

Remembering Luther's Fight A Biographical Sketch

Introduction

There was nothing *small* nor *insignificant* about the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. As church historian, Philip Schaff, observed: "The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, next to the introduction of Christianity, the greatest event in history." Such an accolade given to this historical affair was certainly not without good reason. For as Schaff would go on to demonstrate, the Protestant Reformation was "the chief propelling force in the history of modern civilization." And the basis for this can be seen on many different fronts by what it both preceded and necessitated - such as "the corruptions of the [Roman Catholic] papacy, the decline of monasticism and scholastic theology, the growth of mysticism, the revival of letters, the resurrection of the Greek and Roman classics, the invention of the printing press, [Columbus'] discovery of a new world, the publication of the Greek New Testament, the general spirit of enquiry, [and] the striving after national independence and personal freedom."

Taking all of these things in, Philip Schaff asserted that the "[Protestant] Reformation was neither a revolution nor a restoration, though including elements of both. It was negative and destructive towards error, positive and constructive towards truth; it was conservative as well as progressive...it burst the shell of mediaeval forms, struck out new paths, and elevated Europe to a higher plane of intellectual, moral and spiritual culture than it had ever attained before."

But certainly the most important and significant feature of the Protestant Reformation, was the fact that this was a work of God's divine providence rediscovering *biblical Christianity*. For it reintroduced God's Word to the common people, recovered the gospel of His sovereign grace in Jesus Christ, and reestablished the church as the body of Christ with Christ ruling her as her sole Head by His word alone. The Protestant Reformation therefore was a spiritual awakening. But to be even more specific, it was an *evangelical awakening* - since it proclaimed the Bible as having both the final and supreme authority for faith and practice - and it declared as loudly as it could that salvation is by grace *alone* through faith *alone* on account of Christ *alone* to the glory of God *alone*. This was the Protestant Reformation in its purity.

But where and with whom did the Protestant Reformation begin? If such a massive and colossal movement of God's Spirit started at one point - where would we find that place and even that person? Well, the answer to this question takes us to Germany and to a man by the name of **Martin Luther**. There is no human figure more central to the Protestant Reformation than Luther. While it must be admitted that Luther was not the first voice in the Middle Ages calling for reform in the Church (preceding him were men like John Wycliffe (1329-1384) in Great Britain and John Hus (1373-1415) in Bohemia); yet, Luther would go further and achieve more than these men of God could have ever hoped for.

The chief reason that Luther was the catalyst for the Reformation, whereas Wycliffe and Hus would only serve as forerunners to this great event - is because Luther did not simply attack the pope in his belly but attacked him in his doctrine. Luther himself understood this. He once said of John Hus, that he "attacked and castigated only the pope's evil and scandalous life, but I have attacked the pope's doctrine and overthrown him." Though Luther certainly began his move toward reform by calling attention to the moral abuses and corruption of the Catholic papacy; yet, he eventually would go much deeper. Luther would ultimately stand against the entire Catholic system of authority and salvation and tear it down by the truth of God's Word.

This is why Luther has been described as "God's volcano." For he was a great mountain of a man, but a mountain on fire. And when he finally erupted on the Medieval church, what came out was a torrent of Bible truth (mixed in with Luther's own raw, rude, and rugged personality) that God would use to set the world of 16th century Europe ablaze with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Concerning this fact in how God chose to use Luther as His blunt instrument to ignite the Reformation, Luther himself mused on this, when he said: *Do not think that the gospel can be advanced without tumult, trouble, and uproar. You cannot make a pen of a sword. The Word of God is a sword; it is war, overthrow, trouble, destruction, poison; it meets the children of Ephraim, as Amos says, like a bear on the road, or like a lioness in the wood.*

For Luther, facing both the moral and doctrinal corruptions of the Catholic church, he had no category for confronting this in a half-baked, nonchalant, effeminate spirit. The gospel was under siege and it would take a man of force and fire to retrieve it, preserve it and propagate it against its enemies. Therefore the beginning of the

Protestant Reformation had to be started by a Martin Luther. In the infinite wisdom of God's providence, he would save and redeem this sinful German man, whose rustic, raw bone, moral courage combined with his natural genius, indomitable energy and fiery temper would be just the ingredients needed, under saving grace, to expose and destroy the greatest spiritual tyranny which the world ever saw. Luther was God's man serving God's purpose to recover God's gospel in an age of deep spiritual darkness. As church historian, Michael Reeves, noted under this fact about Luther: *[Luther] certainly...was no stained glass ideal. Perhaps, though, such a red-blooded and blunt man was just what was needed for the momentous and seemingly impossible task of challenging all Christendom and turning it around. He was shock-therapy for the world. And, somehow, his personality seems fit for the gospel he uncovered: he inspires no moral self-improvement in would-be disciples; instead, his evident humanity testifies to a sinner's absolute need for God's grace.* So the root of the Protestant Reformation, by God's design, began with Martin Luther.

