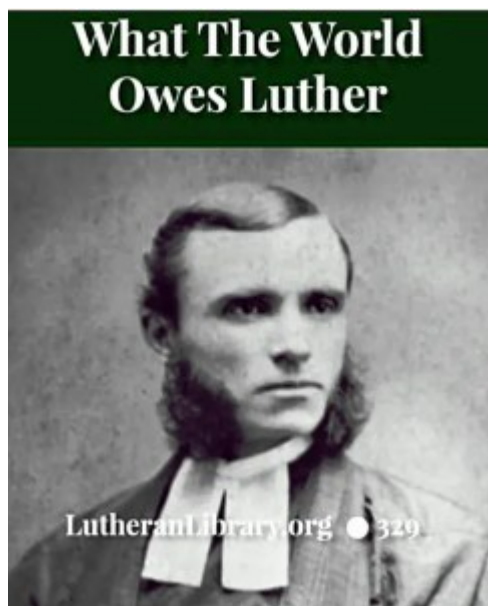


What The World Owes Martin Luther



Junius Remensnyder

This is from chapter XI of **What The World Owes Luther** by Junius Remensnyder which I found on [The Lutheran Library](http://TheLutheranLibrary.org).

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WHAT THE WORLD OWES LUTHER

To realize what mankind owes to Luther for the work of the Reformation, we must look at what the world was when he threw down his challenge to the existing sacerdotal system, and compare it with the world as it has been and is, since.

Although the formula of Papal Infallibility was not officially declared until the Vatican Council in 1870, yet it was recognized as fully existent. This investiture gave the Pope the absolute right to interpret Holy Scripture. Once his decree had gone forth, the decision must be universally accepted as inerrant. This practically placed an embargo upon Scriptural exegesis. When the meaning of disputed passages was not to be decided by linguistic, historical and critical tests, what use for the study of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and the investigation of manuscripts, and Scriptural learning? Consequently very little attention was given to searching out the true meaning, and opening up the fountains of Scriptural truth.

Moreover, as the right of "private judgment" was denied, and as all interpretation was in the hands of Pope and priests, the individual Christian felt that he was in danger of committing sacrilege if he went to the Word of God for himself. Under these conditions, it is not to be wondered at that the circulation of the Holy Scriptures was neither encouraged nor facilitated, so that practically the Bible was excluded from the possession of the people.

There could be no stronger illustration of this than the surprise and joy of a brilliant student like Luther, when one day he found an entire copy of the Bible chained to a shelf in the university. And so, later, "the Bible in the hands of the laity" became his powerful slogan.

Now when we remember that "the entrance of Thy Word giveth light," and compare the hundreds of languages into which the Bible is translated in our day, the circulation of copies by millions, as the leaves of the forests, the cheap editions which the poorest can purchase, and the free distribution, we see the change wrought by the Reformation, through Luther's demand that every one's right and duty were to read and interpret the sacred volume for himself. We cannot expect Christians to be such in deed and in truth unless they are informed and transformed by those Scripture truths which our Lord declares are "spirit and are life." And this one fact explains *the far greater Scriptural intelligence of Protestant Christians and the true spirituality which characterizes their piety.*

But again the Romish Church had abused the claim to infallibility for ecumenical councils and popes, by the teaching of false doctrine, corrupting the pure gospel teaching. By this perversion of the truth, she clouded the minds of Christians and *obstructed the way of life.* These errors taught by the Church were partly the result of ignorance, and partly the lust for authority and power.

A primary one of these errors was that to the Church alone belonged the forgiveness of sins. The next step was that the Church could use this power over the souls and consciences of men to promote her own selfish and temporal interests. Thus came about what can truly be termed the infamous sale of indulgences. For money, then, sins great and small, sins past, present and even in the future [the bold purveyors of them often proclaimed], would be pardoned.

To strike at this pernicious traffic was Luther's chief intent in nailing up his ninety-five theses, the twenty-first of which ran: "Therefore do the preachers of indulgences err when they say that by the papal indulgence a man is released and saved from all punishment." And in the twenty seventh he delivers one of his cutting blows thus: "They preach human folly who pretend that as soon as the money cast into the chest clinks, the soul escapes." And then Luther went on in these theses to declare that the Lord Jesus Christ had paid on the cross the full penalty of human sins, and that therefore any soul was freely justified. All that was needed was penitence and faith. Thus was opened up again the way of life which had been clogged and barred by penances and indulgences and ritualistic formalities and meaningless rites, until it was almost impossible to find it.

