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Luther, the Flawed Giant

Brent A. R. Hege

There's a rather simple question to ask in light of everything we've been discussing this morning. Why, after 500 years, are we still talking about this man, Martin Luther? What is it about him that so captures our attention? There were other reformers in the 16th century, with churches that still bear their influence, but we rarely hear the name John Calvin or Huldrych Zwingli or Menno Simons in the news today. But we still talk about Luther. A lot.

Anniversaries are always times for stock-taking, and this anniversary is no different. Why do we commemorate this event from 1517 in a world that looks virtually nothing like that one? Why do we still discuss and debate this meddlesome German monk, this small-town professor? Obviously the answer to that is fairly simple: because he changed the world. OK, we'll grant that. But a different and perhaps more important question is, *How* do we remember this man? What does our remembering say about ourselves? About our own time, our own issues, our own concerns, our own world? How can we be sure that we're really remembering a *man* and not a comic book superhero? These are the questions I'd like to discuss now, under the heading "Luther: the Flawed Giant."

100 years ago, in the midst of the Great War, Lutherans marked the 400th anniversary of the Reformation in a world ravaged by horrifying violence. Luther's homeland was, for us Americans at least, the enemy: barbarous, savage Huns threatening to destroy Western civilization. And yet even in the United States Lutherans commemorated a German in the midst of that conflict, perhaps tacitly insisting that he could transcend national borders and belong to the world. At the same time, though, most popular commemorations of the 400th anniversary cast Luther in a decidedly heroic light, so much so that he almost took on the qualities of a demigod. Perhaps ironically, then, it was the 400th anniversary that inaugurated a new era of Luther

studies, a Luther renaissance that eventually produced a much more nuanced and evenhanded image of Luther, placing him squarely within his historical context and revealing the man Martin, warts and all.

Yes, Luther was a giant. There's no disputing that. He goes down as one of the most significant figures in European and even world history. But he was also a man, with flaws and prejudices and pettiness and vindictiveness and weaknesses and mistakes, just like each of us. We must never lose sight of that side of Luther, either, lest we make him into something more than he was, lest we excuse his flaws or even enshrine them as models for how we ought to live our own lives as Christians in a very different world. So to close today's event I want to take stock of Luther the man, the "flawed giant," as honestly as I can. Once we've done that, we can ask what we can learn from Martin Luther and how his influence continues to shape and guide us, 500 years later.

Anyone who has ever read even a few of Luther's works knows that he was a gifted thinker, preacher, and writer, with a knack for sizing up a situation and bringing his considerable intellectual skills to bear on any number of issues. He was not a systematic thinker, like a Thomas Aquinas or a John Calvin, and he left us no organized system of doctrine like Thomas's *Summa* or Calvin's *Institutes*. Instead, what we have are literally thousands of occasional writings, written in the heat of the moment to address specific controversies or questions. To put this in perspective, the critical edition containing all of Luther's Latin and German works, the *Weimarer Ausgabe*, begun in 1883 and finished in 2009, is 121 volumes, totaling more than 80,000 pages! Needless to say, we're going to get a pretty wide range of texts in a collection that large. I tell my students that reading Luther is often not unlike reading the comments section of an online article or blog post. You never know what you're going to get, but you can bet that it

will be passionate! Sometimes we wish the author would have taken a few breaths and thought things through before clicking “submit,” but that’s usually not how things work in an online comments section, and that’s usually not how it worked for Luther, either. Fires were flaring up all around him seemingly all the time, and quite often he responded in kind: with fire.

Luther’s temper was legendary, and it doesn’t take long when reading his works to see it displayed in full force. He was particularly prone to mocking his opponents, hoping to cut them down to size to deflate their ego and shatter their aura of invincibility. He loved calling opponents asses, whores, fools, and worse. He left no stone of rhetoric unturned if it could help him score points in a debate. The pope, cardinals, and Catholic theologians took the brunt of his rhetorical abuse, but he could and often did turn his ire on supposed allies, especially when he thought they betrayed core commitments of reform. Luther, for better or for worse, was often a zero-sum thinker when it came to reform, not prone to dwell in nuance when essential truths were on the line. If you questioned anything he had written, you were often in for a torrent of abuse, and he would call down all manner of devils on your head.

