

Sermon Luther 1.4

Luther's Legacy  
[by Keith Barton]

Scriptures:

Mt: 7:21-25

Rom: 3:28 and 4:5

Ex 20:17

Mt 7: <sup>21</sup>NASB (The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount:) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many [a]miracles?' <sup>23</sup>And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

<sup>24</sup>"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and [a]acts on them, [a]may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup>And the rain fell, and the [a]floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.

Rom 3: <sup>28</sup> [Paul] maintain[s] that a man is justified by faith [apart from] [without] works [s] of the Law.

Rom 4: <sup>5</sup>NASB [But] For to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Ex 20: <sup>17</sup>NASB (The 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment:) "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Note: Material in [brackets] below was omitted from the spoken sermon [delivered at BFC on January 14, 2018] for the sake of brevity. KB

A few months ago, I began a series of sermon messages devoted to the Reformation and focused initially on Martin Luther, the first Christian who was not burned alive after challenging

the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. His challenge over the issue of indulgences fell on deaf ears in Rome, but Luther ignited a bon-fire in northern Europe that burned for centuries, and led to the death of some 10 million people in religious wars over the course of 150 years. In some sense, the Reformation still smolders today, often under the guise of secular philosophies, such as Marxism, National Socialism, and white supremacy. The secular remnants of the Reformation destroyed at least 50 million people during the 20<sup>th</sup> C. We cannot attribute these wars to religion alone, much less to Luther. Many factors conspired to bring about this destruction.<sup>1</sup> Luther merely ignited a bon-fire. It was already stacked up and ready to burn. Indeed, humans are always fond of bon-fires. Even so, Luther was a fire-brand in his own right.

[At the same time, Luther established the Evangelical Church, which persists in Europe today under that name, and in America as the Lutheran Church with three independent divisions or Synods. Luther's efforts led to the enormous diversity within Christianity that we know today, where we have over a thousand denominations. Luther himself would have disapproved of this diversity, but we should be grateful, because this congregation belongs to one of the most divergent of Christian denominations, the Religious Society of Friends (RSF). Without Luther's efforts to break the monopoly of the Church of Rome, it is reasonable to expect that Quakers would not exist, unless someone else had come along to perform roughly the same task that Luther accomplished. ]

[Luther's efforts required great determination and courage. Even so, Luther did not act alone. He obtained significant help from the princes of the German States, in particular, the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise who protected Luther from all-but-certain execution at the hands of Pope Leo X and Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor.]<sup>2</sup>

As is often the case, however, the person who has the fiery determination to face death is not the best person to build a coalition. As soon as Luther challenged the Church of Rome, other people followed in short order and set up competing organizations with different theological perspectives. Luther deeply resented these competitors, whom he called the errant brethren, [and he was as harsh with them as he was toward the pope.] Luther had this to say about another prominent reformer, Huldrych Zwingli of Switzerland: "either Zwingli's followers or mine must be ministers of Satan."

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<sup>1</sup> The influx of Mexican silver into Spain, the intensified demand for English wool, the enclosures of the commons, the disruption of trade, disruption of guilds, urban crowding and impoverishment, the industrial revolution, the structure of capitalism, the slave trade, gunpowder and other weapons, etc., were all factors in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> C.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to George Casel, "Either they or we must be ministers of Satan." Cited in *The Protestant Reformation* by Lewis W. Spitz, 1985, Concordia Publishing House.

[When Zwingli died in battle defending Zurich from Catholic Swiss troops in 1531, Luther celebrated his death as a judgement from God.] Luther's arrogant attitudes led to disunity among the Protestants and came close to destroying the Reformation at its very onset. It was largely due to the simultaneous invasion of Muslim Turks into Eastern Europe, even to the gates of Vienna, that prevented Emperor Charles V from eradicating the Protestants. Charles needed all the help he could get from Protestant leaders to resist the Ottoman Turks, so he did not attack Protestant cities when it would have been easy to destroy them. Consequently, we owe the survival of Protestantism, through the calculus of unintended consequences, in part to the Ottoman Empire.

What I hope to do today is to review Luther's legacy and show where it falls short. Of course, this topic deserves many hours, but we can cover at least a few points in our time together today.

As we have seen in the previous weeks, the leading slogans used by Luther to advance the Reformation were *Sola Fide* and *Sola Scriptura*. These slogans signify that Only Faith and Only Scripture provide a sound basis for Christian life and theology. I suspect that the vast majority of living Protestants sitting in the pews do not get beyond the superficial meaning of these two slogans, but in fact, there is a great deal more to these slogans than meets the eye at first glance. As slogans go, they seem innocent and even obvious, yet they generate significant problems.

