

TRINITY LECTURE 1 - Luther's Legacy

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- [0 : 00] I might well sing the final hymn in German, but we'll just see. Our friends, Luther looms larger than life.
- You may know stories about him claiming the high moral ground, confronting the boy emperor, Charles V in 1521, and refusing to recant, though the emperor called him to, refusing to recant his new ideas on the righteousness of God, which comes as a gift.
- You might know the story about Luther throwing the ink pot at the devil as he was locked away in the Wartburg in the castle, translating the New Testament into German.
- He epitomizes in many minds the individuality and determination of someone who's railing against the unjust use of authority, pleading for freedom of conscience, and for every Christian's right to access the scriptures and to have personal assurance before God.
- He makes the university, and not the monastery, the centre of theological inquiry. In many minds, he's seen as the first modern man.
- [1 : 30] Alongside such iconic representations of Luther, you might know other stories about him. He was a man prone to cranky tempers and inveterate hyperbole.
- Did you hear the story about his argument with Zwingli, who was a Swiss reformer? They fell out over the nature of the Lord's Supper. Luther said to Zwingli, You are from the evil one.
- That's a big call. Later he said, not to Zwingli's face, but about Zwingli, I've bitten into many a nut, believing it to be good, only to find it wormy.
- Zwingli is nothing but a wormy nut that tastes like crap in one's mouth. Not long before he died, he said to his wife, Katie, I'm fed up with this world.
- It's fed up with me. I am like a ripe stool, and the world is a giant anus, and we're about to let go of each other. More humorously, he once said, There are two authorities in my life, the Holy Spirit, and my dear wife, Katie.
- [2 : 44] He was of peasant stock. His father was a miner made good, and he wasn't given to the refined life of the 16th century.
- Interpreters through the centuries have told his story in many different ways. His successor, in Wittenberg, whose name was Melancthon, said at Luther's funeral, Some by no means evil-minded persons have complained that Luther displayed too much severity.
- I won't deny this. But I answer in the language of Erasmus, Because of the magnitude of the disorders, God gave this age a violent physician.
- The age needed someone like Luther, who might have been a physician, but he might have had to be a violent physician to achieve his reforming ends.
- Karl Barth, in the 20th century, said, What else was Luther than a teacher of the Christian church whom one can hardly celebrate in any other way but to listen to him?
- [3 : 55] But more ominously, after World War II, Luther, in many circles, was blamed for the rise of National Socialism in Germany.

It was said that it was Luther who bequeathed to the Germans the belief that the church should submit without hesitation to the authority of the state in obedience to Romans 13.

Indeed, Luther had very strong opinions about the Jews being murderers of Christ. So strong were his opinions that he had pigs carved into the upper wall around the church where he preached in Wittenberg to keep the Jews away.

The author, Thomas Mann, a 20th century German novelist, giving a lecture to the Library of Congress in Washington in 1945, had this to say of Luther.

Luther was a liberating hero, but in the German style for he knew nothing of liberty. Luther hated the peasant revolt which, if successful, would have given a happier turn towards liberty.

[5 : 09] Luther, the German man of the people, bears a good share of the responsibility for the sad ending of that first attempt at a German revolution, for the victory of the princes and, let the listener understand, for all its consequences.

In Thomas Mann's mind, Luther had a long-range part in the rise of National Socialism and the consequences of the Second War.

how easy it is with a man of such importance and complexity to remake him in our own image, seeing in him either what we want to see in ourselves or only seeing in him what we want to blame on others.

For a man standing at the crossroads of history might seem to be pointing in one direction, but actually he might well be looking in quite another. Well, I want to introduce you tonight to the radical Luther and the conservative Luther.

The radical Luther, first of all. While acknowledging the constraints he faced in the 16th century, it stands as one of Luther's greatest accomplishments that he preached, embodied, and struggled for religious freedom.

[6 : 36] in theology, in his personal life, and in ministry structures which he cultivated, he protested against established authority and with an ardour, with a burning that sometimes seems unhinged.

