

REFORMATION *Remembered*

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**REFORMATION
2017 It's *Still* All About
Jesus**

INTRODUCTION

In 1983, for the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth, Michael Mathias Prechtel painted a portrait of Luther entitled, "*Martin Luther, inwendig voller Figur*," "Martin Luther: Full of Figures Inside." I first saw this print in Peter Newman Brooks' office in Cambridge (it is now in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England's Westfield House, a gift from Prof. Brooks). Prof. Brooks often held his lectures on Reformation history in his office and he had the delightful habit of breaking away from his notes and carrying on brief dialogues with the portrait of Luther that hung behind us at the back of the room. I even remember once he suddenly shot up from his chair and then dropped to the floor to bow the knee in genuflection to this painting of Luther, this icon of the Reformation. Of course it was all in jest but it does raise an interesting question — *can one still carry on a conversation with Luther?* Does he have anything relevant to say to us in this time of tech and Twitter, or can we only look at Luther in admiration from a distance and genuflect to a relic from the past?

Another commemoration is now just around the corner. On October 31, 2017, the world will remember the 500th anniversary of what is often recognized as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther's posting of the *95 Theses against Indulgences in Wittenberg*. For various reasons this moment catapulted Luther into the public eye and he became the lightning rod for the reform of the church. As with many big anniversaries questions of relevance will once again arise: Why does the Reformation matter? What was at stake? What was it all about? Was it worth it? Does anything that Luther said or taught have meaning for us today? How should Lutherans and the heirs of the Protestant Reformation view Luther? As we close in on the 500th Reformation Day such questions will even

begin to interest those who have no religious commitment to what took place then.

IMAGES OF LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION

In 1529, Johannes Cochlaeus, one of Luther's vocal opponents, published a pamphlet entitled the "Seven-headed Luther." In it he depicted Luther as beast with a head of a doctor, a saint, a heretic, an enthusiast, a priest, a church visitor and Barabbas. All of these were given an interpretation that made Luther look unreliable and dangerous. Since then there have been many images and interpretations of the reformer — some complementary, others less than so. Today, with perhaps more books having been written on Luther than any other historical figure (except for Christ), you can be certain Luther's "heads" have increased well beyond seven. In his own day, Luther's admirers and followers hailed him as a prophet, an instrument of God and a German hero and Hercules battling the tyranny of Rome. But both then and after his death, the emphasis of the next generation of Lutherans was not on Luther's person or life — he was not to be venerated or emulated, and certainly there were no stories of miracles like the stories of the medieval saints. Rather, the focus was on what Luther taught, the strength of his message, his insight into the Scriptures and the blessed rediscovery of the Gospel.

Later centuries saw Luther and the Reformation through different lenses. The rationalists of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century — who had little time for religion of any stripe — lamented that so much turmoil in Germany was caused by Luther's "superstitions" and in England by King Henry VIII's love for Ann Bolynn's deep brown eyes. Others, however, could express a more romantic view, casting Luther as the father of the free individual, who threw off the shackles of tradition and the church's

institutional power. For example, the assessment of François Guizot who lived just after the French Revolution:

“The Reformation was a vast effort made by the human race to secure its freedom; it was a new-born desire to think and judge freely and independently of all ideas and opinions, which until then Europe had received and been bound to receive from the hands of antiquity. It was a great endeavor to emancipate the human race and to call things by their right names. It was an insurrection of the human mind against the absolute power of the spiritual estate.”

In Germany, Luther became a symbol for the patriot and a national hero. The Reformation was deemed Germany’s “consummate achievement” and Luther was the leader of liberty into the life of Europe. Into the nineteenth century and early twentieth, the Reformation was often interpreted as an inevitable movement driven more by social and economic forces than by religious ideas. The Peasants’ War of 1525 was more significant to the direction of the sixteenth century than Luther’s speech before the emperor at the Diet of Worms.

So which is it? Of course, the Reformation is too complex a time and movement to be only about one person or one thing. Its causes and effects touch on a wide range of social and political factors, theological ideas, unique personalities and churchly pressures. Some would even argue that it is better to speak of “Reformations” rather than a single, unified movement.

