

REFORMATION SUNDAY: Martin Luther Monologue

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Text: Habbakuk 2:4; Galatians 2:16-21

Guten Tag! Wie gehen Sie? Ich bin Martin Luther. Sprechen Sie Deutsche? Nein. Maybe I ought to speak in English. A Happy Halloween! We have the eve of All Saints Day coming up, a day which pays honor to all of those saints of the past who have departed this life. Let me introduce myself. I'm Martin Luther from Saxony. I'm delighted with the opportunity to visit with you this morning.

Actually, today is known by many as Reformation Sunday, a day with which I had a lot to do. So I've been invited here to share my story. It's been over 450 years since I spoke to a congregation, since I died in 1554. I had several vocations - student, potential lawyer, monk, teacher, reformer, and as Pope Leo X called me "a wild boar in his master's vineyard".

I was born November 10, 1483. So if I am still around in a few weeks you can help me celebrate my 525th birthday. Eileen in Saxony is where I was born. It is also where I died. I went back to assist in resolving a dispute in the town, became ill, and passed away just a short distance from where my mother delivered me. Ah, my mother, Margareta, she was of peasant stock, as was my father, Hans. She was quite superstitious. She believed in goblins and other little creatures who stole vegetables, fruit, and eggs. I never got away from my beliefs in ghosts and demons but I reflected the beliefs of those of my day.

My father became a small, petty capitalist in the mining industry near Mansfield. He was able to provide me with a good education. I graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Erfurt in 1502, and received a master's degree in 1505. Later in 1512, I earned a doctorate in theology from the University of Wittenberg.

Upon receiving my master's degree my father gave me a gift of one of the most important law books of the time. He had great hopes that I would succeed. Furthermore, he and my mother depended upon me to care for them during their latter years. But to his great disappointment, and I mean great disappointment, that was not to be.

To understand what happened and why one has to understand the religious climate of the sixteenth century. Religion so often focused upon fear. God and Christ were portrayed as ready to pronounce judgment at any moment upon an unrepentant sinner. Paintings of Christ often portrayed him with a sword in his hand or in his mouth.

There was not much hope for relief from the anxiety caused by such a view. One had to be in good stead with the church. A well-known saying was *Nulla salus, extra ecclesiam* - no salvation outside the church. The church administered the sacraments and the sacraments conveyed the grace of God. Get yourself ex-communicated from the church and prepare for an eternity in hell. And even if you made it to heaven you had to get there by way of purgatory, an in-between place where one was punished for unforgiven sins against the church. In our day we believed that every one was born with the sin and guilt of Adam. Baptism washed away original sin and all sins up to one's baptism. But what about sins committed after one was baptized? The sacrament of penance took care of that. You also need to realize that when you sinned, it was not only against God but also against the church. God could forgive you and the priest would pronounce God's forgiveness. But you had to make some kind of retribution for your sin against the church.

This is where penance came into play. There were four stages to this sacrament. First, you were contrite. You were expected to be sorrowful for what you had done. Then you confessed your sin, not only to God, but also to your priest. Initially, you would then perform some act of satisfaction to pay the price for your sin, to balance the scales. You might go on a pilgrimage, do some good deed, offer special prayers, make a contribution to the First Baptist Church sign fund, or perform some other visible

SY, "Martin Luther Monologue"

expression of your genuine contrition. Then the priest would pronounce absolution from the punishment of your sin. As time passed the church reversed stages three and four. The priest would pronounce absolution to be validated once you performed your act of satisfaction.

But what if one could not perform an act of satisfaction at the appropriate time? This concern led to another issue of disagreement during my lifetime, which was over what the church called the "Treasury of Merit" or the "Treasury of the Saints". It was taught by the church that Jesus, the apostles and the saints and the religion professors had lived such good lives that there was extra merit left over. Poor saints like you could use that merit to reduce or eliminate time spent in purgatory, if you could not do some act of satisfaction. The way to access (that's a good 20th century term) the Treasury of Merit was to purchase an indulgence. This was a writ of paper stating that you had paid for the indulgence and that you were due to receive all of the benefits attained therein!