He became an advocate for the freedom of the Christian. Now, his family name, Luther, wasn't originally spelt with a T and an H.

His family name was Luder, L-U-D-E-R. But Luther changed the spelling of his family name, as many educated Europeans at the time, and made it conform to a Greek word, Eleutheria, meaning freedom.

Eleutheria, you might be able to hear it in the Greek word, sounds a lot like Luther. He saw his ministry, he saw his life in terms of freedom.

Freedom for you, freedom for me, freedom that comes with an understanding of the gospel. Now, as a young man, Luther trained as a lawyer and was both devout and anxious.

[8 : 02] While a student at Erfurt, he was travelling during a thunderstorm, this is in 155, and was so scared of the storm around him that he called out to St Anna, who was the patron saint of miners.

I suppose he'd heard his old man calling out to St Anna in moments of grief or terror. And in calling out to St Anna, that patron saint of miners, he asked if she would rescue him from mortal danger.

If she did, he would devote his life to God as a monk. And because he survived the storm, he duly entered the monastery, the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, much to his father's disappointment.

He was hoping for a lawyer as a son. His great talents were recognised early, and in 1511, he was invited to begin lecturing at the University of Wittenberg in Electoral Saxony.

It was a relatively new university, only founded nine years earlier, and it was the first university in Germany to be established without the initiative of the church.

[9 : 09] Effectively, he lectured in Old Testament. through a visit to Rome in 1510, he saw both the grandeur and the corruption of the medieval church.

Through his reading of Augustin in particular, lecturing in Psalms and Romans, he became consumed by the question, where can I find a gracious God?

And his assumptions about Romans, about Romans 1, about Romans 1, 17, made matters worse, because in his mind, when he heard the phrase, the righteousness of God, he understood that to mean God's rightness in judging him.

He was confused, because he thought the gospel should be a declaration that was good, positive news, but he didn't understand how this gospel could be God's righteousness.

How could God judging be anything good? He had no assurance, despite the fact he had been in his monastic obedience scrupulous.

[10 : 25] He was plagued by doubt and insecurity. Now we don't know when he came to his great breakthrough. known as the tower experience, the tomb held edness, when it clicked, what Romans 1.17 was really about.

We don't know when it came, but when it did come, it came with a vengeance. He realised that this righteousness of God, spoken of by Paul in Romans 1, wasn't meant to generate in him fear and loathing of God.

Rather, it became for him the key that unlocked all the scriptures and all of Christian life. He understood that the righteousness of God describes not God's capacity to judge, but God's desire to forgive, to make us righteous, to give to us his own righteous, making us righteous in his own eyes.

This then was truly gospel. This was truly good news, a promise of new life, the guarantee of freedom and experience of grace, as he described the wonderful exchange.

And in coming to this breakthrough, reading Augustine, preaching on Psalms, Galatians and Romans, he could write, here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

[12 : 03] Isn't that wonderful? There a totally other face of the entire scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the scriptures from memory.

I also found in other terms an analogy as the work of God, that is what God does in us, the power of God with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God with which he makes us wise.

The strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. He understood all these other phrases in a new and fresh way as well. God was giving something to him. Today we might say, his chains fell off, his heart was free, he rose, went forth and followed him.

Luther wasn't entirely wiping off the medieval church. He acknowledged that the medieval church had done some of its job faithfully by passing on the scriptures that he had to read, the creeds and the sacraments.

But he was arguing that the medieval church hadn't protected the core message of the scriptures and the creeds and the sacraments, that God makes us right with him through the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

[13 : 23] This message was incendiary. It became not only a yardstick for his experience, for the sound doctrine which he taught, but it became as well a protest against authorities or structures which obscured the message.

this gospel of justification, this gospel of the righteousness of God became a call for freedom. Luther's world was about to change.

Now on the bigger canvas, outside of his study, a Dominican friar arrived in a nearby town.

