



Eat the Scroll

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I have only two theses to advance, not ninety-five. Thesis 1: In popular memory and usage, Luther the historical figure is far more important than Luther the theologian, to the point that the former has all but obscured the latter. Thesis 2: However, in truth and from the perspective of Christian faith, Luther the theologian is far more important than Luther the historical figure, to the point that one might wish to obscure the history so that his theology might come more readily forward.

The latter point is absurd, of course. There is no Luther the theologian apart from the history that catapulted him into the public sphere. And there have been many essential theologians of the Christian church forgotten by most everyone but scholars. The sheer fact of Luther's historical fame is the one thing that might earn his theology a hearing nowadays, half a millennium later.

But it is an ambiguous advantage, to be sure. Luther has become an inkblot test: we see in him what we project onto him. It's much like Albert Schweitzer's cutting indictment of the quest for the historical Jesus, that the results said far more about the questers than the Jesus they claimed to be seeking.

To illustrate the point—and to demonstrate what we're up against, if we hold to the conviction that Luther's theology is the most important thing about him—we'll take a look at three recent popular accounts of Luther's story, all cashing in on the Reformation anniversary.

Martin Luther frequently gets misused in contemporary circles, as Sarah Wilson demonstrates. But, as she suggests, there are appropriate ways for contemporary Lutherans (and others) to employ his life and theology in ways that both honor his memory and enrich our Christian congregations.

In her *Luther and Katharina: A Novel of Love and Rebellion*, Jody Hedlund,¹ a Lutheran “Pastor’s Kid” (PK), has turned her skills and fame as a romance writer to one of the most famous marriages of all time. To be fair: the Luthers’ is a great story. Theirs was indeed a marriage that changed the face of the world, and it’s with good reason that Katie has earned her share of veneration alongside Martin—not least in the romance novel of a two generations ago, *Kitty, My Rib*.²

But Hedlund’s fidelity to her genre’s conventions overwhelms her fidelity to the inherited Luther story that she ostensibly seeks to honor in the novel. Romance evidently requires the principals to despise each other for most of the story, which makes the steamy thoughts they evoke in each other all the more irritating; at the same time, there has to be at least one threat of sexual violence against the woman from another quarter, necessitating eleventh-hour rescue by the protagonist. Applied to the case at hand, we are presented with a story that seems coincidentally to involve characters with the exact same names, time, and place as the Luthers without actually being the same people.

Thus, so far as we know, Martin and Katie were not a love match, but there’s no reason to think they disliked each other, as Hedlund depicts for almost the entire book, even after their wedding. Nor is there any reason to believe that Katie was such a snob that she thought marrying him was a comedown, and anyway Martin wasn’t from a poor family at all but from that of a rising industrialist. And we can be pretty certain that Justus Jonas never advised Luther to write a treatise declaring to the world that he wasn’t acting out of principle or filial duty but because “you’ve fallen in love. It’s as simple as that.”

Even this brief description shows how preposterous the novel is, not worth taking seriously. Except that it does show how great a pull the Luther story has on the imagination, such that it can be shaped to ends entirely at odds with itself and still expect to win a following in the process.

So far, so silly. But when it comes to providing the necessary antagonist, the unreformed Catholic-hating and Catholic-baiting of long Protestant habit become depressingly evident. Yes, nuns could suffer badly for their defection. But *Luther and Katharina* implies that the average abbot was an accomplished rapist, spouting the lingo of submission more characteristic of contemporary cults than of medieval religiosity. Katie’s Aunt Lena is depicted to have sacrificed herself to keep Katharina and other nuns unharmed, resulting in several years of PTSD-induced vacant silence—rousing out of it in the end only to stab an infiltrating toady of the

¹Jody Hedlund, *Luther and Katharina: A Novel of Love and Rebellion* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2015).