Yet in spite of the complexity of the Reformation, October 31, 1517, marks a very specific event with a relatively narrow scope. Luther’s posting of the 95 theses was admittedly a match that set off a firestorm, but the nature of this event is often obscured by the tumult that follows rather than its original intent. To put it succinctly, *Luther’s 95 Theses were written as a protest against bad pastoral care*, and it is from this perspective that one should try to understand what Luther was up to in those early years of the Reformation. As the Reformation scholar Jane Strohl put so wonderfully, “One could describe Luther’s career as the mounting of a life-long pastoral malpractice suit against the church’s authority at every level of the hierarchy.”

“*Pro re theologica et salute fratrum*” — “For theology and the salvation of the brethren.” Luther wrote these words in a letter to his friend Georg Spalatin on October 19, 1516, almost a year before the posting of the 95 Theses. The letter was a critical assessment of the famous scholar, Erasmus, and his recently published annotated Greek New Testament. On the one hand, Luther greatly appreciated Erasmus’ scholarly work — Luther had just finished his lectures on Romans, during which he consulted Erasmus’ text and was about to begin a new series of lectures on Galatians. However, he was not too impressed with Erasmus’ understanding and interpretation of the apostle Paul. Luther wanted Spalatin to convey his concerns to Erasmus

even though he knew that his criticisms might fall on deaf ears. After all, he was a “nobody” and Erasmus was known throughout Europe, a “most erudite man.” Still, Luther said that he felt compelled to say something since this was not merely an academic difference of opinion — an obscure point that could be debated in the ivory tower of the university. No, Luther was only interested in matters that touched on the heart of everything — the whole of theology and the salvation of all were at stake. When Luther began to change things in the university curriculum at Wittenberg where he taught, he did so because of how it would affect the weekly preaching, teaching and pastoral care on the parish level. That was the goal of reformation for Luther.

But what was pastoral care on the eve of the Reformation? Of what did it consist? The formal, ecclesiastical, that is, priestly aspects of pastoral care could be largely subsumed under the following: (1) the sacrament of penance, (2) the selling/buying of indulgences and (3) private mass. On the other hand, there were many less formal but widespread practices aimed at the care and comfort of souls: stories of virtues and vices; devotional literature such as the Fourteen Consolations, the Art of Dying (*ars moriendi*) and the Lives of the Saints, alongside a variety of other spiritual practices such as relics, pilgrimages and prayers patterned after the monastic life. These “*Geistlichkeiten*,” (literally, “spiritualities”) as Luther called them, became the focus of much of Luther’s reform efforts.

It is more customary to think of Luther as a reformer of doctrine (perhaps a specific doctrine like justification or the Lord’s Supper) and as an ardent opponent of papal authority. But questions of doctrine and theological authority arose for Luther as means to a greater end: the pastoral care that nurtures a genuine Christian life. Beginning with his own personal search for consolation and hope, Luther urged practices that would saturate one’s life with the Word of Christ. Only in this deep connection to Christ did Luther find freedom and strength to live in a world shaped by the contradiction of God’s providence and the continual presence of sin and suffering.

And so we see Luther repeatedly and programmatically attack what he believed to be false “*Geistlichkeiten*” — spiritual practices that tried in various ways to overcome the contradiction of Christian existence by pushing God back up into heaven away from the world and mitigate the unpleasant realities of life with the lesser “deities” of saints and other spiritual securities. The intermediary position of the saints had the double benefit of preserving God from blame for sin and people from suffering. That Luther posted the 95 Theses on the eve of All Saints’ Day was perhaps a coincidence, but there is a certain seamliness in the proximity of his attack on a saintly treasury of merits and a feast celebrating that pantheon of holy intercessors. For Luther such efforts at keeping God and affliction at bay was wishful thinking and fostered a way of living that



Power of Scripture

“Note well, that the power of Scripture is this: it will not be altered by the one who studies it; instead it transforms the one who loves it.”