His name was Johan Tetzel, and he was turning his very great gifts in preaching to less worthy ends. For he had been commissioned to sell indulgences, to encourage average punters to purchase certificates signed by the Pope, which would be the clear sign that the sinner had confessed, shown contrition for sins, and was prepared to bear the cost of making good their wrong.

They were not just designed to give sinners assurance that their penance was adequate, but that any period that that sinner or others were destined to spend in purgatory could be reduced.

[14 : 55] The jingle sounded, every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs. This is the indulgence that Tetzel was preaching.

On top of that, the money that was raised through the sale of these indulgences would continue to finance rebuilding programs in Rome, St. Peter's Basilica amongst them. It's no wonder then that Luther took such bold exception to the theology which undergirded the sale of the indulgences, given that he was at this stage coming to his own breakthrough understanding of grace as a gift, not as an achievement, something that can be earned or bought.

Luther protested the sale of the indulgences by nailing his 95 theses, that just means 95 sentences, to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg.

This was not, at one level, a terribly radical thing. It was like a notice board for academics. You might have done it yourself, all invited to morning tea today.

In itself, nailing the 95 theses to the door of the castle church was beginning an in-house academic debate, outlining his concern with indulgences.

[16 : 17] But, importantly, he wasn't actually yet protesting about the mass. His concern at the beginning was a different sacrament, penance and its expression through indulgences.

He critiqued human attempts to pronounce forgiveness, pronouncing forgiveness which belonged to God alone. Interestingly, at this stage in his ministry, he's also not complaining about purgatory.

That comes later. So what began as a scholarly debate on a particular topic, the sale of indulgence or the sacrament of penance, soon became a massive movement for popular reform.

They were taken down and printed and distributed widely. Helped, no doubt, because of the recent invention of the printing press, which was enabling a revolution in communication, not just giving access to new ideas but all the time that academics had spent rewriting documents because by the time you'd finished writing one, you had to go back and start writing it over again.

The parchment might have collapsed or the paper disintegrated. The production by printing presses of books or of these 95 theses gave not only a widespread distribution to ideas but allowed academics more time to do their reading, thinking and writing.

[17 : 55] Luther was protesting. He was trying to defend his insights on justification and grace but people heard him attacking the church.

Luther was wanting to defend St Augustine's view of grace as a gift but it seemed like to many that Luther was actually attacking St Augustine's doctrine of the church and obedience to it.

So Luther finds himself over a couple of years in debate. First of all with Cardinal Cayetan in 1518 and the cardinal very deftly pushes Luther into a more extreme position than he began with.

Luther ends up that debate calling for a general council of the church to decide the matter. In 1519 he debates with Eck, a German theologian and he falls into Eck's trap and argues that both Pope and councils could err.

More and more Luther is seen not just to be defending justification but to be attacking the church wholesale. People think he thinks that there's no other authority but the Bible and Luther's interpretation of it.

[19 : 14] By 1520 he'd written three important treatises addressed to the Christian ability, Babylonian captivity and most importantly freedom of the Christian arguing that though we might be justified by grace through faith as a gift that does not give us permission to go on sinning.

We're saved in order to do good works. These three treatises together in the same year began a more revolutionary program for he was saying the church is not the clergy.

The church is everyone. Everyone has access to God equally. Daily work is dignified. Loving your neighbour, doing good works has value in God's eyes.

It was not just those in monasteries who could please God. Luther was living up to his assumed name. Though he wasn't yet advocating the establishment of a new church, just the reform of the old one, freeing it from its abuses and trying to establish it as the pure church of God.

But the Pope, Leo X, had had enough. These three treatises in the same year meant that Luther was excommunicated, set outside the church.

[20 : 37] He could no longer minister or have permission to minister within it for change. He was given 60 days to change his mind. But all Luther could do was not only burn up the papal bull, the charge of his excommunication outside the gates of Wittenberg, but he also burned up as well the canon law, basically the constitution of medieval Europe.

Luther was pushed into a corner. More and more people are in reaction to his extraordinary ideas.

