

LUTHER SEES THE LIGHT

This month marks exactly 500 years since the Protestant Reformation, which began with Martin Luther nailing his “95 Theses” on the door of a church in Germany.

How much do you know about Martin Luther? When American cable network A&E compiled a list of “The 100 most influential people of the millennium”, Luther came in #3, behind Johann Gutenberg and Isaac Newton, and just ahead of Charles Darwin and William Shakespeare. So he is a very important figure of history, and one of the most influential people in the area of religion—possibly even the most important person since Jesus.

Martin Luther was born in Germany in 1483. His father wanted him to be a lawyer, but when he was 21 he got caught in a sudden thunderstorm and a bolt of lightning almost struck him down. He considered that to be a sign from God and he vowed to become a monk if he survived the storm. He survived, and kept his promise; gave up his study of law and entered a monastery in 1505.

The monks began their day at 1 a.m. They started with prayer and singing, then a time of meditation, then more prayers and singing. Then breakfast, then morning prayers. Then they worked all morning. After lunch they had more prayer and singing, all afternoon until dinner. Then they had prayer again before going to bed.

He followed that rigorous lifestyle because he wanted to be justified and have his sins forgiven. He threw himself into this, and became “a monk of the monks,” but he still felt distant from God. So he seriously began to do more deep confession. The Catholic Church (pretty well the only church at that time), taught that if you wanted your sins to be forgiven they must be confessed one by one. He was dead serious about this and went into the confessional every day to confess all the sins he could remember. Sometimes he spent six hours a day confessing his sin! But no matter how many sins he confessed, he realised there were some sins he couldn't remember, buried deep in his subconscious. Even though he confessed and confessed and confessed, he never felt complete forgiveness. Trying to confess every sin actually led to despair and further guilt!

Eventually he decided to go to Rome, the centre of the Church, to see if he could find true peace with God there, where the Pope and leaders were. When he got to Rome, he was sadly disappointed. First he was surprised, then shocked, and then sickened. Coming from the simple, peasant religion of Germany to the full flower of religion in Rome was an enormous culture shock. He found priests who were so drunk they couldn't finish the mass. He found other priests who would give 70—100 masses a day, just running through it as fast as they could. He found priests who had broken their vows of celibacy. He even heard that some priests who bragged they were righteous because they confined themselves to women. The veneration of relics from the early church sickened him. His biographer, Roland Bainton, says that when Martin Luther got to Rome, he concluded that “if there were a Hell, Rome was built upon it.”

At one church, Luther saw a series of ancient stairs that had been transported from Jerusalem to Rome. Jesus had supposedly walked on those stairs outside Pilate's hall. The church taught that if you got on your hands and knees and crawled up the 28 stone stairs, and if you said an “Our Father” on each one of the stairs, by the time you got to the top stair you would have released a soul from purgatory. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims came to Rome to climb those stairs.

Martin Luther—now deeply troubled—thought he should do that too. On his hands and knees, he crawled up those stairs, kissing each one and saying an “Our Father”. When he got to the top, he looked back at the stairway and asked himself a question “What if it is not so?” He couldn’t see how saying prayers over some stairs could have anything to do with the forgiveness of sins.

The Roman Catholic Church taught that salvation was possible through good works, and also that sins could be forgiven by buying “indulgences” from the priests. In particular in 1517 there was a priest (Johann Tetzel) who began selling indulgences in Germany to raise funds to renovate St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Tetzel said “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory into heaven springs.”

In other words, by paying money to the church, your sins will be forgiven and you’ll get into heaven! Luther questioned that. He had been studying God’s Word carefully and praying for understanding, and the Holy Spirit opened his mind to see the light. There were others God was working with too, who didn’t agree with the doctrines of Catholicism. These included the Waldensians, the Lollards, and followers of John Wycliffe and Jan Hus. They were precursors of the reformation, and later embraced it. Luther is the one who spoke out most strongly and spearheaded the movement.

The scripture that opened his eyes was Romans 1:16-17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

The reference in Verse 17 to the righteousness of God being revealed in the gospel was something he couldn’t understand, because he had always thought that the “righteousness of God” was the fact that He is righteous and punishes the sinners. This is what everyone believed at that time. Luther actually says that he hated the word “righteousness” of God because it referred to tough and cruel justice, and for God to say the gospel was all about that meant the gospel wasn’t really good news.

But Luther meditated day and night on this passage, comparing it with others and studying it in great depth, until finally he said “I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives as a gift of God, namely by faith, i.e. the righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith.” In other words, the righteousness wasn’t something God required humans to offer to Him, but something God offered to humans who believed the gospel; and was in fact a marvellous expression of the grace of God.

God justifies the repentant human being through the righteousness of Christ. That is the salvation of the gospel. This means the gospel doesn’t demand work or sinless perfection from us, but offers to us the gracious gift of His own work and perfect righteousness. By His grace He justifies us and announces us righteous.