Luther lived for sixty-three years. He was born in 1483 on November 10th in Eisleben, Germany; and died in 1546 on February 18th in the same town of his birth, though at that time his residence was in Wittenberg. A broad sketch of Luther's life can be divided up into two main sections. There are the *early years* which start with Luther's birth in 1483 to his permanent break with the Catholic church in 1521. And then we have the second half of Luther's life (which we could call *the later years*) that begin in the spring of 1521 with his exile to the Wartburg Castle to his death in 1546 in Eisleben.

The fruit and legacy of Luther's life is manifold. In Stephen Nichols' book, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of his Life and Thought* - Nichols highlights what he considers as the three major features of Luther's legacy. First and foremost, *Luther served as the Reformation's architect.* Secondly, *Luther shaped the presuppositions that defined the Reformation.* We know these presuppositions as the "Five Solas" - *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, and soli Deo gloria.* The Reformation slogans find their root in Luther's thinking, and continue to be what defines historic Evangelical Christianity to this day. Thirdly, *Luther's tireless commitment to the church assures him a prominent place in its history.* On this point, Stephen Nichols wrote: *Not only did Luther take a bold stand and point the church in the right direction, he committed his life to leading the church in the right path. Luther worked tirelessly, and often at great personal sacrifice, to see that the church thrived in his lifetime and beyond.*

And under this point, there are a host of further contributions which Luther made that has given his legacy a lasting endurance that is retained to this very day. For instance, we owe to Luther the principle of taking the Bible as our highest authority. We also are indebted to him for the right of laypeople to read the Bible, having a Bible in our own language, having been taught to read so that we can read the Bible in our own language, and having the Bible preached to us in our own language. In fact, just the preaching of God's Word itself in a corporate worship service was the result of Luther's reforming efforts. All these blessings, which we commonly take for granted, were the fruit of Luther's labors.

Moreover, the fact and reality of congregational singing is also a part of Luther's legacy. Before Luther's day, congregational singing was virtually non-existent. So having the freedom and joy of singing in the church (and even singing in our own language) is something we can thank Luther for. And finally, it has been said that "Martin Luther invented the Christian family." What does this mean? Gene Edward Veith, in his biography of Martin Luther, called *A Place to Stand*, explains this accolade paid to Luther: *The Christian family, though not of course invented by Luther, was nevertheless part of his legacy. Before Luther, those who wanted to be truly spiritual rejected marriage and having children as being worldly, choosing instead the supposedly higher calling of the monastery, the convent, or the priest's cell. Luther, though, stressed marriage and parenthood as among the highest Christian callings. Before Luther, many marriages and the approach to parenthood were worldly, with both wives and children often treated like mere possessions.*

Luther and Katie [his wife], in their very public household, modeled the loving relationship between husband and wife and the loving relationship between parents and children. The spiritual exercises that took place in a legalistic way in the monasteries and convents were transformed by the gospel and brought into the home, with family devotions, the father catechizing the children, the whole family singing hymns together, and Bible reading. Luther brought out the spirituality of the home.

So there is much that we can be grateful to God for in how He used Martin Luther to basically bring the church back to the Bible. But of all the things that can be said about Luther, there is perhaps no feature of his entire

life which engenders more interest than those things which he fought for - which brings us to the subject of this address: ***Remembering Luther's Fight***. And specifically, what I want to bring to your attention under this subject, is remembering Luther's ***fight for conversion*** and his ***fight for recovering the gospel***. These two fights, above all, are the most commemorated and celebrated of Luther's life. And from these battles, (which were very personal to Luther and yet at the same time used by God for His greater purpose) there is much for us to learn in our own day. Because on the one hand, the genuine conversion of sinners to Christ is always a matter of the greatest concern; and on the other hand, recovering and preserving the gospel is as much a need today in many respects as it was at the beginning of the 16th century. So then, to begin our study, let's start by remembering -

I. LUTHER'S FIGHT FOR CONVERSION.

When Martin Luther came to faith in Christ in the year of 1518, his conversion took place on the heels of a long and agonizing struggle that began in earnest thirteen years earlier in the summer of 1505. At the beginning of that year, Luther had just received his highly prized master's degree from the University of Erfurt. Luther was on his way now to becoming a lawyer. But on July 2nd, as Luther was heading back to the university following a short visit with his parents in Mansfeld, he was suddenly caught in a terrifying thunderstorm. And in a moment, without any warning, a single bolt of lightning struck right next to Luther literally knocking him to the ground. Luther's immediate reaction was a solemn vow and a cry of desperation for the salvation of his soul. Luther exclaimed: "Saint Anne help me! I will become a monk!" With this pledge, Luther's life for the next thirteen years would be a fight for conversion.