And an even stronger reaction comes. Not only the Pope, but now the Emperor calls him in and asks him to recant, to change his mind.

The Emperor was whistling a different tune and Luther was meant to sing along. But claiming that his conscience was captive to the word of God, Luther refused to change his mind.

He took his stand in front of the Emperor and the elective princes. He took his stand upon his right to read and understand the scriptures without hierarchical mediation.

[22 : 01] It wasn't that he was saying there is no authority other than the Bible, rather that all other authority received its legitimation from the Bible, from the designs of God.

All authority had to conform to the Bible. His view of sola scriptura, scripture alone, didn't mean, as some suggest, that Christians ought to recognize no other authority.

Indeed, as he stood before the Emperor, he said, unless I'm convinced by the testimony of scriptures or by clear reason, for I believe neither in Pope nor councils alone, I'm bound by the scriptures which I've quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God.

He wanted to obey and even the Emperor to submit to the scriptures as the authority above other authorities, the authority that mediates between other lesser conflicting authorities, the authority that validates other powers.

He was taking a stand on the Bible. Captive to the word, he was free to serve the word. God in the flesh, the Lord Jesus himself.

[23 : 21] Friends, there is freedom in serving one master. It's highly unlikely that he ever uttered the next words attributed to him.

Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen. Though I suspect some later copyist was reading his speech before the Emperor and got so carried away he inserted a couple of extra lines to give it a bit of bang at the end.

The Emperor in this hearing declared him a heretic but honouring his word gave him safe passage back to Saxony. Though on the way he was kidnapped by friends and hidden away in the Wartburg, the castle.

The gospel of justification by grace through faith was making its impact in the world. It was a dynamic that would undermine medieval religion and form Christian faith anew.

Luther exuded passion because he'd benefited from this very power at work in his life. This passion, this ardour of Luther encouraged new forms of church service based around not what we can sacrifice for God but what benefits accrue to us from God.

[24 : 47] His ardour led him to compose hymns that all congregations could sing in which could join in with. His ardour saw him marry in 1525 a runaway nun named Katie.

His ardour saw him write catechisms or booklets summarising Christian faith that even children could learn and recite. His ardour led him to passionate disagreements with Zwingli over the Lord's Supper, with Erasmus over freedom of the will, with the local prince who outlawed the reading of the New Testament in German.

As a prophet of the last days as he believed himself to be, a new world was dawning through his preaching reforms and commitment. It was in many eyes no coincidence that the reformation of the church was taking place amidst great speculation that the Lord would return about the year 1500, a thousand years after Rome's final fall.

The radical Luther, motivated by ardour, having experienced the gospel as the power of God for salvation to all who believe.

This righteousness of God which comes as a gift through faith. But I want to introduce you as well tonight, not just to this radical Luther, but as well to the conservative Luther.

[26 : 19] The man who was motivated not just by ardour, but also by a desire for order. Through the tumultuous early years of his life, as I have recounted them, he was both intentionally and unintentionally dismantling a system of church and faith which was severely corrupted.

He'd been on the front foot, taking the initiative, driven by a heat for his cause. And others were reacting to him, excommunicating him or banning him. Well, they did only those once each time, but it was enough.

But after 1521 and his exile, his secret hiding in the Wartburg, Luther faced a new challenge for now he was no longer taking the initiative for reform.

Now others were taking the reform movement further than Luther was comfortable to support. Now he has to fight on two fronts. He has to fight the Roman hierarchy, which he thought needed to be formed.

And he wants to fight the shverma, the enthusiasts, who he thinks are taking the reforms far too far. He's wanting to try to shape a church more deliberately conforming to the gospel.

[27 : 30] But he has to oppose other reformers whose ideas and practices are creating chaos and bringing his own ideas and reforms into disrepute. While appealing to the power of God for salvation, now he appeals to the power of the state to protect the reforms that he's achieved.

And more painfully, he appeals to the power of the state to use that power to coerce, to punish those undermining stability in the realm.

If his position at the center of the German movement for reform is to be defended, then threats to that movement have to be put down.