—MARTIN LUTHER

made faith in a good God and faithful Father inconspicuous if not unnecessary. But because Luther found in Christ a God who entered into the breach between goodness and sin, suffering and salvation, Luther was also able to bring the saints back down into the secular. For Luther, the saints were now those who found hope in life’s contradiction by holding fast to the promises of a God who deigned to suffer for and with man. And in that hope the saints found courage to live life in God’s creation — to marvel in it, to find beauty in it, to plant, to harvest, to marry, to raise children — though plagues and peasant wars raged.

It is here that we touch upon perhaps the most far-reaching impact of the Reformation; namely, its subversion of the saint, its redefinition of the religious life, its sacralization of the secular. And Luther did this through a single, brilliant assertion: neither ordination nor religious vows make one spiritual or religious; rather, it is Baptism and faith. Against prevalent piety, the common people are spiritual. The common people are the priesthood.

In the late-medieval context, Christendom could be divided into what was essentially a two-tiered Christianity. The top tier was the spiritual elite represented by members of the monastic life and, by derivation, the priestly office. After martyrdom, monasticism was long regarded as the religious ideal of Christianity. In an attempt to embody the more sacrificial, radical tenets in the Gospels, the monastic distinguished himself from the ordinary Christian by his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Ten Commandments were important, but “if you would be perfect,” said the Lord, “sell all you have, give it to the poor and come follow me.” To be fair, the monastic usually did not make such a distinction between the ordinary Christian and the “perfect”; he regarded his vows and life as intrinsic to the call to discipleship. For the monk, genuine Christianity looked like monasticism. It would be the church’s conscience, an ideal in the midst of Christian mediocrity.

As such, monasticism was frequently both the catalyst and benchmark for reform. More often than not reform was contained by simply establishing a new monastic order, but sometimes it would spill over into the broader church. For example, the Cluniac reforms of the tenth century would among other things bring the mandatory vow of celibacy into the priesthood, giving priests a deeper share in the same spiritual estate. The common people too, when seeking a more religious, devoted life, approached monasticism as the standard. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, lay piety grew into a “modern devotion” (*devotio moderna*), modeling itself after certain habits and practices found in the monastery. In short, religious life was not common life. The common and ordinary was *de facto* not spiritual.

It was thus a revolutionary assertion when Martin Luther (an Augustinian monk!) argued that all ordinary Christians were spiritual and religious. Only faith made one spiritual, and the life of the common, lay person was a true religious sacrifice and worship when shaped by God’s commandments. Living as a faithful father or mother, an obedient worker, a responsible citizen or temporal ruler was the real religious life, more pleasing to God than all the vows and daily offices together. Monasticism was neither the ideal nor the moral mediator for the church. Likewise the priesthood. The ordinary Christian did not need a priesthood to stand in the breach between the common and the holy. In Baptism, all Christians participate in a spiritual priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), having direct access to God by faith.

The result was a genuine lay piety with secular life as a self-referential spirituality. Everyday vocations were divine callings. When coordinated with other vocations and ordinary works, the neighbor was served and loved and the community flourished. The body of Christ had many members, each with its own function and role. Even the weakest and least was to be honored as a special and important member of the same body of Christ.

A PRE-MODERN LUTHER FOR A POST-MODERN WORLD

Luther's picture of the Christian life in this world sounds beautiful, and yet we know that life isn't like that. The contradictions between the presence of God, the presence of sin and the presence of suffering continue to exist. Vocations have lost their moral compass and are continually being redefined by social norms and a whole host of "isms" — capitalism, individualism, consumerism, materialism, and ... post-modernism.

Post-modernism is word often used to describe our present context in the West, though it is not always understood. Often it is defined as relativism — nothing is true except what is true for me. But relativism as such is not really that new of an idea. One can find such views in variety of movements in late antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment — often called Skepticism. While post-modernism can lead to skepticism there is more to it than that. Simply put, post-modernism describes that, whether we like it or not, the old reliable norms have been called into question. Our so-called "foundations" — those assumed bases for authorities and power structures, truth claims and ethics — these "foundations" have been crumbling. In this context nothing is objective, everything is relative to our perspective, everything is an interpretation, all conclusions are necessarily provisional. There is no longer a single frame of reference for our understanding of ourselves or the world, rather it is increasingly argued that we live in a network of *narratives* and *stories*, each competing with one another to define us and explain our world. We have personal individual stories, but also societal and cultural stories and narratives — large meta-narratives. All of these narratives and stories shape us, define us, give us meaning and identity, even if the "truth" of them is not demonstrable.

