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He fought the Roman Church in the interests of the Church, and sought to establish her authority (1) on the basis of the Bible understood and studied, (2) in the light of an inspired patristic tradition and (3) with the help of reason and common sense. It is important to see that what Luther did was to provide thinking, reasonable men with better answers than the patently false ones of his day. Some of his work is polemical, not simply because he was attacked and fought back, but because a large part of it was removal, even the demolition, of accretions and innovations that had served to blind men to the reality of the Gospel, for example, meritorious works, saint worship, Mariology, paid masses for the dead, indulgences and Purgatory.

—JAMES ATKINSON, *MARTIN LUTHER AND THE BIRTH OF PROTESTANTISM* (ATLANTA: JOHN KNOX PRESS, 1968), 53.

## POST TENEBRAS LUX MARTIN LUTHER: PATHFINDER OF THE REFORMATION

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*Michael A. G. Haykin*

In the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam there is a painting done by a seventeenth-century Dutch painter titled simply "The Candlestick." It depicts all the leading Reformers—including some voices for reform from the Middle Ages, men such as John Wycliffe (d. 1384) and Jan Huss (d. 1415)—gathered around a table upon which a single, shining candle burns. The painting graphically portrays the main achievement of the Reformers: the unveiling of the light of the gospel in Europe after a long eclipse and period of spiritual darkness. *Post Tenebras, Lux* ("After darkness, light"), the words carved in stone on the Reformation wall in Geneva, could well serve as a title to this painting.

Before we look at the light that was unveiled, though, it is necessary to look briefly at the spiritual darkness which prevailed in western Europe in the late Middle Ages, that we might appreciate all the more the unveiling of the gospel in that benighted time.

### THE SPIRITUAL DARKNESS OF THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

It is important to note, first of all, that when Martin Luther and the other Reformers protested against the church of their day, the main thrust of their attack was directed against the piety of the medieval Roman Church. From the vantage point of the Reformers, it was a piety that was shaped by superstition and man-made religion. Late

medieval men and women had a deep concern with death and judgment, a concern that was an outgrowth of what is known as the Black Death. A particularly powerful outbreak of the bubonic plague in the 1340s, the Black Death, slew around 40 percent of the population of western Europe. On the eve of the Black Death, for instance, the population of England and Wales stood between 4 million and 5 million. By 1377, successive waves of the Black Death had reduced it to 1.5 million. The plague found ready soil in the unsanitary conditions of medieval society, for as one historian has put it, the Middle Ages was "a thousand years without a bath"! Where could security be found in face of such massive death? The "saints" were one answer that men and women turned to, especially as their holy power was thought to be preserved through their relics.

This is a prime example of medieval superstition. It was believed that the relics, i.e., parts of the bodies of "saints" and holy objects, had various innate powers which could aid their owner or bearer. The origin of such an idea lay back in the Roman idea of holiness as comprising something spatial. A person who lived a holy life accumulated holiness, as it were, in his body—and the body continued to radiate holiness after his/her death. Thus, a part of the saint's body could become a channel for transmitting this holiness, or act as a reservoir of holiness.

By the Middle Ages the preservation and sale of relics was big business. For example, after the murder of Thomas Beckett on December 29, 1170, in Canterbury Cathedral, his body was placed before the altar, where the monks kept watch all night to collect any more blood that flowed from his wounds. Later, some of the poor of Canterbury came and dipped rags in the blood of the martyr; one used such a rag to supposedly cure a paralyzed wife. Another of the Beckett relics was reportedly used to put out a fire. Affixed to the end of a long pole, the owner of the home used the

pole to drive away the flames by pointing it at the conflagration. Ultimately this confidence in relics was a confidence in the saints. Thus a key question raised at the time of the Reformation was, "Who saves—Christ alone? Or Christ and the saints?"

Alongside this emphasis on the saints was a growing reverence for Mary. Especially from the twelfth century onward, there was a rapid expansion of the cult of Mary. For example, a synod in Paris in 1210 required knowledge of "Hail Mary" by all believers along with the Creed and Lord's Prayer. In 1349—the year of the Black Death—flagellants revealed that Mary had succeeded in preventing the end of the world, which God had scheduled for September 10 of that year.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there arose in the late Middle Ages a contrast between Christ the Judge and Mary the merciful intercessor. Again, the Reformers posed this question to their contemporaries: "Who saves us—Christ or Mary?"