It was because there was confusion, chaos in Wittenberg, where he'd been employed, that he was released from the castle to sort out the mess.

A fellow member of the faculty, whose name was Karlstadt, had, catch this, right? He'd proceeded to conduct a church service on Christmas Day without robes. Heaven forbid.

[28 : 43] Dressed as a layman. He prayed the Thanksgiving prayer in German. He distributed the bread and the wine to all without them having previously fasted.

All gone to confession. He actually let the people take the cup into their own hands to drink. And what's more, the next day, though he was a priest, he got engaged to be married.

This was causing extraordinary chaos in Wittenberg. Steps had been taken to break away from a thousand years of church practice. And local self-proclaimed prophets from Zwickau had been encouraging congregations to elect their own pastor, not asking the bishop or prince for help.

And had appealed to God's spirit without reference to Christ or to the Bible. Many in Wittenberg said, this was enough. Then crowds took it into their own hands to smash idols and church furniture in order to fulfill the commandment against graven images.

outside of this small German principality, there were greater threats. The Turks were advancing through Hungary in their campaigns of war.

[30 : 10] Indeed, the Turks very soon would be at the gates of Vienna, threatening the very heart of the empire. The borders of the empire were proving unstable. It's not just that the borders on the east were collapsing.

The borders on the west were expanding for Spain and Portugal had been exploring. Columbus had so-called discovered North America in 1492. These other bigger geopolitical events were causing the local magistrates, the princes, the kings, great anxiety.

The last thing they wanted was, in their homelands, disturbances, chaos, which would undermine their own authority. Luther emerged from the castle and preached love and told the people to slow down.

The reforms were getting well out of hand. Things were moving too fast. Things did calm down in Wittenberg. But between 1523 and 1525, there were spontaneous revolts all over Germany amongst the peasants.

Though perhaps they were more like landed middle classes with unemployed knights providing early leadership. They'd heard Luther preach freedom and so they were rising up against their princes.

[31 : 35] They were wanting freedom too. They'd heard freedom. Luther had preached freedom. But they were interpreting freedom in a different way. They were responding with arms.

Organization. And terror. Terror. Now, Marxist historians more recently have argued that these uprisings were the first of the workers' revolutions to throw off capitalist oppressors.

That said, they certainly did shock Europe. There had never been uprisings against the prince like this. Luther himself appeals for peace.

Not only does he do that, he asks the authorities to step in. He writes in 1525. They are starting a rebellion and they're violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs.

By this they've doubly deserved death in body and soul as highwaymen and murderers. If a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executioner. Just as when a fire starts, the first man who can put it out is the best man to do the job.

[32 : 54] Rebellion is not simple murder. It's like a great fire which attacks and devastates a whole land. Rebellion brings with it a land filled with murder and bloodshed. It makes widows and orphans.

Turns everything upside down like the worst disaster. Therefore, let everyone who can smite, slay and stab secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish than a rebel.

It's just as when one must kill a mad dog. If you do not strike him, he will strike you and a whole land with you. I will not oppose a ruler who, even though he does not tolerate the gospel, will smite and punish these peasants without first offering to submit the case to judgment.

He is within his rights, since the peasants are not contending any longer for the gospel, but have become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious, murderers, robbers and blasphemers, whom even a heathen ruler has the right and authority to punish.

This is the conservative Luther. In a way, Luther wasn't particularly concerned about reforming society. If indeed, in his estimation, if the last days were upon the world, Christ was soon to judge, why would you transform the society?

[34 : 10] Such world transforming vision came not from Luther or from Wittenberg, but came from Zurich and Geneva with Swingley and Calvin, who wanted to reform not just the church, but society, according to the word.

Luther only wanted to preserve society, so it didn't get any worse. Preserving the world from further decay. He wanted the people of God to love their enemies, turn the other cheek, not to resist an evildoer.