Now for us living in the 21st century, it is really difficult to appreciate how serious and life altering Luther's vow was to become a monk. Why would this be Luther's reaction to almost being killed by lightning? Where would such a conviction come from to make this kind of vow? Well, to answer these questions we need to understand what Luther, and all Europeans of his day, were taught as to the way of salvation.

To begin with, we must remember that there was only one church (at least for the West) which was the Roman Catholic Church. There was the Eastern Orthodox Church which separated from Rome in the eleventh century - but she was just considered the "black sheep" of the same family. Now growing up in Europe during the 16th century, you would have been taught from childhood that "without Father Pope there could be no Church; [and] without Mother Church there could be no salvation" (Reeves). But the way this was unpacked created a complex system of "salvation by works" which had buried the biblical gospel out of sight.

To understand "salvation" according to Roman Catholicism, we can break it down like this: first, you must be "baptized." This takes place in infancy, and by this act you are born again and your sins have been washed away. But those sins which have been taken care of in baptism apply only to the penalty of original sin. This means that your inherited guilt from Adam has been cleansed but you still have to bear the penalty of your own personal sins.

This brings us to the next need for salvation which is "confession and penance." While it is true that your personal sins can be forgiven through the merits of Christ on the cross, yet this forgiveness can only take place if you remember to confess all your sins orally to a human priest. The priest stands between you and God with divine authority to forgive your sins, absolving you of guilt, and then reconciling you to God. Thus seeing the priest for confession is mandatory for salvation. And once you confess your sins to the priest, you will not only receive forgiveness but you will also be given a prescription for penance so that you can make up for what you have done.

But even with this, you still have no assurance of being saved. First of all, confession and penance only takes care of eternal punishment that sin deserves. You however will still have to suffer temporal punishment for your sins. And that punishment will take place after death in "purgatory", where the fires of sin's punishment will cleanse you after centuries of torment until you are worthy to enter heaven. But your time in purgatory can be cut short. This is made possible by all the merits of past saints whose good deeds have filled the church's bank account of virtues. And their merits can be applied to you or your loved ones by the means of a "get-out-of-jail-free" card called "indulgences." By the means of indulgences, the church has the authority to release anyone from purgatory.

And if you're wondering how God's "grace" fits into this system of salvation, it is something which can only be dispensed by the church through what is called "the sacraments." The sacraments were seven taps of grace, as it were, that only the pope, bishops, and priests had the authority to turn on for anyone they chose. These sacraments were baptism, confirmation, the Mass, penance, marriage, ordination, and last rites. Through these sacraments and the power of the priesthood, it was believed that grace was infused into a person enabling them to

do good works which had the potential to be good enough for God's acceptance. Therefore, by the teaching of this whole system, a sinner was never assured of being right with God because their only hope was held in their futile efforts that would never truly measure up to sinless perfection and thus having God's acceptance.

But if there was a way to be more certain than others of securing a right standing with God, for a European in the 16th century, that way would be by entering the *monastery*. In other words, if you really want to be right with God, become either a monk or a nun. Now why was this considered the more certain way to salvation? Answering this question, consider how Gene Edward Veith described it: *Earning...salvation was much easier and more certain in the monastery, where a conscientious believer could devote all of his attention and make it his full-time job to save his soul. The ordinary people who worked for a living, who married and had children, and who were preoccupied with such "worldly" concerns could also be saved, of course - leaving your lands and money to the church after your death scored a lot of merit, so many did, funding the foundations that supported the monasteries - but if you wanted to follow the "path of perfection," you would become a monk or a nun. Taking the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience that made you a member of a religious order was considered to be as efficacious as baptism in returning you to a state of innocence. And the intense life of self-denial, confession, prayer, and worship was designed to keep it that way.*

So on that hot sultry day in July of 1505 when Martin Luther vowed to become a monk, he was essentially pledging to give his life for the purpose of saving his soul. Moreover, on a personal level, Luther had struggled for several years with an overwhelming sense of guilt that tormented his soul. And living under the Catholic system of salvation this should be no surprise. But with Luther's own very sensitive nature, he was living at that time with constant fear of being cast into hell at any moment. What's more, he was also angry at God for even doing such a thing. Thus, when that lightning bolt struck, all of Luther's worst fears combined with his agonizing guilt married into one solemn vow prescribed by the Catholic church for sure salvation - "I will become a monk."