And the freedom, the simplicity, the confidence and the joy Christians now have in the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone, opening to them a new view and way of life, they owe to the blessed Reformation under Martin Luther.

The blessings of a *free state*, and of *civil and religious liberty*, are another heritage the world owes to Luther, through the Reformation. In the

Middle Ages the Church, through her claim to the spiritual primacy of St. Peter, asserted her right to dominate the State. No sovereign could ascend the throne without her investiture, and through her bull of excommunication she could, at pleasure, release his subjects from their allegiance. Thomas Aquinas sought to show that "submission to the Roman pontiff is necessary to every human being."

And how this principle was reduced to practice is shown by Henry IV of Germany pleading, bareheaded and cold, for three days at the castle of Canossa for Pope Gregory VII to restore his forfeited crown. So King John of England, in 1213, after a losing struggle with Pope Innocent, laid his realm at the feet of the Pope's legate, "to receive it back as a fief from Rome." In his pledge he decrees "the concession of the kingdoms of England and Ireland with all their rights and appurtenances to our mother the Holy Roman Church, and to our Lord Pope Innocent and his Catholic successors, receiving and holding them as it were a vassal from God and the Roman Church, we swear fealty." "The Political Theories of Martin Luther," Waring, p. 17.

How fatal so preposterous a claim to freedom on the part of the State! How impossible under such a *régime* the development of mankind in the art of representative civil government! No wonder that under such a system there developed in Europe iron-clad autocracies in which the rights of the common people were utterly ignored. That all power, wealth, utilities and ownership of land, were held by a very few. That the princes, nobles and great families led lives of absolute ease, selfishness, indifference to the welfare of communities, and spent most of their time in revelry and vice. And that the masses of the peasants possessed no rights that their harsh lords were bound to respect, and were doomed to lives of hopeless poverty, ignorance and misery.

It was these wrongs and these unrighteous conditions that made the great heart of Luther bleed with sympathy, and that fired his courageous soul with hot indignation. In the boldest terms he challenges the claims of the Church to dominate the State, and proves from the Scriptures that her kingdom is not of this world, and that she must confine her sovereignty to the spiritual sphere. And in his "Address to the German Nobility," he reproves the princes for their tyrannies and vices, and threatens them with an outbreak of divine vengeance, like one of the prophets of the Old Testament. At the same time he pleads the cause and rights of the peasantry in the strongest terms.

And it was only under the colossal and continuous blows of Luther that these unscriptural and destructive claims of the Church were relegated to the Dark Ages, and that there resulted the modern Free State. Hence the boon of civil liberty, the cause of human rights, the welfare and happiness of the masses, and the signs of the coming rule of Democracy everywhere, are our debt to Luther and his contemporaries alone.

And the same is true with respect to *religious liberty*. The pages of history are crimson with the blood that has been shed for conscience sake. The noblest saints, and those whose characters have shed the rarest luster upon our race, have suffered the severest persecutions, and been broken on the wheel, or burned at the stake, for the only reason that they "feared God

rather than man." The fires of martyrdom have lit up with a lurid glare the horizon from the days of the primitive Christian persecutions down to the sixteenth century. And even later, in France, England, Switzerland, etc., this spirit of intolerance led to barbarous executions.

And it was alone owing to the inflexible stand taken by the German princes whom Luther's powerful personality had won to his support, that he himself escaped death. But from that era, religious liberty has prevailed in Germany, and thence has spread throughout all Protestantism.

No more burnings of a heroine saint, Joan of Arc, or of a preacher of the pure Gospel, John Hus, or of a noble Archbishop Cranmer, or exile of the Quakers from their native land, for conscientious religious convictions. Every man now can hold such religious belief as he pleases and worship God as he thinks right "sitting under his own vine and fig-tree, none daring to molest or make them afraid."

And for this most inestimable prerogative of the human soul, that which affects more than every other his happiness and peace—religious liberty—enjoyed in these later ages, in all its fullness, we can thank none other than the indomitable hero of the Reformation.