Much of this is a reaction to the self-assuredness of *modernity* (hence the "post" of post-modernity) which, building on the foundations of reason and that which can be known through our observations and senses, dismissed the importance of narrative and story altogether. Instead, narrative — including the Bible's narrative — was regarded as an impediment. One must try to get behind the story in order to find some kind of verifiable, historical, rational or reliable truth. Hans Frei, in his book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, essentially called this modern approach to narrative the "reverse of fit." Back in the days of the Reformation, before the Enlightenment, the pre-modern reader approached the Bible as an accurate description of his world — as Frei notes, the reader saw "his disposition, his actions and passions, the shape of his own life as well as that of his era's events as figures of that storied world" of the Bible. That is to say, the reader of the pre-modern era *fit* her world and her story back into the world of the Bible. But the great shift of modernity is a "reverse of fit": "All across the theological spectrum the great reversal had

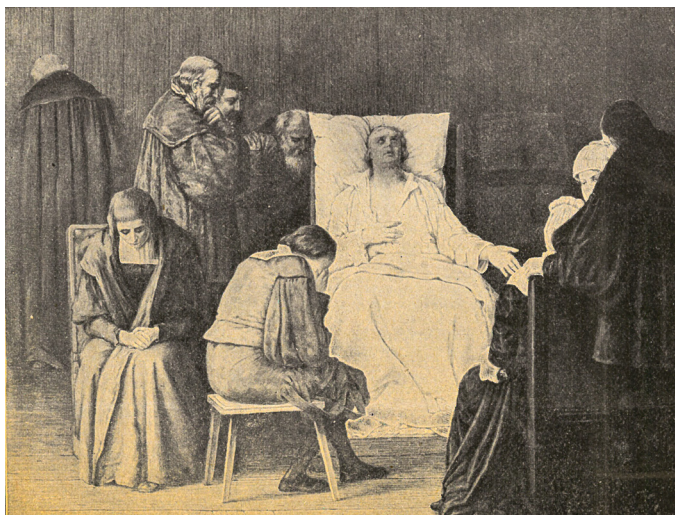
taken place," Frei remarked. "Interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story." Our present existence became the judge and norm and interpretive key to the story of the Bible.

However, we are said to live in "post-modernity." And in this context, we are again seeing an *embrace* of narrative and story, and we can see it in almost every area: in philosophy and ethics and politics, and — over the last quarter century — narrative has also found an increasingly central place in theology. The narrative, the *story*, seems to be all important to the post-modern condition ... the story is king.

But then Luther always knew this. Or at least he came to fully know this as he struggled against his own doubts and uncertainties. In the end, it was the story of the Scriptures alone, the story of God and His people, the story of Christ that filled Luther's horizon and replaced the false securities and crumbling foundations of his day with new-found certainty. I would like to suggest that the nature of Luther's use of the Scriptures as narrative — as identity-shaping story — is a point of relevance worth stressing again in our time.

Luther is in many ways a typical pre-modern interpreter of the Bible (though the intensity of his occupation with the Scriptures sets him apart even from the monastic tradition). Still, like his contemporaries, Luther found the unity of the biblical narrative as the definitive explanation for his own world. The connection between world history and salvation history was assumed even though it was not always clear. Early on he followed the traditional four-fold method of biblical interpretation that tried to make the connection between the two through a series of figural or allegorical readings of the biblical narrative. Later, however, Luther would eschew this method because it reinforced a view of salvation history that moved along a course of such graduated continuity that Christ and the Gospel appeared merely as new and improved versions of Moses and of the Law. Instead, Luther began to find a different meta-narrative that pervaded the Scriptures beyond that of simply figure and fulfillment or type and antitype.

