

*RECONNECTING
WITH THE HISTORY
OF THE CHURCH*

EDWARD RHODES

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REFORM AND RADICALISM

*Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Holy Scripture or by evident reason – for I can believe neither popes nor councils alone, as it is evident that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves – my conscience is bound to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand. I can do no other.
God help me.¹*

It was with these words (or words very much like them) that a German monk and theologian took a stand against the entire mediaeval church establishment. He refused to disown his writings, even though they had been condemned by the Catholic Church. Instead, he acted on the basis of his own conscience and his understanding of

¹ The words Martin Luther is reputed to have said in his defence at the Diet of Worms, 1521.

what the Bible clearly taught. His name was Martin Luther and his defiance started a revolution within Christianity, one which endures to this day – and which probably went a good deal further than he himself intended.

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION

In his early days, though, Martin Luther (1483–1546) was an unlikely reformer. He had been a law student in Erfurt, in what is now Germany. Yet one day, when caught outside in a lightning storm, he made a vow to St Anne that he would become a monk if he was spared. His life was spared, so he duly became first an Augustinian monk and then a priest. But even then he made an inauspicious start when, during his first mass, he was apparently so struck with awe at the holiness and majesty of God that he struggled to complete the service. Initially Luther was very much a participant in the Catholic Church's practices, making a pilgrimage to Rome to say mass for his dead mother and to climb the Holy Stairs on his knees on behalf of his dead grandfather. Nevertheless, he was troubled by doubts as to whether these acts had done any good for their souls in Purgatory.

It was during his time as a doctor of theology at Wittenberg that the crisis erupted which was to trigger the Reformation. A travelling preacher named Johann Tetzel (1464–1519) arrived in town, selling indulgences from the Pope. It was said that these indulgences could rescue people's loved ones (and themselves) out of the fires of Purgatory. Tetzel's sales pitch included the following catchy slogan:

*“Wenn das Geld im Kasten klingt
Die Seele aus dem Feuer springt!”*

*“When the money rings in the casket
The soul springs out of purgatory”.*

Luther, concerned by this theology and practice of selling indulgences, was spurred into action. He responded on 31 October 1517 by issuing his famous 95 theses (or points for discussion), demanding that a formal debate take place about indulgences. One of the most stinging attacks in this document went as follows:

(82)... Why does not the Pope empty purgatory on account of most holy charity and the great need of souls, the most righteous of causes, seeing that he redeems an infinite number of souls on account of sordid money, given for the erection of a basilica, which is a most trivial cause?

In other words, Luther was asking that if the Pope truly has the keys to the ‘treasury of merits’ and can release souls from the pains of Purgatory, then why do people need to pay him money? Why doesn’t he just do it for free? The reason why the Pope didn’t issue the indulgences for free was because he needed to raise enough money to build St Peter’s basilica in Rome.

The following April, Luther took part in a public debate (now known as the Heidelberg Disputation) with his fellow monks on these issues. Later that year he was summoned

to appear before Cardinal Cajetan and ordered to recant his views but refused to do so. Matters came to a head in 1520 when Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church on the grounds that he attacked papal authority, spread false opinions about the sacraments and Purgatory, believed that ordinary people could hear confessions as well as priests, and taught that the burning of heretics grieved the Holy Spirit.

In 1521 Luther was summoned before the Diet of Worms (an imperial council in the German town of Worms), where he again refused to recant, arguing – as we have already seen – that his conscience was bound to the Word of God. Luther would have known what had happened to the Czech reformer Jan Hus, a century before, and must have suspected that he was probably going to his death. Nevertheless, he still went and stood up for what he believed to be true, whatever the cost to himself. As it turned out, the council did indeed condemn him as a heretic and declared him an outlaw. However, Luther had powerful friends to protect him, most notably Frederick III, Prince-Elector of Saxony. They staged an abduction to capture Luther and hide him away at Frederick's castle, where he would be safe.

LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

Luther's biggest contribution to Christian doctrine was his understanding of what is called 'justification through faith alone'. According to this teaching, sinful people can be declared righteous by God and receive all that Christ

achieved on their behalf simply through putting their trust in him. It was (and is) a radical idea. It liberated Luther from years of trying to save himself and he couldn't keep quiet about it for the sake of others.