Back to my story. I was headed toward a career in law. But two things happened which changed all of that. First, a close friend about my age died suddenly. This resulted in great fear for my own life. Did God punish my friend with death for his sins? If so, might he not do the same to me? The second event occurred in July, 1505. I was walking near Stotternheim when a thunderstorm developed. Lightning struck near me and I was knocked to ground. I truly thought that God was trying to kill me! I cried out for help, not to God but to St. Anne, the patroness saint of the miners and the mother of Mary. You dare not approach God directly. Anyway, I made a vow as I cried "St. Anne help me, I will become a monk". I was absolutely scared to death and absolutely serious. Perhaps with the intervention of St. Anne and the pledge to enter a monastery, perhaps God might spare my life.

I survived, shaken but true to my vow. A short time later I entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, much to the dismay of my father. I chose this monastery because of the strict discipline of the order. Many monasteries had gotten soft, but my dilemma was too serious for me to choose an easy way of life. As a side note ironically related to something that would be, every morning I and other monks would go to the chapel of the monastery to pray. I would kneel to pray before the altar on a marble slab that covered the place where about a century earlier another Augustinian monk named John Zarchale was buried in 1428. Zarchale was chiefly responsible for the conviction of charges of heresy of John Hus in 1415 at the Council of Constance. Hus, a Bohemian reformer and professor, was burned at the stake for his beliefs, many of which I would later adopt and defend!

I was a good monk. In fact, I later surmised that if anyone could be saved by monkery, I certainly would have been. I did everything required of me. I prayed. I studied. I worked diligently. I performed the mass when assigned, although it frightened me greatly and I barely got through it the first time. I even walked to Rome in 1510-1511 to represent my monastery in a dispute within the Augustinian order. I was greatly disappointed at the flippant attitude toward religion and the sacraments of the church of so many there.

Perhaps it was here that I began to question the teachings of the church for the first time. The church claimed that it had brought the stairs of Pilate's judgement hall from Jerusalem to Rome, the very stairs that Jesus had climbed to appear before the procurator. It was taught that if you climbed the stairs on your knees and said a *pater nostra*, or as you call it "the Lord's Prayer" on each step that when you reached the top a soul would be released from purgatory. When I reached the top I asked myself concerning this belief "Who knows whether it is so?" Doubt is often the beginning of deliverance!

Back at the monastery I practiced self-denial like no other monk. On cold nights I would sleep without sufficient covering in an act of asceticism that endangered my health. I confessed every sin to my superior, Johann von Staupitz. I got to the point of even confessing unknown sins, just in case I left some out. I feared God like no other could fear him. I didn't want to take any chances.

I became a real nuisance, you might me call me in your day a basket case. I had gone off the deep end spiritually, emotionally, psychologically. What do you do with one who has reached the edge of his limits? What do you do with someone who is suffering from spiritual, emotional, and psychological insecurities of the highest order? Johann von Staupitz, my superior, knew what to do with such a messed-up individual. He assigned me to teach religion at a university!

SY, “Martin Luther Monologue”

Actually, looking back I realize that he knew what he was doing. I began to teach courses in the Bible. And, of course, studying the Biblical books was an important part of carrying out my responsibilities. In 1513 I taught the Psalms. In Psalm 22 I realized for the first time that Jesus died for our sins, for my sins. He carried our burden. The Psalm reads “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cited that verse during his crucifixion. For the first time I began to realize that I could not earn my salvation but the price had already been paid.

In 1515 I taught Paul's Letter to the Romans and in 1516 I taught Paul's letter to the Churches of Galatia. In these two books I discovered the marvelous teaching that resolved so many of my concerns that teaching was “The just shall live by faith”. How are we made right with God? Not through the sacraments administered by the priesthood of the church. Not through the disciplined life of the monk. Through a confident, trusting, simple faith in the redemptive work of the crucified and resurrected Christ. That's it. It is just that simple. Salvation is a gift. I discovered that, I believed that, and I found the peace for which I had so long sought.

The university life also provided the environment from which my call for reforms of the church began. As early as 1516 I questioned the doctrine of indulgences, as others had done, and preached against them on three occasions, including the Eve of All Saints Day in that year. In fact, my ruler Frederick the Elector, a very religious man, had collected many relics which were used in the sale of indulgences. Each relic had been assigned a value for released time in purgatory, a total that reached 1,902,202 years! I might add that my salary was paid by sale of indulgences, a practice against which I was openly preaching! I think that I was rather courageous, don't you?

