



The Controversial Luther

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To speak of the controversial Luther is for the most part redundant. Very few aspects of his life did *not* become controversial—either in Luther’s own lifetime or after his death. The biography of Luther can be written as the story of the disputes in which he was involved. As Luther looked back on his life in 1545, one year before his death, he saw it as a succession of such disputes. First came the “indulgence affair,” which he recounted in the preface to the collection of his Latin writings; this “affair” was followed, in Luther’s memory, by the “sacramentarian” and the “Anabaptist affairs.”¹ Other disputes could be added, but these three illustrate the way in which Luther spent much of his public career: in controversy with the Roman Church on the one side, and with the radical reformers on the other.

One would hardly expect less of the person who initiated the major European controversy of his century and one of the most crucial controversies in church history. Yet other important figures of the sixteenth century have not generated as much ongoing controversy as Martin Luther. Several reasons account for this. First, as the initiator of the Reformation, or at least as its major catalyst, Luther was subjected earlier than anyone else to praise and to blame. He was being lauded in humanist circles even prior to the ninety-five theses and became the object of popular cult already in the early 1520’s.² Of course, vilification was not far behind once the “indulgence affair” gathered momentum. Second, Luther died before the Reformation reached either a political or a theological settlement. His death ended his own involvement in that conflict, but it only fueled debate about Luther’s legacy and which group of followers was faithful to it. That dispute has never ended, despite the *Formula of Concord* in 1577, and is

¹Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimarer Ausgabe; Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883) 54.186-187; *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 34.338; hereafter cited as *WA* and *LW*, respectively.

²Helmar Junghans, “Initia gloriae Lutheri,” *Unterwegs zur Einheit: Festschrift für Heinrich Stirnimann*, ed. Johannes Brantschen and Pietro Salvatico (Freiburg [Switzerland]: Universitätsverlag; Freiburg and Vienna: Herder, 1980) 292-324. Robert Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981) 14-36.

carried on by the different confessional and ecclesiastical traditions within Lutheranism.

The third and most influential reason for the continuing controversy surrounding Luther is the vehemence of his polemical statements. Especially in his later works, but not only there, Luther employs harsh and sometimes vulgar language against his opponents, most notably against the papacy and the Jews. Add to this Luther’s advice to princes in 1525 to kill rebelling peasants if necessary, and the result is a formidable catalog of harsh and abrasive attacks which

have occasionally. obscured his less polemical contributions to theology and exegesis. Persons who have never heard of Luther's translation of the Bible or his lectures on Galatians have been alerted to his outrageous condemnations of Jews and peasants. The titles alone of his major polemical works against the three groups already named illustrate their ability to capture notice: *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (1525),³ *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543),⁴ and *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (1545).⁵

Various attempts have been made by historians to explain and sometimes to tame the virulence of these attacks. Luther's health, world-view, and theology have all been suggested as explanations for his harshness, and all of them did play a role. In a new study, however, Mark Edwards has attributed greater influence to factors outside Luther, namely to the political pressures exerted on Luther by his own prince and by the broader Protestant-Catholic conflict.⁶ These pressures exacerbated the anger which Luther recognized as his peculiar sin and also strengthened his apocalyptic conviction that the Last Day was at hand. In this historical context Luther's penchant for coarse and blunt expression was utilized and exploited by friends and foes. Most of Luther's polemical works produced during the later years were provoked or solicited by others, often by his aggressive prince, Elector John Frederick, in support of Protestant political decisions.⁷ After Luther's death, Philip Melanchthon noted that the times had called for a "sharp physician" and that God had graciously filled the need.⁸ Luther was better with an ax than with a scalpel, however. In 1529 he described himself as a rough woodsman whose job it was to "dig out stumps and trunks, hack away thorns and briar, fill in puddles and clear a path."⁹

All attempts to understand Luther's polemics or just to comprehend his basic motivation as a reformer have been enormously complicated by the events of the twentieth century. In his rebukes of all three groups mentioned above—the peasants, Jews, and the papacy—Luther touched nerves that have become sensitive and even raw over the last fifty years. After John XXIII, Vatican II, and the accomplishments of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues, Luther's

³M. Luther, *WA* 18.357-361 (*LW* 46.45-55).

⁴M. Luther, *WA* 53.417-552 (*LW* 47.121-306).

⁵M. Luther, *WA* 54.206-299 (*LW* 41.257-376).

⁶Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics 1531-1546* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1983).

⁷*Ibid.*, 205-207.

⁸Ernst W. Zeeden, *Martin Luther und die Reformation im Urteil des deutschen Luthertums* (2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1950-52) 2.4.