It bears mentioning, of course, that Luther was convinced the world was about to end and he had no doubt in his mind that devils were real and were waging an epic battle for the souls of Christians. Bearing that in mind, it makes a bit more sense why he would take any perceived slight to be the work of the Devil and Antichrist, because he thought the future of the church itself was at stake in every debate. Nevertheless, he often pushed his attacks way too far. He fulminated against popes as the Whore of Babylon, birthed anally by the Devil. Theological opponents were braying asses, in love with the smell of their own farts, shitting out drivel and calling it theology. Luther-approved woodcuts showed peasants shitting in the Pope’s tiara and farting in the faces of cardinals. Scatological references are everywhere in Luther, so much so

that some psychologists have wondered about his gastro-intestinal health; and they're right to wonder: years of fasting and punishing his body left Luther with a terribly weak GI system, which, in true Luther style, he never tired of describing in vivid detail in letters to Katie.

Did this raw, often vile language serve a purpose? Yes, of course. Luther would not compromise on what he understood to be the truth of the gospel. But at the same time, he was quick to equate whatever he thought with what God thought, and that way often lies hubris and disaster. At various points in his career there were opportunities to build bridges, to make alliances, to achieve consensus, but Luther rarely passed up an opportunity to belittle his adversaries and exacerbate differences. This was largely due to his temper and his narcissism, his insistence that he alone was right. Needless to say, this is not a good model for us in our own time, when now more than ever we need compassion, charity, humility, and good faith negotiations across the chasms that divide us.

Perhaps nowhere else is this flaw of Luther's more damning than in his views on the Jews. Much has already been written on this aspect of Luther's thought, but we keep returning to it for a reason. Early in his career, Luther sought out scholars who either were Jewish themselves or who had studied with Jews because he wanted to immerse himself as completely as possible in the thought world of the Hebrew Bible and he needed to master Hebrew to do it, and he did become an admirable reader and translator of Hebrew. In his early career, Luther had a relatively open-minded attitude toward Germany's Jews. In 1523 he wrote a book called *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, which was rather radical for the time, in that he acknowledged that Jesus was a Jew (even today this still surprises some Christians...). In that book Luther urged tolerance and respect for Germany's Jews as descendants of Jesus' own people. But when we read a bit deeper in this book, it becomes clear that Luther thought the Jews had not accepted Christianity because

of the Roman Church's distortions of the gospel. Once they heard the pure gospel preached, Luther assumed the Jews would gladly convert to Christianity *en masse*. So he encouraged missionary activity among the Jews, for Christians to preach the gospel to Jewish neighbors so that God's chosen people could fulfill their destiny and enter the fold of Christ's church.

Needless to say, that didn't happen. By the end of his life, Luther's views on the Jews had taken a dark and sinister turn. In 1543, three years before his death, he wrote another book on the Jews, called *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Any trace of tolerance or forbearance was gone. The Jews had heard the pure gospel and had refused to convert to Christianity. Now Luther's patience had dried up. Any Jew who persisted in practicing Judaism was to be expelled from Germany, their books and synagogues and homes burned to the ground. 400 years later, Hitler and the Nazis drew from Luther to justify their own genocidal program, viewing Luther as a German nationalist defending the fatherland from the Jewish threat. To be clear, this is not a misreading of Luther. He said these things about the Jews and he meant every word of it. It is to the Lutheran churches' great shame that it wasn't until decades after the Shoah that they finally officially condemned Luther's writings on the Jews. I'm glad they did it. But I'm ashamed that it took them – us – so long to do so.

The Jews were not the only group on the receiving end of Luther's ire and condemnation. Muslims, or "Turks" in Luther's parlance, were also singled out as particularly dangerous threats to European Christendom. Some context here might be helpful. For much of the Middle Ages the center of civilization was not Europe but West Asia, especially Baghdad, Cairo, and, in Luther's own time, the Ottoman Empire in Turkey. During what used to be called the Dark Ages in Europe, the Islamic world flourished as the center of politics, economics, literature, science, and urban planning. The Ottoman Empire in particular came to dominate the Muslim world and by

Luther's time was encroaching on the Holy Roman Empire itself, reaching as far as Vienna in Luther's lifetime. This was an existential threat to Christian Europe, and everyone was aware of the dangers pressing on Europe from the east. Luther was well aware of these international issues and even sponsored a translation of the Qur'an, not for the sake of interreligious dialogue, but for the sake of knowing the enemy and defeating them.