Applying the Sermon on the Mount as a set of precepts, not just for those in monastic orders, but for all believers as individual Christians. Luther argued from Romans 13 that rulers, princes and kings in their public role were permitted to use force to preserve the peace, to protect society, to punish evildoers and to defend order.

The secular authority was an arm of God fulfilling its role when it established order, order which would allow the gospel to flourish.

The church wasn't answerable to the state, but the church could call on the power of the state in an emergency to intervene. This became known as the two kingdoms theory.

[35 : 28] Arguing that the church should be released from unswerving loyalty to a prince who may not be a supporter of the gospel, though appealed to the prince for support, even if he wasn't a Christian, supporting the gospel, to establish order in the community.

This has led, though, to Lutheran churches, countries that are chiefly Lutheran, developing a social ethic which encourages compliance or complacency or quietism.

The result was that churches that held Lutheran views more often only flourished where civil authorities supported the church, unlike the church reform movement coming out of Switzerland, which flourished even in territories where civil authority opposed the church.

Indeed, Lutheran churches in the future would have much less significant role in the world than those churches which trace their origins back to Zurich or Geneva.

Can you see Luther as a man of ardour and Luther as a man of order, preaching freedom but nevertheless wanting the reforms he so desired to be brought slowly?

[36 : 53] We might think that at one level, Luther was a very modern man appealing for individual human freedom of conscience. Indeed, in many people's minds today, being a Protestant means nothing more than being able to exercise freedom of conscience in face of threats to conform.

In lots of people's minds, being a Protestant has nothing to do with grace alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, and faith alone. But though Luther was radical, perhaps he wasn't as progressive as we might think.

For even in defending grace alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, and faith alone, he was actually only taking the church back to things that it had preached in its earliest days.

In a way, they weren't new beliefs. They were just rediscovered. They'd been veiled. Luther's agenda is actually quite a conservative one all round, even when it comes to understanding the gospel.

All he wanted to do was get behind the corruptions of the medieval church to see more clearly the roots of orthodox faith in the belief of the fathers, particularly Augustine. Though the word Protestant might sound like we defend something negatively, we're protesting against, it was actually the case that for Luther, when they received, Luther and his movement, when they received the title Protestant, they weren't actually trying to argue against something.

[38 : 33] More positively, they were trying to show how they conserved the message of the gospel, which had been preached from the beginning and taught in the early church. The later Luther did defend established authority, and he did quite conservatively back the princes.

But perhaps that wasn't as out of character as might first appear. He was perhaps less a modern man and more a man of his own time than often self-serving presentations of Luther suggest.

Where do we stand? How do we appropriate the legacy of Luther? Now, friends, I hope you with me want to hold fast to his discovery, in which he argued so passionately that human beings cannot do deals with God.

No amount of indulgences, masses for the dead, monastic discipline, subservience to the Pope can give us secure, liberating relationship with God. Communion with God comes through his Son and by the Spirit.

Justification by grace through faith assures me of God's gift to me without any deserving. We are free.

[39 : 56] We are forgiven. And don't believe for a moment that you or I can cut deals with God. That only leads to slavery.

The legacy of Luther is we, you and I, as believers in the Lord Jesus, are free. Praise God.

On the other hand, we can take another lesson from the ministry of Luther, this time a warning. Our freedom in Christ does not deny the very concrete and earthed responsibilities we have in this world.

Now, it is true that preaching the power of the gospel for salvation will have consequences in the world around us, in its power structures. It will affect our churches, our culture and our commonwealth.

But we have to learn as well how to honour the order in which we live. Learning to connect our doctrine of redemption with our doctrine of creation.

[41 : 09] This freedom that comes to us through the proclamation of the gospel does not remove us from this world. We have to learn to think theologically about how we live in the light of that doctrine of justification.

We have to learn how to exalt both God as both Lord of Lords and Lord of the Church. And though the radical Luther and the conservative Luther may be at times hard to hold together, we probably know from our own experience of our own difficulty in holding ardour and order together as well, whether in our own lives or the life of our local congregation.

This was not a struggle unique to him.