

# MARTIN LUTHER

James Kittelson

Have you ever learned or heard anything about Martin Luther? What have you learned?

The mature Martin Luther characterized the epoch-making significance of his life with these words: "Others before me have contested practice, but to contest teachings, that is to grab the goose by the neck!" Many of his contemporaries, whether friends or foes, agreed. Johannes Bugenhagen, who later became pastor of the City Church in Wittenberg, and eventually Luther's personal confessor declared when he first read some of Luther's writings, "The church has never seen a greater heretic!" At the time, Bugenhagen was the rector of a school in Pomerania. When he later had occasion to reread Luther, he wrote, "This man alone is right!" So he packed his books and belongings and went to Wittenberg.

To this day, many people who study Luther are never the same afterwards. There is a simple reason for this fact. As Luther put it, "I went where my temptations took me." Specifically, he was tempted to conclude that he could not and would not be saved from "sin, death, and the devil," as he called his foes. That temptation to despair, he once declared, is so deep that, "if it lasts for but a moment, it will grind your bones to dust!" Indeed, the first time he read the famous "Reformation" text, "the righteous shall live by faith," he found his eyes drawn not to the word, "faith," but the word, "righteous," and confessed that "I hated that word," because he knew he was not righteous and that therefore the promise of living by faith could not be for him.

Toward the end of his life, Luther explained that he had been taught to believe that righteousness was a quality of God by

which God judged unrighteous human beings, and found them short of His glory. Mortals were then faced with the task of trying to meet divine standards by vigorously exercising whatever good instincts remained in them. Chief among these, according to Luther's teachers, was a healthy regard for saving themselves. As a popular saying today has it, "You can't love others unless you love yourself first," but the selfishness of doing so poses Luther's dilemma precisely. God, after all, had no particular regard for self-love. He instead demanded that people be like Him, that is, that they deny themselves in love for one another. In order to be saved, human beings, for whom loving themselves is deeply rooted, had to pacify God by "good works" that God might then graciously regard as "good enough."

What do you think 'righteousness' is? How do we become righteous? What role do good works play in our righteousness?

In Luther's day, good works, rather than simple trust in the gracious God of the cross, topped the list of avenues one might take in order to please God. Hence, recommendations that ordinary people purchase indulgences, go on pilgrimages, engage in special acts of devotion, venerate the relics of saints, pray to the Virgin and the saints, and so forth followed. As one reform-minded (in the moral sense) preacher put it in a thunderous ending to his sermon, "Do what is in you! Use well your natural abilities and whatever special gifts you have been given, and God will save you." Achieving salvation reduced itself to an "if . . . then" proposition according to which if the sinner does her or his best, then God will be gracious. The entire reli-

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gious edifice was therefore built on inducing fear that one had not and could not do enough.

What do you think of the expression 'Do your best and God will do the rest?' Is that the gospel?

Luther was a professor of theology and of the Bible in particular. He could be found every day except Sunday lecturing to his students on one or another of the books in the Bible. While doing this work, he turned everything he had been taught on its head. He came to realize that the righteousness of God, far from being a characteristic God jealously held to Himself, was instead first and foremost something God gave to human beings on the cross of Christ and there alone. Hence, there was not only no need for "good works" in order to semi-merit salvation, but indeed preaching good works also lead human beings into precisely the anxiety that he, Martin Luther, felt.

The Reformation, as it is known today, flowed from this one, central discovery. By no means did it all come about at once. Luther himself commented "I was led like a horse with blinders on, unable to see to the left or the right." He did not plan the movement that came to be associated with him. With respect to indulgences, a small but annoying matter, he posted his *Ninety-five Theses* against them because an indulgence preacher happened to be active in his area. Even then, he intended no more than an academic debate on the subject. Others translated them and spread them across Germany. For more than a year, he persisted in seeking the debate but, rather than debate at Augsburg in 1518, he was ordered simply to recant without discussion. From this demand came the Leipzig Debate in mid-1519 at which the issue at hand was not indulgences but the authority of the church to order Luther's silence. At this point, Luther declared that "A simple layman armed with the Scriptures is superior to pope and councils without them."

What was at stake in the debate about the church's authority to order Luther to be silent? What did the church have to lose?

A year after Leipzig, Luther was excommunicated. Less than one year later he found himself at the Diet of Worms confronted with the Holy Roman Emperor and the political forces of Germany. Once again, he was asked simply to recant, to take back all he had said and written. Frightened at this turn of events, he asked for a day to think matters over, and it was granted. He was still so fearful when he reappeared, that he mumbled his response and was ordered to speak up. Then, in words reminiscent of those at Leipzig, he declared, "Unless I can

be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning . . . I cannot and will not recant. . . ."

These highlights from how Luther became an arresting public figure all circle around two points: 1) His insistence on understanding and teaching the grace of God as he found it in the Scriptures; 2) The refusal of those who defended Rome to engage him in debate. All "reforms" flowed from the fundamental rediscovery of the Good News that salvation came from the cross of Christ alone through faith in him alone.

Big historical phenomena such as Luther and the Reformation are commonly seen solely from the top down, as it were. But Luther and his colleagues had the common people in mind from the beginning and fully intended to teach this faith to them throughout their reforms. Thus, one of Luther's early works was *An Explanation of the Lord's Prayer for the Simple Laity* (1519), and his life was punctuated not just with learned and blunt condemnations of the teachings of others but also with *The Small Catechism* for the ordinary parishioner and *The Large Catechism* for the pastor, who was to teach it to the laity.

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Why do you think Luther devoted so much time to teaching and writing for lay people? How is that connected to his understanding of the gospel?

One of the most enduring consequences of Luther's life flowed directly from this emphasis on the average Christian. He located the visible church solely with the individual congregation, because only there was the Word preached and the sacraments administered. Members of the congregation thus possessed every right and indeed the obligation to call their own pastors and to judge their teachings without necessary deference to any "higher" authority. If, he declared from the pulpit in 1539, parishioners heard anything contrary or in addition to the Word from their pastor, they were to "flee" or acquire a different pastor. After all, the Gospel was intended for them and for their sakes and by no one less than God Himself.

What do you find most interesting or surprising about Luther's life and work? What would you like to know more about?