

Martin Luther: Rediscovering the Gospel and Reforming the Church
Romans 1:16–17; 1 Timothy 3:14–16 | October 29, 2017 | Biography

This Tuesday marks the 500th Anniversary of Protestant Reformation.

At least, it is the date on which Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses – 95 short statements listing the abuses of Catholic Church re: indulgences and Pope’s authority.

October 31 is the day when stumbling in the dark . . . Luther lit a match to show the church what troubled his conscience . . .

And in an amazing act of providence . . . God took this Augustinian monk . . . a theology professor in a town of 4,000 person town of Wittenberg . . .

And he catapulted him to lead a revival that swept through Europe and the world.

As we have been considering all fall . . . the object of the Reformation was actually . . . NOT the Bible or the Gospel . . . IT WAS THE CHURCH.

Rather . . . as in all times in church history . . . the Bible and the Gospel were unchanged.

Luther did not reform the Bible . . . he did not Reform the Gospel.

Rather . . . in studying the Bible, he found the gospel . . . and set out to Reform the church.

This is how the Bible always works . . . to those who abide in the Word, it reforms their thinking, their living, and their desiring . . . and their gathering!

Now maybe this point is self-evident . . . but for all that we talk about the Reformation, I think we forget how its primary objective relates to the church.

Meaning . . . that in recovering the Scriptures and the doctrine of salvation . . . the result was a changed church . . .

It was not the dismissal of the church . . . nor a Christianity devoid of the church . . . but a Church that was truly Christian.

Thus . . . this morning . . . as we remember the life and legacy of Martin Luther

We will consider the gospel Luther **recovered** . . .

And the impact that gospel had on **reforming** the church 500 years ago.

In fact . . . I must share a personal note here . . .

In reading Luther this year – not just reading about him – the thing I am most amazed by is the way he so frequently spoke about the church.

His desire was to see the gospel reform the church he loved so dearly.

Indeed . . . we will get a mistaken notion about Luther . . . if we only think of him with regards to salvation and Scripture.

Luther was a churchman . . . a trained theologian who wrote to princes and against the Pope because of the abuses he saw in the church . . .

But never in his wildest imagination . . . would he deny or distance himself from the EKK For him . . . Christianity was not and could not be an individualistic endeavor.

Even as he sought to bring salvation to the individual, it was a ministry conducted in the church, for the church . . . because Christ had died for the church.

Thus . . . the idea that Luther was a precursor to the modern Enlightenment and the rise of the individual is patently false.

Luther lived under constant threat of death . . . for the sake of the church.

Indeed, after God revealed the gospel to him . . . he set out to purify the church, not abandon the church.

For him . . . and all the Reformers . . . there was no Christianity apart from the church . . . and thus for all he did to free Christians from the snares of Roman Catholicism . . . he never sought to free Christians from the church.

But rather . . . he sought to make the church a place where the rich and poor alike could come find the promise of the gospel . . .

So this morning . . .

As we celebrate the recovery of the gospel in the Protestant Reformation,
. . . our aim is to see what Luther said about the church

That is – What did Luther say about the church

And what can we . . . learn from him . . . to help us be a Gospel-Centered Church?

And to answer those questions . . .

We will FIRST . . . look at this life and ministry . . .

I'll give a brief biography of his life and the setting in which he came to faith . . .
and how that setting led him to oppose the abuses he found in the church

NEXT we will see what . . . Luther said about Rediscovering the Gospel.

In particular, we will see how justification by faith alone led him to seek
reformation in the church, so that the church could be the pillar and buttress of
gospel truth as it was intended

THIRD we will consider FOUR lessons from Luther on Reforming the Church.

In this way, we will put into application **Hebrews 13:7**

**Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider
the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.**

Luther's Life and Legacy

ML was born in 1483 to Hans and Margareta in Eisleben, a small village in Northern Germany.

His father was a hard-working miner who managed to amass a rather large fortune.

As a result, Luther received a good education, even though he wasn't a great student.

At 18, he placed 30th out of 57 students. But, like his father, he was a hard worker.

So when it was time to go to college, he was sent to the University of Erfurt, to become a lawyer . . . a calling he would soon abandon.

At the age of 22, while still a university student, Luther traveled across the parched ground outside Stotternheim, a village near Erfurt. (Bainton, 15)

All of a sudden, in the heat of that July day, a violent thunderstorm broke.

Immediately a bolt of lightning struck, knocking Luther to the ground, at which he exclaimed, **"St. Anne help me! I will become a monk."**

This vow . . . foreshadows the next decade of his life ... and it sets up the context from which his life would shake the world.

But first . . . it's worth exploring how this bolt of lightning would produce such a superstitious vow.

At the turn of the 16th C (1500 AD), Germany was divided into numerous electorates—states of varying size and strength, each ruled by a local prince.