Well, in 1517 Pope Leo X sold the position of Archbishop of Mainz to Albert of Brandenburg. The story goes that Leo wanted 12,000 ducats for the twelve apostles and that Albert offered 7,000 for the seven deadly sins. They agreed upon 10,000 ducats, presumably not for the Ten Commandments! In order to enable Albert to pay for the position and to obtain money for the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome the Pope declared a special sale of indulgences in Albert's domain. Half would go to the Pope for St. Peter's and half would go to Albert, who would then forward his share on to the Pope.

A Dominican monk named John Tetzel was assigned the task of hawking the sale of these indulgences. He was good, too good! He didn't come into Saxony, where I lived and taught, but set up just across the border. Many persons from Saxony would cross over to purchase what Tetzel had to offer. He would go into a town, set up his stand with a coffer in front of him. A coffer was a large, rectangular box with a dish on top and a slit where the coins could be deposited. After an impassioned plea to the hearers to purchase an indulgence which would release loved ones from purgatory, Tetzel would conclude with a jingle, “When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!” In fact, some accused Tetzel of changing the stages of penance to Acontrition, confession, and contribution!

Tetzel made other extravagant claims, many which were rejected by the church and others which were open to debate. One of my favorite stories tells of the time when a man asked Tetzel if he could purchase an indulgence to take care of the punishment for a sin which he planned to commit. Tetzel quickly responded, “Yes, if you buy it now!” The man purchased the indulgence. Later he followed Tetzel out of town, robbed him, beat him up, and then proclaimed that “This is the sin that I had planned to commit!” I doubt that the story is true, but I hope that it is!

Tetzel's activities and claims caused me to challenge the idea of indulgences. On October 31, 1517, the Eve of All Saints Day I posted on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg what is known as my “95 Theses.” In this document I stated that the belief in indulgences was inconsistent with the teachings of the New Testament and I denied the concept of the Treasury of Merit. All I really wanted to do was to have a debate over the issues. Posting theses calling for such a debate was a common approach during my day.

Well some of my friends translated the “95 Theses” from Latin into German, had them printed, and distributed throughout Saxony. I hope you realize how important the invention of the printing press in the previous century was to the Reformation. Anyway, a simple initiative for a debate soon exploded into a major controversy and it seemed like everyone was after me.

SY, “Martin Luther Monologue”

During 1520 I published three works which were at the heart of the Reformation, which historians have concluded began on October 31, 1517 with the posting of the “Theses” I wrote the *Address to the German Nobility*, defending the authority of the civil officials over the Papacy and calling upon them to implement the reforms for which I was calling. My *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* dealt with the sacramental system of the church and reduced the number from seven to two. In the *Freedom of the Christian Man* I magnified the freedom of every believer and defended the priesthood of every believer and the doctrine of justification by faith, the central doctrine of the Reformation.

I was soon called to appear before Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, at the Diet of Worms in 1521. I was asked to recant of my positions. I considered this request carefully. My response was “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me!” When you truly believe what you teach, there may come a time when your commitment to those beliefs are tested. This was such a time for me. Roland Bainton, a twentieth century historian, titled his biography of me, *Here I Stand*. The results of this defense resulted in grave dangers for me. I was excommunicated from the church and banned as an outlaw. Anyone could put me to death.

Fortunately, while the politicians were debating my friends smuggled me out of town and took me to the Wartburg Castle. I grew a beard and went into hiding under the name of Knight George. I was at Wartburg for eleven months, during which time I began to translate the Bible into German. One of the great contributions of the Reformation was the translation of the New Testament into the vernacular of the people. Of course, the Bible was the source of authority for the Reformation. The belief of *sola scriptura* rejected the Roman Catholic position based upon the Scriptures and the tradition of the church. When you call for reform, begin a revolt, you need an authority. Mine was the Bible.

I returned in 1522 to Wittenberg at risk of my on life. Things were getting out of hand. A group called the Zwickau Prophets were creating a disturbance by stirring up rioting, the breaking of images, and the destruction of pictures. They were a chiliastic group, anticipating the return of Christ, and justifying all kinds of militant and destructive actions based upon their beliefs. I can't tell you how many times groups such as these have caused chaos in the years that followed the Reformation. The things that we justify when we are convinced we know what is going to happen and when it will happen. I can tell you this. I didn't know then and I don't know now when all of these things will be. Anyway, I calmed the city down, stating that “Faith produces works of love and order, not works of hatred and disorder.”