Late medieval reflection on the way of salvation was also clouded in spiritual darkness. A number of late medieval theologians emphasized on the basis of such passages as—"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8), and "Return to Me . . . that I may return to you" (Zech. 1:3)—that a person who did his/her best on the basis of his/her natural ability would be rewarded with grace by God. If that person then cooperated with this grace—which was given regularly through the sacraments—he or she would eventually win the reward of eternal life. In this understanding of salvation, one could initiate one's own salvation. But, the Reformers asked, "What saves us—faith alone, or faith and works? Grace alone, or grace and works?"

One final characteristic of late medieval Roman Catholicism that needs to be mentioned is the authoritarianism and corruption of the papacy. Boniface VIII, pope from 1294 to 1303, declared in the papal bull *Unam Sanctam* (11/18/1302) that outside the visible church of Rome

"there is neither salvation nor remission of sins." He compared the church to Noah's Ark. Just as the ark had but one helmsman, Noah, so the church has only one pilot, Christ, and the one who acts on His behalf, that is, Christ's vicar, namely, the apostle Peter, and Peter's successor, the pope. Thus, Boniface can conclude: "It is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff." Yet, at the same time as this pompous declaration there was immense corruption in the papal palace: nepotism, sexual immorality, worldliness to the core. And this corruption permeated the church. Thus, there was a saying in France: "If you want to go to hell, become a priest."

#### MARTIN LUTHER: EARLY YEARS, 1483-1514

There were voices raised in protest at this spiritual darkness—John Wycliffe and the Lollards, for example, or Jan Hus and the Hussites—but a lasting Reformation did not occur until Martin Luther was raised up as a pathfinder of reform in the second decade of the sixteenth century.

Luther was born in Saxony in 1483, the eldest son of a fairly successful businessman, Hans Luther, who was the owner of several mine shafts and copper smelts. Hans wanted a better life for his son than he had, so he sent him when he was of age to Erfurt University. According to Heiko Oberman, the world's foremost authority on Luther, "There is hardly any authenticated information about those first eighteen years which led Luther to the threshold of the University of Erfurt."<sup>2</sup>

Martin graduated with a M.A. in 1505. His father encouraged him to go on to get a master's degree in law, but on July 2, 1505, Martin had an experience that changed the entire course of not only his life, but the history of the West.

He had been home for the summer and was returning to Erfurt on foot when, about half a mile from the city gates of Erfurt, a storm broke.

Thunder clouds had built up, and suddenly the lightning flashed, a bolt striking close to Martin, knocking him to the ground. Though unhurt, in terror he shouted out, "Beloved St. Anne! I will become a monk." St. Anne was the patron saint of miners; Martin had heard prayers to her throughout his childhood perhaps more than to any other saint. In later years he described himself at the moment when the lightning struck as "walled around with the terror and horror of sudden death."<sup>3</sup>

Fifteen days later, on July 17, 1505, Luther knocked at the gate of the Augustinian order in Erfurt and asked to be accepted into their monastic ranks. When he later told his father of his decision, his father was quite angry and asked Martin, "Do you not know that it is commanded to honor father and mother?" Luther's response was that his terror in the thunderstorm had led him to become a monk. "I hope it was not the Devil," his father replied.<sup>4</sup> Later Luther recognized that this choice was a sinful one—"not worth a farthing," because it was done against his father's will and out of fear. Then he added, "But how much good the merciful Lord has allowed to come of it!" As John Piper comments, "We see this kind of merciful providence over and over again in the history of the church, and it should protect us from the paralyzing effects of bad decisions in our past. God is not hindered in His sovereign designs from leading us, as He did Luther, out of blunders into fruitful lives of joy."<sup>6</sup>

And so Luther became a monk, a member of the Order of Augustinian Eremites, one of the strictest monastic orders in Europe. He entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt to find peace and salvation. But for nearly ten years genuine peace eluded Luther. He feared that God might have predestined him to destruction. He often imagined Christ sitting in judgment on him at the Last Day. In fact, at Wittenberg, where Luther was now reading, there was a stone carving of Christ as Judge with two swords coming

out of His mouth. Because of its terrible severity, Luther could not bear to look at this image, and hurried past it on his way to daily prayer, shielding his eyes with his hand.

