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Commemorating the Reformation in “Post-Christian” Europe?

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The debate over the meaning of Reformation jubilees or commemorations is an old one. Such celebrations can be put to different uses and interpreted in a range of ways. For example, at an early marking of the occasion in 1617, Friedrich V (1596–1632), elector of the Palatinate and an enterprising Calvinist, was perhaps the first to propose the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Reformation. He wanted to observe it as a single, common celebration for Lutherans and Calvinists. But his plan was criticized by Lutheran statesmen and theologians, who accused him of making this proposal for improper reasons.¹

Some suspected that his motive was political—namely, to show that the Reformed or Calvinist Christians in the Palatinate *did* belong to Luther and his tradition, and that therefore they were entitled to full legal recognition in the Holy Roman Empire under the umbrella of the Peace of Augsburg (1555). In his defense, Friedrich claimed that he was proposing the commemoration, first and foremost, simply to thank God for what he had accomplished through Luther’s rediscovery of the gospel. The subordinate political reason was tied to the theological one, demonstrating to the Church of Rome and the Catholic emperor that Protestants possessed, despite their internal disputes, a firm unity. As things turned out, Friedrich was not able to convince his fellow Protestants, and so in 1617 Calvinists and Lutherans held commemoration events apart from one another.

As this episode illustrates, questions about why, how, and with whom to commemorate the Reformation have been around for a long time. For different reasons they

remain highly relevant, even more so since conditions in Europe and the world have changed massively since Friedrich V’s first proposal. Indeed, in the last fifty years, the position of Christianity in Europe has changed more dramatically than in the almost 450 years between 1517 and the middle decades of the twentieth century. In spite of these changes many people, especially among Protestants, take as self-evident that the 500th anniversary of Luther’s 95 Theses will be celebrated, some way, somehow. Events have long been in the works for this purpose across Europe.²

But fundamental questions about to *how* to do this, and even more *why* to do so, are seldom posed, let alone answered adequately. In this essay, I attempt to pose these questions and sketch some tentative answers.

Why Commemorate the Reformation?

Before the question of *how* to commemorate the Reformation in Europe comes the question of *why* the 500th anniversary of the Reformation should be commemorated at all. Amid the flurry of activities connected to this jubilee, that fundamental question deserves priority. Of course, if you are a German, you might want to recognize a national figure who helped shape your language and was deeply influential in your

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country's history. But what does such a Reformation jubilee mean for someone living in Madrid or Palermo—much less Istanbul or Moscow, and perhaps even much less in Beijing or Kampala?

We also must pause to reflect on the choice of words: *commemoration* must be explained. The word *celebration* is too positive to be helpful in settings that strive to be neutral, to remain above religious or other forms of partisanship. Yet *commemoration* can indicate, misleadingly, that we are dealing with something purely historical, a relic that is no longer relevant. Still, *commemoration* is preferable since the term carries less of an ideological connotation, even if we insist that we are not dealing with a dead past.

Since question of “why commemorate?” deserves an elaborate philosophical analysis that is certainly beyond the scope of this essay, the following might be considered thumbnail sketches of motives for commemorations in general, and for the specific commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.

a. *Historical motivation*: Historical interest in who did what, why, and where can be a motive. This motive can engage scholars and others interested in history, as it did for the heightened focus in Luther research on the 400th anniversary of his birth in 1883 and for John Calvin's comparable birthday anniversary in 1909. The present-day identity of Europe has been shaped fundamentally by the religious developments set in motion by Martin Luther, so the search for the causes, origins, and consequences of this movement deserve validation.

b. *Theological motivation*: Under the “theological” can be included a variety of motives. These might be ecumenical in the sense that remembering 1517 in 2017 can help restore the unity of the Western church that was over the *causa Lutheri*. This opportunity seems especially pertinent after the ecumenical breakthroughs in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The theological motive can, however, also be the opposite. The Reformation jubilee might be seen as an occasion to show how wrong the Reformers were and how lamentable their long-term influence has been. Or, in a different judgment, it might be used to justify Luther's actions, to revitalize the polemical features of his theology, to demonstrate the rightness of certain Protestant confessional positions, and replay traditional Protestant habits by pointing out the deficiencies and falsehoods of Roman Catholicism.

c. *Economic motivation*: Commemorations quite often have an economic dimension, as was the case in the former East Germany for several earlier commemorations of Luther's life. In other words,

jubilees can be big business for publishers, travel agents, cities, and museums that see a chance to boost the number of visitors and customers. And let us not forget the university administrators who send their professors as writers and presenters to gather grant funding and to put their institutions in the spotlight, garnering attention and perhaps increased enrollment.

d. *Political motivation*: Today there might be political reasons for marking the Reformation, just as much as in the sixteenth century. Fortunately, we are decades away from the situation in which the Luther jubilee in 1983 (the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth) was used by the German Democratic Republic to promote socialism—even as this instrumentalizing of the occasion had many critics in the church. But the jubilee in 2017 is not without its own political aspects. It allows historically Protestant countries to promote their national inheritance. It promises to allow Protestant minorities in other countries to call attention to their identities. In Germany, at a regional level, it allows the federal states to showcase their particular histories and cultures. At the same time, many want to focus on the Reformation as a pan-European, liberating event that, properly commemorated, can help strengthen the idea of a unified Europe. Still others want to blame Luther for introducing so much divisiveness and conflict into Europe's past.

None of these motives is completely new. They have all appeared in some form or another ever since special—or, should we maybe say holy?—places, persons, and dates have been commemorated. Although motivations may vary, one answer to the question of why commemorate the Reformation seems quite clear. The Reformation was one of the most influential events in the history of the world generally and of the Christian church in particular. Without it, the present global society would look completely different. If we want to understand the world and the church today, and if we want to behave responsibly toward the world and the church, we need to know about the Reformation, its broader context, its actors, its message, and the reactions to it. A commemoration judiciously planned and executed can stimulate and improve such an understanding. In order to reach this understanding, all of the motives mentioned possess a claim to legitimacy. But a commemoration will be fruitful only if the higher-minded motives are combined in productive ways and without being dominated by narrowly partisan or pecuniary agendas.

How to Commemorate

A number of options present themselves in response to the question of *how* to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. These options are related to the various motivations and each presents

complications. The historical option, for example, can approach the Reformation with an unbalanced focus on the person Martin Luther, but that approach leaves him as a figure from the distant past with little or no connection to the present.³ Luther in this account might then show up as the monk who rocked the church, irritated pope and emperor, got married, drank beer, preached, gained too much weight, and died. This Luther might be interesting, even entertaining, but as only a curiosity from yesterday, with no relevance for today or tomorrow.

In the theological approach, Luther might be instrumentalized as an apostle of freedom, a rebel against Rome, the father of modern tolerance, the inventor of grace, or other such idealizing titles. Yet all such images, if accepted uncritically and without greater nuance, create more problems than they resolve.

In the economic option, where Luther and the Reformation are “sold,” cities and regions expect millions of visitors to open their wallets. Tourists will come to the places where Luther lived—where he stayed for at least one night, or the places he had presumably intended to visit—what some have called “almost Luther” cities. The irony here is that publishers, brewers, and producers of “Refo relics” hope to reap in 2017 the same sort of profits as Albrecht von Mainz expected when he started Johannes Tetzel on an indulgences tour in 1517!

