

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Number 236

Copyright 2004 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

October 2004

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/> Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Forgotten Principles of the Reformation

John W. Robbins

Every October, while the world is imitating and celebrating witches and ghouls and ghosts and magic in good pagan and medieval fashion, Christians remember the Christian Reformation of the sixteenth century when the Gospel of Jesus Christ swept across Europe, shattering a thoroughly corrupt Christendom and granting everlasting life to millions of lost souls.

On the last day of October 1517 Martin Luther, a university professor in Germany, published 95 propositions for debate on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg. Someone took Luther's Latin propositions, translated them into German, printed them, and distributed them to the people. Luther had intended an ecclesiastical and academic debate; God intended to save souls, advance his kingdom, and radically change the course of world history.

Less than a year later, Luther was summoned to appear before the papal legate, an Italian named Jacopo di Vio de Gaeta, who called himself Thomas Cardinal Cajetan, in Augsburg. Gabriel Venetus in Rome had ordered Luther to be seized, "bound in chains, fetters and handcuffs" and sent immediately to Rome, but Elector Frederick had intervened on the principle that Germans were not to be tried in foreign courts. In Augsburg Cajetan demanded that Luther retract all criticism of indulgences. When Luther refused, Cajetan exploded in rage, but Luther was again protected from the wrath of the "Holy Apostolic Church" by Elector Frederick. In 1520, Luther was excommunicated by the pope. On December 10, 1520, Luther publicly burned the papal bull of excommunication and canon law in open defiance of Church authority.

The 20 year old Emperor, Charles V, of the Holy Roman Empire, a devout and loyal subject of the Roman Church, now summoned Luther to appear before the Diet of Worms to face the united wrath of Church and State. There, before the assembled princes, nobles, bishops, and the Emperor himself, Luther faced his greatest challenge: The assembled pomp and might of the medieval Church and State were arrayed against him. The traditions, dogmas, and practices of a millennium were there to judge him, a

wild boar rampaging through God's vineyard, in the words of the reigning pope. The spokesman for the Powers demanded that Luther recant his writings – essays such as *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *An Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, and *The Liberty of a Christian Man*. To the surprise of almost everyone, and the outrage of the papal representative, Luther asked for a day's delay, which the Emperor granted.

Luther, perhaps better than most scholars since that time, understood the import of this assembly, this question, and this answer. For a thousand years the Roman Church had claimed and enforced a monopoly on God and truth, at least in that tiny appendage of the Eurasian land mass called Western Europe. It impudently claimed that it was the sole repository of revelation on Earth, the author of Scripture itself, privy to traditions so heavenly that the apostles had not even written them down, the guardian of the theosophy of Christian men, and God's representative on Earth. The development of its dogma was the unfolding of Truth Itself, and it could not err. For a thousand years, millions of people had believed these megalomaniacal claims. Kings and princes and Emperors had been overawed and humbled by the Church. When Luther faced the assembled powers at Worms, he was confronting not merely the current Emperor and the reigning bishop, but a thousand years of history. He wanted his answer to be remembered for another thousand years.

Pressed for a simple yes or no response, Luther gave the speech he knew he must give. First, he acknowledged that the books in question were all his. He refused to dodge the issue by denying his authorship or attempting some other evasion. Second, like a good theologian and logician, he rightly divided his books. He pointed out that some of his writings were simple statements of accepted Christian truth, pastoral in nature, and that even some of his opponents had admitted that every Christian could benefit by reading them. To denounce those writings would be a sin. Third, Luther distinguished other writings in which he had attacked the doctrines and lives of the papacy and papists. Their scandals were well known, and to denounce those writings would also be a sin. Fourth, he

said some of his writings were attacks on individuals who opposed his theology; he admitted that he had sometimes been harsh; and he apologized for any undue severity in those writings. He admitted that he was but a sinful man who could err, but his doctrinal errors must be demonstrated from Scripture. He said:

So it is that, because of my teaching, danger, dissension, and conflicts have arisen in the world. So yesterday I was admonished about them in the strongest terms. But I have seen what has happened and what is happening. And I must say that for me it is a joyful spectacle to see that passions and conflicts arise over the Word of God. For that is how the Word of God works! As the Lord Jesus said, "I came to send not peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." And so we must weigh carefully how wonderful and how awful our Lord is in his secret counsels. We must be sure that those things we do to banish strife (if in so doing we undertake to condemn the Word of God) do not rather lead to a flood of unbearable evil. Then it might be that the government of this young, noble prince Charles (on whom next to God we hope for so much) would become sick unto death. I could call on many examples from Scripture – Pharaoh, the King of Babylon, the Kings of Israel – that would show how there were brought utterly to earth when they tried to free their kingdoms from strife by means of their own wisdom.