In any event, Luther gave more intentional thought to how the Scriptures functioned as the Word of God. There is a saying that "there are some books that you read, and then there are some books that read you." For Luther, the Bible was that second kind of book. He does not see the Scriptures primarily as the object of our interpretation, but rather we are the object as the Scriptures interpret *us*. Now this is not to say that Luther thinks there is no need to try to understand the text, or that Scripture requires no study and no explanation. It's simply that for Luther the primary function of the Scriptures is to shape us, form us, to lead us into a new creation, to kill us and make us alive again. He writes, "Note well, that the power of Scripture is this: it will not be altered by the one who studies it; instead



Christ for us

In the midst of defeat, the fear of death, the doubts and trials that seem to contradict the power and mercy and justice of God — it is nevertheless the death and resurrection of Christ that promises hope and gives meaning and purpose to one's own story.

it transforms the one who loves it. It draws the individual in — into itself — and into its own powers.” The Scriptures draw you in — into its world, its history, its story — so that we read our world, our history, our story against the backdrop of the Bible. The biblical narrative becomes the key to understand our life, the defining story that interprets our world. It’s not that we find the Bible meaningful to our life, but rather our life receives its meaning from the Bible. This, of course, runs completely counter to the *modern* approach, but interestingly it is not so foreign to the *postmodern* understanding of narrative.

For Luther the Scriptures are not merely a deposit of divine propositional truth. They do contain such truth, but the Scriptures are properly more than this. They are the story of the living God of Israel who brings kings and mighty men to naught and raises up the lowly and the orphan, who brings forth springs in the desert and gardens in the desolate places, who makes patriarchs out of pagans, who cuts down the olive tree and makes the stump blossom, who chooses the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are. And what’s more, this story confronts us with the remarkable claim that it is also *our story*.

We can see this view of the Scriptures in how Luther continually understood the contemporary events around him in light of salvation history. Luther always saw more than just emperors and princes, peasants and popes. He saw their actions as well as his own against the eschatological backdrop of salvation history in which, as St. Paul says, our striving is not against flesh and blood but powers and principalities ... against this present darkness — Luther sees a world full of men but also full of devils! Consider Precht’s portrait of Luther again — Luther is stuffed full with figures of his own particular history — peasants aligned against armored knights: The terrifying Peasants War of 1525! Yet for Luther this is not just some social uprising, some class warfare — reading his own history against the backdrop of the biblical narrative Luther views

these events in apocalyptic terms. Indeed, what could be more apocalyptic than such a complete upheaval of the world and its order. (The Luther scholar, Oswald Bayer, has pointed out that this does not escape the artist, who paints the knights in the style of Albrecht Dürer’s “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”)

But isn’t Luther’s apocalypticism usually highlighted as evidence of his distance from us rather than his contemporary relevance? And isn’t such a view of history dangerous? After all, this precisely what one of his contemporaries, Thomas Müntzer, did in leading the Peasants’ War. Müntzer used the Scriptures to interpret the events of his day apocalyptically, being inspired by the stories of the Bible that describe the wars that will arise between good and evil in the final days. To be sure, at times we can see that Luther could also slip into such dangerous apocalyptic interpretations — his assessment of the Jews being the most egregious example.

But more often than not, Luther’s apocalypticism is nothing like Müntzer’s or the other “prophetic” figures of the sixteenth century who tried to seize the reins of political history in the name of God. The word “*apocalypsis*” means to unveil what lay hidden, to reveal what was before unknown to the world. It asserts that without such a revelation the world’s true meaning remains closed. In his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* of 1517 and even more clearly in his *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, Luther rejected a theology that proceeded without *apocalypsis*, without revelation — that one could simply discern the hidden, invisible things of God from the visible things of this world. Such a “theology of glory,” as he called it, presses the biblical world into a world understood by logic, philosophy and human experience. In effect, it tries to fit the narrative of Scripture into the narrative of the world, whether that be the world of philosophy or science, or the world of peasant and prince. With such a reversal of reason and revelation, of dialectic and the apocalyptic, the

scholastic would try to fit the righteousness of God into the righteousness of man, and someone like Thomas Müntzer would search for the eschatological power of God in the power of peasant armies.