Since such marketing ventures are already well under way, sober-minded scholars should not have the illusion that they can do much about it. But they can provide alternatives, even capitalizing on the more questionable approaches to strengthen the more responsible commemorations. Still, everyone—academics, commemorators, and celebrators alike—needs awareness that the complications of the Reformation should not be ignored but dealt with openly. To begin with the most obvious: Martin Luther is both a fascinating personality and a problematic one. Those who take 2017 more as a moment of celebration than commemoration should be cognizant of the excruciatingly harsh attacks that Luther leveled at Jews, Catholics, Anabaptists, Muslims, and at anyone else with whom he disagreed—and there were many! Of course, this was true not only of Luther.

But Luther is purported to be the (re)discoverer of the gospel, of the authority of the Word, and of the power of grace. How, then, can he have said so many offensive, indeed, abusive things? Many Protestants wish the ugly side of Luther would simply vanish from history. But it will not. The problem, of course, goes well beyond Luther. Luther and the Reformation as a whole have many regrettable aspects. Whether the topic

is Luther and the Jews, Calvin and Servetus, or *cuius regio, eius religio*, evidence does not support the notion that the “Era of the Reformation” led to the “Age of Toleration.” Any attempt to present the Reformation as the initiator of tolerance and equal rights in order to claim its importance and current relevance is doomed to fail. The facts require much greater nuance.

Furthermore, a focus on Luther as an evangelist of freedom must make clear that his great concern remained freedom from sin and guilt, not freedom in a political sense as we would understand this today. That view of Luther is really a child of modernity, not of the sixteenth century. If it were up to Luther, for example, the Netherlands would still be occupied by Spain, and Dutch Protestantism most likely would have been eradicated by the Inquisition long ago. Luther opposed any resistance to political authorities. Luckily for the Dutch, their prince, William of Orange, though raised as a Lutheran, turned Catholic and then went back to Protestantism and did not strictly keep to the “obedience to authority” (*Obrigkeitsgehorsamkeit*) that Luther defended. It is a common historical judgment that elsewhere in Europe this posture led to unintended yet disastrous consequences, as later times revealed. Instead, William chose Calvinism with its “right to revolt,” a theory *in nuce* developed by John Calvin.⁴

Problems created by Luther also beset the realm of theology. To mention just one well-known example: his attitude in the debate about the Lord’s Supper in Marburg in 1529, when he not only held off any attempt to find peace with Zwingli and other Swiss reformers, but also was ready to accept, as a logical consequence of his position, conclusions on the person of Christ that many of his fellow reformers regarded as irrational. Many other examples of his intransigence could be adduced. In short, Luther presents too much controversy and belligerence to qualify him for placement on a pedestal in 2017 as hero or saint.⁵

Looking at the larger picture, it is imperative to remember the obvious fact that the Reformation entailed a split in the church. It contributed to religious wars that brought personal tragedy into the lives men and women in the sixteenth century and afterwards. A convinced Protestant today might still be able to declare with approval: “Where would we be without the Reformation?” Yet for others, that question might prompt a very different answer. Some might even say that the world would have been much better off without the Reformation. Even Protestants who affirm the value of the Reformation should take full account of those dissenting from doing so in 2017.

Myopia is an additional complication. Luther started the whole thing, or as Calvin put it: “The Gospel started in

Wittenberg.”⁶ Yet the focus of 2017, again, should not be just on one man but also on those who supported and opposed him, on the Reformation as a whole in all its vexing complexity. Excessive focus on Luther could seriously undermine commemorative events; just a few quotations from Luther on Jews, women, and Turks could tag him as an intolerant fundamentalist with no message for the present. Even more, it is a mistake to look at the Reformation from a generically Protestant perspective. A better path to more a satisfying commemoration can be opened by speaking of the plural “Reformations,” as has become custom in Reformation research today.⁷

For commemorations in 2017 to avoid such problems, it must be constantly kept in mind that Luther worked in a world where much was changing. For example, it is clear that his actions stimulated other varieties of reform, such as the Catholic reformation—what used to be called the “Counter Reformation”—and the Anabaptist movement, or the “Radical Reformation.” What is more, the notion of “sixteenth-century reformations” can also be applied to other area of human endeavor. As demonstrated by other chapters in this book, the sixteenth century witnessed not only major shifts in church, theology, and spirituality, but also in science, culture, law, politics, cartography, medicine, and more. The great variety of related national and regional developments must also be considered when commemorating the Reformation in “Post-Christian Europe.” If such complexities are kept in mind, much can be learned in 2017.

Post-Christian Europe: Facts and Concepts

Perhaps an even bigger challenge than the problematic aspects of Luther’s career or general developments in the sixteenth century is the question of how to commemorate the Reformation in a *post-Christian Europe*.⁸ Much literature has been published lately trying to define what “post-Christian” means, even whether or not it is the best term to characterize the situation in Europe today.⁹ This is not the place to analyze the overall role of faith in Western Europe, although many indisputable facts do indicate that Europe is a substantially secularized continent, especially when compared to other parts of the globe. Churchgoing, church membership, and numbers of those who profess belief in a personal God are all declining. This reality, too, deserves full consideration when approaching the commemorations of 2017.

Still, it is possible to wonder if “post-Christian” is an entirely accurate way of characterizing contemporary Europe. Some research suggests that Europe is not as secularized or post-Christian as it might seem. For example, about half of all Europeans tell survey researchers that they pray or meditate at least once a

week. Three out of four Europeans say they are “religious persons.” The number of outright atheists is relatively low. In countries like Italy and Greece, the Christian faith is alive and visible every day of the week.

In Eastern Europe, churches are being built, people in some areas are returning to church, a growing number of children and adults come to be baptized—and these developments are taking place in the wake of fundamental political changes in these countries, maybe even as a result of these changes. The fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) as a symbolic end of the artificial divide between “East” and “West” Europe demonstrated the power of the church and its believers. As has been widely documented, the Monday evening church prayer meetings that began in Leipzig in September 1987 sparked a chain of events that eventually brought down the wall—and that, in a socialist country where the influence of the church had been massively degraded. It is also noteworthy, although Luther might not have been too happy about such a development, that Pope Francis today enjoys great popularity and regular, positive notice in European newspapers, magazines, and online. In sum, it might be premature to speak of a “post-Christian era” in Europe today.¹⁰

Yet one cannot deny that the religious situation in Europe now is fundamentally different from that of the sixteenth century, even from fifty years ago. Public life is certainly less visibly shaped by the Christian tradition—a fact best illustrated by empty pews on Sunday, by the growth in the number of mosques in recent years, and by the ongoing conversion of church buildings into bookstores, apartments, and for other nonreligious purposes. As Europe has moved from a post-Westphalian, multi-confessional society to a multi-religious/secular one, it has witnessed a parallel transition from a public to a private form of Christianity. What is more, Christian profession has mostly become a local, voluntary, “optional” designation of one’s identity. It is less often the case that individuals are simply born and baptized into a particular confession (Lutheran, Anglican, Calvinist, etc.), but instead living as “a Christian” results from a conscious choice. The fading of church membership as simply a traditional inheritance entails a different awareness of what it means to be a Christian. Those who identify as believers often have a keener sense that “I am a believer at the workplace” or “I am a Christian in my town,” as opposed to, say, “I am a member of the Church of England.” The notion of “believing without belonging”—to use the phrase of the sociologist Grace Davie—speaks to a situation where ecclesiastical mobility prevails in parallel with the way people switch jobs or move houses.¹¹ This way of thinking about religious identity in terms of flexible relations rather

than in defined obligations marks a major change from the age of Luther, and for what prevailed during many centuries after his passing.