Now for the next thirteen years, Luther would enter a struggle of his soul like he had never known before. But Luther would throw himself into this quest for salvation that would exceed the zeal of all his contemporaries in the monastery. In fact, even after his conversion to Christ, he still kept up many of his habits as a monk for six more years. In his own words, he testified to this period: *I myself was a monk for twenty years. I tortured myself with praying, fasting, keeping vigils, and freezing - the cold alone was enough to kill me - and I inflicted upon myself such pain as I would never inflict again, even if I could...If any monk ever got to heaven by monkery, then I should have made it. All my monastery companions who knew me can testify to that.*

Suffice it to say, Martin Luther exhausted every prescribed method for salvation by the Roman Catholic Church, but to his dismay he could not reach salvation. This meant that no matter how conscientiously he obeyed every rule of his monastic order and practiced every mortification, yet his inward spiritual torment and agony only grew worse. Or as Roland Bainton put it: "[Luther] tried the way of good works and discovered that he could never do enough to save himself."

This can be seen, for example, in 1507, as he officiated his first Mass and barely got through it. As he stood at the altar, holding the elements that were believed to be transformed into the actual blood and body of Christ re-sacrificed again - Luther was overwhelmed with terror. How could a sinful man like him, bear to have direct, unmediated contact with the holy God? Such a question like this would begin plaguing Luther in all his endeavors.

And then there was his pilgrimage to the city of Rome in 1510. There was no greater privilege for any Catholic than to make this trip to the "holy" city. Luther was thrilled. But Luther's excitement would give in at once to disillusionment. Rome was a city of thieves, brothels, and hypocrites. Luther was shocked. But despite the immorality, he still tried to make it a trip worthy of his salvation. Thus he decided to climb the Scala Sancta - which was a large staircase, where Jesus supposedly climbed to appear before Pilate. By climbing it, kissing each step and repeating the Lord's Prayer, a pilgrim is promised the power to free a soul of his choice from purgatory. But for Luther, once he reached the top of the staircase, he simply said to himself in disbelief: "*Who knows whether it is true?*" Luther was full of doubts. And rightly so since no one under Catholicism could ever be truly certain of salvation.

But in 1511 there would be the beginning of a major turning point for Luther. Following his return from Rome, the providence of God would take Luther to the town of Wittenberg, where he would transfer to the Augustinian monastery and be placed under a man named *Johann Von Staupitz*. Dr. Staupitz was the vicar of the Augustinian monastery and the Bible professor of the newly established university. He had become known for

encouraging the Augustinian monks to read and study the Bible, and to go back to the founder of their order, Saint Augustine. For Luther then, Staupitz was a God-send. He became essentially Luther's pastor and counseled him not to fear Christ as his Judge but look to him as his Savior. For the first time in his life, Martin Luther was hearing the gospel.

But in addition to Staupitz pointing Luther to Christ, he also recommended Luther to take over as the Bible professor of the university. By this work of providence, in 1512, Luther would set himself to learn and expound God's Word. Slowly and gradually the light of the gospel would begin to breakthrough in Luther's dark tormented soul. From 1513-1518, Luther would prepare and teach lectures on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. Through this intensive exposure to God's Word (which forced Luther to deal strictly with the text of Scripture itself) he found himself growing increasingly at odds with reconciling the Bible with the teaching of Catholicism.

For example, in his work on the Psalms, Luther not only applied the kingly elements to Christ (which all Medieval interpreters did), but he also applied the suffering and servile elements to Christ as well. In fact, this understanding was especially acute for Luther when he prepared to teach on Psalm 22. Clearly this Psalm was referring to Christ. But it was Christ in agony and suffering and rejected by God. Luther wondered, why would Christ have known this kind of torment? Luther understood why he had such torments. He was sinful. But Jesus was not sinful. Why then should He cry out from the Cross, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Luther's only conclusion brought him to a gospel conclusion: Christ suffered God's rejection because He took to Himself our sins and for our sakes became sin, and so identified Himself with us as alienated from God.

Over the next five years, as Luther lectured from the Bible, there would be many other flashes like this of gospel light that would work to dispel the darkness in Luther's mind and take away the stumbling blocks which kept him from Christ. But it wasn't until the year of 1518, as Luther was lecturing a second time on the Psalms, that his fight for conversion finally came to its culmination. But the text of Scripture God would use to bring Luther to saving faith was not in the Psalms, but in Romans 1:17.