Muslims, Jews, "Papists" – all were lumped together in Luther's mind as enemies of the gospel of Christ. For Luther, there was no longer any excuse to avoid siding with the Reformation now that the gospel had been preached in its purity. He really believed that he had eliminated any justification for remaining aligned with the pope or continuing to practice Judaism or Islam. In his mind, all three – Judaism, Islam, "Papists" – now bore the shame of hearing and rejecting the gospel, and his later writings reflected his assumption that anyone continuing in these traditions did so out of stubborn pride. Luther's attacks on the Pope and cardinals need to be understood within this context and here Lutheran churches have often been guilty of a grave injustice to our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. Because of Luther's attacks on the papacy, Lutherans have often viewed Catholics with suspicion if not outright hostility, so much so that anything deemed "too Catholic" has often been banished outright from Lutheran thought and practice. But Luther's own views were more nuanced. Until the end of his life Luther considered himself a validly ordained Catholic priest and he continued to refer to himself as "Father Martin Luther." He did reject his monastic vows, but he never rejected his ordination vows. Luther was not rejecting the Catholic Church outright, and he continued to consider himself a Catholic for his entire life. Rather, Luther wanted to reform the church, to purge it of what he considered to be its "Babylonian Captivity," and to return it to its original purity.

To think of Luther simply as an opponent of Catholicism is to misunderstand him. He reserved his ire for the hierarchy and for practices that he thought strayed too far from the Bible. To its credit, the Roman Catholic Church called the Council of Trent in the middle of the 16th century in part to address Luther's criticisms, and some of its pronouncements did introduce reforms that Luther himself had advocated. Others, of course, did not, and doubled down on matters that Luther had rejected. The history of warfare between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th and 17th century bears witness to the failures of both sides to envision a broader unity of European Christianity. But the intervening centuries, particularly the 20th century, have opened up new paths of dialogue and rapprochement between Lutherans and Catholics, especially the pronouncements of Vatican II and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, in addition to more recent ecumenical efforts, such as the Declaration on the Way, to find common ground in common mission. In some ways the Catholic Church has come to see value in Luther's critiques and suggestions for reform; at the same time, many of the Lutheran churches have rediscovered and embraced their Catholic roots. This is a blessing for the unity of Christ's church.

One last episode deserves mention here, another instance in which Luther made profound mistakes that have resonated down through the centuries. In the late medieval period, economic tensions between aristocrats and peasants threatened to erupt in violence. Peasants had their own rhythms of life and ways of organizing their communities, rooted in collective organizing and generous sharing of resources. Luther, whose parents came from peasant stock, sympathized with the peasants' plight when aristocrats squeezed more and more taxes out of the peasants, confiscated their communal lands, and stripped them of their traditional rights. All of this came to a head in 1524 when the peasants revolted in what has come to be known as the Peasants'

War. The peasants appealed to Luther's writings on Christian freedom to support their efforts to emancipate themselves from servitude and reclaim their ancient rights. But Luther was horrified, insisting that they misinterpreted Christian freedom, which, he argued, was entirely spiritual and had nothing to do with politics or economics. For Luther, law and order were more important than political liberty, especially liberty won through violence. He urged the princes to do whatever was necessary to crush the rebellion, and they responded by slaughtering thousands of peasants.

It was one of the darkest moments of Luther's career, and it enshrined a tendency toward ethical and political quietism in Lutheranism that has dogged it ever since, nowhere more so than in the Nazi period. At the same time, though, perhaps Luther was not able to appreciate the full significance of some of his own writings and allowed his own political inclinations to overshadow his theological insights. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is perhaps the most prominent example of someone who took Luther's thought in a radically different direction than Luther himself would approve, and we remember Bonhoeffer today as a martyr formed by a deep and abiding faith in Christ and love for the neighbor, thanks in no small part to his inheritance of Luther's own insights.

Luther certainly lends himself to many different and often conflicting interpretations, and we can certainly say that at various points in his career he betrayed his own insights, sometimes with disastrous results. As a pivotal figure with one foot in the medieval world and one foot in the modern world, perhaps it's only natural that we will find in Luther what we hope to find. Traditionalists and progressives alike will find ample support in Luther's life and thought, as evidenced by the radically different church bodies that still bear his name. But we must always remember that we are dealing with a flawed, flesh-and-blood human being in Luther, who was

always the first to admit that he was a rank sinner, justified only by God's extravagant grace in Christ. We do him, and ourselves, no favors by ignoring his flaws and making him an idol. He would likely be the first to admonish us never to elevate him to the same level as the Christ he tirelessly proclaimed.