⁹M. Luther, *WA* 30/2.68.

rigid condemnation of the papacy seems incomprehensible. Amidst calls for revolution, liberation, and social justice, Luther's apparent alliance with the princes against the peasants appears to be not just callousness but an adulteration of the gospel. And, finally, after the Holocaust and the use of his anti-Jewish statements by National Socialists, Luther's anti-semitic outbursts are now unmentionable, though they were already repulsive in the sixteenth century. As a result, Luther has become as controversial in the twentieth century as he was in the sixteenth.

Instead of treating the ongoing controversy as an embarrassment, however, we can take advantage of the positive function that controversial figures from the past exercise. They remind us first not to distort the past by failing to include those parts of the story which now seem

incomprehensible or unmentionable.. Moreover, they alert us to the restrictions on our vision and invite us to inquire if insights might be present which still deserve consideration even though they might challenge our own comfortable assumptions. Not all disputes yield such insights, but the controversial Luther can on occasion cause healthy discomfort.

I. LUTHER AND THE PAPACY

In the first place, the praise and blame which Luther garnered for initiating the Reformation points to the ambiguity of historical events and the need for care in assessing their impact. In the case of the Reformation, we have moved beyond the narrowly confessional question of whether Luther was right or wrong to a more helpful historical question: why did Luther feel constrained to persist in his opposition to the Roman Church to the point that schism resulted? This question has to do with the controversial issue of Luther's motivation and the role of his "Reformation discovery" in the motivation. Did Luther in fact achieve such important new insight into the gospel that it justified his own adamant stand? Scholars are still not agreed on the nature or the timing of the "discovery."¹⁰ For some who date it prior to 1517, Luther's protest against the indulgence practice was only a secondary consequence of his new theological insights. Luther had to be a theologian before he could become a reformer. For those who date the "discovery" after 1517, however, Luther stumbled into conflict with Rome over indulgences and then was pushed to develop a theology in support of his protest. In this case, Luther only became a theologian of renown because he tried unprepared to be a reformer.

Neither point of view, however, does justice to the real breakthrough which Luther accomplished. Both viewpoints divorce theology from reform and faith from life, whereas Luther's new insight was the connection which he saw between them. To teach justification by faith was more than to give a definition of righteousness different from that of medieval theology. Rather, it taught that

¹⁰A clear overview of the positions is provided by W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, "The Problem of Luther's 'Tower Experience' and its Place in his Intellectual Development," *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian*, ed. Derek Baker (Studies in Church History 15; Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) 187-211; reprinted in *Studies in the Reformation: Luther to Hooker*, ed. C. W. Dugmore (London: Athlone, 1980) 60-80.

people did not become righteous in God's sight through religious ritual or ecclesiastical services like indulgences. In 1518 Luther stated that connection lucidly: "I teach that people should trust in nothing but Jesus Christ alone, not in prayers and merits or even in their own works."¹¹ In other words, justification by faith was a direct challenge to the penitential system of the church and to the religiosity which that system encouraged. The result was the liberation of people from these wrong kinds of works and freedom for the right kind of works which could be called truly "good"; the service of others and the exercise of a responsible secular calling.

The controversy over Luther's Reformation "discovery" has thus encouraged a more precise understanding of Luther's reforming intention and, in particular, of his protest against the religiosity of late medieval life. The outcome has been to explain why Luther and the Protestant reformers struck such a responsive chord in an intensely religious culture and why they stressed the dignity of the secular sphere. At the same time, the controversy has recalled that one of the

greatest perils for faith is excessive religion. That lesson will always be controversial in the church and in a culture like contemporary American society in which religion flourishes and is highly approved. In such a society the churches are always tempted to promote religion in general, and consequently they comprehend the intention of the Reformation only with great difficulty.

The threat which misguided religiosity posed to faith was the reason why Luther held out persistently against the papacy and ultimately discarded the notion of the papacy as a useful office in the church.¹² Of course Luther had no long-term ecumenical goals in mind. They did not fit into a view of the world which saw the devil making his last furious attempt to reverse the victory of the cross and the resurrection. For Luther the Last Day was at hand, and faith was under attack. The devil was at work everywhere and potentially in everyone: “the God of this world lies in wait (for us) through the pope, the emperor, and even through our own teachers.”¹³ The pope was the Antichrist because his office was the agency through which the devil was attacking faith from inside the church. The purpose of rejecting the papacy, then, was not to start anew church or, for that matter, to split the old one, but to protect the faithful from the jurisdiction of that office through which, in Luther’s eyes, the devil was most insidiously at work. In ecclesiastical terms, exclusion of papal jurisdiction from Saxony and other Protestant territories eventually meant different churches, but Luther did not equate the rejection of the papacy with the permanent establishment of a new church.