²E. Jane Mall, *Kitty, My Rib: The Heartwarming Story of a Woman of Courage and Devotion* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959).

aforementioned rapist abbot. Who, by the way, kidnaps Katharina sometime after her escape, whips her back to bloody shreds, and is just dropping his drawers when Mother Superior walks in and saves her. Ecumenical considerations aside, it's clear in this aspect of the story that the demands of the genre have severed the slightest tether to actual history.

Even this brief description shows how preposterous the novel is, not worth taking seriously. Except that it does show how great a pull the Luther story has on the imagination, such that it can be shaped to ends entirely at odds with itself and still expect to win a following in the process (witnessed by 90 percent of the Amazon reviews awarding it four or five stars).

This susceptibility to rewriting has more serious consequences in other genres, demonstrated in this next example. *Luther: The Graphic Novel*, published by Faith Inkubators,³ is evidently intended for confirmation-age students and youth groups. Rich Melheim's retelling of Luther's history is an aetiology of Lutheran community meant to shore up young people's Lutheran identity. The net effect, however, is not an overview of the historical facts, or even catechism per se. Rather, the whole book is an exercise in Lutheran dispensationalism.

Yes, dispensationalism, as in a theory of the meaning of church history that selectively and self-aggrandizingly construes events to build up a theology of glory for one's own institution. The dispensationalism begins on the cover with the dramatic announcement: "The Medieval Era ended and the Modern Era began with one stormy monk!" So we learn right off the bat that history is neatly divided into epochs, and that our man Luther was the lynchpin of the ages, the first rugged individualist—disregarding the last century of scholarship that has worked valiantly to undo that old stereotype, which implicitly set Lutherans and other Protestants as the vanguards of progress and left Catholics in the dust.

The inside cover goes on to say, "Human rights and an individual's conscience meant nothing. Any dissent could land you in the stocks or find you facing the Inquisition and the stake..." No mention of the fact that the very concept of "human rights" didn't exist then, or that "conscience" was such a clear and important concept in medieval theology that Luther was being entirely traditional in invoking it at his trial. Facts must give way to the dispensational scheme!

The first page depicts Jan Hus screaming in agony as he burns at the stake—but also prophesying the coming of another, the swan that won't be cooked as Hus the goose was. This is, indeed, a long-standing myth, and one that Luther's own contemporaries liked to invoke. But why begin this graphic novel this way? Because it sets up the historical pattern and establishes the institutional church as essentially a torture machine of that regressive "medieval" period, soon to be replaced by enlightened "modern" times.

In the next section the dispensationalism lets up a bit. Unfortunately, what takes its place is Unaltered Erik Erikson—setting up Luther's drama not only as

³Rich Melheim et al., *Luther: The Graphic Novel* (Stillwater: Faith Inkubators, 2016).

historical but psychological and familial. It's all about his father's disapproval, his mother's refusal to see him, his sense of total rejection. Old Hans Luther is shown actually slapping Luther in front of his friends at his first mass. This is apparently why Luther chose the Augustinians, because they are the "harshest" (not true, either of the Augustinians or of Luther's choice), and the abbot is shown continually telling Luther to shut up in the rudest of tones. Luther takes the hint and starts scourging his back to a bloody mess instead.

The agonizing sense of his father's rejection recurs through the story. Even Luther's tower experience—which has some theological validity, citing Romans 1:16, Isaiah 55, and Ephesians 2:8, and speaking of how God sent Christ to take sinners' place—begins with Luther's recollection of "parents who were convinced their son could not survive without regular thrashings." This is all exaggerated well beyond what the historical record shows.

Setting aside the fact that the author couldn't tell the difference between the Augsburg Confession in 1530 and the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, the message is once again that Luther was the lynchpin of history—of our history, bringing us to the good and righteous present. Jesus Christ is not the point of this story. But honestly, neither is Luther, not really.