In large parts of Europe, those who do believe often express ambiguity about church structures and hierarchies, especially in cases where flagrant abuses of office have occurred. The positive image of Pope Francis cannot obscure the incredible damage the priest sexual scandal has done to the Roman Catholic Church. For many of the Protestant churches, a similar image problem attends their interminable bickering over positions on marriage and sexuality. Those churches also suffer from outsider ridicule, marking the widespread tolerance of theologians who deny essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Both church members and nonmembers are regularly troubled by a sense that Europe's historical religious institutions have drifted from their primary responsibilities and have entangled themselves excessively in "worldly" affairs. But perhaps precisely at this point the contemporary situation resembles that of the sixteenth century. Luther was moved to protest by what he saw as a theology and a church adrift from its foundation and primary message. As in contemporary Europe, during the Reformation the laity often experienced the church as a distant, bureaucratic entity obsessed with power and money, its clergy disconnected and ethically lax. Parallels on this score between the early sixteenth century and the early twenty-first deserve attention in 2017 and beyond.

There are still other features of European life today that suggest similarities with the sixteenth century. Economic instability, a distrust of politics and politicians, the disorientation of many young people, and a host of marital and family issues are just a few of the items that beg comparison. In addition, at the same time that much of Europe seems to be moving in a post-Christian direction, a growing interest in religion and "spirituality" can also be seen.¹² In light of the fact that the visibility of institutional Christianity in Europe has declined, even as many consider themselves believing Christians or religious at least in some sense, perhaps the term "secularized" may be more fitting than "post-Christian."¹³

But a secularized Europe, again, is strangely also a religious Europe, with the emphasis on "religious," not "Christian." Dietrich Bonhoeffer may have offered an especially prescient forecast when he predicted that Christianity would decline and religion would return.¹⁴

It has done so, if in fact religion, understood in its most general sense, ever departed in the first place. Religion, particularly as concerns the growing Muslim presence in Europe, plays a larger role in politics and society than

it has formerly. Thus, it is now most intriguing, and maybe even imperative, to be thinking about the 500th anniversary of the Reformation at a time when faculties of theology at state universities are relabeled as departments of religious studies and when Western Europe's traditional two confessions (Catholic and Protestant) have become a new situation with two religions (Christianity and Islam). Commemorating five hundred years of the Reformation in a so-called post-Christian Europe, at once secularized and religious, residually Christian and newly Islamic, does make sense. But it does so only if we honestly seek to understand what the Reformation, at its core, was really about.

What Was The Reformation About?

In 2011, great expectations accompanied the former Pope Benedict XVI when he visited his homeland, Germany. Perhaps with an eye on the near approach of 2017, he carefully avoided Wittenberg and the Wartburg, sites forever associated with the dawn of Protestantism, but chose instead to visit Erfurt, where Luther lived while he was still a Catholic monk and a city that has a history of ecumenical engagement. Many anticipated that the pope would say kind words about Luther and then make some kind of conciliatory overture. But this did not happen, and they found themselves afterwards in confusion and disappointment, since the pope instead spoke, not about the church divisions that Luther's life had sparked, but about the gospel message that Luther had tried so hard to proclaim.¹⁵ That message, according to the pope, was the central theological question about the relation between the righteous God and sinful humanity. In Benedict's speech he urged that this question should be taken up again today. Instead of lifting the ban on Luther or making an ecumenical gesture, the pope had the chutzpah to remind German Protestants about the gospel that Luther proclaimed.

But, really, do Protestants need the pope to tell them what the Reformation was all about? Perhaps, since most Protestants no longer view the pope as the Antichrist, this idea that once would have seemed impossible may actually be true. In fact, not a few Protestants today perceive the recent popes as the last redoubt of genuine Christian witness; for them, as hard as it would have been for Luther to imagine, Rome has become the last bastion of a visible and assertive Christianity. Historians and historical theologians might have a clear idea of Luther's central message, but for the wider Protestant—or vestigially Protestant—world, he has been too often reduced to a comic figure, a beer-drinking monk with a simplistic message: "Be merry and get married, for free grace will let you." The commemorations of 2017, therefore, provide the opportunity to ask what would happen if Protestants,

not to speak of Europeans in general, would turn to what Luther actually desired and preached, and for which he lived and died. That prospect essentially, was what Pope Benedict offered to Protestants at Erfurt in 2011.

In recent decades, Reformation research has profited immensely from the influx of social historians into the field. For a very long time, Reformation research was dominated by church historians, who focused more on ecclesiastical matters and theology than on historical contexts. Because of that concentration, these scholars often did not pay sufficient attention to connections between religious matters and the broader worlds of politics, society, and culture. Social historians taught such narrowly focused scholars that historical contexts were in fact very important, and that a description of institutions could not be complete without a description of the people and social forces afoot within these institutions. It was at first difficult for church historians to accept this message, but eventually they did, and this has brought about a needed correction of emphasis.

Yet one problematic result of this healthy correction was that the theological center in the Reformation often gets lost from view. Scholars with great skills in history, demographics, ethnography, and class and gender analysis have transformed our academic understanding of the sixteenth century, but often they show little interest in questions of biblical interpretation and theology that both reformers and their critics treated as primary. In excellent efforts to contextualize the theology of the sixteenth century, sometimes theology gets eclipsed.

Therefore, we should remind ourselves in 2017 that Luther's primary goal was not a reformation of society, nor a revolution in natural sciences, nor a restructuring of political and social life in Europe, nor a re-evaluation of marriage, family, and education. As much as it is legitimate to study these changes, sober scholarship knows that these were not Luther's main concerns. His goal was not even in the first instance a reformation of the church. Certainly, he was concerned about the state of the clergy and the abuse of power in the church. But his main concern, and for him a profoundly existential concern, was the relation between God and human beings—more specifically, the relation between God in his holiness and human beings in their sinfulness, or what theologians call the doctrine of justification. When in 1545 Luther penned a foreword to the first edition of his collected works, he wrote that it was as if the gate of paradise was opened to him when he discovered what justification by faith really meant. That insight was the essential ingredient of the Reformation.¹⁶

It is noteworthy that this observation came in the next to last year of his life (he died in 1546), after he had witnessed many positive and many negative results from the Reformation movements that he had sparked. By recalling that it was as if the gate of heaven opened to him, he did not mean that all of a sudden he saw that Europe needed a new political system, or that monks and nuns should get married, or that human beings needed freedom for self-development. Instead, he was claiming to understand a central theme of the Bible in a new light, which was that men and women could be saved from God's judgment and eternal death by the free and unmerited grace of God in Jesus Christ. Although this teaching implicates matters of great depth and breadth, Luther's understanding of Reformation was as simple as that. This was the new insight that he enthusiastically wanted to circulate.

The momentous debate that Luther carried on with Erasmus in 1525 underscores that the question of justification by faith was for Luther the fundamental issue; on this point Erasmus had attacked him. On the last page of his long reply to Erasmus's book on free will, Luther made his central concern glaringly clear:

Therefore then I give you great praise and proclaim it that among all you are really the only one who got into what in fact is the true issue at stake here, which is, the heart of the matter and that you have not wearied me with those irrelevant issues about popery, purgatory, indulgences, and other trifles—for that's what they are more than real issues—with which so far nearly all have troubled me and in vain I must say. It's you, and only you who has seen what was the point on which everything turns, and so you attacked the main issue; and I want to thank you heartily for that.¹⁷

The "point on which everything turns," as Luther called it, was the theme of his discussion with Erasmus. That, then again, concentrated on how sinful humans can come to terms with a righteous and holy God. In turn, that message was tied to questions of personal and institutional guilt, public justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and righteousness—and more.