So what now? 500 years later, what can we learn from this man, this flawed giant? I would like to propose three areas where Luther can be a guide for us at the dawn of the 21st century, a world vastly unlike Luther's own but at the same time profoundly shaped by Luther's life and work. These three areas concern quite different topics, but I believe all can find significant support in Luther's life and thought: interreligious dialogue, the perennial reform of the church, and grace and gratitude.

This first one might sound a bit surprising: Luther, a champion of interreligious dialogue? In many ways our world is obviously quite different than the world Luther knew. For Luther, the default setting was Christian, with some Jews on the social margins and Muslims on the borders of Europe. Our world, obviously, is quite different. We live in a country of astonishing religious diversity and where increasing numbers of people choose not to identify with any religious tradition at all (the so-called "nones"). What can Luther teach us about dialogue among the religions? At first glance, it would appear that Luther would not be very helpful because of his insistence on demonizing anyone who did not accept the gospel as he articulated it. But if we push deeper, we can find surprising resources in Luther for interreligious dialogue. After all, Luther's primary message was that we do not save ourselves, that salvation is a free gift of a loving and gracious God. Our salvation does not depend on our works. If we push this even further, we might say that our salvation doesn't even depend on our religion. If salvation is entirely up to God, then we must leave it to God to determine who is saved and how God will do

that. That might mean that God is saving people who aren't Christian. It might even mean that God is saving people who aren't "religious." That's not up to us to decide.

While it's safe to say that Luther himself would profoundly disagree with this conclusion, it's nevertheless a conclusion I think we can safely draw from Luther's own insights. If salvation has nothing whatsoever to do with human effort, then that includes human religiousness. The gracious and loving God Luther never tired of proclaiming is free to reveal Godself in any number of ways, and it's possible that God is at work in multiple traditions and even outside religion, drawing all things to Godself. If Luther was right about salvation being an utterly free gift of a gracious God, then we must leave open the possibility that God's grace is active in any number of contexts in any number of ways. In a world often torn apart by interreligious violence and increasingly hostile conflict between religion and secularism, this is very good news indeed.

One motto of the Reformations, especially in its Reformed expressions, runs, in Latin, *ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda est*, "The church reformed is always reforming." Luther and the other reformers did not assume that their reforms would be the last word of the Spirit in the life of the church. They did their work always with the conviction that the Church is a living organism, constantly evolving and addressing the questions and the needs of its particular time and place. By defining the church by the criterion of the gospel rather than by its hierarchy, Luther and other reformers built into their ecclesiology a living, breathing criterion for perpetual reform. Where the church falls short of the gospel, there it must be reformed. As times change, so does the church's witness to the gospel. In Luther's day, the pressing question was how a sinner can become righteous before God. In other times and places, other questions are more pressing. I invite you to consider what the most pressing questions might be for our own time, and how the gospel addresses those questions. The Reformers encourage us to think of

reform as a process, not as a deed done once and for all. The church will always be reformed and reforming, always applying law and gospel to its particular situation. For this we can thank Luther, who saw this perhaps more clearly than anyone else. And this also means that, for the sake of the gospel, we are obliged to be critical even of our own traditions and assumptions, and of Luther himself, when they fall short of the Great Commandment.

Lastly, the core of Luther's teachings can be summed up in two words: grace and gratitude. Our salvation is a free gift of the gracious God, loving us in Christ and adopting us as God's own children for the sake of Christ. Our proper response to that gift is gratitude, living out our calling as Christians in loving service to our neighbor, whoever they are. Grateful service does not ask about the status of our neighbor, does not make sure that their doctrinal or moral ducks are all in a row, does not check their papers before loving them. No, grateful service is rooted in unconditional love, precisely the love Christ shows us. If God's love is really freely given to us, then that's the only way to love our neighbors: freely, without reservation, without conditions. Luther himself certainly failed to live out this insight consistently in his own life. But it's often the case that an author is rarely their best interpreter. Luther showed us the way, even if he wasn't always able to follow that way himself. We have the benefit of hindsight, of knowing where he himself failed to live according to the principles he so boldly taught. And yes, we will sometimes fail too. That's inevitable, because we are all sinners. But, as Luther also taught, we are *justified* sinners, sinners set free from the wages of sin, set free to love and serve our neighbors as Christ served us. 500 years after Luther, this is his enduring legacy, his message to us from across the centuries. "We are beggars, this is true." Everything we have is a gift from our gracious and loving God. What else ought we to do but share this gift, to be Christ to our neighbors? This is Luther's legacy, 500 years later, and this is our calling, today and every day.