A *Scriptural conception of the Church* was another rediscovery of Luther. His studies of the Post-Apostolic era and the primitive Church showed that its office had been perverted from its original purpose. The Church was designed to help, guide and strengthen the believer in the Christian life. But, under the prevalent conception of Luther's time, it had taken the place of Christ, and stood between the believer and his Lord and Saviour.

The great theologian, Schieiermacher, thus defines the diverse theories held by Luther and his papal opponents:

"According to the Romish conception the soul can only come to Christ through the Church, whereas, according to the Protestant doctrine, the soul is led through Christ to the Church."

When, through the Word, the believer has found Christ, then the Church tenderly nurtures within him the new spiritual life. Luther by no means depreciated the Church and her legitimate sphere and authority. Contrariwise, he laid great stress upon the importance of the Church with her Word and Sacraments as the means of grace. By this Scriptural, Protestant interpretation, the Church becomes, instead of an obstacle in the path of the seeker, a living shepherd to nurture and strengthen him in the way of salvation.

An important practical result of the Reformation is the *change wrought in Public Worship*. It had, with the predominance given to the priest, and with the abnormal authority lodged in him, been taken almost wholly from the congregation. The officiating clergy conducted the service mostly himself. And the part of the people consisted chiefly in routine formulas and inane repetitions. And, as the service was conducted in the Latin tongue, and not understood by the people, there was very little intelligent and real worship

in it. Besides the sacraments, with their forgiveness and grace, being in the power of the priests, they reduced the preaching of the Word to a very secondary place.

But Luther changed all this. And, by having the service in the vernacular tongue, and setting aside many of the meaningless and burdensome repetitions, and encouraging the congregations to join in the popular hymns he wrote for them, the service was simplified, it was made natural instead of artificial, and inspired and enthused by Christian song, the worship of the sanctuary became free, spontaneous, joyous and helpful.

Then Luther brought into the forefront the *prophetic office of the ministry*. *Preaching*, from being almost neglected, was given the chief place in the service. The art of preaching was again studied, effective preachers and expounders of the Holy Scriptures were sought after, and the churches were filled with ardent listening congregations. The liturgies of the past, and the usages of the universal Church, freed from corruptions, were retained, and the Protestant form of worship became an ideal one. This distinction, and this superior simplicity, directness and popularity characterize, to a greater or less extent, all the branches of Protestantism.

The Worship of the Saints, which had become one of the greatest abuses and most universal practices of the Church, was rejected. Luther tells us that "it took him twenty years to emancipate himself from the delusion of the perfect holiness and power of the intercession of the saints," so deeply had this fallacy been ingrained in him. Then he at last learned "to test even the holy fathers whom he so much revered, as Sts. Augustine, Jerome and Francis, by the Gospel of Christ, and he found them fallible men."

Hence suppliants were taught that the worship of the saints was contrary to the teaching of Scripture and to the usage of the primitive Church, and was an act of sacrilege. And, instead of going to the saints, who themselves needed intercession, the petitioner was sent direct to Christ, who, possessed of all power in heaven and upon earth, and sitting at the right hand of the Father, Himself presents our prayers to the Almighty Throne.

Luther, moreover, gave us the true ideal of a *Christian Home*. He protested against the false notion that God could only be served by celibacy and retirement from the world into a cloister. He held matrimony to be God's order and that of nature, and that therefore it was "a holy estate." Hence he protested against the monks and nuns shutting themselves away from the active service of men and living at the expense of the community. And he held that it was desirable that the clergy should marry, and be familiar with the cares and duties, and also be recuperated by the pleasures of the domestic sphere. And Luther, himself, set the example of a charming and happy family life. Thus he glorified the Christian Home. And, in contending that the humblest peasant could serve God and the Church and society by fidelity in his lowly calling, as well as princes on their thrones, he upraised and sanctified the duties of common life.