This was a passage Luther continued to come back to again and again. What plagued him about the passage was the whole concept of the justice of God. How could sinners meet God's demands to be righteous like Him when achieving such a righteousness is impossible? This was the final great stumbling block to Luther's conversion. But it was a stumbling block that gave Luther fits of anger at God. How could God demand such a thing as perfect righteousness from sinful people - and then punish them for not being what was impossible for them to achieve? Finally, however, God in His saving mercy gave Luther the understanding he needed which resulted in a genuine conversion to Jesus Christ. Remembering that greatest event of his life many years later, Luther testified: *I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather I hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.*

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.

After thirteen long and tortuous years pursuing salvation by his own efforts, Luther now came to see that it was not *his righteousness* that saves but the righteousness God has provided him through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Luther now realized that salvation was completely outside of himself. He could not contribute anything to make himself right with God. But he need not to fear this fact. For God in His mercy and love, had sent Christ into the world to live the life Luther could never live and die the death he really deserved - so that on Christ's sole account, through trusting Him alone, Luther would stand completely justified before God.

What incredible joy must have filled Luther's heart in those immediate moments following his conversion. And what relief as well. The fight was over. No more striving and struggling to earn God's favor. Jesus had done it all. Christ was Luther's righteousness. Moreover, out of this new spiritual position in Christ, Luther would also

begin living a new kind of life. Luther was now a new creation in Christ. And the overflow of this reality changed his attitude and desires toward God and man. Luther loved God and loved his neighbor.

But now that his fight for conversion was over, a new battle was quickly to ensue. Luther may have been changed by God's grace in Christ, but the rest of the world needed this change as well. Especially that which claimed to represent Christ on earth: the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, armed now with the authority of God's Word combined with his growing faith in Christ, Luther would begin a fight that would last him for the rest of his life. And this fight takes us now to the second and final section of our address:

II. LUTHER'S FIGHT FOR RECOVERING THE GOSPEL.

Now as we begin to unpack Luther's fight for recovering the gospel, I need to clarify something of great importance as far as historical context is concerned. While it has been believed by many that the Reformation (which was essentially Luther's gospel recovery) began in 1517, with the posting of Luther's 95 theses on the Castle door in Wittenburg - this assumption needs to be dismissed. First of all, as significant as Luther's 95 theses were, they were not written to be a Reformation manifesto. In fact, there was nothing in the 95 theses which pointed people to the heart of the gospel at all. The 95 theses made no mention of justification by faith alone nor even the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. There was no core Reformation thought in the 95 theses.

The truth is, the 95 theses were a call to an academic debate which did not question the use of relics nor indulgences, but only their misuse. Luther believed that the way the indulgences were being sold actually cheapened repentance; which at that time, was at the core of Luther's thinking. But Luther was still a dutiful son of Catholicism. As Michael Reeves points out in his introductory book on the Reformation, *The Unquenchable Flame: The theses were an attack on the mistreatment of indulgences from a monk who still worked within the thought-world of medieval Roman Catholicism. The theses affirmed the existence of purgatory and sought to defend the pope and indulgences from the bad name abuse would give them. In the ninety-five theses, Luther was being a good Catholic.*

Now it is true that the 95 theses created a stir which caused some Roman Catholic leaders to call for Luther's condemnation. But it was a stir that would have probably blown over had Luther not come to faith in Christ and embraced the biblical gospel a year after he posted his theses.

To be more accurate to Luther's own testimony and the facts of history, the Protestant Reformation truly began first at Luther's own conversion in 1518, and then quickly took shape in the public arena through *four* specific events: first, Luther's debate in Leipzig with John Eck in July of 1519. This debate centered on the issue of authority, asking the question: who has the final say - the Bible or the pope? Luther's answer was of course Scripture alone!

The second event took place between the months of August and November of 1520, when Luther penned and published three books that would be called *The Three Treatises*. These works went by the titles: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (August), *The Babylon Captivity of the Church* (October), and *The Freedom of the Christian* (November). In each of these books Luther basically tore down the walls of Catholicism's political and spiritual tyranny. In the first book, he called for "the priesthood of all believers" over against Catholicism's false division between the clergy and the laity. In the second book, Luther attacked the seven sacraments of the Catholic church. He reduced the seven down to two (baptism and the Lord's Supper); and then radically reshaped the remaining two. And in his third book, Luther simply expounded the gospel and how that through the preaching of the Word and faith in Christ alone we are truly united to Christ and set free from sin inheriting eternal life. It is not hard not imagine how each of these books created a firestorm for Luther with the Catholic church. Essentially, they demolished the complex system Catholicism had built to wield its power over all people.