Yet Luther's apocalyptic view of the events of his own history was ultimately not governed by the injustices of pope or prince, the threat of peasant or plague, the wars and rumors of wars, nor even the raging of devils. Rather it is the mystery that was hidden for ages, a wisdom kept from the wise but made known to the lowly, a "theology of the cross" that reveals that the end of the ages has come upon us in Christ the Crucified. This is the *apocalypsis* that, for Luther, interprets his world and its end: the Crucified One has taken all evil and sin into Himself and triumphs over them in His cross. Following Paul's summary of the biblical narrative, especially the grand sweeping history of salvation recounted in Romans and indicated in Galatians, Luther focused on the story of *promise* — *God's promise*. From the beginning of the biblical story until the end, Luther witnessed God's promise continually breaking into the lives of His people in order to claim the last word so that everything else is penultimate — sin, death, the devil ... even the law. Only by the promise does Israel live in faith, and only through faith in the promise do the Gentiles find their spiritual home, for "all the promises of God find their 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20). And this story of promise confronts us as *itself* a promise — *Christ for us*. So it is that the Scriptures, confronting us as a promise, require and produce faith. Therefore, in the midst of defeat, the fear of death, the doubts and trials that seem to contradict the power and mercy and justice of God — it is nevertheless the death and resurrection of Christ that promises hope and gives meaning and purpose to one's own story.

Without the revelation of this promise, without this other story — Luther's statements and actions can sound absurd. You have undoubtedly heard the saying falsely ascribed to Luther, "If I knew that the world was to come to an end tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today." They are not his words, but they seem to get close to his thought. Perhaps more striking is something that he did say: in the midst of the darkness and tumult of the Peasants War, Luther does something even more absurd than plant an apple tree — *he decides to get married*. Writing to a relative about his possible death at the hands of the peasants, he pauses and says, "If I can manage it, before I die I will still marry my Katie *to spite the devil*, should I hear that the peasants continue. I trust they will not steal my courage and joy." A remarkable moment: Luther paradoxically exhibits both resignation from the world and yet at the same time confidence and freedom to live and even invest in the world. He does this because the story of the Scriptures, stained on every page with the blood of Christ! — promises him that the God who destroys the power of sin, death and the devil is his God. In this faith, the biblical story of salvation becomes his own story, interpreting and shaping every

moment of his life. Only with his "conscience held captive by the Word of God" does he find true freedom.

To be clear, Luther does not mean that every narrative in the Scriptures is simply to be reduced to the admonition "repent" and "believe." God's promise and the faith that it calls into being come not in generalities but in the midst of the particularities of human life and history. (The saying, "the devil's in the details," is really quite incorrect — the devil is much better at general platitudes; it is God who descends into the irreducible sweat and blood of human history — as Luther says, "into the muck and work that makes his skin smoke.") It is in real life, with all its contradictions and uncertainties, that God speaks to us, that He draws near to us in the flesh of His Son.

It is here, in the story of God's promise that I would suggest that Luther's theology is even more important and urgent for our day. While it is true that the post-modern tearing down of traditional assumptions and foundations exposes the naïveté and arrogance of modern man, it has also left our society in a state of disorientation, disillusionment, and anxiety. There seems to be an ever-growing cultural "*Anfechtung*" that simultaneously rejects all authority but still longs for certainty. In the midst of this uncertain climate with all of life's contradictions and doubts, that values authenticity more than authority and truthfulness more than truth, Luther's theology points to — not another set of securities, handholds or objectively verifiable foundations — but a *promise*, a Word that depends entirely on the love and faithfulness of the One who speaks it. Luther's hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*, says that it is just "a little word," but words and stories are all we have — and "though devils all the world should fill," against the prince of this world, this "one little word can fell him."

Story and promise — of course, what we are talking about is Luther's theology of the Word. After all, if Luther does still speak to us today it is not because *his* words are all that terribly important, but because he directs us to hear the One whose Word promises the world hope and life. Before this Word we are, as Luther wrote in his very last words, "*aller Bettler*" — we are all beggars. This is true.