Roman Catholics, intelligent and pious, will contest this picture of mankind's debt to Luther and Protestantism. The author's friend, the

accomplished Dr. James J. Walsh, in his very able and fascinating volume, "The Thirteenth the Greatest of Centuries," cites this eloquent description from the historian, Frederick Harrison:

"This great century, the last of the true Middle Ages, which as it drew to its own end gave birth to Modern Society, has a special character of its own, that gives it an enchanting and abiding interest. It was in nothing one-sided, and in nothing discordant. There was one common creed, one ritual, one worship, one sacred language, one Church, a single code of manners, a uniform scheme of society, a common system of education, an accepted type of beauty, a universal art,—something like a recognized standard of the Good, the Beautiful and the True. Men utterly different from each other, all profoundly accepted one common order of ideas, and could all feel that they were all together working out the same task " (p. 12).

This is a beautiful ideal, and such a universality and unity have a surpassing charm for all, especially for conservative minds and cultured tastes. But, unfortunately, it is an ideal that cannot be realized until humanity is much more highly developed than anything we can conceive of now. As mankind is constituted at present, such a harmony would be that of stagnation, such a unity can only be that of suppression, such a peace but that of death. It utterly lacks the breadth, the movement, the diversities, the activities and the inspirations of life.

That the gains of Protestantism have not been made without some regrettable losses cannot be denied. The unity of the Roman Catholic Church has many advantages over the divisions of Protestantism, but the price required to be paid for it far outweighs the gain. The right of private judgment and the individual freedom of the Christian often lead to a hurtful disregard of the necessity and proper authority of the Church.

It is a sad truth, exemplified a thousand times by history, that liberty is liable to abuse. The larger privileges men enjoy, to the greater dangers and fallacies are they exposed. A strong government prevents disorder, but it is also hostile to free growth. In Protestantism we do suffer from the vagaries of individualism, and the large range accorded to congregations and pastors is sometimes taken advantage of by sensational methods and fanatical evangelists, by which means the Church is injured and the influence of religion weakened with intelligent and sensible people.

But these are disadvantages inseparable from the exercise of individual and ecclesiastical freedom. And they are not for a moment to be set over against the inestimable blessings of civil and religious liberty procured by the Reformation. Romanism has indeed the solid unity, the strength, the massiveness and the immobility of a mighty fortress, but Protestantism is rather a majestic tree, its springing branches swaying freely in the winds of heaven, instinct with energy, virility and growth —a Tree of Life.

Genius and the iron hand can no more harmonize than Napoleon and Madame de Staél could live within the boundaries of the same France. The spirit of man, to attain its loftiest flights, must have unclipped wings and unwall'd skies. It is better to tolerate the vagaries of genius by giving it the open, than

to stifle its powers within the bars of a prison. Besides, if great wrongs have been perpetrated, and dangerous heresies held in the name, and through the exercise of liberty, how multitudinous and woeful have been the tyrannies, the persecutions, the repressions, and the outrages committed by authority? The bloodiest chapters of the world's history record its monstrous enormities. And the experience and wonderful progress of the past four centuries have given incontestable proof that it is only when the human mind is unfettered by ecclesiastical and civil tyranny that the race advances most rapidly upon the path of achievement, happiness and prosperity.

So it is to the work of Luther in the Reformation that we live in a new world. In passing from the Middle Ages to this modern period, mankind has left behind it darkness, and entered upon an era of light.

On every hand we see civilization taking greater strides. Absolute freedom of investigation has given an immense impulse to science. Schools and universities and specialized studies abound on an unprecedented scale. Government, not by and for the privileged few, but "of the people, by the people, and for the people," is rapidly becoming universal. Religion, relieved of cramped uniformity, is more spiritual, vigorous, joyous and true. The missionary spirit is bearing abroad the Gospel to the nations, near and afar.

In short, no such a wondrous transformation in the condition of the race, no such a new epoch in civilization, no such a forward step in the march of the human mind, and no such a revolution in the destinies, uplift and happiness of mankind, have been introduced by any single personality in the world's history as that by Luther in the work of the Reformation.

Yet Luther's mighty task is far from being completed. Vast is the responsibility that rests upon the Christendom of the twentieth century to carry it forward. Luther has made a merely external Church and a merely formalistic religion forever impossible. But a spiritual religion, charged with living energy and power, propagated by a Church preaching the pure Gospel of Christ, and winning the world to God,—that is our ideal and our aim. And the larger the blessings of the Reformation, and the richer the possibilities in it for the uplift and happiness of the world, the greater should be our devotion, enthusiasm and sacrifice.