[Many Protestants today maintain that scripture is self-explanatory, clear and free from contradictions. However, Luther himself did not think that this is so for untrained readers, but only for trained theologians, specifically theologians who agreed with Luther. But this qualification, in turn, underscores the inescapable role of theology in interpreting Scripture. It means that Scripture itself, read by the untrained mind, is obscure at best and misleading at worst. As we have noted before, Luther himself wrote over 100 volumes of theological writings, of which only half have been translated into English. Despite this torrent of writings, that lies outside of scripture, Luther did not retreat from the slogan *Sola Scriptura*, and many Protestants promote this slogan even today. However, if scripture alone was sufficient, it would not require something else to explain it. The paradox that Luther wrote extensive commentaries on the Bible means that Luther did not actually believe in *Sola Scriptura*.]

Actually, Luther had no other recourse in his dispute with Rome than his strategy of proclaiming *Sola Scriptura*. If he had admitted that theology was the arbiter of Scripture, then he would have had to admit that his personal interpretation of scripture was driving the Reformation train, and he would have no basis for claiming that his opinions were better than the

established Church theology that preceded him. Hence, he would have automatically conceded defeat. Consequently, he insisted that scripture is the sole arbiter of theology. Even though his case was weak, he made the most of it, amplified by daring *ad hominem* attacks on his opponents. Moreover, he was either clever – or very lucky – in choosing indulgences as the core dispute with Rome, because it enlisted the support of German princes who realized that the sale of indulgences was destroying the German economies by sending vast sums of money to Rome.

[Very few lay people understood the subtlety – and frailty – of Luther’s position, and not too many people cared. Instead, they were attracted by the financial aspects of indulgences, and to the ancient conflict between Germans and Romans. Luther’s colorful and often crude language caught the attention of the populace, who had never imagined that someone could call the pope the Anti-Christ and survive. Luther was soon the best-selling author throughout northern Europe.]

Both the Roman Church and Luther were backed into a corner with the issue of indulgences. The Church of Rome, [led by Pope Leo X, a member of the avaricious Medici family of Florence,] generated enormous income from the sale of indulgences, and it had no intention of relinquishing this revenue. For Rome, Luther was a mortal threat and Pope Leo set out to destroy him. [In fact, however, Leo dies long before Luther.] On the other hand, Luther perceived that the sale of indulgences had bankrupted the German states, and Luther’s survival depended upon the support of the German princes, who in turn depended on Luther to provide a theological justification to drive a wedge between Rome and northern Europe. Compromise in either direction was impossible.

[Moreover, Luther’s use of both lively music and withering rhetoric attracted the man in the street and made church attendance a fresh and exciting experience. In short, Luther was thoroughly charismatic in addition to being a formidable scholar and debater. But he was in no position to be fair and impartial in his theological judgement.]

The second Lutheran slogan, *Sola Fide*, is even more problematical than *Sola Scriptura*. It is fraught with ambiguity and obscurity. In attempting to untangle the layers of hidden meanings, I am indebted to Giuseppe [Rensi] for introducing me to Karl Barth, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Swiss theologian. What Barth does, almost single-handedly in the 20<sup>th</sup> C., is to make a valiant attempt to revive and retain Luther’s ideas in contemporary theology. But by doing so, Barth embraces, and thereby exposes, the astonishing paradoxes embedded in Luther’s theology.

[Luther's meta-theology:] Here is my attempt to summarize Luther's core theology, based on Karl Barth's presentation – perhaps Giuseppe will correct me where I am wrong. For Luther, the only essential sin is to deny that one is sinful. However, it is not immediately obvious that someone is sinful. In fact, the obvious sins are not the sins that count with Luther. It does not ultimately matter that someone steals pears or commits adultery -- the two sins that preoccupied St. Augustine. In fact, at times Luther advises people to sin boldly.<sup>3</sup> The only sin that matters to Luther is the lack of faith, and the faith that matters to Luther is the acknowledgement of human sinfulness and the confidence that Christ has the ability to erase sin and to impute a credit of righteousness, even where it is apparently absent. Hence faith is the confidence that a Christian – every *faithful* Christian – is made righteous through faith, despite persistent residues of sinful behaviors. At the same time, this faith is not acquired by rational discourse, but instead, it is a gift of grace. Hence, the faith that matters to Luther is not something that you can prove through rational argument. In fact, rational argument is irrelevant. It is the visceral possession by the Holy Spirit that counts, and it was clear to Luther that the Holy Spirit had possessed him, and therefore, Luther possessed the key to the Holy Spirit through his understanding of scripture.