In the years that followed there were advances and setbacks. In the end, however, the Reformation succeeded. Saxony became a Protestant state. An agreement was based upon the position that the religion of the prince would be the religion of the people. By the time of my death the Reformation was well established and there would be no return to the old ways.

Other reforms would take place among the Swiss, led by Huldreich Zwingli and then John Calvin. At one point when things were going badly Zwingli and I met at Marburg to consider uniting. We agreed on 14 and 2 points but disagreed on the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. He had some strange view, saying that it was a symbolic memorial. Can you imagine such a position? Of course you can. You Baptists believe the same thing.

A left-wing group called the Anabaptists would appear throughout many areas, such as in the Swiss provinces, in Germany and Austria, and in the Netherlands. They rejected any union of church and state. They were a peculiar bunch, holding to baptism of believers only, congregational church government, and religious liberty. They were a whole lot like you Baptists in their beliefs and practices.

In England reform took place when Henry VIII wanted to get a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Henry had earlier been awarded the title of “Defender of the Faith” by the Pope for his efforts in opposing my reforms! He got his divorce by splitting from the Roman Church. Churches splitting? Maybe they were closet Baptists. It took a while but real reforms took place under Edward VI and his half-sister, Elizabeth I. You Baptists would appear from among the dissenters during the reign of Elizabeth's successor, James I, who took the throne in 1603.

There are a few other highlights I want to mention. In 1525 I married a runaway nun named Catherine von Bora. I had helped her escape and tried to find her a husband. She insisted that I be the

SY, “Martin Luther Monologue”

one. I feared that I wouldn't survive very long and resisted. But she persisted and she was an enormous help to me. My dear Katy ran our household, produced six children, and managed a farm. She was joy to my life and contributed greatly to my success. I also completed the translation of the entire Bible in 1534, which was used to teach the German language.

I must also confess on this All Saints Day that I was no saint. I had a number of flaws. I suffered from depression on many occasions. I sometimes became emotional. I am sure that many of you know the story of my throwing the inkwell at the devil!

As I look back I realize that I was so very intolerant. Do you know that happens often by those of us in religious life? We become so convinced of the certainty of our beliefs and practices that we narrow the boundaries for those who we consider who are truly on God's side - and, of course, we always are. But I was very anti-Semitic. I could try and justify it by arguing as other Christians did during my day that the Jews were the ones who sacrificed Jesus and therefore, deserved no mercy or sympathy. But as I look back I realize that I was wrong. Yet I find satisfaction in the fact that my journey contributed eventually to greater tolerance in later generations.

I tried to understand the peasants who were being mistreated by nobility during my time. In fact, they saw me as a potential champion of their cause in the early days of their movement. Early on I wrote a work entitled *Admonition to Peace*, urging the authorities to grant the just claims of the peasants. But when they revolted in 1525 I could not remain sympathetic with their cause. I believed in an orderly society. Militant rebellion would have destroyed my cause of reforming the church. I wrote another work addressing the new realities. My title suggests a subtle change of heart and a basic intolerance with the Peasant's Revolt. It was called *Against the Robbing and Murdering Peasant Gangs!* My advice was – “Let him who can, smite, slay, and stab the ‘mad dogs’”. Was I a little too intolerant? I basically said to the princes “Now control them anyway you can.” On May 15, 1525, 50,000 peasants were stopped for good at Frankenhausen. I am not sure than I can now justify such actions, even in the name of God and the reform of his church.

In your day, I see a trend in the church that too often looks for the bad in people rather than the good. Like I did, you face the same temptation to identify with God so much closer than anyone else that you justify whatever means you can to separate yourself from those with whom you disagree. You also use power, assaults (often of a verbal nature), innuendoes, distortions, and sometimes even violence, to harm those that are different in terms of practice and beliefs. In fact, you attack rather vehemently your brothers and sisters in Christ, demonizing them for diverse beliefs and interpretations. I heard about a denomination not many years ago that used to brag about “unity in diversity”. I wonder what ever happened to that group? I have observed that instead of throwing your computer keyboard at the devil, you invite him in and like the prophets of old charged the leaders of Israel, you call evil good and good evil. Be careful that you don't lose sight of a caring, compassionate God in your quest for theological and ethical purity.