'Justification through faith alone' became the watchword of the Reformation and the teaching which most set Protestants (as they became known) apart from Catholics. Oddly enough, one of the best accounts that I have found on this subject comes from a Catholic author, Peter Kreeft, who writes:

Luther's story is well known. Passionate, impetuous, demanding, sensitive, and pessimistic in temperament, Luther had never been able to find inner peace. He could not overcome his sense of guilt despite all his good works, prayers, penances and alms. His confessor advised him to read Romans. No more historically momentous advice was ever given by a confessor. In Romans Luther discovered the simple bombshell truth that God had forgiven his sins freely, not because of Luther's works in Germany but because of Christ's work on Calvary. That discovery freed Luther's spirit and ignited a fire that swept over Europe.²

So what about good works then? If these are no longer seen to be the means of our salvation, are they to be discarded? Not at all! For Luther, justification through faith didn't mean rejecting good works. Rather, faith enables and

² Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (Ignatius Press, 1990), chapter 44)

empowers them. Christians are meant to do good works out of love for others and gratitude for God's mercy, not as a way of trying to earn God's favour. 'And this ...' as Peter Kreeft goes on to say, 'is winsome. No one wants to be loved as someone else's good deed for the day'.

The distinctive theological views of Luther and his followers were proclaimed in the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530. This confession of faith (a common practice among early Protestants) is still a key text of Lutheranism. Yet, while it strongly emphasises justification through faith alone, it would surprise many people to know that it is still a lot closer in much of its theology to the Catholic Church than most other branches of Protestantism. For example, many Lutherans still believe in baptismal regeneration,³ the real and physical presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, confession and absolution, liturgical worship and some use of images in church.

A FLAWED HERO

Martin Luther, while to many the hero of the Reformation, was nonetheless a man of many weaknesses. He is recorded as having had a foul temper and often used coarse and abusive language. While he had defended Jews against prejudice in the early days of the Reformation, he hardened in his attitudes as time went on and, towards the end of his life, it is sad to say, he became particularly anti-

³ Baptismal regeneration is the belief that a person is 'born again' by God through baptism.

Semitic. Nevertheless, he should still be remembered as a courageous man who risked his life in order to reform abuses within the church.

It is also worth recording the fact that Lutheran theologians conducted a respectful and friendly dialogue (in Greek) with the Patriarch of Constantinople between 1559 and 1581, though they were ultimately unable to fulfil their desire to reunite with the Orthodox Christians in the East.

THE REFORMATION BECOMES RADICAL

Like Luther, Huldrych (or Ulrich) Zwingli (1484–1531) – a priest and scholar from Zurich and effective leader of the Swiss Reformation – believed in using Scripture as the primary source of his beliefs. Yet this resulted in Zwingli coming to far more radical conclusions than Luther had. Zwingli always argued that he came to his theological opinions directly from the Bible and independently of Martin Luther and events in Germany. He was also fluent in Greek and read widely the writings of early church fathers. Unusually for a church pastor, though, he died in battle.

Zwingli came to understand the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper more as memorials (or symbols) than as means of receiving God's grace, although he still believed in baptising infants. He came to oppose church disciplines such as Lent, although he believed in fasting in private. He came to oppose church government by bishops and the traditional understanding of the priesthood, although this (unfortunately) resulted in a greater role for

the state in matters of church discipline and government. He was critical of the lax sexual morals among the clergy of his time and argued in favour of a married priesthood, although his own personal life in this area was not entirely beyond reproach. Like many other reformers, he opposed prayers to the Virgin Mary and the saints, as well as prayers for the dead. In many ways, it is Zwingli rather than Luther who established the doctrines familiar to most Evangelicals.

However, the Reformation soon became far more radical than even Zwingli had anticipated. The Anabaptists under Thomas Müntzer (1489–1525) – the leader of a peasants’ revolt in Germany – and Balthasar Hubmeier (1480–1528) – one of the leading theologians of Anabaptism – came to reject infant baptism and any role for the state in church affairs. Some Anabaptists were alleged to have advocated both anarchy and communism.