Notice what Luther did:

(1) He did not back away from confrontation with the combined powers of Europe; his delay only heightened the anticipation and focused greater attention on his words.

(2) He candidly acknowledged that the books in question were his, thus guaranteeing a direct and head-on collision with the pretentious potentates of Christendom.

(3) He carefully differentiated between his books, pointing out that to denounce any of them would be a sin.

(4) He rejoiced that his teaching had caused danger, dissension and conflicts in the world, for this is precisely the initial effect the Gospel has on society; and he warned against trying to keep the peace by compromising the Word of God.

(5) Luther put the young Emperor himself on notice that he too had a King in Heaven and had better be careful in his judgments, reminding him of Pharaoh, Belshazzar, and the many sinful Kings of Israel.

But his persecutors did not relent. They demanded an answer "without horns or teeth." They got one.

Since then your majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns or teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture and by plain reason (I do not believe in the authority of either popes

or councils by themselves, for it is plain that they have often erred and contradicted each other) in those Scriptures that I have presented, for my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me, Amen.

One Spanish observer said that Luther, in the gathering darkness, raised his hands above his head in the gesture of triumph used by German knights. Some observers shouted, "To the fire! To the fire!"

Despite the efforts of the "Holy Apostolic Church," Luther was not burned alive as so many other saints had been murdered by the Roman Church for centuries. He lived another 25 years, writing, translating, and organizing. Out of those writings, and the writings of other Reformers, came what are generally thought of as the principles of the Reformation: justification by faith alone, salvation by grace alone through the merits of Christ alone, all to the glory of God alone. And those principles are most important Christian truths that had been smothered by Antichrist for a millennium. They are truths that are under attack today by men who claim to be Christians and Protestants, some of whom are pastors of nominally Reformed churches.

But there are other principles of the Reformation, even more fundamental than these, and they can be seen in Luther's peroration. First, he states his axiomatic acceptance of the Scriptures: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason..." Scripture was Luther's axiomatic starting point, his sole authority. He talked about this principle so much it became known as the *Schriftprinzip*. Here are just a few of his remarks about the axiom of Scripture (the numbers following each paragraph are the paragraph numbers in *What Luther Says*, a compendium of his writings):

The matter of supreme importance to us is to appreciate the value and use of Scripture, that is, to know that it is a witness to all the articles of Christ, and the highest witness besides – the witness that exceeds by far all miracles. Christ indicates this to the rich man (*Luke 16:29-31*)... The dead may deceive us, but Scripture cannot.... So Christ wants to emphasize it even more than his appearance. He does not say: Why do you not want to believe the women who told you that I had risen? Nor does he say: Why do you not want to believe the angels who bore witness to my resurrection? He simply directs them from himself to the Word and Scripture [194].

Though people were to place all books of all faculties on Earth before us, we still could not acquire from them a knowledge of the origin of Adam, sin, and death, or of the effect of sin; for Holy Scripture alone teaches these things. This is why we should study it, for through it we become wiser than the entire rest of the world. Whoever does not consult Scripture will know nothing whatever [201].

This I say that we may see how richly Christ has requited the papists for calling his Scripture dark and dangerous and driving it from the field. He let them read a dead heathen [Aristotle] in whose writings is no real science [knowledge], but pure darkness. And what I have said is the very best of Aristotle. I shall say nothing of the passages in which he is thoroughly poisonous and deadly. All the schools for higher learning deserve to be ground to powder. Nothing more infernal and satanic than they are ever has come or ever will come on Earth [232].