As I look back I also realize that I was all too willing to change positions when circumstances changed. When I was being hunted and persecuted as a heretic by the Church at Rome, I called for freedom of conscience and liberty before God. But later, when my reforms had succeeded and when I had the support of state authorities, I called upon my followers to “bathe in the blood of the Papists”. I wanted freedom for myself but was now ready to deny it to those who were obviously theologically and ecclesiologic ally wrong. They deserved no compassion acceptance, or understanding.

Maybe what I have to say is relevant to you who are Baptists. I have observed your history. You were champions from your very beginnings, which I might point out were rooted in some of my basic teachings, which I will comment upon in a few moments, you were champions for the causes of religious liberty and separation of church and state. From the early seventeenth century in England until just a few decades ago you never, ever wavered on these issues. But times changed. From a small, struggling minority of dissenters, you became the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Suddenly, you have started acting like it. Freedom was important to you but in recent years you have joined with those who want privilege and status for yourselves but not for others. You would do well to remember your

SY, “Martin Luther Monologue”

history and not sell your birthright for a mess of pottage, short term gain with long term consequences.

CONCLUSION: Well, I need to get back to the positive. On this Reformation Day in 1999 whether you realize it or not you continue to believe and practice some of the basic teachings that I and other reformers of the sixteenth century struggled to implement and uphold.

You have consistently believed in justification by faith alone, and I commend you for that. What a wonderful discovery for me. In fact, there have been so many reforms since my time that have focused on this significant biblical teaching. It certainly opened my eyes. It was a significant part of the teachings of John Calvin and the Anabaptists, although we did not treat the latter very kindly. The Great Awakening in New England in the eighteenth century began when Jonathan Edwards preached a series of sermons on the topic beginning in 1734 in Northampton, Massachusetts. John Wesley wanted to be a good servant of God. He even came to Georgia as a missionary. But only after he heard a Moravian preacher speak on the subject of justification by faith, from my preface on my commentary to the Romans I might add, did he truly understand God’s grace and move ahead as one of the outstanding leaders of his day. Look at the place of this doctrine in Reinhold Niebuhr as he grapsed with making the gospel relevant in the mid-twentieth century in the urbanized and industry-dominated Detroit. From Habakkuk to Paul to Augustine and through the Reformation, to you the relevancy of this doctrine is front and center. When you start to get out of focus, return to the simplicity of this wonderful biblical and Reformation teaching.

The priesthood of all believers is one of my favorite doctrines. It used to occupy a central place in Baptist teachings. You need no authority save that of the Lordship of Christ to stand before God. I discovered that the grace of God is not administered by the priesthood through the sacraments of the church but by approaching God through trusting faith. Yet, we all can serve as priests to others as we demonstrate and share God’s love and grace to them. You Baptists, so soon you forget. In recent years you have listened to the voices of those who say “Trust me, trust me. I am the one who really knows what is good for you. I am the one who will keep you on the straight and narrow, and I do mean the straight and narrow.” You have forfeited your belief in the priesthood of the believer for the priesthood of the pastor. One of these days you will remember your roots and you will return to this precious biblical teaching. It again will benefit and enrich not only you but in reality also your pastors.

You Baptists have done a good job of remaining committed to *sola Scriptura*, the sole authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice. Yet, you fight over the Bible too much. In your exuberance and commitment to the written Word you often miss the point that the Scriptures testify of God and his redemptive work, especially in the Living Word, Jesus Christ. In so doing, in the name of Biblical authority you too often justify unbiblical attitudes and practices. But the Bible will continue to be major starting point to understanding God and his love for you. Don’t forget the price that I and others paid so that every one of you would have the right and the duty to study and interpret the Scriptures for yourself. Don’t forget how I committed my time and effort in translating the Bible into the language of my people and the reason for so doing. And don’t forget that just because you have a Bible in your own language, that you can read it and study it, and therefore you are going to have inerrant and infallible interpretations for yourself and for others, as well. Maybe you would do better to try and apply the teaching of the Bible than you would in trying to force others into conformity according to your own interpretations.

I need to conclude before I put you to sleep or before I get into trouble - again! Thank you for allowing me to visit with you on this Reformation Day, 491 years after I posted my “95 Theses”. As you move toward a new century, do not forget the sacrifice that I and others made for the cause of Christ during our time. Do not forget to remember my contributions and please forgive me of my failures. And do not be afraid to risk. You owe that to my generation. And you are indebted to the future generations to build upon the foundations of the past and to leave for the future a faith much better than the one that I have passed on to you.

Guten tag! I will see you in another time and another place.