

would beat himself and lay out in the cold. Other Romanist saints did similar things; Saint John Stylist was named such because he lived his entire life unmoving atop a column (imagine the stench even after only a few days). Saint Margaret of Hungary didn't even wash her body, and due to this insects nested in her hair. Luther examined his conscience all too often even for the remotest trace of sins. Luther's confessor, Staupitz once even told him to go and commit a real sin he could confess. The source of Luther's troubles was that he regarded even his best efforts at reaching salvation to be in vain. Luther admitted in even hating God because he was unable to be righteous in front of Him. Luther's inassurance of salvation were the greatest source of his doubts, these same doubts that came back even later during his life in the form of *Anfechtungen*, or in other words, grievous anxiety about the condition of his soul.

In order to dispell this myth we must understand what Luther went through during his conversion. All along, Luther was preoccupied about living a righteous life which would be acceptable to God. He truly strove to reach salvation through his own good deeds and his own righteousness. Luther was dead serious about his faith, and was shocked to find that other priests took the Romanist faith lightly. Luther was very appalled at the level of immorality of the priesthood when he visited Rome, some being guests in the brothels of the city.

Luther discovered in Romans 1:17 what was the very essence of the Gospel: „For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”. It is important here to note that the previous verse, number 16 talks about the gospel of Jesus Christ being the power of God unto the salvation of all men. It was this monumental re-discovery of the nature of salvation that set off the Reformation. Here Luther talks about how faith, and not acts sustain the soul of man unto salvation. It is Jesus Christ's one act of self-sacrifice on the cross in the stead of sinners that brings salvation to man, completely independent of a man's own deeds. It is furthermore Christ's righteousness that saves a man before the judgement of God. To Luther, it was completely in vain, even misleading for a man to rely on his own righteousness, as it was scarcely enough to match up with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Vain, because a man may try to be as righteous as possible, when however his sins utterly condemn him before God.

Wasn't Martin Luther too coarse in his writings?

It is true that Luther pinched many an ecclesiastic nerve and wrote in strong terms. Many could have felt that his words were quite abrasive. However, one must understand the motives behind these strong words Luther had towards others. Reforming the church was an extremely serious business. The very salvation of millions was at stake. Christendom had to be renewed. The Roman church prior to the Reformation was grossly immoral; the celibacy had to be instituted by pope Gregory VII at the end of the 11th century because of the great extent of sexual immorality amongst the clergy at all levels. Pope Julius II for example, was actually the general of an army from which 200,000 soldiers died in various wars waged by this pontiff. The church had not only amassed uncalculable fortunes since the Dark Ages, but was actively theiving the populace out of their money, topped by the immense blasphemy embodied by indulgences against which Luther railed against with all his might, and justly so.

Therefore the Reformation was sorely needed and long overdue. Of course, the popes, the prelates, the cardinals sitting in their luxuriant riches weren't just going to let a maverick theology professor by the name of Martin Luther just have his way, especially because of the political situation: the Turks were marching through southeastern Europe and posed a volatile threat to the rest of the continent. The man to start the Reformation had to be very strong in character; a choleric person - he had to really stick to his guns and be able to tell others what's what. Martin Luther, psychologically was just such a man.

But Luther was not a rude man. Of course, there were times where he expressed himself mildly and apologetically for the harsh words he may have used against others. There were some even in the Jesuit fold who expressed views that Luther wasn't harsh; one must also take into account that many of Luther's enemies used arrogant and insulting terms against Luther just to discredit him. In the 16th century it was just a give and take situation.

Was the Reformation really only just about indulgences?

If the Reformation was only about the single indulgences, then the church of Rome would have either reformed this practise (or it would not have), and Martin Luther would have stayed in the church. However, the question of indulgences was only one aspect pertaining to the question of salvation through grace alone by faith alone, by Christ alone. The question of indulgences touched upon other theological themes, such as the question of salvation through grace alone without acts, Purgatory, and the role of saints and of Mary in a person's salvation, and the part that sacraments played in a person's salvation as a few examples. However, the church of Rome had become utterly corrupt by the Middle Ages, characterized by its constant power plays as well as its designs on exacting money from the hapless, uneducated populace, a single episode of which was designing and implementing the form of chicanery known as indulgences. Therefore Martin Luther and the Reformers took to the task of reforming the church and its hierarchy as well as putting a stop to indulgences and similar practices.