These issues remain relevant today. In fact, it is remarkable how many current novels, plays, and movies are obsessed with the notion of "guilt"—even as "guilt" has receded as a central theme in sermons, catechesis, and in Christian education. In Luther's Reformation, confronting guilt was essential. It would, therefore, be entirely fitting if commemoration in 2017 focused on questions of guilt and sinfulness again. Such commemoration would reflect not only the basic Christian message but also one of the most basic concerns of a secularized society. One sees this clear in

our ecological crisis, which Pope Francis addressed in his 2015 encyclical *Laudate si*. Our earth might well be ceasing to hold up under the sins of an avaricious society of consumers and waste producers. Theological resources from the Reformation, and from Luther in particular, might well offer us means to deliberate wisely about this issue.

But once we view Luther's theology as the central factor in the Reformation, we must return to the question of *how* to commemorate the 500th anniversary.

Of first importance is to recover Luther the preacher, the pastor, the professor, and the believer. Political, social, and cultural movements related to the Reformation, again, remain important, but these movements ought to be considered in relation to his theology. The 500th year since the Reformation is not marked five centuries after 1529, when at the Diet of Speyer statesmen first coined the term "Protestant," nor does it mark 1525, when Luther, the former monk, married a former nun, Katharina von Bora. In 2017, we are commemorating five hundred years since 1517, when a professor at new university (Wittenberg was only founded in 1502) on a town on the outskirts of European civilization published a number of theological theses that dealt with the relation between a righteous God and sinful humanity.

But, of course, if we only focus only on this event and focus solely on Luther, we miss the breadth and international character of Protestantism, and thereby underestimate the impact of Luther's theological rediscovery. The message of justification by faith alone soon enlisted influential figures such as Philip Melancthon, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin, who worked out concepts of personal holiness and church reform from the basis of justification by faith. That message also helped these theologians and others fashion a Christian worldview on education, politics, social life and culture. These things, too, are relevant in a commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.

Luther's central theological concern also relates directly to the many upheavals of sixteenth-century Europe—to a plurality "reformations." Protestant Reformers, Anabaptists, and reform-minded Catholics alike agreed in their conviction that Europe, because it was not sufficiently Christian, required a deeper, truer Christianization. Naturally they varied in their conceptions of how to realize this goal, but they agreed that reform was necessary. Furthermore, they were agreed that such reform began with theology. Whether Europe today is Christian, post-Christian, pre-Christian, or something else, commemoration of 2017 can only be fruitful if European churches unite, not in vague paeans to unity, but in a spirit that desires to understand

correctly the theological emphases of the sixteenth century and their present-day implications.

Then and Now: A Complicated Relevance

Permit me to conclude on a note of "prophecy": in the coming decades, religious and theological issues will become more pronounced and important. Given this possibility, it is fitting to observe some parallels between Europe in the early sixteenth century and Europe in the early twenty-first century. The first similarity might be characterized by the German word *Orientierungslosigkeit*, which we might render in English as "the loss or absence of orientation." In this condition, basic certainties are either lost or questioned and many, mainly young people, are adrift from normative points of reference—what we call "values" today and which were called "virtues" in the past.

Second, religious tolerance concerns us now, as it did in the sixteenth century. Although at that time it was tolerance between Catholics and Protestants (or among Protestants) that was most needed, now it is tolerance as a basic framework for pluralistic, multi-religious societies; such tolerance is vital for society and politics to function.

Third, a media revolution took place in both eras, with its possibilities, challenges, and dangers. The spread of the printing press, combined with the increased abilities of people to buy and read books, was quite similar to recent developments in digital data and social media. Both revolutions should make us think about the responsible use of the media that we possess.

Fourth, in economic terms, we face a range of issues from corruption and greed at the top of organizations to a growth of debts and poverty. Just think of the situation in Greece today or of Europe's immigration crisis. Then and now, society was constructed so that many could strive but only a few succeed. (A relevant difference between then and now is that once where saints were celebrated for the merit that they had gained to enter heaven, we now regard as blessed the soccer players, movie stars, and CEOs who earn enough to live in heaven on earth!).

Fifth, church-state relations are becoming increasingly fraught in Europe. The issue is related to changes in society and in the decline of churches' institutional power. Yet questions about the state's responsibilities for the church, the independence of the church, and the church's opinions about politics and law grew in importance because of the Reformation. Thinking about the long arc of church-state relations since the sixteenth century might help us better understand these relations today.

Sixth, while we recognize that people in the sixteenth century were preoccupied with sin and salvation, it is true that people are also concerned about these today, but in a different sense and setting. Although “sin” is no longer connected to death, let alone eternal death, sin and guilt are the major problems for which people seek help from psychiatrists and therapists. Related is the quest for spirituality and spiritual stability. In recent decades, tour operators and former monasteries have discovered “spiritual tourism,” a market niche addressing their visitors’ needs to escape workplace stress or psychological turmoil. Now as then, the church in its preaching does not seem to meet people with the answers they seek, but many still look to the church as a way of finding space to seek inner stability. Sometimes, though, it seems as if the physical space of the church, more than its message, is what touches people.

Neither Luther, Calvin, nor any other reformer viewed Europe as a vibrantly Christian place. They did recognize that Europeans were almost all baptized, but also concluded that only a small minority of them actually lived up to their baptism. They complained about Europeans as not being Christian in any genuine sense. Calvin spoke of “Europa afflicta”¹⁸ and in his lifetime came to the conclusion that Christianity worldwide—not just in Europe—was on the brink of collapse.¹⁹

He might conclude the same today. But it merits asking if Europe’s church is as post-Christian as Europe’s society. In the centuries since the Enlightenment and its aftermath, fundamental changes have come about in the way that the major Protestant churches view the Bible and the gospel. Have these changes been so fundamental that the gap between the Protestant churches today and the theology of the sixteenth century is unbridgeable? The answer might be mixed. To mention only Luther, his vision of the church continues to sound a clarion call: “Churches are there for no other function than that the Lord Jesus speaks to us through his Holy Word and that we in turn speak to Him through prayer and hymns.”²⁰ In a formal sense, this function persists. But one might be forgiven for asking if the substance of what takes place in present-day Protestant church buildings is close enough for Luther to understand.

When the last bus has departed Wittenberg on the day after October 31, 2017, what will have entered the hearts and minds of those who in 2017 have visited the sites, purchased the memorabilia, read the books, joined the tours, or otherwise paused in some sense to observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation? The answer certainly depends on the motivation. If we stay close to Luther’s chief concern, the answer will be clear. A proper commemoration requires reflection on the

meaning of justification by faith. If Europe is post-Christian already, or if it is about to become post-Christian, then the commemoration of the Reformation at five hundred years may be quite salutary for Europe. For this observance may show Europe aspects of where it came from—and where it might want to go. And this is a task for historical scholarship to show. But beyond the history of the Reformation and its influence, what of its theological, existential core—human beings’ proper relation to God? This question, too, begs to be loudly asked and discussed in 2017.

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¹ Herman Selderhuis, “Wem gehört die Reformation? Das Reformationsjubiläum 1617 im Streit zwischen Lutheranern und Reformierten,” in *Calvinismus in den Auseinandersetzungen des frühen konfessionellen Zeitalters*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, Martin Leiner, and Volker Leppin (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 66–78.

² For an overview of projects in process for the commemoration, see: www.luther2017.de and www.refo500.com.

³ For an overview of the way Luther has so far been presented in commemorations of the Reformation, see the collection of articles by Hartmut Lehmann, *Luthergedächtnis 1817 bis 2017* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

⁴ See John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ For such presentations, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher and Hero. Images of the Reformer, 1520-1620* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999).

⁶ A.-L. Herminjard, *Correspondance des Réformateurs dans les pays de langue française* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1896), ix, 223.

⁷ Thomas A. Brady, *German Histories in the Age of the Reformations, 1400-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard. The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004).