For Luther himself, the Reformation instead was a “holding action” in the face of the devil’s final furious assault before the Last Day should arrive.¹⁴ Luther lived twenty-seven more years after he first identified the papacy with the Antichrist, and perhaps he should have realized that the End had not come. Moreover, many reformers did not share Luther’s apocalyptic urgency. Instead

¹¹M. Luther, *WABr* (Weimarer Ausgabe: Briefwechsel) 1.160.

¹²See, for example, Luther’s direct statement in the *Smalcald Articles*, in *Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 299.

¹³M. Luther, *WA* 51.131-132.

¹⁴Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1982) 79-86.

of mellowing, however, Luther’s harsh attitude toward the papacy intensified with time. He saw no possibility of reform because the papacy was unyielding on precisely those matters which he regarded as the greatest threat to faith: the mass, monastic and clerical vows, and the penitential system of the church. The papacy not only *did* not reform the church but in Luther’s eyes *would* not, as long as it claimed direct divine authority for the office and the church granted it that claim. The only way for the faithful to survive was to remain free of the papal control, and that meant to live in a church without a papal office.

Luther’s analysis of his own times and his fierce rejection of the papacy seem unnecessary in the late twentieth century. Luther was certainly wrong about the nearness of the Last Day, although he never predicted a date for the End. Nor did he live in the pluralistic, global society which has fostered the new ecumenical consciousness of Christianity. Luther’s opposition to the papacy, however, which today seems so anti-ecumenical, was based on an intensely ecumenical view of the church. The church could be confined to no particular time, place, or

hierarchy, such as Rome, but was potentially universal. The church was present wherever the gospel was creating and strengthening faith. Whether or not a papal office in the twentieth century is inherently incompatible with this view of the church depends on the way in which the papacy formulates and exercises its claims to serve an ecumenical purpose.

For making this decision Luther supplied a standard which can still be helpful. The utility of every office of leadership in the church—whether papal, episcopal, or collegial—should be judged by no criterion more important than whether it promotes the access of people to the gospel and thereby strengthens their faith and enhances their Christian freedom.¹⁵ Reforms introduced since Vatican II have improved the access of people to the gospel; the charismatic qualities of John XXIII and John Paul II have increased respect for the present papal office. Nevertheless, the office itself has not reduced its claims to divine authority or lifted its restrictions on the lives of priests and laypeople to the extent that even irenical sixteenth-century reformers like Melancthon demanded. Luther's criterion, of course, stretches beyond inter-confessional dialogue; it is also a nettlesome reminder to all churches which are restructuring themselves and reexamining their purpose.

II. LUTHER AND THE PEASANTS

The same apocalyptic outlook which shaped Luther's attitude toward the papacy also colored his views of the peasants and of the Jews: the devil was behind the rebellion of the peasants¹⁶ and the proselytizing (so Luther was told) of Christians by Jews.¹⁷ In Luther's eyes, the precarious recovery of the gospel was threatened in both cases, and that seemed reason enough to demonize these groups along with the papacy. Such a view is not tenable, of course, but in both controversies Luther raised some pertinent questions for the twentieth century.

¹⁵See, for example, Luther's last extended discussion of the words of Christ to Peter in John 21:15-17: *WA* 54.273-283 (*LW* 41.344-356, especially 350-354).

¹⁶M. Luther, *WA* 18.357 (*LW* 46.49-50).

¹⁷For example, M. Luther, *WA* 53.417 (*LW* 47.137).

In addition to his condemnation of the rebelling peasants, Luther blamed princes for the injustices which gave the peasants legitimate grievance, and he admonished both sides to negotiate an end to the conflict. In light of the widespread and organized nature of the revolt, which Peter Blickle calls the "revolution of 1525,"¹⁸ Luther's admonition was too little too late. Nonetheless Luther's admonition to peace and his call for non-violent solutions sound less vacillating to people who sense acutely the destructive potential of violence in the modern world. Luther did not support violent revolution for any cause, but he was far from being a social reactionary. He believed that governments as well as subjects could be called to account. The new dignity awarded secular authority by the Reformation also meant greater responsibility.