What brought unity and order to the world, therefore, was the Church.

Yes, the electorate of Saxony where Luther lived was part of the Holy Roman Empire, but in various ways this empire was under the influence of the Church and the authority of the Pope.

And at the time of Luther's Vow, Pope Julius II, "[the warrior pope](#)" was on the throne.

And indeed it was a throne. The pope was not simply the spiritual leader of the church. He was the ruler of Christ's kingdom on earth. And in 1505, when Luther entered the monastery . . . Julius was looking [extend his power](#) thru-out Europe.

In his time . . . Julius was constantly looking to acquire new lands through various military campaigns, and at home with the riches he acquired . . . he sought to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica—a project that Luther would later question in 95 Theses.

If you wonder how all this could happen . . . how the church could let the Pope rule in such a worldly manner . . .

Just go back to Luther face-down in the mud . . . **Why did he make a vow to St. Anne . . . to go and join a monastery?**

The answer is **FEAR . . . FEAR** was the overriding sentiment of Luther's age.

If sentimental love and unqualified acceptance fill every aspect of our world, then FEAR of punishment, FEAR of God's judgment, FEAR of death . . . filled every square inch of Luther's world.

And this is quite understandable when we consider the conditions of his age.

First of all . . . death was everywhere. In the 14th C . . . 25M out of 80M people died of the Bubonic Plague – that's more than 1 in 4 people.

This was a century before Luther . . . but the fear of death remained. In fact, the artistry of the era is filled with skeletons dancing over graves . . . and pictures of people being tortured by devils.

Sadly . . . and wickedly . . . the church capitalized on this fear, even increasing this fear of death and God and hell . . . to hold people in captivity to the church & acquires their \$

For Luther . . . growing up in this climate . . . the lightning bolt was not a fluke of nature. It was the very judgment of God . . . and his Fear of God . . . led him to St Anne.

Instead of trusting in the gospel of Christ . . . he offered himself to St. Anne . . . the mother of Mary . . . the mother of God . . . because she was a more merciful mediator.

Growing up in the Catholic Church . . . where the gospel was not clearly taught . . . he followed the traditions of praying to saints . . . and in this moment Anne was savior.

Likewise, because the church taught that grace came thru 7 sacraments – baptism, communion, penance, marriage, last rites, . . . and holy orders.

Luther . . . sought relief by offering himself to a life of greater service to God

Thus . . . his vow was a backwards plea for mercy . . . he reasoned . . . that by offering more works to God, he would receive more grace . . .

Thus in 1505 . . . he dropped out of law school and entered the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt . . .

Yet for Luther . . . if he had hoped to find solace in the monastery, he was mistaken.

Instead of finding peace as a monk, his heart and mind were overcome by his own sin.

R. C. Sproul in his book *The Holiness of God* has described this as “Luther’s Insanity.”

While other monks made daily confession for things like coveting another monk’s potato salad, Luther would spend hours confessing sin—then feeling guilty for a poor showing in the confessional . . . he would go back and confess some more.

Why?

Because he was overwhelmed by God’s holiness . . . and every work he performed only made him feel that much more in debt to God.

Still . . . the Lord used Luther’s affliction of the soul . . . to make him read the Bible with incredible earnestness . . .

Indeed . . . there’s a lesson for us here in Luther’s life . . . that the heart-anguish he suffered . . . was necessary for him to grasp the gospel.

Like Joseph . . . who for **13 years** remained in captivity in Egypt . . . before God raised him up to be the means of salvation for his brothers . . .

So Luther for 13 years – from the time of his vow to the time God shone gospel light into his heart – God tested Luther with his word (Psalm 105:19)

But through that testing . . . God was preparing Luther to rediscover the gospel and reform the church.

Brothers and sisters . . . this is why we read history . . . Not so we can be the next Luther, but to see how in the life of God’s children . . . suffering is never wasted.

And Christian suffering . . . when coupled with Word-saturated faith . . . always bears fruit larger than we could ask or imagine.

Are you going through suffering right now?

Abide in the Word . . . and wait for the Lord to work on your behalf.

This is what Luther did . . . and in 1518 . . . the year after he wrote his 95 Theses . . . he rediscovered the gospel . . . WHEN God by his Word . . . gave him light to see justification by faith ALONE.

Rediscovering the Gospel

Here's how Luther described it . . . in a famous passage written one year before his death.

Notice . . . how physical suffering combined with Bible-saturated prayer . . . is the key to knowing God's grace and goodness:

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was ... a single word in Chapter 1 [:17], 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed,' that 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 been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteous wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, *I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.*

At last, by the mercy of God, *meditating day and night*, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." There *I began to understand* [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. *Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. . . .*

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.' Thus *that place in Paul* was for me truly the gate to paradise. (Dillenberger, 11)

Paradise! This is what the gospel offers . . . And in Romans 1:17 . . . Luther found the key

What does the key say?? . . . **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.¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

That’s the key . . . the just shall live by faith.