The third event which publicized the Reformation that Luther was taking within the Church, was his response to the Pope's *papal bull*. On June 15th, 1520, Pope Leo X issued a decree against Luther. This was a personal declaration from the Pope listing forty-one statements found in Luther's writings; and warning anyone who held to these views that they would be condemned. As for Luther, he was forbidden to preach, his books were to be burned, and he must send a recantation to Rome. If he did not comply within 60 days, he and his followers would be declared heretics and excommunicated from the Church. Moreover, all legal authorities were obligated to seize Luther and send him to Rome.

Luther received the papal bull on October 10th, and in November he responded first by writing a tract called

“Against the Detestable Bull of the Antichrist”. And then on December 10th (exactly 60 days after Luther received the Pope’s decree), he took the document into the public square of Wittenburg and burned it. Not surprisingly, Luther was officially excommunicated from the Catholic church following this reaction (January 3rd, 1521).

But the final and greatest event which crystallized the Protestant Reformation in the public arena for Luther, was his appearance at the Imperial Diet in Worms on April 18th, 1521. Summoned to stand before the Holy Roman Emperor and all the German nobility to answer for his writings against the Church, Luther was called upon to do one thing: to recant of his writings. After requesting 24 hours to think over his answer, when he reappeared he gave what is now his all-famous reply which was the battle-cry for the Reformation: *Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, not embellished: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradict themselves, I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand. May God help me. Amen.*

Following this event, Luther would be exiled by a staged kidnapping to the Castle of Wartburg, where he would spend a year in solitude and give the German people the New Testament in their own language. And once he came out of exile, he returned to Wittenburg and began the great work of reforming the church in Germany which would last the rest of his life.

But at the heart of everything Luther did as a reformer, it was fighting for *the recovery of the gospel*. For Luther, this is what the Reformation was all about. Despite all the abuses and corruption which the Catholic Church was riddled with at that time, Luther’s ultimate battle with Rome was theological. Roman Catholicism had sabotaged the gospel of Jesus Christ. Luther therefore made it his lifelong mission to recover the gospel which Catholicism had buried underneath her man-made traditions and her system of a works-righteousness salvation.

This recovery effort was brought forth in several ways: first and foremost, it was by Luther’s translation of the Bible in the German language. The New Testament was completed in 1522 and the Old Testament was brought forth ten years later in 1532. This one achievement sealed the Reformation for Germany by placing God’s Word in the hands of the common people to read in their own language. And of course by giving the people a vernacular Bible, no one in Germany would be barred from reading the Gospel for themselves.

Secondly, Luther’s fight to recover the gospel took shape in his influence as a Bible professor, pastor, and mentor for the next generation. This can be seen in the production of Luther’s *Small Catechism* (1529) which would explain the theology of the Bible and Gospel for Children. And also there was the enormous affect Luther had on his university students by what would be called his “Table Talk.” These were informal discussions and exhortations Luther would give his students and other guests who would gather around the dinner table in Luther’s home. Through these “talks” Luther took great advantage to unpack the Gospel and shepherd the impressionable and hungry hearts who sat at his table.

Thirdly, Luther’s fight to recover the gospel certainly took its greatest shape in the form of preaching. The act of preaching was central to the Reformation since the Reformation gave centrality to the sermon. As Roland Bainton said of Luther: “The pulpit was higher than the altar, for Luther held that salvation is through the Word and without the Word the elements are devoid of sacramental quality, but the Word is sterile unless it is spoken.” And for Luther, he took this conviction to heart. From the years 1522 to his death in 1546, Luther preached some 6,000 sermons. He believed firmly that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom.10:17). Thus he knew that God would save as His Gospel was preached.

Finally, next to preaching the Gospel, Luther also gave his labors to writing and publishing books that would work to spread the Gospel as well. And without question, this is where Luther’s Gospel recovery efforts would have their longest lasting effects. For once Luther’s physical voice was silenced in 1546, his written voice would keep fighting to reestablish the Gospel for future generations. But of everything Luther penned for this purpose, there would be no book more prized and revered for recovering the Gospel, than Luther’s forceful, theological reply to Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) in 1525.

Originally titled in *Latin* as *De Servo Arbitrio* (which translated means “On the Enslaved Will”) - we have come to know this book by its more popular title, *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther himself regarded this book as the only book of two that he wished to be preserved. The other book for preservation was *The Small Catechism*.

But outside of these two books, Luther said you could burn everything else he wrote.