Luther's second objection to the peasants was to the insistence that their demands were specifically Christian. Indeed, the peasants in southern Germany had formed Christian associations and had appealed to Luther and to other religious leaders in support of their grievances. Luther's assertion that no Christian issue was at stake seemed incomprehensible in sixteenth-century German society, where religious institutions were some of the most oppressive landlords. His refusal to associate the gospel with their grievances is also difficult to understand

in a society which has generated a “social gospel.” Luther’s writings are not very helpful in drawing implications for social justice directly from the gospel, although his application of the law to the created order is unequivocal. Luther’s refusal to see a specifically Christian issue at stake, however, cautions us against attaching the label “Christian” exclusively to any particular cause. The churches which have seen many moral crusades come and go do well to heed Luther’s warning against the Christianizing of any cause, especially those legitimate causes like peacemaking which draw genuine support from Christians and non-Christians alike.

III. LUTHER AND THE JEWS

It is more difficult to find positive insights from Luther’s writings against the Jews. Certainly no defense of his anti-semitism is possible. One can only say what that anti-semitism was not, and then ask what issues his writings against the Jews still raise. On the first point, Luther’s anti-semitism was not the “Gentile” or Aryan racism of German National Socialism. It was instead part of the cultural anti-semitism that permeated medieval Europe and erupted in political and economic persecution in Luther’s lifetime. Thus cultural anti-semitism did not dominate all of his anti-Jewish works. Even his treatise entitled *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543) contained mostly exegetical discussions of disputed messianic passages in the Old Testament. That does not make the anti-semitic remarks or his abusive language any less repulsive, but it does demonstrate that the bulk of Luther’s opposition to the Jews was theological anti-Judaism rather than anti-semitism.¹⁹

¹⁸Peter Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525: The Gennan Peasants’ War from a New Perspective* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1981).

¹⁹The importance as well as the inadequacy of this distinction, long recognized, is discussed by Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles*, 136-142.

After Luther gave up the hope for the conversion of the Jews that he had expressed in a treatise of 1523, he included them along with the “papists” and the Turks among the opponents of the gospel. In 1543 he wrote: “Jews, Turks, papists, radicals abound everywhere. All of them claim to be the church and God’s people in accord with their conceit and boast, regardless of the one true faith and the obedience to God’s commandments through which alone people become and remain God’s children.”²⁰ Luther was following a certain precedent by placing the Jews in this notorious company. In his early biblical commentaries he echoed the exegetical tradition by associating Jews with heretics and evil Christians in their deviation from the faith. At the same time, Luther stressed that the Old Testament faithful, like Abraham and David, who believed the promises of God were models of Christian faith and, again following the tradition, he extolled the earliest community of believing Jews as the “faithful synagogue.”

The harsh attacks of his later years show that Luther sensed the especially sensitive threat that unbelieving Jews posed to Christians. Rabbinic exegesis undermined the distinctive Christian claim, based on the New Testament itself, that the Old Testament pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. This was a challenge to the truth of Christianity, and it had fueled Christian opposition to Judaism since the earliest days. Therefore Luther tried to prove that Jewish exegesis was nothing but a “lie” that made God himself a liar in his Word. This threat to the most elemental Christian claim was handled no better by Luther than by the earliest Christian exegetes.

His exegesis of messianic passages is often helpful, although even Luther refuses to Christianize the entire Old Testament. His exegesis is rather another illustration of the difficulty which Christianity has had in making the Old Testament its own without denying the integrity of the Jewish people as God's people. Modern Christianity has devised different ways of adopting the Old Testament, but it has seldom faced the question of what that means for its relationship to contemporary Judaism. That question is being taken up anew by Jewish-Christian dialogues.²¹ In the meantime, Luther's own inability to purge his later anti-Judaism of anti-semitism is not just a lesson about the sixteenth century, but also a warning to twentieth-century Christianity as it seeks to understand this puzzling aspect of the truth which it claims.

Luther's writings against the Jews will remain the most controversial of his polemical works, and rightly so. They remind us how remote and yet how dangerously near the sixteenth century is to our own. Controversy is a two-edged sword. It makes old insights fresh again, but it also goads one to find new insights when old ones are obviously out of date. The value of the controversial Luther is that he does both. He forces one to look ahead as well as behind. The Reformation turned out to be more than a holding action limited to Luther's own time; his controversies remind us that reformation is always unfinished business.

²⁰M. Luther, *WA* 53.448 (*LW* 47.175).

²¹See, for example, the helpful contribution to this subject by Ralph Klein in the Report of the Fourth International Consultation held under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation's Department of Studies: *The Significance of Judaism for the Life and Mission of the Church* (Geneva: *LWF*, 1983) 19-39.