When Luther understood this truth, his conscience was at last freed from the enormous weight of guilt he had been feeling. Later he described it this way: “It seemed to me as if I had been born again and was entering into paradise through newly opened doors. All at once, the Bible began to speak in quite a different way to me. The very phrase “righteousness of God” which I had hated before, was the one I now loved best of all. That is how the passage of Paul’s became for me the gateway to Paradise. At once the whole scripture showed me another face. Thereupon I ran through the (relevant) scriptures from memory...”

Luther's practice for many years had been to read through the whole Bible twice per year. He had a very high view of the Bible and considered it vastly more important than the views of Church fathers, Priests or commentaries. In 1538 he said: "He who is well acquainted with the text of scripture is a distinguished theologian."

It took great courage for Luther to bring this new understanding to the leaders of the Catholic Church. We take a lot for granted today, that God's Word is freely available for everyone to study, but that wasn't the case back then.

But Luther studied hard and put together 95 arguments against indulgences. One of the Theses, #86, asked, "Why does the Pope, whose wealth today is greater than the richest person, build the basilica of St Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?" So Luther could now see that several of the teachings of the Catholic Church were wrong. The understanding that human self-denial and religious exercises didn't do anything to merit salvation, meant that lots of things thought to impress God were now virtually useless, like monasticism, fasting, poverty vows and pilgrimages.

In the Theses, he said that repentance involves something inside us, a change of heart, rather than external confession. He argued that indulgences had led Christians to avoid true repentance and sorrow for sin—because all they had to do was buy forgiveness. He began to realise it wasn't necessary to go to a Priest for forgiveness—in fact anyone can simply and directly receive grace, through faith. He moved from questioning indulgences, to questioning papal authority, and ultimately concluded that Rome was apostate.

Because the printing press had only just been invented, Luther's ideas and writings could be quickly translated and copied. Within two weeks, copies of the Theses had spread throughout Germany; in two months they had spread throughout Europe. Needless to say, the Church wasn't too happy about this, and he was called in to explain himself.

On April 17, 1521, he appeared before the Diet of Worms in Germany, before the Holy Roman Emperor and German Princes. Here he famously asserted: "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures, because my conscience is captive to the Word of God, then I can't and won't recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience...Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me! Amen."

The Pope excommunicated him, and the Emperor ordered that his writings be burned. He went into hiding and spent the next 10 years translating the New Testament into German. One of his revolutionary arguments was that the Bible should be readily available to all, rather than just read by the Priests as it was at that time. And the printing press helped with that too!

Many people started to follow him, and so began the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant faith was summed up in five short battle cries:

Sola Scriptura	(by Scripture alone)
Sola Gratia	(by Grace alone)
Sola Fide	(by Faith alone)
Sola Christo	(through Christ alone)
Sola Deo Gloria	(Glory to God alone)

Luther especially used the books of Romans and Galatians to prove the Catholics wrong. He was fond of quoting from Romans 3.

Romans 3:23-24 “all are justified freely by His grace”. That gave rise to “Sola Gratia.”

Romans 3:28 “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”
“Sola Fide” came from verses like this one.

In 1546 the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification was defined by the Council of Trent, that “one’s justification must be accomplished by one’s own efforts in co-operation with God.”

What do you believe? That statement sounds not too bad until you think about it carefully. In fact, *The Bible Advocate*, Nov/Dec 2017 issue, page 23, said: “According to a recent study by Pew Research Centre, Protestant commitment to Luther’s theological legacy is waning. Just three in ten American Protestants believe in both salvation by faith alone (sola fide) and the complete sufficiency of Scripture (sola scriptura). It’s the same for Western Europe, where a minority of Protestants in almost every nation holds to sola fide, including its birthplace. Only one in five German Protestants adheres to the doctrine.”

It is easy to believe we gain salvation by our keeping God’s law, with His help. But actually we gain salvation only because it is the gift of Jesus Christ, and not through any of our work. That’s what Martin Luther found, when Luther saw the light. We read it clearly in Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁸ “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.”

But the result of that is to do good works, as the next verse says.

Eph. 2:10 “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

So Martin Luther is a great figure of Christian history. But actually, when you think of it, there have been numerous times in history where God has stepped in to cause a reformation when people have strayed from the truth. A couple of Old Testament examples were the reformations led by Kings Josiah and Hezekiah. A modern instance happened when the Holy Spirit opened the mind of Joseph Tkach Sr to see where our denomination had gone astray. God constantly guides the church through the Holy Spirit, but it’s not always a steady, easy journey. It never is, because God is working with frail and fickle human beings.

Indeed, God works with all of us in this way when we are called to repentance from our past way of life. Each of us is guided through our own personal reformation, you might say. Five hundred years after the famous Reformation, God graciously and lovingly continues to bring reformation to us frail and fickle humans, both individually and corporately, in the light of His glorious gospel through the eye-opening Holy Spirit.

We need to continue to trust in God and follow the lead of the Holy Spirit and God will help us, as He helped Martin Luther, to see and follow the light.