We should observe with particular care that the apostle attributes such authority to Scripture that we are under no obligation to accept anything not asserted in it... we should likewise reject all non-Scriptural doctrine [259].

Scripture is to be understood alone through that Spirit who wrote it. This Spirit you cannot find more surely present and active anywhere than in these Sacred Scriptures, which he himself wrote. Our endeavor must, therefore, not be to put aside Scripture and to direct our attention to the merely human writings of the fathers. On the contrary, putting aside all human writings, we should spend all the more and all the more persistent labor on Holy Scriptures alone.... Or tell me, if you can, who is the final judge when statements of the fathers contradict themselves? In this event, the judgment of Scripture must decide the issue, which cannot be done if we do not give Scripture the first place...so that it is in itself the most certain, most easily understood, most plain, is its own interpreter, approving, judging, and illuminating all the statements of all men.... Therefore, nothing except the divine words are to be the first principles for Christians; all human words are conclusions drawn from them and must be brought back to them and approved by them [267].

The doctrine of Scripture should be approved even if Herod presents it and commits nothing but murder besides. Just so, on the other hand, the doctrine of men should not be approved, even if St. Peter, Paul, or an angel presents it and produces a cloudburst of miracles besides [277].

But there is another principle of the Reformation, actually part of the axiom of Scripture stated in another way: The laws of logic. Notice that Luther rejects the authority of popes and councils because they contradict each other: "I do not believe in the authority of either popes or councils by themselves, for it is plain that they have often erred and contradicted each other." The Reformation began with a rejection of contradiction and logical paradox, not an embrace of it. Those who today claim to be Reformed, and yet praise paradox, have abandoned this principle of the Reformation.

Unlike modern theologians who find in contradiction, paradox, antinomy, mystery, and tension a sign of divine "inspiration," "spirituality," and "piety," Luther rejected

contradiction as error: "They [popes and councils] have often erred and contradicted each other." It may seem elementary to the reader that error ought not to be believed, but in the chaos called contemporary philosophy, that elementary point is denied. For example, the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, regarded as co-founder (with Alvin Plantinga) of a contemporary philosophical movement misnamed "Reformed Epistemology," wrote in his little book, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Eerdmans, 1984): "Some of what God wishes us to believe may be fit and proper for us as his 'children' to believe, yet strictly speaking false" (99). The Neo-orthodox taught that it was possible for God to reveal himself through falsehoods. Truth itself is denied by modern "Reformed" theologians and philosophers.

What these theologians and philosophers deny is what Gordon Clark called the "primacy of truth." He explained the concept in his book *Religion, Reason and Revelation*:

The primacy of truth will mean that our voluntary actions ought to conform to the truth. Obviously sometimes they do not. If it is true that worshiping God is good, we ought to worship him. Perhaps we choose not to worship God, but the truth is superior in right to our will. This way of putting the matter extends as well to the voluntary choice of belief. We may choose to believe a truth, or we may choose to believe a lie. Both types of choice actually occur. But the primacy of truth means that we ought to believe the truth and we ought not to believe the lie [105].

Luther accepted what Clark later called the primacy of truth. Some contemporary philosophers do not. Because of his acceptance of the laws of logic and the principle of non-contradiction, Luther wrote:

Passages of Scripture that are opposed to one another must, of course, be reconciled, and to one must be given a meaning which agrees with the sense of the other; for it is certain that Scripture cannot disagree with itself [220].

Holy Scripture must certainly be clearer, plainer, and more explicit than the writings of all others, because by it, as by a writing clearer and more reliable, all teachers prove their statements; and they want their writings to be confirmed and clarified by it. But surely no one can prove an obscure statement with a more obscure statement. Therefore, we must needs turn to Scripture with the writings of all teachers and from that source get our judgment and verdict concerning them. For Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writing and teaching on Earth [226].

I have learned to hold only the Holy Scripture inerrant. All other writings I so read that, however learned or holy they may be, I do not hold what they teach to be true unless they prove by Scripture or reason that it must be so [264].