So by the mere fact that Luther would esteem *The Bondage of the Will* as holding that much importance in comparison to the rest of his writings (which fill 55 volumes in the English edition and 127 in the German) - it would serve us well to know what this book was about and why it was written. Because in truth, *The Bondage of the Will* actually crystallizes Luther's fight for recovering the Gospel in written form with greater clarity than anything he ever wrote. Regarding its place of importance among all the books written by the Protestant Reformers, B.B. Warfield (1851-1921) called *The Bondage of the Will* "the manifesto of the Reformation." He then went on to say: *It is the embodiment of Luther's reformation conceptions, the nearest to a systematic statement of them he ever made. It is the first exposition of the fundamental ideas of the Reformation in comprehensive form.*

Now as already mentioned, *The Bondage of the Will* was a personal reply that Luther had made to the famed Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus. At that time in European history, there was no one who could rival Erasmus in reading and writing the classical tongues. His greatest gift to that age (and even to the church) was his reproduction of the Greek New Testament. Luther himself felt great indebtedness to Erasmus for this publication. And in addition to this work as a scholar, Erasmus also sought to reform the Catholic church. He was repulsed at the abuses and corruption he witnessed in every part of Medieval Catholicism.

But the vision of reform for Erasmus was poles apart from Luther. Erasmus was not a theologian. In fact, he detested theology. For him, a reformation in the Catholic Church was a Christianity without Christ. It was nothing more than "a bald moralism", which said: "Be good and all will be well with you." Erasmus therefore saw nothing wrong with the doctrine of Catholicism. He applauded its high and impossible system of works-righteousness salvation.

Luther however, standing firmly against Rome's doctrine of salvation, was also at odds with Erasmus. But these two men had drawn swords over this issue until 1524. After much pressure from popes and princes, Erasmus reluctantly wrote his first and only attack against Luther. It was a small book he simply entitled, *A Discussion Concerning Free-Will*. Surprisingly, despite all the subjects he could have chosen to rebut Luther on, Erasmus took the heart of Luther's *doctrine* as the battle-ground.

For Luther though, he could not have been more pleased. In his reply to Erasmus (which came a year later), he actually thanked him for "attacking the real thing...the essential issue." And that "essential issue" was the nature of salvation as it related to human freedom. There was no subject more important for Luther than this. As far as he was concerned this matter was the centerpiece of the Reformation because it struck at the heart of the Gospel. Luther's reply therefore to Erasmus would be nothing less than a strong, thorough, dogmatic exposition regarding the biblical doctrine of salvation. What Luther would labor to do with all zeal, was to defend "the absolute exclusion of works from salvation, and the casting of the soul wholly upon the grace of God."

You see, for Erasmus, his idea of salvation was nothing more than a regurgitation of both Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian doctrine. While Erasmus strongly maintained that he believed salvation was by God's grace yet he would not concede it was *by grace alone*. Man must play some part and make some contribution to salvation, however small it may be. And for Erasmus, man's contribution was in his freedom to make the *final* decision as to whether God would save him or not. In other words, though man was a sinner yet his sinfulness did not impair his ability to apply himself to those things which would lead to salvation. In short, God may provide salvation but it is man's "free will" that makes it happen.

Luther was neither impressed nor convinced by the eloquence of Erasmus' words. In fact, Luther compared Erasmus' book to that of using gold and silver plates to carry feces! Luther's point was that the Erasmian gospel of Free Will was worthless and abominating, since it called no man to see his total helplessness as a sinner to merit salvation; and in turn, would not point men to the sole efficiency of God's grace to save. For Luther, nothing could be worse for sinners to hear than a message like this. Moreover, Luther called Erasmus' "free will" nothing more than a "pure fiction." The only thing man is free to do is "build houses, milk cows" and sin. But left to himself, Luther contended, no sinner would ever strive after God since they are completely ignorant of Him, paying Him no regard whatsoever, bound up in a corrupt sinful nature. Furthermore, in our sinfulness, Luther maintained we would not even know we're sinners unless the Spirit of God convicted us of our sin. So rather than celebrating human freedom like Erasmus, Luther declared that man's freedom as a sinner only reveals his desperation and need to be saved. Therefore, since man in his sin has no power in himself to do any good that

would merit salvation, then he must be exclusively dependent on God's grace alone in Christ alone if he would be truly saved.