⁸ I will not take up the question of whether the Reformation was a prime cause of the movements that led to a post-Christian Europe. As indicated by Brad Gregory’s contribution to this book, opinions and arguments on this question are many, multifaceted, and often mutually exclusive.

⁹ See, inter alia, Hartmut Lehmann, *Das Christentum im 20. Jahrhundert: Fragen, Probleme, Perspektiven*.

Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/9 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012); Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, eds., *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and the literature mentioned therein.

¹⁰ Hugh McLeod, “The Crisis of Christianity in the West: Entering a Post-Christian Era?” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 9: *World Christianities c.1914-c.2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 347.

¹¹ See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

¹² Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter. Religion in der modernen Kultur* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2004); and Martin Riesebrocht, *Die Rückkehr der Religionen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2000).

¹³ For the discussion on secularization and de Christianization, see Matthias Pohlig et al., eds., *Säkularisierungen in der Frühen Neuzeit. Methodische Probleme und empirische Fallstudien*. Zeitschrift für

Historische Forschung: Beiheft 41 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2008), 9–109.

¹⁴ See Jeffrey Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* (London: T & T Clark, 2008).

¹⁵ The headline of the prominent *Süddeutsche Zeitung* the day after (September 24, 2011) was: “Benedikt XIV macht Hoffnungen der Protestanten zunichte” [Benedict XIV disappoints the hopes of Protestants].

¹⁶ “Hic me prorsus renatum esse sensi, et apertis portis in ipsam Paradisum intrasse.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Werke. Kritische Ausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau1883-) [hereafter WA], 54, 186.

¹⁷ WA 18, 786.

¹⁸ *afflicta est Europa*,” Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia, Ediderunt Guilielmus. Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss. Vol. 1–59 Brunsvigae, Beroliniae 1863-1900 [hereafter, CO], 36, 202.

¹⁹ “videmus statum religionis in toto orbe christiano fere collapsum,” CO, 36, 178.

²⁰ Torgau, Oktober 1544, WA, 51:333.

Seeking A Correctable Conscience

by John L. Thompson

Had things gone differently for Luther at the Diet of Worms—where he was on trial before representatives of Pope Leo X and Emperor Charles V—these might have been his famous last words: “I cannot do otherwise; here I stand. May God help me. Amen.”

Last words, because Luther’s life depended on the promise of a safe-conduct to the Diet and back again. The troublesome Luther already had made many enemies, and on the way home his friends were shrewd enough to kidnap him and take him into hiding.

That story is well-known, and this year, 2017—the 500th anniversary of Luther’s 95 Theses and the purported beginning of the Protestant Reformation—Luther’s famous words and deeds will surely be recounted over and over again, if we go by the previous Luther jubilees in 1917 and 1817. But at least three things about Luther’s dramatic declamation are less well known. First, Luther may never have said the “Here I stand, I can do no other” bit. Perhaps he should have done so, but the best sources leave these words out.¹ Second, his declaration is often wrenched from its context as a warrant for any defiance of authority or twisted into a strangely modern defense of the autonomous freedom of the individual.² Such readings

are all too common, and they miss Luther’s careful crafting of the two sentences that came before:

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 contradicted themselves), I am bound by 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. . . . May God help me. Amen.³

Luther’s declaration was not intended, therefore, as a defense of his conscience per se, much less a bold claim on behalf of worldly freedom or individualism. On the contrary, Luther was defending the utter priority of the Word of God not only as a guide for what Luther taught and wrote, but also—first and foremost—as the only possible way to know that he, Luther, still confessedly a sinner, was loved and saved by God. Luther’s plea to his examiners was not to dispute about his conscience, but simply to recognize the preeminent authority of the clear Word of God, to which Luther’s now peaceful conscience was merely a witness.

Of course, Luther's plea stands or falls on whether the Word of God is, in fact, clear—a point not lost on those present at Worms who feared that every Christian would become his or her own interpreter. Medieval Catholicism knew how to avoid such chaos. Competing interpretations of Scripture were to be resolved by the teaching authority of the Church, the so-called *magisterium*. And this brings us to a third little-known fact about the Diet of Worms: Luther did not get the last word.

As the interrogation was ending, it was reported that the presiding secretary called after him in some frustration, “Lay aside your conscience, Martin! You must lay it aside because it is in error, and it will be safe and proper for you to recant.”⁴ In other words, Luther's pangs of conscience were irrelevant, because they were based on the wrong authority, on Luther's notion of what God's Word says, instead of the surer authority of the church. This was a perfectly appropriate exhortation. Indeed, in its context, it was pastoral, and even compassionate, because the presiding secretary cared about the safety of Luther's soul—and the secretary was well aware that consciences can make serious mistakes.

A brief glance at our recent Presbyterian history or the PCUSA's *Book of Order* (F-3.0101) will quickly demonstrate that we think conscience is very important: “God alone is Lord of the conscience” is one of our foundational principles going back to 1788. It is a great slogan. It gets invoked on a regular basis. But what does it mean? For the balance of this essay, we will try to look more closely at our God-given consciences and see, perhaps, what they are supposed to do.

A good deal of traditional Christian thinking about conscience derives from what Paul says in a handful of important passages. But Romans 2:14–16 may be the archetype:

When Gentiles who [do not have] the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when ... God judges [everyone's] secrets by Christ Jesus.⁵

It can hardly be missed that whatever the written law asked of the people of God in the Old Testament, somehow those commands were also found among the Gentiles—within them by nature, imprinted on their hearts, and attested by conflicting thoughts, all of which are ingredients in a Pauline definition of

conscience. Romans 2 plays a huge role in Christian doctrines of natural law—the notion that what God reveals and commands in the Bible can also be read in the so-called “book of nature.” Both Luther and Calvin embraced a traditional point of Christian theology, that each of the commandments that God revealed in the Decalogue is also attested to every human conscience by the law of nature. Thus, everyone knows that theft and adultery and lying are wrong. Everyone knows parents are to be honored. Indeed, in their heart of hearts, all people know there is a divine Maker who deserves thanks and loyalty. But, as we have all experienced, knowing those commands does not mean obeying them.

Medieval theologians added some helpful precision to the Pauline case for conscience as the channel for natural law. They distinguished two parts of the conscience. The higher part they called the *synderesis*, a word that designates our inborn knowledge of the general or theoretical principles of right and wrong. (This is why Paul can say God's law is written on the hearts of all: because everyone knows in at least a general way that good is to be pursued and evil is to be shunned.)

The conscience proper, on the other hand, is a practical faculty. Conscience takes its impulse from the *synderesis*, this general orientation to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. Conscience translates those principles into concrete moral judgments and actions. At the same time, the conscience is also tied to our emotions and our perceptions of guilt and shame. For although we are hardwired to love the good, the true, and the beautiful, sometimes we find ourselves loving lesser goods, half-truths, and beautiful things that are not meant for us. A well-ordered conscience will call attention to our errors and make us feel uneasy.

Medievals had a stock phrase here: they said it was the job of the conscience “to murmur back in reply to sin.” We might say it like this: a well-ordered conscience is a voice that warns us when sin seems near and thereby helps us resist it.

Possibly the most interesting part of the medieval discussion of conscience addressed the distinction between the *synderesis* and the conscience. The *synderesis*—our inborn disposition toward the good—always urges us toward doing good. But the *synderesis* is also highly general in what it knows. The conscience, on the other hand, translates those good impulses into action. Conscience is concerned with details, circumstances, and practical applications.