Both Luther and Zwingli were fearful of what they saw as the dire social and religious consequences of this lawlessness and anarchy. They therefore lent their support to the authorities’ use of violence to bring the dissidents back in line. The peasants’ revolt in Germany was violently crushed by the princes with Luther’s support. Likewise, in Switzerland, Zwingli acquiesced in the decision that Anabaptist leaders be drowned in mockery of their practice of baptising adult believers by full immersion.

Soon, though, a synthesis between the relative conservatism of Luther and the radicalism of Zwingli was to be found in the theology of a French lawyer and exile in Geneva, John Calvin (as we shall see in the next chapter).

SUGGESTED APPLICATIONS

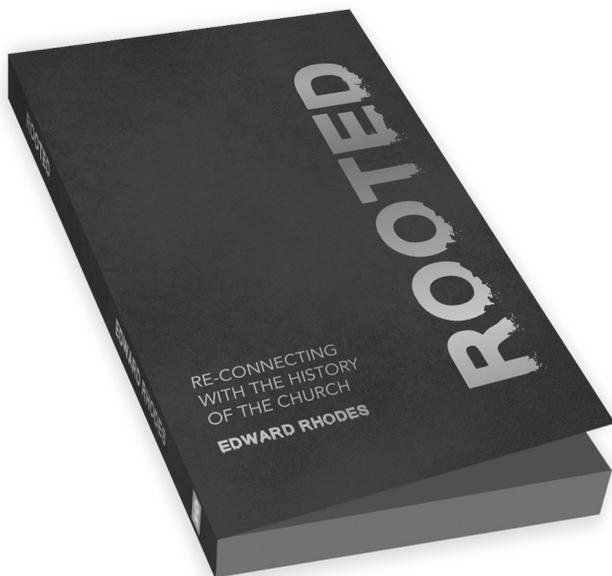
One of the lessons to be learnt from this period is avoiding the sort of religious hucksterism characterised by Johann Tetzel's sale of indulgences. It is sadly still too easy for Christians to get caught up in this sort of thing. Without wanting to be judgemental, some modern 'prosperity theology' doesn't seem to me to be a million miles away from Tetzel's approach.

There are also lessons here when it comes to applying Christian teaching on faith and works. At one extreme we can fall into the trap of trying to earn our way into heaven. At the other extreme it is possible to forget that faith in Christ is meant to lead us into a life of love for God and others, full of good works.

A final lesson is that it is much easier to start a revolution than it is to stop it again. Zwingli took things much further than Luther ever intended. The Anabaptists, in turn, took things much further than Zwingli ever intended. Both Luther and Zwingli were aghast at the outcome.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- 1 Can you think of any other examples where a reform movement has become more radical than was intended by those who started it? This isn't necessarily limited to religious reform.
- 2 How can we avoid religious hucksterism? What do we mean by this? Can it happen today?
- 3 How do you try to earn God's favour?
- 4 What good works are there in your life as a result of your faith in Christ?



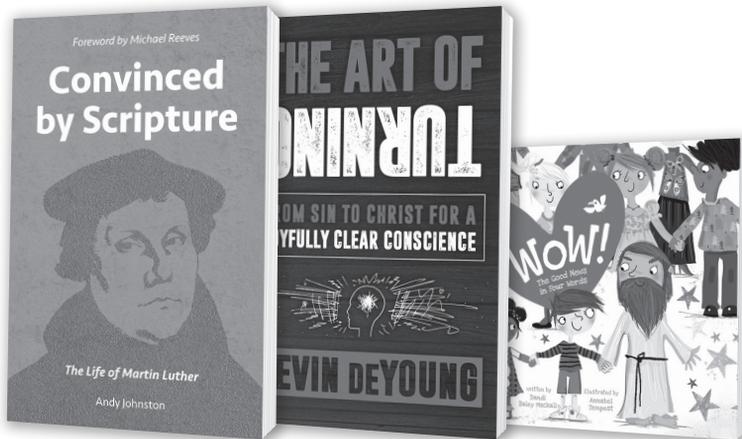
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