In this manner, Luther constructs an impregnable fortress – a mighty fortress indeed. There is no way to contradict Luther, because if someone disagrees – and many people did disagree with Luther – Luther can simply say that they lack the grace to see what Luther sees. God has not offered them the means of salvation through faith, as articulated by Luther's doctrine.

This has two effects: one is that Luther is rendered infallible and essentially becomes a new and permanent Pope – and this is substantially how Luther is still perceived within the various Lutheran denominations today. The second effect is that all efforts to achieve or manifest righteousness through deeds are rendered suspect. Luther's abiding reproach of certain Christians (particularly the Anabaptists of his era) is that they are reckless enthusiasts who are too much concerned with fulfilling the letter of the law, even the law of Christ as presented in the Sermon on the Mount. Luther would have viewed Quakers through this same lens, had he lived to encounter them.

Luther would have maintained that imputed righteousness through faith in the blood of Christ is the only righteousness that matters. Superficial righteousness is an illusion, while imputed righteousness is the only righteousness that can exist in the eyes of God. All other human activity is actually contemptible. Any attempt to act justly or righteously is contaminated by the desire to please God with superficial appearances rather than to satisfy God through faith in God's Biblical Word as explained by Martin Luther.

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Philip Melancthon. Obviously, Melancthon was not someone who was likely to sin boldly.

Moreover, the Jewish Law, as revealed at Sinai in the ten commandments is valuable precisely because it can never be fulfilled. We will always look with envy upon the neighbor's wife or his house or her BMW. Consequently, the Law of Moses reveals its own insufficiency to achieve salvation, and it demonstrates the necessity for salvation through faith alone. In fact, the Law – whether Jewish Law or Christian Law – is actually a trap that makes Christians vulnerable to a false confidence and draws them further away from faith. Hence the Law is both subordinate to faith and implicitly dangerous. If we get to examine Calvin in future months, we will see that Calvin has a more positive attitude toward Biblical laws.

Now if this is not confusing enough, Luther still insists that good deeds are in fact necessary manifestations of a Christian life. You might remember this detail from the sermon by Luther I read in November. Deeds cannot be the source of salvation, but the lack of good deeds indicates that salvation has not taken place. So, in effect, Protestants had to be very careful just how they manifested good works. They could not omit them entirely, but at the same time, they could not manifest too many good works, lest they be accused of enthusiasm and Anabaptist heresy. It is little wonder, then, that Soren Kierkegaard, writing in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C., accused Danish Lutherans of having a lukewarm faith. That seems to be the inevitable outcome of Luther's doctrine of *Sola Fide*.

[There are many other paradoxes embedded in *Sola Fide*, which Kierkegaard explores at great length in his own writings. For example, we have to concede that we almost always have mixed motives and that we rarely have clear insight into our motives for acting. Sin is always close at hand. However, it is not at all clear that Protestants behaved with any greater integrity than did, say, the Ottoman Turks, and Luther would have said, that's just how it should be. Only faith matters and only God knows whether a person has faith, and only God is able to dispense faith. However, if we take Jesus at His word, we are evaluated and rewarded on the basis of deeds. So these are, at least superficially, contradictory positions.]

There are several other implications of Luther's slogan, *Sola Fide*, that we may cover in a future sermon. I would maintain that the difficulties that Kierkegaard identified are implicit in the concept of salvation by faith, and they go all the way back to the writings of the apostle Paul. If you want to re-examine Paul in a fresh light, the Bible class that now meets on Tuesday evenings has begun [on January 9, 2018] an overview of Paul's writings under the direction of NT Wright, an Anglican bishop in England. I am hopeful that we will have time to examine these core doctrines with the attention that they deserve. Feel free to join us.

However, the issue for Quakers with *Sola Fide* is that Luther attempts to speak for all Christians everywhere and to lay down a normative set of behaviors and beliefs once and for all. Luther did not think that God spoke directly to each person in the way that God spoke to Luther himself through the Scriptures. Therefore Luther could arbitrate these matters for everyone.

In contrast, the early Quakers believed that God, in the Person of Jesus, visits each person and offers them personalized instructions. This almost always begins with a recognition of specific sins and personal failings. Acknowledging [and remediating] this sin is essential to receiving further instruction. Moreover, the person is free to accept or to ignore God's instruction. The individual must cooperate with the inspiration that comes from God in order for some degree of righteousness to come to fruition. Faith without works is a contradiction in terms. God's grace is offered, but not imposed. Similarly, righteousness is not imputed. The opportunity for departing from grace is constantly present. Salvation is not assured, but is found by heeding the internal leading of God's Spirit and by seeking the company of the Quaker community. Hopefully we will explore all of this in greater detail later in the coming months. Clearly there is much more to say, and perhaps you will have some insights to share in the time that remains today.

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