

‘The Protestant Reformation: Works of Martin Luther’,

pp. 44-48 and how this reflects significant global
historical change within the contemporary era

This essay endeavours to indicate the importance of using primary source documents to give as accurate a reflection as possible of what we may discover about historical events and their long-term effects that can be seen today. There is no doubt that in this case, from the plethora of publications describing the event, that the Protestant Reformation has been one of the most significant events in global history.¹ It is fair to say that Martin Luther was the agent provocateur who made the first most noticeable step to shake the ground on which the Catholic Church stood on, by attacking their manipulative dogmatism in their interpretation of the Holy Bible. Unfair it is to say, however, is that the Religious Reformation that ensued, was either created at this time purely by the efforts of one man ² or in fact, claim this as being the only reformation regarding criticism of religious power globally; this occurred also during the same period in both China and India.³ However, the objective of this essay is to review how Martin Luther’s work reflects on historical change within the contemporary era and in doing so, reflects on what Birkás states:

¹ Peter N. Stearns, Stephen S. Gosch and Erwin P. Grieshaber, *Documents in World History. Volume 2: The Modern Centuries, from 1500 to the Present*, 6th edn, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2011, p. 38.

² S. A. Onwugbenu, ‘A Re-examination of the Causes and Effects of the Protestant Reformation on the Contemporary Church’, *Crowther Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol.1, no. 5, 2024, p. 48.

³ Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*, New York: The New Press, 2007, p. 206.

It was not only a theological movement: what happened 500 years ago also led to a new beginning in politics, law, culture, education, and economics, and has even had an impact on modern science. Spreading initially through Europe, and then beyond, the forces of Protestantism have changed the entire world.⁴

In doing so, brief descriptions follow regarding these specific concerns and how they have played out into what we may recognise today. It could be argued that Luther's fundamental contention with the Catholic Church had been influenced by the earlier effects of Renaissance thought.⁵ However, according to Beutel:

... as far as Luther is concerned these changes could be deceptive because his childhood and youth had not been touched by the spirit of humanism or of the Renaissance. Limited to the provincial surroundings of his hometown, Luther grew up as a typical child of the late Middle Ages⁶

Nevertheless, through his education and lifestyle he attained the position of Professor of Theology at the University of Wittenburg⁷, using this knowledge to produce 95 theses that:

...condemned many practices of the Catholic Church. Luther particularly objected to the Church's practice of selling indulgences, or spiritual credits, by which people might gain credit toward salvation in heaven.⁸

The main extract from the Bible with little doubt used by Luther, and in conflict with the Church's stance, from the Book of Ephesians 2: 8-9, is:

⁴ Ágnes Birkás, 'The Protestant Reformation: Origins, Impact and Heritage', *Civic Review*, vol.14, 2018, pp. 424–434.

⁵ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd edn, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 46.

⁶ A. Beutel, 'Luther's Life', in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. by D.K. McKim, Cambridge Companions to Religion, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 3–19.

⁷ Birkás, 'The Protestant Reformation', p. 425.

⁸ Peter N. Stearns, Stephen S. Gosch and Erwin P. Grieshaber, *Documents in World History. Volume 2: The Modern Centuries, from 1500 to the Present*, 6th edn, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2011, p.38.

8. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9. Not of works, lest any man should boast.⁹

This is a clear example of a Biblical mandate versus a socially entrenched Catholic directive. Luther would also have presented a further demand from the Bible to affirm his statement of “The pope should have no authority over the emperor, except that he anoints and crowns him at the altar”¹⁰ by referring to 1 Peter 2:13-15:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: to every human institution, whether to a king as supreme; or unto governors as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men...¹¹

Thus, affirming his criticism of the self-appointed status of the Church as the identified political body appointed to direct the will of the people. As Birkas contends:

Control of the Holy Roman Empire had come into contention between the Emperor and the pope by the 1520’s. With the crowning of Charlemagne, the Catholic Church had laid claim to religious authority as well as power over secular rulers of the empire.¹²

Although it has been considered that Luther was not considered a political theorist, he admits that:

God had given to man a polity, or national government; and also an economy or the principles of domestic government.¹³

In opposition to this, and in an attempt to be rid of Luther, the Catholic Church proclaimed him as a heretic and outlaw, his works to be banned and him to be

⁹ *The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible: King James Version*, ed. by Frank Charles Thompson, Indianapolis: B. B. Kirkbride Bible Company, 1964, *Ephesians* 2:8-9.