There is still another principle of the Reformation that is largely forgotten today: the right of private judgment. Those who defend church tradition and church authority and heap scorn on “Lone Rangers,” “schismatics,” and individualists echo the tyrants of Rome. Standing alone before the assembled powers of Europe, Luther said, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.” In doing this, Luther was imitating Elijah, who thought he alone was left; and Daniel, who alone faced the lions and became ruler of Babylon; and Christ, standing alone before the powers of Judaism and pagan Rome; and Paul, who said no one stood with him at his trial; and Athanasius, who opposed all the other bishops; and Wycliffe, and Hus, and many more. The Lord has frequently raised up such heroic individuals, standing alone on the Word of God, challenging the judgments of kings, councils, and popes. The defenders of church authority and tradition are not worthy to lick their boots.

Luther was not putting forth some Jiminy Cricket philosophy of “let your conscience be your guide”; he was setting forth the Biblical principle that the only reliable guide is Scripture, and it is the right of all men to read and interpret Scripture for themselves, according to the logical rules that Scripture itself contains. As for the so-called church fathers, Luther wrote, “Scripture should be placed alongside Scripture in a right and proper way. He who can do this best is the best of the fathers” (268). All those suffering from veneration of the “Church Fathers” should read that last sentence again. Luther wrote:

St. Peter addressed these words to all Christians, clergy and laity, male and female, young and old, of whatever state or condition they may have been. It follows that every Christian should know the ground of, and reason for, his faith and be able to maintain and defend it if necessary. But up to this time reading the Scripture has been forbidden the laity....

When you are about to die, I shall not be with you; neither will the pope. If you then do not know the ground of your hope but merely say: I will believe as the councils, the pope and the fathers have believed, the devil will answer: Yes, but what if they were in error? Then he has won and will drag you down to Hell.

Therefore we must know what we believe, namely, what God’s Word is, not what the pope and the holy fathers believe or say. For you must place no confidence whatever in any person, but in the bare word of God [239].

Bishops, the pope, the learned, and all have the right to teach; but the sheep are to judge whether they are teaching what Christ says or what a stranger says.... Therefore we let bishops and councils decide and establish whatever they please. But if we have God’s Word before us, we, and not they, are to decide whether it is right or wrong [270].

From this right of private judgment springs the Biblical principle of freedom of religion, so much opposed by the three medieval religions now at war among themselves in the twenty-first century: Romanism, Islam, and Judaism. Tragically, many who claim to be Christian and Protestant also oppose freedom of religion and the institutional separation of church and state. Luther saw that Christianity implied freedom of conscience and separation of church and state:

Moreover, everyone believes at his own risk what he does believe. He must see to it for himself that he believes what is right. A man can no more believe or disbelieve for me than he can go to Hell or to Heaven for me; and he can no more drive me to faith or unbelief than he can open or shut Heaven or Hell for me. Since, then, belief or unbelief is a matter of everyone’s conscience, and since this does not diminish secular power, this power should be satisfied and tend to its own business and let men believe one thing or another, as they are able and willing, and should constrain no one by force. For faith is a voluntary act to which no one can be forced. It is, in fact, a divine act, done in the spirit, certainly not a work which an external power should enforce and create [1004].

Faith will not force and press anyone to accept the Gospel.... But here you see the pope errs and does wrong when he presumes to drive people by force; for the Lord commanded the disciples to do no more than preach the Gospel. And that is what the disciples did; they preached the Gospel and let him get it who wanted it. They did not say: Believe, or I will kill you [1410].

To the end of the world men should not mix these two powers [church and state] as was done at the time of the Old Testament among the Jewish people. But they must remain severed and separated from each other if we are to preserve the true Gospel and the true faith.... For all reach for the sword. The Anabaptists, [Thomas] Muenzer, the pope, and all bishops wanted to rule and reign – but not in their calling. That is the wretched devil’s way. ... The devil does all this. He takes no holiday until he has mixed the two swords [860].

We should learn to separate spiritual and temporal power from each other as far as Heaven from Earth, for the pope has greatly obscured this matter and has mixed the two powers... [861].

These also are principles of the Reformation, largely forgotten among those who call themselves Reformed. We ought to remember and defend the *solas*, but we ought also to remember and defend the equally Biblical principles of logical consistency, Scripture alone, the right of private judgment, and separation of church and state.