To find peace with God, Luther zealously confessed every sin he could think of. He confessed every day, sometimes up to six hours a day. For every sin to be forgiven, there had to be confession. Luther had been taught that the moment the priest whispered in the confessional, "I now absolve thee," all his sins were forgiven. But Luther was never certain that he had been fully forgiven. Always present was the fear—Have I confessed every sin? Then came a discovery even more startling and distressing to Luther—humans commit sins that are not even known to them. But how could these be confessed if they were not known? Luther redoubled his efforts and threw himself into all-night vigils and long seasons of fasting—all to find forgiveness and peace with God. As he once said:

I was indeed a pious monk and kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say: If ever a monk gained heaven through monkery, it should have been I. All my monastic brethren who knew me will testify to this. I would have martyred myself to death with fasting, praying, reading, and other good works had I remained a monk much longer.<sup>7</sup>

Luther sought to find peace with God through such works, but he was troubled by an overpowering fear of God's judgment. Again, listen to his words:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if,

indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.<sup>8</sup>

And again:

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule . . . nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession." Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it.<sup>9</sup>

The law, recall, requires perfection. In plainer language Luther later stated of himself at this time, "If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy."<sup>10</sup>

By 1514 Luther had obtained a doctorate and had been installed as professor of biblical theology at the relatively young University of Wittenberg. During that year he was teaching a course on the Psalms. In his lectures and studies he came to Psalm 71 and was struck by the psalmist's cry in verse 2, "In Thy righteousness deliver me, and rescue me." Now, for Luther, the righteousness of God spoke of judgment, not deliverance. Mystified by the psalmist's language, Luther decided to study what the Scriptures had to say about this phrase, "the righteousness of God." He was thus led, in the providence of God, to Romans 1:16-17: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also

to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous shall live by faith.'" Again, let us read his testimony:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to . . . the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'" (Rom. 1:17). There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

#### MARTIN LUTHER AND SOLA FIDE

Now what was Luther's discovery? Namely this: that the righteousness of God in this Pauline text is not an attribute of God, but that righteousness which God imputes to the person who puts his or her trust (*fiducia*) in Christ. This was the decisive discovery of the Reformation. Prior to this experience Luther knew that he could never obtain the righteousness God demanded in His law, and that one day he would be bound to face the withering wrath of God. By this experience, though, Luther realized that salvation was not at all a matter of his attaining the perfect standard of righteousness which God demanded, but simply, by faith, clinging to and relying upon Christ's righteousness. For Christ alone, among all men and women, has never sinned, He alone has lived a life of perfect righteousness.<sup>11</sup>

Luther's discovery was that salvation from God's wrath was to be found by simple trust in Christ's death for sinners—that at the cross Christ takes all responsibility for the

believer's sins—past, present, and future—and that to the one who truly believes God imputes, that is, reckons as the believer's, Christ's righteousness.

Luther would have heartily agreed with the following second-century description of this absolutely central truth:

God . . . gave his own Son a ransom for us, the holy for the lawless, the pure for the evil, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but His righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us who are ungodly and lawless to have been justified except in the Son of God alone? Oh the sweet exchange! . . . Oh, the unexpected benefits! That the iniquity of many should be hidden in the One Righteous Man and that the righteousness of One should justify many who are godless!<sup>12</sup>

What Luther realized was that salvation

was not a matter of Martin and his righteousness, but of God and His Righteousness, nor a matter of Martin's work but God's work. . . . Martin realized that the meaning of Christianity was not a matter of works of merit, pilgrimages, fastings, good works, etc., but a simple capitulation in faith to God's work of salvation [in Jesus Christ and Him crucified].<sup>13</sup>

Again, here is Luther describing what justification by faith alone means.

I, Dr. Martin Luther, the unworthy evangelist of the Lord Jesus Christ, thus think and thus affirm:—that this article, viz, that faith alone, without works, justifies before God, can never be overthrown, for . . . Christ alone, the Son of God, died for our sins, but if He alone takes away our sins, then men, with all their works, are to be excluded from all con-

currence in procuring the pardon of sin and justification. Nor can I embrace Christ otherwise than by faith alone; He cannot be apprehended by works. But if faith, before works follow, apprehends the Redeemer, it is undoubtedly true that faith alone, before works, and without works, appropriates the benefits of redemption, which is no other than justification, or deliverance from sin. This is our doctrine; so the Holy Spirit teaches and the whole Christian Church. In this, by the grace of God, will we stand fast. Amen.<sup>14</sup>