When the Ninety-Five Theses episode rolls around, the graphic novel does (and unusually, so it gets extra credit for this) acknowledge that indulgences do not buy salvation but release from punishment in purgatory. A dramatic nailing is depicted, and that takes us back to the dispensationalism again. "It appears Jan Hus has risen from the ashes," somebody says. By the time Luther burns the papal bull, we are told, "There was no turning back. The Protestant Reformation had begun." And at the end of the trial at Worms: "With those three words—'Here I Stand'—the Medieval Era ended and the Modern Era began." The reader will take away the message that the issue at stake is defying authority—which, of course, is self-evidently good.

Perhaps the strangest manifestation of the Lutheran dispensationalism at work, however, is that the end of the book shifts attention almost entirely to Charles V. There is a word about the Catechisms, and a tossed-off reference to Henry VIII of England, but a whole lot more about the emperor. The end of the story is not Luther's death at all but that of "Charles V, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, [who] retired to a monastery...unaware of the fact that under his watch, the Medieval Era ended and the Modern Era began. And perhaps the biggest irony in history: three years to the week of signing the Augsburg Confession—the Augsburg Concession—the king who could neither roast a goose nor silence a monk, died alone in a solitary monk's cell, surrounded by a wall full of clocks. Tick tock."

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One could argue that it's too much to expect a graphic novel for youth to get the facts straight, or not be biased historically and confessionally; or that such things are fitting for the black-and-white absolutism of youth and we can expect them to grow out of it with age and maturity. But this fond hope is belied by the documentary *Rick Steves' Luther and the Reformation*,⁴ intended for a more aged audience and promoted with great gusto by some ELCA leaders.

Here, in only slightly less overt form, we find the same dispensationalism at work, modified to be a linear and cheerful tale of Progress, as if Lutherans universally held Whiggish theories to be self-evident. That must be why the Renaissance gets almost as much attention as the Reformation—one suspects that Steves actually likes the former quite a bit better, at least his own version of it, which espoused “optimism, the goodness of creation, and the power of the individual to effect change.” But even the Reformation is “the story of progress,” he tells us, “from medieval darkness to Renaissance humanism, and how it's with great struggle societies earn freedom as they evolve.” Reformation and Renaissance both helped give “birth to our modern world,” obviously a big improvement over the “institutionalized slavery that was feudalism,” thoughtlessly condoned by the church.

Once again Luther's theology barely makes an appearance—and when it does, it's simplified to the point of grotesque distortion. Luther apparently was “questioning fifteen hundred years of church tradition” (in the ambivalent company of Columbus, Machiavelli, and Copernicus!). The Augsburg Confession would be astonished to hear that, since it was the church's recent *departure* from the common tradition of the church as expressed in creeds, councils, and Scripture that formed the foundation of the Lutherans' complaint about Roman innovation. A simplistic picture of the ecclesiastical embargo on knowledge and the persecution of defectors conveniently ignores all the other successful reformers of the Middle Ages, all the disseminated knowledge that brought about dramatic evolutions within medieval thought (like Aristotle did for Aquinas), and Luther's own immersion in ancient and medieval tradition from which he drew the resources to critique selectively, not universally.

Adding insult to injury, the hero gets described in terms that sound more Spiritualist and Enthusiast than evangelical: “Luther began shaping a new theology

⁴*Rick Steves' Luther and the Reformation* (Edmonds, WA: Rick Steves' Europe Inc., 2017).

that emphasized a personal relationship with God. It was each person's faith that mattered rather than church rituals." (Take that, baptism!) And there's the tendentious assertion that "perhaps as never before in European history one ordinary person stood up to authority for what he believed." It's likewise implied that the medieval and later Roman Catholic church didn't believe that salvation was by grace, but then maybe it would be too dangerous to point out that the dispute was over what exactly constitutes grace—which would indict a great deal of present-day so-called Lutheranism. Better to keep your historical enemies firmly in place, with an ecumenical sop at the end to relieve the anxieties of the constitutionally tolerant.

One need not buy into a positivistic myth of perfect objectivity to perceive how badly Luther's history has been distorted in these three examples for the self-serving purposes of the present. Of course, and appropriately, we are always going to bring our present-day questions to the past. But the past does not exist for the sole purpose of confirming and affirming the present.