Did Luther incite schism even amongst Protestants?

When the Reformation had solidly gone underway, the Protestant movement had already split up between the Evangelical Lutherans and the reformers such as Bucer and Capito in Southern Germany and Zwingli in Switzerland who would later form the Calvinist branch of the Reformation. The main difference between Luther and the Swiss reformers was the question of the Lord's Supper. Luther basically held to the belief that Jesus Christ was present in the bread and wine served in the Lord's Supper. This he did so because he was still tainted by the Romanist ideas of Biel. The Swiss held to the view that the bread and wine were purely symbols of Christ's body and blood. In the early stages they argued even quite bitterly between each other. The controversy lasted for years.

It is interesting, however, that during the Colloquy of Marburg Luther presented a statement of belief in 15 points covering different topics such as creation, incarnation, the Trinity, sin, salvation, and the sacraments. The Swiss agreed to 14 of these points, the only difference being the Lord's Supper. The Marburg Colloquy was an almost victory for Christian unity; although Luther still could not accept the Swiss as brothers in Christ he still wished them peace. In 1535 the Swiss reformers led by Bucer and Capito travelled to

Wittenberg, Luther's stronghold, where they were able to come to an agreement that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were not just merely symbols, and that both faithful and unfaithful received Christ therein. Luther declared Christian unity, and thereafter they even planned on sending their theology students to study at each other's universities.

In short, Luther was greatly concerned about sticking to the Gospel and not erring from the Word of God. This was done in order to preserve the Gospel. Luther's attitude was to proclaim, publish, and defend the Gospel, a mentality which is in contrast sadly lacking in an overwhelming number of churches in our modern day. By erring on the conservative side Luther also fended off a couple of other truly heretical movements such as an early version of the charismatic movement, namely, the Zwickau prophets who claimed that they had received special, spiritual revelation from God outside of the Bible. Another such heretical movement was that of the antinomians who stated that good works were not needed for salvation, and that the faithful should even not be exhorted to produce good fruits. Sadly, this idea has lasted until the present day. Luther opposed them in his work, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, that „A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none”, but that „A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Let it also be noted that Luther was also able to make peace with people who had turned against him. After the Reformation began, one of his colleagues, Karlstad, had turned against him and had bitter theological exchanges with him. Luther still was magnanimous enough to provide housing for Karlstad when his fortunes turned bad in his own Wittenberg.

Did Luther incite unrest and war?

Nothing could be further from the truth than the accusation that Luther was a bloody warmonger. During the very early stage of the Reformation the poorer, less educated segment of the German population started revolting against their lords and also destroying Romanist churches and property. Luther consistently wrote against the peasants for their actions, and also rather harshly. Luther also wrote against the oppression of the nobility and upper class. Luther played no favorites, even speaking out against the

iniquities that had spread after a time in his own church.

Luther would rather have had that the common people be educated instead of them running amok causing unrest. He was quoted as once saying that there was a time when it was hard for him to decide whether to be a preacher or become a schoolmaster teaching boys. In fact, Luther did a lot for the concept of public schooling and education as it is understood today, that is why he wrote and preached so proliferously producing a number of catechisms.

Luther wasn't so initiated into politics, although many times high standing politicians such as Landgrave Philip of Hesse or other princes and electors asked his opinion about matters. Luther's main concern was preaching and defending the Gospel. It was of his opinion that citizens must be loyal to their rulers, even if oppressive, but only to the point where the Gospel came under attack. In fact, Luther consequently advised the Protestant princes of Germany only to aid emperor Charles V militarily against the Turks if their religious freedoms were completely secure. At that time during the 16th century, the Turks had made a major breakthrough and were even threatening to reach the very border of the Holy Roman Empire. This they did out of the fear that the Romanists would then use these armies to attack them, which Charles V actually did promptly after Luther's death.