Faith in Christ’s work is what justifies the ungodly. Or as Luther puts it in his commentary on this verse: Righteousness is a gift from God without works.

He writes: According to [man’s] view, righteousness follows man’s works, and is brought about by them; [BUT] God’s judgment . . . is different, for according to it, righteousness (=justification) precedes works and good works grow out of it. (*Romans*, 41)

For Luther . . . righteousness came by faith alone AND this is what quieted & comforted his soul

Maybe the same is true for you . . . Maybe . . .

You’ve never heard the gospel . . . how X died for sinners, was raised to secure their right standing with God. . . and that he offers his righteousness and life to you thru faith.

Or maybe you’ve never believed the gospel . . . because you’ve always thought. . . yes, Christ died for sin . . . but I have to add something, somewhere.

. . . And thus you’ve tried to bargain with God instead of believing him.

. . . You’ve made your own vows to St Anne . . . The result? failed works & frustration

But that’s just it . . . the gospel justifies the ungodly BY FAITH ALONE . . . and that’s the key that unlocked Luther from his captivity to a religion of works.

And with that key . . . Luther spent the rest of his life seeking to free others from the fears that the Pope and the Catholic church sought to increase and exploit.

Indeed . . . rather than reject the church for its errors . . . Luther sought to reform the church, because he loved the church . . . and longed for the church to know and love the gospel.

Which leads us to the way in which Luther . . . sought reformation in the church.

Reforming the Church

If you look at the content of his teaching . . . you will find constant discussion about the church.

In 55 volumes of his collected works . . . 30 of them are given to biblical exposition – Committed to the Scriptures that freed him . . . he sought to bring the gospel to others.

But the other 25 volumes are filled with instructions to the church about the church.

And thus from 1517, when he nailed his 95 Theses . . . until his death . . . he labored to give the Word of God to the church.

Indeed, this is what motivated him to translate the Bible into German in 1522.

This is what led him to write hymns for the people . . .

This is what led him to pen three treatises in 1520 – that would lead to his trial at Worms in 1522.

He wrote a treatise to the German nobility about the church and the state,
He wrote a treatise on the captivity of the church to the seven sacraments,
And he wrote another dedicated to declaring the freedom of Christian.

Indeed . . . for all we remember about Luther as the champion of the gospel, he was a churchman who sought to make – by God's grace – the church a pillar and buttress of truth.

He longed for his countrymen to know the grace of the gospel . . .

And so he wrote with incredible force . . . exposing the errors of the Pope, warning about the graceless nature of the sacraments, and extolling the forgiveness promised by God.

In our own individualism . . . we might mistakenly read Luther's bio as elevating the gospel and leaving the church behind.

But . . . Luther and the Reformers with him . . . would think of it differently.

When they rediscovered the Bible . . . they sought to bring the gospel TO THE CHURCH

And thus we have much to learn from them about how to be a Gospel-centered Church.

For sake of time . . . let's consider four lessons from his life and ministry.

Four Lessons on Being a Gospel-Centered Church

First, the church ought to a community of repentance and faith.

In the first of his 95 theses, Luther writes, . . .

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ``Repent" (in Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Indeed . . . repentance is the necessary complement of faith. Saving faith is repenting faith . . . and genuine repentance is more than outward behavior; it is inward trust.

So . . . whereas the verse Luther cites is Matthew 4:17, which says "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," the parallel in Mark 1:15 says: "Repent and believe in the gospel."

Indeed . . . the church is created when the gospel is preached AND people respond in faith AND repentance.

Thus . . . what creates the church—repentance and faith—is what keeps the church.

In Luther's day . . . the focus of church was almost entirely external. And yet . . . the gospel does a work on the heart – convicting of sin and calling to repentance and faith.

Thus . . . the true church is one that believes the gospel and lives together as a people who are turning from sin . . . towards the grace of God found in Jesus Christ.

Interestingly . . .

Even though Luther always held to infant baptism . . . a practice that made every child in Christendom a part of the state church . . . Luther also held the church ought to be a community or assembly of believers.

He did not like the word CHURCH, for it spoke too much of a building.

He preferred the spiritual idea of genuine believers abiding together, serving one another as a priesthood of believers . . .

Hence he rejected the notion that the Pope and Cardinals made the church

Instead . . . the church is the gathering of "holy believers . . . who hear the voice of the shepherd." (George, 88–89)

Therefore . . . the church is a community faith and repentance.

Second, the church is created by the Word of God and the Sacraments.

Throughout his writings is a focus on the Scripture.

Thus he could say . . . “The church does not constitute [or create] the Word of God, but is constituted by the Word.” (WA 1:236)

And famously . . . when describing the work of the gospel in Wittenberg, he said,

I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all! (George, 55)

For Luther . . .