Have we mentioned progress and tolerance yet? The narrative continues relentlessly: the Reformation unleashed fundamental changes on Western civilization such as secularism, free-market capitalism, the Protestant work ethic, and the democratic spirit, all unfolding inevitably toward a golden future as Europe learned the hard lessons of tolerance. Steves concludes: "The Reformation was more than a religious event. It was part of the societal weave we call progress, and progress comes out of struggle. Religious freedom grew out of the Protestant Reformation, political freedom came out of the French Revolution, and personal freedom is the cry of the civil rights movement in our age." Luther stood up for what he believed and opened up the way to "diversity in how people strive to better understand God"—except for the times when Luther persecuted precisely that. How the apparent fountainhead of religious, political, and personal tolerance could also be so bloody intolerant is a contradiction conveniently ignored.

In the end, the viewer infers, the best reason to be a Lutheran is to get a piece of progressivist action. "Many consider this the most important religious event of the last thousand years," Steves assures us. Who wouldn't want to be progressive by association? And who wouldn't want to live right now, in our joyous society of progress and tolerance and freedom?

A last note: Luther loved beer. As we are told again, and again, and again. Because, you know, he's a Mensch, one of us, not a killjoy. Except for those unfortunate moments of bigotry and intolerance.

One need not buy into a positivistic myth of perfect objectivity to perceive how badly Luther's history has been distorted in these three examples for the self-serving purposes of the present. Of course, and appropriately, we are always

going to bring our present-day questions to the past. But the past does not exist for the sole purpose of confirming and affirming the present. The study of the past illumines the present without unqualifiedly blessing it; the past undermines our cherished myths about ourselves, dethrones our narcissistic narrations of our achievements. But in these three—and too many other—retellings of Luther for the 2017 anniversary, he has been forced to *justify* (oh, the irony!) where we are in history now. What claims to be so progressive is staggeringly conservative of the status quo.

If narratives of the past seek to justify and confirm the present, how much more predictions of the future! Attempts to scry the future inevitably become laughably inaccurate. Fifty years ago, Lutherans were said to be on the verge of dominating the American religious landscape, taking their rightful place at the helm of the mainline, balancing out the extremes of Reformed scholasticism and Methodist revivalism with a saner theology and richer liturgy. Needless to say, that didn't happen. Anxieties about Lutheran irrelevance in the Western hemisphere are now often calmed by the phenomenal growth of Lutheran churches in Africa and to a lesser extent in Asia. If trends hold, then certainly Lutheranism's future lies there. But that's the point: no one knows if the trends will hold.

Lutherans are not unique in wanting to secure their place in history, in progress, or in the grand tale of the church. It's an underacknowledged but universal feature of churches across the spectrum: you see it in the Orthodox doctrine of "sacred Hellenism," in the defense of unbroken lines of papal succession and magisterial teaching in Catholicism (which is what makes the continuity/discontinuity debate over Vatican II so fraught), all way to the elaborate Holiness and Pentecostal theories of decline and restoration of charismatic gifts in the church in preparation for the end times. I suspect it's these underlying theories of who's on the right side of church history that silently block any meaningful ecumenical rapprochement, now that so many apparent doctrinal obstacles have been removed.⁵

And if these historical theories block reconciliation of the past, how much more do they control our hopes for the future—eager as we are to keep our place on the right side of history! Thus the Enthusiastic (in the sixteenth-century sense of the term) declarations of "what the Spirit is doing in our midst" of the most uninspiring bureaucratic decisions of our denominations. We *have* to keep seeing progress, forward movement, divine blessing on our ecclesiastical passage, or we don't know who we are or why we count.