¹⁰ Stearns et al., *Documents in World History*, p. 39.

¹¹ *1 Peter 2:13-15* (KJV, *Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*).

¹² Birkás, ‘The Protestant Reformation’, p. 426.

¹³ Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*, trans. Henry Cole (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858), p. 130, cited in A. Aubert, ‘The Political Theology of Martin Luther’, *Verbum Christi: Jurnal Teologi Reformed Injili*, 10, no. 1, 2023, p. 79.

arrested, but he found safe exile in Wartburg Castle¹⁴, where he translated the New Testament into the German language and from there, the printing press enabled greater spread of his theses. This became an unsettling time that ultimately resulted in decades of conflict terminating in the Thirty Years War and the Peace of Westphalia.¹⁵ Politics had then developed a more secure secular base and could be considered a primer for the efforts of separating the State from Religion¹⁶. This also brought about great changes to social life and education through changing economies. Encapsulated in Luther's Works¹⁷ are also statements that criticise the necessity of papal homage by requiring a man to leave his home and spend a lot of money on a pilgrimage that amounts to nothing other than depriving his family and neighbours of needed assistance. This is further emphasised in his assertion that:

It would also be easy to make a law, if only we had the courage and the serious intention, to the effect that every city should provide for its own poor, and admit no foreign beggars whatever they might be called, whether pilgrims or mendicant monks¹⁸

This is not only a swipe at the draining of the local economy by those traipsing around the countryside using religious expediency as an excuse to set aside their families and labour but using the goodwill of others in need to meet their own. But it was in a relatively short time that Luther's assertion became realised with the establishment of the Wittenberg Church Order of 1522 that created a 'common

¹⁴ Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p.125.

¹⁵ Paul A. Bishop, *Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation*, Hillsborough Community College, 201), pp. 11-12.

¹⁶ John Witte Jr., 'Facts and Fictions About the History of Separation of Church and State', *Journal of Church and State*, 48, no. 1, 2006, pp. 21-22.

¹⁷ Stearns et al., *Documents in World History*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Stearns. Et al., *Documents in World History*, p. 40.

chest' for welfare work.¹⁹ Further afield this work was also reflected in Fishman's discussion of the Poor Law Act of 1601, regarding the development by the Protestant Reformation in England:

Governmental encouragement of charity in times of crisis is at least four hundred years old and can be traced to the economic and political crisis of sixteenth century England, and the state's effort to encourage a plenitude of private philanthropy to relieve the poor. Over the sixteenth century occurred far-reaching changes in society that had an important impact on the nature of philanthropic giving and the law relating to charities.²⁰

Luther continues to clarify his position regarding Church leadership suggesting that this should be a position where a pious member of the congregation should be elected to oversee local spiritual needs and to enable freedom from the unnecessary expense of worthless pilgrimages; with the member chosen free to marry or not. He further condemned the edict that priests should not marry²¹ and that the many festival days allegedly designed for pious reflection, ironically, having developed into activity days that neither reinforce faith and family life but serve as instruments of sin; again, bleeding the family purse.²²

Luther, credited with being the nucleus of the Protestant Reformation had opened a Pandora's Box that, together with the early changes associated with the Renaissance, created further radical changes to social thought. His ambition was to replace the Catholic Church's hold on the power it held over governments and

¹⁹ Carter Lindberg, 'Luther's Struggle with Social-Ethical Issues', in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. by Donald K. McKim, Cambridge Companions to Religion, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 172.

²⁰ James J. Fishman, 'The Political Use of Private Benevolence: The Statute of Charitable Uses', *Pace Law Faculty Publications*, Paper 694 (2017), pp. 4-5.

²¹ Carter Lindberg, 'Luther's Struggle with Social-Ethical Issues', in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. by Donald K. McKim, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 168.

²² Stearns, *Documents in World History*, p. 40.

people's welfare, but it evolved through the immediate decades that followed into a warring scenario over his proposed changes, ultimately resulting in The Thirty Years War concluded by the Peace of Westphalia. In so doing, the foundations were laid for governments not to be subservient to religious institutions, economies more focussed on parochial issues with more charitable concern for the poor and disadvantaged, wider education through the spread of knowledge printed in vernacular languages instead of limited information printed only in Latin, family life improved by redirection of funding from unnecessary pilgrimages or irreligious festivals and that those in leadership positions in the Church can become married and become as the rest of society – at one with them both as equals in social abilities and better understanding of what a family really is.

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