But conscience can fail in a number of ways: it can be tripped up (1) by faulty reasoning, (2) by a will that is

impulsive or weak, or (3) by other competing affections or desires. Of these three, it is the first—the case of the misinformed or mistaken conscience—that is easily the most interesting.⁶ What happens when the conscience is sincere in its judgments, but just as surely sincerely mistaken?

Suppose a person mistakenly believes that a particular action is morally binding because it has been commanded by God. Would it then be a sin if the person were to fail to carry out that action, that act of wrongheaded and misdirected obedience? Actually, yes. Medieval theologians typically argued that even a mistaken conscience binds the actions of the mistaken individual. It is wrong to do wrong. But it is also wrong to violate one's conscience, even if that conscience is itself wrong, because one's intention is evil even if the substance of the deed is not itself evil.

It was no quirk of late medieval theology, then, if Luther was exhorted to set his conscience aside during the Diet of Worms—it was rather a sound instinct. Consciences are an amazing gift from God, and they generally should not be ignored. But consciences can err. As medievals and Reformers knew, they can be misled by faulty reasoning, by the warping influence of peer pressure, or by out-of-control desires or even addictions. They can, in the words of Paul from 1 Timothy 4:1–2 (NRSV), become “seared”—traumatized so badly by being repeatedly skewed or silenced that they are utterly defunct.

Consciences can also have scruples—a nifty old word that ancient Latin writers used to refer to a pebble, presumably in one's sandal or shoe, that causes discomfort. As a result, we limp along, yet in the case of a literal pebble, we would surely work to take it out of our shoe. In other words, scruples refer to concerns on which a conscience is weak, but (ideally) only temporarily weak. But whether the conscience is healthy, sedated, timid, or weak, conscience is at best a secondary authority. We often say (okay, at least my mother used to say), “Let your conscience be your guide.” But that only works if the conscience has a guide.

I spent many summers with the National Park Service as a backcountry ranger, back in the pre-GPS era. A map and compass were my constant companions. I had a great compass—not only was it liquid-filled, with a sighting mirror, it also had a declination screw, which lets you adjust your compass to match true north wherever you are, often correcting the magnetic reading by ten or twenty degrees. (Someday on the trail, the battery on your smart phone will die, and you will be glad to know this.) If the map shows true north, but your compass—your conscience—is leading you to

magnetic north, well, you may make some wrong choices and even lose your way. The lesson: if a conscience is misguided or misaligned, it is no longer reliable. It needs to be corrected, or set aside—if we have somehow managed to realize our mistake!

We do not do this well. We do not manage or calibrate our consciences well, if indeed we pay them any attention at all. More often, we confuse conscience with our feelings, our tastes or our opinions. We may even work at rationalizing our private agendas or desires in an attempt to make our conscience think something is really okay when we know from the start that it is not.

Calvin also saw this tendency. As a pastor, he was remarkably insightful about human behavior; he knew very well how people try to manipulate their own consciences, though it still appalled him:

Most people, having learned that a thing is displeasing to God, nevertheless give themselves leave to go seeking its defense. ... People who are fairly convinced in their consciences that it is wrong to bow down before idols [will still] inquire and query about what they should do, not to subdue their affections to God by submitting to his word, but so that they may have free rein and, having an answer to their liking, may flatter themselves enough to remain in their evil-doing. In short, as Ezekiel says, they are looking for cushions to put their consciences to sleep.⁷

Calvin knew only one antidote: a skewed conscience and a weak conscience alike had to be exposed to the clear teachings of the Word of God.

For Calvin, that meant not just the happy blessings and promises of the gospel, but also the precepts of God's law. One of Calvin's earliest controversies in Geneva arose in 1537 when residents were required to swear allegiance to the Genevan Confession, which also entailed an affirmation of the Decalogue. Despite the fact that the Confession clearly states that observing the divine law is impossible, that the law drives us to seek the righteousness of Christ, many balked. One dissenter professed readiness to swear to the “articles of reformation” but not to the Ten Commandments, “because,” he apologized, “they're hard to keep.”⁸

When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 (after having been dismissed in 1538), the demand for an oath was dropped. What took its place was the consistory—a panel of pastors who constituted a “compulsory counseling service” and who were the first responders to reports of superstitious religious practices (often the

residue of someone's Roman Catholic past) or misbehavior of any kind, including marital strife.⁹

Among observers today, the actions of the Geneva consistory generate strong opinions: some see the consistory as intrusive, oppressive, and theocratic; others credit it as often a gentle and insightful intervention that worked toward reconciliation and restoration among neighbors and sought to protect marriages, spouses, and children.¹⁰

But Calvin's larger point is that the gospel was meant to effect not merely a bare confession of faith, but also transformation of life. Pursuing the lofty goal of general edification meant cultivating "sober fear of God, sincere piety, and unfeigned holiness of morals"—and to that end, the conscience needed not only to be freed from false beliefs about achieving righteousness by works, but also to be guided in its growth by the Word of God.¹¹

Once again, we do not do this well. When sinners act like sinners (as we often do), how often do we deal with the resulting conflict by avoiding it? Even though Hebrews 10:23–34 urges us not only to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering," but also "to provoke one another to love and good deeds," we are slow to challenge and exhort one another, lest we be seen as legalistic.

There is a sad irony here, that the heirs of Calvin should regard any invocation of God's law as tantamount to legalism, when we all know that we are constantly yearning for better secular laws to restrict all kinds of human evil, whether corporate greed or human trafficking! Indeed, the Reformed tradition was known for extolling the law as an immense blessing in the life of the Christian, particularly in what came to be called its "third use," whereby God's character is revealed.

One of the "opening sentences" for morning worship in the PCUSA's *Book of Common Worship* states that God is "the source, guide, and goal of all that is" (drawing on Romans 11:36). Calvin believed that insofar as the law reveals God's wisdom, goodness, and justice, the law also points to the character and virtue that God wants us to embody and live out in community. When we meditate on God's law as part of God's Word, then, many things happen by way of our spiritual formation, but one of those things is this: we correct and calibrate our conscience according to the one, true standard who rules over it.

Calvin had other strategies for forming and reforming the conscience. One such means was catechism, which was offered as a separate service in Geneva every Sunday, and not just for children. Sometimes the

consistory would instruct adults to attend, believing that a better grasp of Christian beliefs and principles would help an erring parishioner to see the bigger picture of how and why to love God and neighbor with greater self-awareness.

In my opinion, one of the best opportunities to reset and recalibrate my conscience comes in the corporate confession on the Lord's Day—that moment each Sunday when we stand together in prayer and tell the truth about two cosmic verities that frame our lives. First, we tell the truth about who God is as our maker, judge, and redeemer. Then, we tell the truth about who we are, including who we've failed to be—again. Our consciences need this grace and correction, every week if not every day.

Still, I worry that such lessons will be lost if we do not engage one another in greater depth on the topic of conscience. We need to cultivate the practice of listening to our conscience and probing whether it is well-tuned or not—whether it is overly sensitive, or just plain dull. Most people, I expect, know something of the voice of conscience, whether they identify it as such or not. Fewer, I expect, have noticed or even considered that consciences can need correction. I have been fortunate to experience such correction in my marriage. Sometimes my "conscience" has been all too self-indulgent or self-congratulatory, which has sometimes meant that I was far quicker to justify my anger than were those who stood by watching. "Be angry, but do not sin"—good words for recalibrating the conscience. At other times, I have agonized over whether I had offended someone by something I said, unable to let it go. My wife has been invaluable as a spiritual director at such moments, helping me to follow some ecclesiastical wisdom by setting my conscience aside in submission to God's Word and to sound reasoning based on God's Word. Together, we also tried to pass on an awareness of the important but penultimate significance of conscience with our children, sometimes using the bedtime story hour or bedtime prayers as a forum for reflection on the importance of a clear (and calibrated) conscience. But still, I worry that we adult Presbyterians may think we have grown out of these elementary lessons.