What we generally fail to recognize is that the most important things that the church does are not newsworthy precisely because they are done daily, faithfully, and consistently. They are three: the church baptizes; the church communes; the

⁵For more extensive discussion of this idea, see my essay "Beggars All: A Lutheran View of the 2017 Reformation Anniversary," *Pro Ecclesia* 26/2 (2017) 139–149.

church proclaims the gospel. These three are always the center of the church's history. Hardly exciting from a world-historical perspective, but for those directly concerned—the people saved from sin and death by baptism, whose sins are forgiven and who are knit together with other forgiven sinners in the Supper, who gain in wisdom about God and the human condition from the study of Scripture—for them, these three things are everything, bread and butter, milk and meat.

The only kind of advice for the future church, then, is to attend ever more deeply to these three matters of baptism, communion, and proclamation. In this task, it seems to me, we would be well served by honoring our roots in the university and its clarion call ad fontes.

This assertion will undoubtedly raise alarms about quietist withdrawal, but such alarms betray fundamental uncertainty as to whether or not the Word will return empty, not to mention overconfidence in the human ability to right history's zigzagging course. Indeed, baptized, communing, Scripture-reading-and-hearing Christians will *do* things. They will care for their neighbors and get involved in matters of justice and run businesses and create art. Sometimes these actions will be judged good, retrospectively, and sometimes disastrously bad. But however important these things prove to be for the world's story—which is also God's, if even more mysteriously and counterintuitively than the church's—they are a dangerous distraction from the church's story. The church loses its mission, its very purpose, if anything other than Word and Sacrament are taken to be its lifeblood and telos.

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The first is to return to the Reformation itself—and as the foregoing has shown, this is no small task, precisely because we think we already know it. Reclaiming the Reformation means foreswearing the historical fictions and ideological slogans that have accreted upon Luther like barnacles. And it means engaging with his texts—an eminently doable task, despite all fears about our Google-ized brains. Luther is still an amazingly accessible author, even across all these centuries. He is not arcane or dull. The Small Catechism is (or at least was) the standard for confirmation students, but adult Lutherans are in dire need of immersion in the Large Catechism. And that's only the beginning. Luther's hymns, his treatises like “The Freedom of a Christian” and “What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” and his Bible commentaries, from Deuteronomy to Galatians to the unjustly neglected but magnificent Genesis commentary, are loaded with gems. Pastors should avail themselves of their heritage in any event, but laypeople are capable of

far more than we give them credit for. The last thing they need is another Twitter-length summary of Luther's theology, dismissive and dismissing. Laypeople are thoroughly capable of more complex engagements with complex texts, ideas, and arguments. If anything, our Lutherans today are severely underchallenged—which may explain their drift to more legalistically demanding churches, not because of the much-deplored “decision theology” but because they hear a call to discipleship richer and more textured than they tend to get in our midst.

But this is maybe putting the cart before the horse. The original font is that of the Scripture, and I have come to think it is no less neglected than the seminal Reformation texts. My work and curiosity have taken me to a lot of Lutheran worship services, over the past decade and especially in the past year, in congregations and at public events across the United States. This unscientific survey has led me to believe that we have put our people on a starvation diet of Scripture. And the result is that they are dying for want of the Word. The disconnected snippets of lectionaries of any kind don't solve the problem. Nor does the vacuous preaching that's more interested in interpreting society along any number of ideological lines than in interpreting the Bible, or whose depiction of grace is essentially “God is not a problem”—from which it's a short leap to “God is not of interest” and finally to “God is *not*.” From the pulpit we have been tossing out shorthand, slogans, summaries, crumbs, leftovers. The busywork of the church seems to be nearly anything but reading, listening to, and wrestling with the written Word of God. Do we distrust our people? Or do we distrust the Bible? Or have we simply lost interest? Hard to say, but the outcome is indisputable: people are starving. Time to eat the scroll again, honey and bitterness alike. Better to have indigestion of the Word than the steam-table buffets of fast food otherwise on offer.

What good will it do? The question suggests some other end is more valuable. The end *is* to be baptized, to commune, and to come to know God through his Word. Whatever else Lutheranism may be, in however many years it is granted on this earth, may it remain always delighted, exuberant, and eager to receive and share these three best of all divine gifts. ⊕

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