Luther clearly saw that what was happening was a spiritual war between God and His people and the forces of darkness. Consequently, Luther therefore never endorsed the way Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss reformer went to war with Romanist forces on the battlefield. He stressed his own success against the church of Rome by saying that he preached only the Word of God, and God did the rest:

„I did nothing.; the Word did everything. If I had wanted to stir up trouble, I could have brought immense bloodshed on Germany. In fact, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe... I did nothing, I let the Word do its work... I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word.”

Did Luther really hate the Jews?

If Luther could be found guilty of being too harsh against the Jews, the Romanist

church could be found guilty of hatred against the Jews a hundred times over, banishing Jews to Poland and Russia time and time again and burning them away in the Inquisition. It is still sad and lamentable that Luther wrote harshly against them, and should have followed Bucer's example, who advocated dealing gently with the Anabaptists. Luther still, however, was compassionate in a treaty that he wrote in 1523, called *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, in which he hoped for the conversion of the Jews after the Gospel had been preached to them.

Did Luther really believe in the intercession of Mary?

In the Middle Ages Romanism gave special attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus, so much so as to be guilty of rank idolatry. „The Queen of Heaven”, „Mediatrix”, „Co-Redemptrix”, „The mother of God” were all titles which that church bestowed upon Mary along with superstitious and legendary capabilities, continuing even until today.

Luther wrote of Mary that „she does nothing; God does everything.” For Luther, Mary was not the super-saint, with light bursting around her in the sky, but a lowly and impoverished person, who had absolutely nothing so as to be receive the grace of God to fulfill her. In this way she stood as an example of faith to believers, to be humble and accept the calling if God. She was an example of being utterly empty so that God could fill her. Luther wrote that „[One] must not only think and speak in a lowly manner, but actually become impoverished and be completely wrapped up in poverty so that, without any human help, God alone may do the work.”

Luther's theology of salvation through grace and faith alone was so broad that it could not be upset by the good deeds of a single woman of faith.

Is Luther guilty of „tearing a hole in the garment of the church”?

This argument is used by Romanists in the ecumenical dialog/deception in order to accuse Luther of hatred, heresy, and schism, the latter sin being one of the greatest according to Rome as it was directed towards her. They imply that what Luther did when the Reformation began forced bodies of Christians out of mother church. Rome's

catechism self-importantly calls this a grave sin, the sin of plurality, which oddly enough she enjoys herself. The ultimate solution to separation as her dogmatists present would be for God's people who are under different roofs to be unified as a single people – under a single roof.

Luther all along wanted to stay within the Roman church. He still walked around in his monk's coat years after the Reformation had begun. Luther believed that he would be able to help reform the church from the bottom up and from inside out. He wanted the church to stay the same institution but with reformed teachings. Interestingly enough, the Augustinian order, even his confessor himself, Staupitz sowed in Luther's mind the seed of salvation through grace alone which was the foundation of the Reformation movement. All throughout the attacks on his character and teachings Luther believed that the church authorities would reform the church if he could only convince them. That is why he always wanted to have fair hearings at his trials before cardinal Cajetan and at the diet of Worms where he was bid simply to obediently recant. The church authorities, however were interested only in making money through indulgences and political power plays, attested to the fact that pope Leo X even agreed with more than 40 of the 95 theses posted by Luther on the door of the Wittenberg church.

Johann Eck, the Romanist theologian even tried to get the upper hand over Luther during their debate in Leipzig by saying that by opposing the pope Luther opposed the church. This he did in order to defend the church's practise of issuing indulgences by saying that it was sanctioned by the pope. Luther wanted to avoid being seen as an archheretic, following Jan Hus who was executed by being burnt at the stake. Luther went so far as to write explanations to the pope, figuratively casting himself down before him in obedience to the pontiff.

Luther, although trying to reform the Roman church at the grassroots level was cast out of the church, excommunicated, condemned, and sent into exile and hiding in the Wartburg castle in order to save his life. This was one reason why Luther appealed to his rulers to avoid having to go to Rome, because he knew by the example of Jan Hus that Rome executed those who differed from her in her views. Furthermore it was the church of Rome during the council of Trent who in spite of the Reformation being under way that reaffirmed all of her teachings instead of extending a hand of understanding,

acknowledging the need to reform. It was the Jesuit order, which had it's beginnings contemporaneously with Luther, who's express goal was to root out and destroy Protestantism and Protestants.

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