"Conscience" is not an organ that an MRI scan can locate. Rather, conscience identifies an element that is essential to the human person, yet also one that is subject to formation, deformation, and reformation. It is easy to confuse conscience with all kinds of strong feelings, preferences, hopes, and private agendas. The conscience is a guide, but it also needs a guide. Luther's interrogator at the Diet of Worms was right, in principle, to exhort him to consider setting his conscience aside in favor of a higher authority. Where

Luther differed, crucially, was over the question of just what or who that higher authority was.

All the same, 2017 is not 1517. Where Luther was sure that the Word of God was clear with respect to the nature of justification and the prior authority of Scripture over church, council, or pope, we often struggle to see God's Word as clear on issues that beset us today. Some of our most painful recent divisions have come over whether Scripture is clear or not on certain issues. This short essay cannot resolve those issues of biblical interpretation. But it certainly can be said here that it is wrong to extrapolate from any one unclear text or issue in order to discount the authority of Scripture altogether.

Sometimes our perplexity over the Bible arises for very good reasons, but sometimes not. We are just as capable of seeking "cushions for our consciences" as Christians were in Calvin's day—and this we need to resist above all. To that end, I constantly ask myself as I read the Scriptures,

"Can the Bible tell me anything I don't want to know?" For if the answer is no, chances are good that we are being guided by neither God nor God's Word nor even by a decently functioning conscience—and we are desperately in need of correction. Perhaps by now it is obvious that I have my own strong opinions about what the Word of God teaches, as well as about what nature and conscience confirm. But I also know this: I am not the Word of God.

However much I may worry that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has departed at points from the "clear teaching of the Bible," there is still room for common cause at the heart of my church. The state of our discourse and the spiritual state of our congregations suggest to me that we share this task in common: we need to promote and demote the conscience.

We need to demote the conscience when it is acting under false pretenses, with our feelings or self-interested agendas pretending to speak as conscience when in fact we have bypassed our conscience in order to use it in name only—as a bargaining chip, as our personal supreme court, as a refusal to engage.

On the other hand, we need to promote the calibrated conscience wherever we can—by catechism, by sincere confession, by genuine engagement with one another in mission, by proclamation, and by ecclesiology—speaking the truth in love. As Luther exclaimed, "It is never safe nor right to go against conscience," but only if our consciences are truly "captive to the Word of God."¹² So, by all means, take your stand! But first check your exegesis, and see if your conscience is itself

in need of correction: because if popes and councils have erred, so too have presbyteries and Presbyterians. May God help us. Amen.

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¹ The textual problem of "Here I stand, I can do no other" is treated in passing by the editors in "Luther at the Diet of Worms," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 32: *Career of the Reformer II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 112–13. See also Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985–93), 1:460.

² Tendentious uses of Luther to support modernized agendas abound, but here are two examples recently noted in Zachary Purvis, "Martin Luther in 19th-Century Theology," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Religion* (DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.314). The first is from Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), writing against J. M. Goeze (1717–1786): "The true Lutheran does not take refuge in Luther's writings but in Luther's spirit; and Luther's spirit absolutely requires that no man may be prevented from advancing in knowledge of the truth according to his own judgment." The second is from Emmanuel Greenwald (1811–1885), a Lutheran pastor in Lancaster, PA: "If there had been no Luther in Germany, there would have been no [George] Washington in America. For the invaluable blessing of our civil liberty and free institutions, we thank God for Luther."

³ *Luther's Works* 32:112–113.

⁴ See the translated original text in "Luther at the Diet of Worms," *Luther's Works* 32:130 (with revised punctuation).

⁵ Revised Standard Version (RSV) with my more contemporary translations in brackets.

⁶ The case of the mistaken conscience is discussed with special reference to Bonaventure and Aquinas, including original texts, by Timothy C. Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 118–120; 128–130.

⁷ John Calvin, "A Short Treatise Setting Forth What the Faithful Man Must Do When He Is among Papists and He Knows the Truth of the Gospel" (1543), in *Come Out From Among Them: "Anti-Nicodemite" Writings of John Calvin*, trans. Seth Skolnitsky (Dallas: Protestant Heritage, 2001), 47–48 (slightly modified).

⁸ The anecdote is reported by Amadée Roget, *Histoire du peuple du Genève*, 7 vols. (Geneva, 1870–87), 1:43n.

⁹ "Compulsory counseling service" seems to be the coinage of Robert M. Kingdon; see, e.g., his *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4; and possibly earlier as "Calvin and the Family: The Work of the Consistory of Geneva," *Pacific Theological Review* 17 (1984): 5–18.

¹⁰ Jeffrey R. Watt, "Reconciliation and the Confession of Sins: The Evidence from the Consistory in Calvin's Geneva," in *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, ed. R. Ward Holder (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 105–120.

¹¹ See "John Calvin: Catechism 1538," trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 7.

¹² *Luther's Works* 32:112–113.

Luther's Mistress and Knowledge of Ourselves

by Richard Burnett

Martin Luther had a mistress. It can be denied and has been many times. But the fact is he did, or at least he thought he did, and he struggled with her for many years, especially as a young man. There is much about this relationship we do not know, but we do know this: rightly or wrongly, he sometimes called her "Reason."

It is complicated, of course. But to understand this relationship we must be clear: The Protestant Reformers had nothing against reason as such. On the contrary, they loved reason and believed Christians should always strive to be reasonable. They taught that reason is a gift of God that should be cherished, cultivated, and exercised whenever possible, and should never be taken for granted, neglected, or denigrated.

Nevertheless, reason alone cannot tell us, as Calvin says, "who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be toward us" (*Institutes* 2.2.1). Nor can reason alone tell us who we truly are. Reason can be a useful tool but never a substitute for revelation. It can be a servant of revelation but never its master. Luther struggled to maintain the order of this relationship. Yet he sometimes got confused and it created real problems for him, especially when he contemplated himself.

Luther was an exceedingly rational person who had been schooled according to the highest, most exacting standards of rationality. Thus, when it came to being justified by faith, even after he understood better what it meant, he was still often tempted to look for rational demonstration or proof of his righteousness within himself rather than receive it by faith as a pure gift.

As a young monk he often prayed and fasted for days, performed all manner of good works, engaged in all sorts of extreme ascetic practices such as mortifications, flagellations of the flesh, vigils, pilgrimages, penance, etc. He later said: "If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I." He would confess his sins for hours and receive absolution only to return moments later, recalling yet another peccadillo, driving his confessor, Father Staupitz, nearly crazy until finally, exasperated, he told Luther to go out for once and commit a real sin!¹

Luther later reflected: "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 hated and murmured against him."² Luther admitted it was he who was angry, and not only because he could not please God, but because he could not please himself. He wanted a righteousness of his own (contra Phil. 3:9), not a "borrowed righteousness" from Christ. When he discovered that the former was the sort the devil promoted and the latter was the only righteousness worth having, it changed everything.

"The Devil's Whore" And No More?

Even after leaving the monastery, however, Luther still struggled. He was still tempted to desire a righteousness he could see and feel, examine and admire, as his own private possession. He still wanted to be righteous in himself, not by faith, but sensibly. Thus, at times he portrays reason as a mistress or seductress, who tempts Christians to look for a "home-made righteousness" within rather than to an "alien righteousness" which we have only outside ourselves (*extra nos*) in Christ. At one point, he exclaims: "Reason is the devil's whore and can do nothing but blaspheme and defile everything God speaks and does" (*Luther's Works* 40: 175).