The Word was what mattered, because in it we find the gospel and the power of God.

But he also taught that the sacraments of baptism and communion pronounced a word of gospel promise . . . Thus as Timothy George comments,

Luther attacked [the idea] . . . that the sacraments [by themselves] conveyed grace to everyone not in a state of mortal sin. No, the sacraments are a word of address from God. They must be personally received, believed, and appropriated. (George, 93)

In *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther explained how the Roman Church had imprisoned God’s people with seven sacraments.

He argued these sacraments had failed their purpose. For Luther a sacrament made a gospel promise, but these sacraments had become works devoid of gospel hope.

Likewise, five of them—confirmation, marriage, holy orders, last rites, and penance, -- had no biblical authority. Thus, he called for their disuse . . .

For him . . . the purpose and effect of baptism and communion was to promise gospel hope to weary sinners . . . and thus to build up the body of Christ.

Again . . . Luther never divorced the word of God and the sacraments from the church.

Rather he saw how both were designed by God to create the church . . . and how the church had been entrusted with the treasures of the Word and Sacrament. He says:

“The true treasure of the church is the holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God” – which was proclaimed in the preaching of the Word and the practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Third, Luther affirmed the local church, not the papal hierarchy, possessed keys of the kingdom.

First, in a pamphlet written in 1523, he argued the local congregation has the right to rule itself.

Arguing against the need of the Pope and his Cardinals to make decisions for a local congregation they don't even know, . . . he shows from Scripture how local gatherings are responsible for judging doctrine and calling elders in their midst.

Citing numerous passages about the church, he advocates that everyone believer is a priest: "For no one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be a priest" (39:309)

Similarly, in a pamphlet written in 1530, Luther wrote about the **Keys of the Kingdom** that have been given – NOT to the Pope – but to the church.

He argued that these keys symbolized the authority of Christ given to local churches to conduct the business of Christ on earth.

He writes In conclusion, we [the church] possess these two keys through Christ's command. The key which binds is the power or office to punish the sinner who refuses to repent . . . [And] The loosing key is the power or office to absolve the sinner who makes confession and is converted from sins. (40:372)

In other words, Luther sees the keys of the kingdom as the delegated authority of Christ . . . and this authority is given to the local church to make disciples and exercise church discipline.

That is in church discipline, when a member of the church hardens themselves against God, the church has the office – **the binding key** – to pronounce that.

Likewise, when someone repents of sin and identifies with Christ, the church has the **loosing key** to proclaim a word of promise, that this repenting believer is one of Christ's.

Luther qualifies that this authority is not ultimate and depends upon the belief or unbelief of the person in question. But clearly, the church – and not the pope . . . and not some collection of leaders – has been given this kind of authority.

And this authority – symbolized in the keys – he says is for the advancement of the gospel.

He writes: The loosing key carries forward the work of the gospel. It invites [repenters] to grace and mercy. It comforts and promises life and salvation through the forgiveness of sins. [By contrast] . . . The strong key which binds is for the pious Christians a great consolation, protection, defense, and fortress against evil people [who have snuck into the church]. Also, it serves as a wholesome medicine and has a beneficial effect on evil persons, although terrifying and annoying to the flesh. (40:373)

In these words . . . Luther affirms the role of the local church in protecting and preserving the people of God . . . and promoting the gospel . . . which our fourth lesson from Luther.

Fourth, gospel passion must transfer to passion for the church.

And the reason for this brings back to our theme verse in 1 Timothy 3:15

The church is by God's design **the pillar and buttress of the truth.**

And when the church is being the church . . . it functions as a city on a hill, spreading the light of the gospel far and wide.

But when the church is filled with error . . . as it was 500 years ago . . . that church distorts or even extinguishes the light of the gospel.

Thankfully . . . God raised up Martin Luther to rediscover the gospel.

And with that gospel . . . he went on to reform the church.

Indeed . . . this is what the Reformation is . . . it's not a reformation of the gospel or the Bible . . .

Rather with the Word of God . . . the Reformation calls us seek reformation in our midst.

Indeed . . . salvation is not found in the church . . . as a church . . . but the church should be the place where the saving message of grace is found . . . explained . . . and defended.

And thus like Martin Luther . . . we should give ourselves to the church.

Why? Because the church is the people created by the gospel . . . and we as God's people are created to display and declare that gospel.

Thus . . . what we learn from Martin Luther . . . is NOT a passion for the gospel divorced from the church . . . but rather . . . a passion for the gospel that leads us to serve within and suffer for the church.

When we consider Martin Luther's life . . . that is what we find.

A great sinner . . . saved by a greater gospel . . . laying down his life for the sake of Christ's bride . . .

500 years later . . . his life continues to have impact . . . because he gave it to the church.

May we consider how he did that . . . and imitate his faith.