Notice what Luther is saying here: We are justified by faith alone, faith in Christ's death for sinners. Our works do not enter the picture at all when it comes to being made right with God. Thus "faith" itself is not to be considered "a work." The faith we exercise is itself a gift from God, a creation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup> And in the final analysis, our faith only justifies because it lays hold of Christ, who is, in the words of Michael Horton, "inexhaustible in riches of righteousness."<sup>16</sup> Our faith is often weak, but it is the unconquerable strength of Christ's righteousness, not the strength of our faith, that keeps us in a right standing before God. Or put another way, for Luther, salvation "from first to last . . . is a gift of the grace of God, a gift actualized in the atoning work of Christ, applied individually by the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith."<sup>17</sup>

It is often maintained that Luther's view of faith inevitably leads to indifference to good works. But this is a very unjust accusation. Luther's occasional unguarded utterances about good works must be understood in connection with his whole teaching and character. In his own forcible language which expresses his true view,

Faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing and it is impossible that it should not do good without ceasing; it does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is put, it has done them already, and is always engaged

in doing them; you may as well separate burning and shining from fire, as works from faith.

Genuine faith manifests itself by subsequent obedience.

### FINAL WORDS

Among the last words Luther wrote before his death in 1546 were the following found in a note on his desk: "We are beggars. This true." To the end Luther was aware that when it came to salvation he was a beggar, utterly and totally dependent on God's grace and mercy. In his explanation of Galatians 1:11-12, he recounted:

I recall that at the beginning of my cause Dr. Staupitz . . . said to me: It pleases me that the doctrine which you preach ascribes the glory and everything to God alone and nothing to man; for to God (that is clearer than the sun) one cannot ascribe too much glory, goodness, etc. This word comforted and strengthened me greatly at the time. And it is true that the doctrine of the gospel takes all glory, wisdom, righteousness, etc., from men and ascribes them to the Creator alone, who makes everything out of nothing.<sup>18</sup>

Our study of Luther's great discovery is well summed up by a passage from *The Orthodox Catechism*, drawn by the London Calvinistic Baptist pastor, Hercules Collins (d. 1702), and which is a revision of *The Heidelberg Catechism*:

[Faith] is not only a knowledge, whereby I surely assent to all things which God hath revealed unto us in His Word, but also an assured trust kindled in my heart by the Holy Ghost, through the gospel, whereby I make my repose in God, being assuredly resolved that remission of sins, everlasting righteousness, and life is given not to others only, but to me



also, and that freely through the mercy of God for the merits of Christ alone.<sup>19</sup>

### Author

Dr. Michael Haykin is a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He is the recently appointed editorial director for Joshua Press, Burlington, Ontario. Joshua Press is a new venture which intends to publish Reformed literature for the church. Dr. Haykin is also adjunct professor of church history at Heritage Theological Seminary. If you are interested in the new work of Joshua Press you may write to Dr. Haykin at: 34 Thornton Trail, Dundas, Ontario L9H 6Y2.

### Notes

1. Adrian H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 339.
2. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (1982 ed.; repr. New York: Doubleday, 1992), 102.
3. John M. Todd, *Luther: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), 25-26.
4. Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1978), 24.
5. Oberman, op. cit., 125.
6. John Piper, "Martin Luther: Lessons from His Life and Labor" (Address, Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, January 30, 1996).
7. *Ibid.*, 24.
8. *Ibid.*, 27.
9. Cited Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 7.
10. Oberman, op. cit., 315.
11. See, e.g., 2 Corinthians 5:21.
12. Letter to Diognetus, 9.
13. James Atkinson, "Justification by Faith," *Vox Evangelica* (No. 9, 1975), 78.
14. Cited M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Faith of the Church: A Reformed Perspective on Its Historical Development* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 109-110.

15. G. W. Bromiley, "The Doctrine of Justification in Luther," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 24 (1952), 98-99.
16. Michael S. Horton, "The Sola's of the Reformation" in James Montgomery Boice and Benjamin E. Sasse, eds., *Here We Stand! A Call from Confessing Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996), 123.
17. Bromiley, op. cit., 93.
18. Piper, op. cit.
19. *The Orthodox Catechism* (London, 1680), 7.