Luther was often brilliantly one-sided. This was his genius. Unfortunately, however, such statements have led some to conclude that he did not value reason or, worse, that he prized irrationality. This is false. A more positive statement on the place of reason comes from a sermon he preached in 1531, the humor of which would not have been lost on his Wittenberg congregation:

"In external and worldly matters let reason be the judge. For there you can calculate and figure out that a cow is bigger than a calf, that three ells are longer than one ell, that a gulden is worth more than a groschen, that a hundred guldens are more than ten guldens, and that it is better to place a roof over the house than under it. Stay with that. You can easily figure out how to bridle horses, for reason teaches you that. Prove yourself a master in that field. God has endowed you with reason to show you how to milk a cow, to tame a horse, and to realize that a hundred guldens are more than ten guldens. There you should demonstrate your smartness; there be a master and an apt fellow, and utilize your skill. But in heavenly matters and in matters of faith, when a question of salvation is involved, bid reason observe silence and hold still. Do not apply the

yardstick of reason, but give ear and say: Here I cannot do it; these matters do not agree with reason as do the things mentioned above. There you must hold your reason in check and say: I do not know; I will not try to figure it out or measure it with my understanding, but I will keep still and listen; for this is immeasurable and incomprehensible” (*Luther’s Works* 23:84).

Yet even this statement does not do justice to the role of reason put into service of faith or sanctified by grace. Still, Luther’s point was that as enormously helpful as it can be (and as much as it may rightly tell us about ourselves), reason *alone* cannot tell us who we truly are.

Our Problem Since the Garden

The desire to know ourselves from ourselves rather than from God has been our problem all along. In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer discusses the difference between eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which the serpent connects “to the promise of being like God [*sicut Deus*],” and living obediently in the image of God. Bonhoeffer compares “God and *imago dei* man against God and *sicut deus* man” and says the latter lives from “out-of-himself, in his un-derived existence, in his loneliness” and “out of a division of good and evil,” whereas the former, “bound to the word of God of the creator and living from him,” lives “in the unity of obedience” and in proper knowledge of himself.³

Our efforts, in other words, “to explain ourselves by ourselves instead of by our concrete confrontation by God,” Barth says, is precisely our sin and “perhaps the fundamental mistake in all erroneous thinking of man about himself is that he tries to equate himself with God and therefore to proceed on the assumption that he can regard himself as the presupposition of his own being.”⁴

Calvin knew this, which is why he begins his *Institutes*: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess ... consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” As he elaborates in detail, contrary to philosophers ever since Socrates who teach “Know thyself” above all things, we cannot know ourselves truly apart from knowing God. Nor, contrary to speculative philosophers and theologians, can we know God truly apart from knowing him as our Redeemer or “until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us” (1.2.1).

Right knowledge of God and of ourselves is a twofold knowledge, not two kinds of knowledge, but one with two interdependent parts. Indeed, one is not possible without the other and is so interconnected it is difficult to know, Calvin says, where one begins and the other ends. But this much is clear: so long as we look only at ourselves we will never understand ourselves truly. We can only understand ourselves truly by looking to God.

To Whom Are We To Look and Listen?

This is also why telling people, “Let your conscience be your guide,” may not always be a good idea. Barth says: “Conscience, in Latin as in Greek, clearly means: to know with.” The question is always: “With whom?” With ourselves? With our peers? With other authorities? What counts, ultimately, is knowing “With God.”⁵ We can betray our conscience, but our conscience can also betray us, depending on how it is shaped. This is why, as John Thompson explains so well in the previous essay, we ought to seek “A Correctable Conscience.”

The Reformers, in fact, did not regard conscience as such, or knowledge of ourselves from ourselves, a reliable witness as far as sin and salvation are concerned. On the contrary, Luther said: “If it depended on us, sin would very likely remain dormant forever. But God is able to awaken it effectively through the Law.” “*Let God be true and every man a liar*” (Rom. 3:4) meant to Luther that the believer must, again and again, “cease to believe in himself and believe in God,” and acknowledge “God truthful and himself a liar. For he disbelieves his own mind as something false in order to believe the word of God as the truth, even though it goes against all he thinks in his own mind.”⁶

Likewise, Calvin states: “When the apostle teaches that we should ‘*work out our own salvation in fear and trembling*’ [Phil. 2:12], he demands only that we become accustomed to honor the Lord’s power, while greatly abasing ourselves. For nothing so moves us to repose our assurance and certainty of mind in the Lord as distrust of ourselves, and the anxiety occasioned by the awareness of our ruin.” Calvin adds such anxiety [*timor filialis*] “renders us more cautious—not the kind that afflicts us and causes us to fall [*timor servilis*]—while the mind confused in itself recovers itself in God, cast down in itself is raised up in him, despairing of itself is quickened anew through trust in him” (*Institutes* 3.2.23). Thus, “if you contemplate yourself” apart from Christ, Calvin says, “that is sure damnation” (3.2.24), but knowing ourselves in Christ is life and peace.

Luther preached: “‘*This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief*’ (I Tim. 1:15). Ponder on this text and diligently arm yourself so that you will be prudent at all times—not only if your conscience is clear (apart from the struggle with your conscience), but also and particularly, when you have to contend with death and you are confronted with the greatest perils and dangers. This is when your conscience will be reminding you of the sins you have committed and it will be in a state of horror. Satan will appear before you as a mighty power and his intention will be to overwhelm you with the great burden of your sins flooding into your mind like a huge deluge. Satan

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to inform and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416 or admin@theologymatters.com or at our web site: www.theologymatters.com.

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will try to scare you away from Christ and will also try to chase you away from Him so that you will end up in despair. I say: 'Remember that Christ did not offer Himself up for invented or exaggerated sins but for real sins—not for small insignificant sins but for great and coarse sins, not for just a couple sins here and there, but for all the sins in the world, not for sins that have been overcome and eliminated, but for scarlet and powerful sins that have still not been dispensed with.'⁷

Luther never forgot his torments of conscience or how they made him feel. "A Christian, however," he said, "is not guided by what he sees or feels; he follows what he does not see or feel. He remains with the testimony of Christ; he listens to His words and follows Him into the darkness" (*Luther's Works* 22:306). "For," as Paul says, "we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

Few have stated more clearly what it means to live as a sinner saved by grace than Bonhoeffer: "the Christian is the [one] who no longer seeks his salvation, his deliverance, his justification in himself, but in Jesus Christ. He knows that God's Word in Jesus Christ pronounces him guilty, even when he does not feel his guilt, and God's Word in Jesus Christ pronounces him not guilty and righteous, even when he does not feel that he is righteous at all. The Christian no longer lives of himself, by his own claims and his own justification, but by God's claims and God's justification. He lives wholly by God's Word pronounced upon him, whether that Word declares him guilty or innocent." "If

somebody asks him, Where is your salvation, your righteousness? He can never point to himself. He points to the Word of God in Jesus Christ, which assures him salvation and righteousness." Thus, "The death and the life of the Christian is not determined by his own resources; rather he finds both only in the Word that comes to him from the outside, in God's Word to him. The Reformers expressed it this way: Our righteousness is an 'alien righteousness,' a righteousness that comes from outside of us (*extra nos*)."⁸

Christian, where is your salvation? The Reformers remind us where, which gives us good reason to rejoice!

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¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 34–51.

² *Ibid.*, 65.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation And Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 70–71.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:151.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 67.

⁶ *Luther's Works* 25: 284. See Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 60.

⁷ *Luther's Breviary: A Meditation for Each Day of the Year*, ed. Thomas Seidel (Wartburg: Wartburg Verlag, 2007), 86.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 21–22.

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