Articulating this truth to Erasmus (which is the Gospel in a nutshell), Luther essentially gave his greatest fight for recovering the gospel. For this was not some academic debate between two scholars. This was a battle for preserving and propagating the only message that will redeem sinful man. In fact, even throughout Luther's reply to Erasmus, he made personal evangelistic appeals to the humanist scholar. Luther wasn't trying to win an argument he was seeking to unpack with the greatest clarity the only way sinners can be saved - and Erasmus unwittingly gave Luther the platform upon which to do so. Some years after Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will*, he recalled in one of his many "Table Talks" what was at the core of that controversy, which he declared would always be the stand he would take: *Free will brought us sin and death...Every part of us suffers corruption. So my position is this: Anyone who thinks that by free will he can do anything says "no" to Christ. I have always taken this position in my writings, especially against Erasmus, one of the world's most learned scholars. I stand resolutely by my thesis because I know it is true. I will stand by it even if all the world opposes it. Divine truth stands.*

Conclusion

As we draw this study to a close there are **four** lessons I want to leave for us to glean both from Luther's fight for conversion and his fight for recovering the gospel:

1. Luther's conversion came by the objective means of God's Word alone. It wasn't until Luther was being confronted by the truth of Scripture through voice of Staupitz and pouring over its pages in his study - that he finally heard the Gospel. Before then he could not see the Gospel in the Catholic Mass, the confessional, or in a myriad of man-made traditions and rules which had in fact buried the Gospel out of sight. Rather, it was when he had nothing but the Word before him that Christ was revealed to him by grace.

What did the apostle Paul remind Timothy, in Second Timothy 3:15, but that God's Word is "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus?" This is what Luther discovered. He gained wisdom for salvation by the Word of God. Practically, this should remind us that the teaching of God's Word is sufficient for bringing sinners to faith in Christ. This means that the preaching of God's Word is enough to give sinners the wisdom they need to know how they must be put right with God. Through the Word alone is the Gospel revealed.

Moreover, it is by the preaching of the Word that God has ordained to bring sinners to Himself. As Romans 10:17 declares: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Through the proclamation of God's Word, the voice of Christ is effectually heard calling sinners savingly to Himself. Thus any other method employed by the church that trumps the preaching and teaching of God's Word will essentially hide the Gospel from sinners. This is what Catholicism did in Luther's day (and is still doing). And this is also what many so-called evangelical churches are doing in our day - by turning the pulpit into a psychiatrist couch or a comedic platform or just simply obscuring the Gospel message by adding unbiblical imperatives for salvation (like walking an aisle, praying a prayer, signing a card, raising your hand, and many other things like this). May we learn from Luther: the teaching of God's Word is sufficient for the conversion of sinners.

2. Luther came to realize that salvation was entirely outside of himself. He discovered through God's Word that there could not be any shred of merit found in himself for God's acceptance, it was all in Christ alone. On this glorious point, Luther once declared: *Christ must be everything: the beginning, the middle, and the end of our salvation. We must lay Him down as the first or foundation stone, rest the others and intermediate ones on Him, and also attach the rafters or the roof to Him. He is the first, the middle, and the last rung in the ladder to heaven. Through Him we must begin, must continue, and must complete our progress to life.*

But how many people are there in the visible church who simply don't get this? So many appear like Luther in his pre-conversion state: counting on their baptism, church membership, or their long record of service in the church as their merit-badge to win God's favor. And like Luther, they are sadly self-deceived. All our righteousness is nothing but filthy putrid rags in the sight of holy God (Isa.64:6). We have nothing to contribute. Only the righteousness of Jesus Christ can put us into a right relationship with God - and keep us there! As Jesus said of Himself: "No one comes to the Father but by Me." Salvation is outside of ourselves - it is by Christ alone!

3. When the Gospel is being sabotaged we must fight for its recovery and renew its clarity. From the time of his conversion in 1518 to his death in 1546, this was Luther's ministry at large. Through pen, preaching, and pastoring

Luther stood without compromise, at great sacrifice to himself, for the Gospel to be heard and understood in his own generation and beyond. And certainly, by his response to Erasmus (as we have seen), this was his deepest passion. All those years he spent in the darkness of Catholicism trying to save himself was a bondage he wished on no one. Therefore once God saved him, bringing him to Christ through the Gospel, Luther could not help feeling the greatest passion for making the Gospel known with certainty and clarity.

And should this not be true for us? Look at the many ways the Gospel is being sabotaged today: through pragmatism, postmodernism, religious psychology, traditionalism, and even through a revived Pelagianism and a persevering Semi-Pelagianism that holds so many churches in a death grip. Beloved, we have as much a need to stand for the Gospel and fight for its recovery in our own day, as did Luther in his. Do not take for granted that just because we may not be Roman Catholic, that the Gospel is being fully proclaimed and all is well in our churches. Nothing could be further from the truth! A Gospel stand is sorely needed at this hour.

4. Luther's conversion and the subsequent Reformation occurred in one of the darkest periods of the Church. This should be encouraging. Despite the widespread apostasy, unbelief, and immorality in the 16th century - God still reigned! Biblical Christianity was recovered by God's mighty power and the gospel was heard again. Should we then despair over the darkness in our own times? Never!! Trust God. Let us look to Lord. His Truth will always prevail. Amen.