

Fort Payne church of Christ



The Weekly Moment

A Weekly Motivational Message

Wednesday, April 18, 2018

(Note: The following account of an important part of the Church history appeared in the *Shades Mountain Messenger*. Shades Mountain is in Birmingham area. Mel Futrell is the preacher.)

The Lasting Legacy Of Martin Luther

By Mel Futrell

October 31, 2017, will mark the 500th anniversary of what is traditionally recognized as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. It is usually argued, and I have done this as well, that on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a Catholic Monk and professor, nailed his Ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. However, there is increasing doubt about whether Luther actually on that date did post his Ninety-five theses. In his just released biography of Martin Luther, popular author Eric Metaxas writes:

"While the theses had been written before that celebrated day, they were perhaps not actually posted on the fabled cathedral doors until roughly two weeks after that date." 1

Nonetheless, the specific date of the posting is not nearly as important as the event itself.

This "turning point" event of Martin Luther writing and eventually posting the Ninety-five theses is historically important because of what it contained - a denouncement of indulgences - which were being peddled throughout the area. And its value likewise is connected to its purpose "to let the academic community of Wittenberg know that he was proposing a scholarly debate...on the subject of these theses." 2 In other words, Luther believed there were abuses in the Catholic Church and that they needed to be corrected. And the way to begin to do this was through disputation or debate. And, of course, we've said nothing about the huge importance of the religious reformation that Martin Luther's actions prompted. That itself is a related matter that is equally deserving of its own article and consideration.

Admittedly, often today members of the Lord's church fail to see this rare event of 500 years ago as having any importance to us and for us — if they are even aware of the details of the event itself. So, before we briefly review Luther's significance to us, let's note a connecting thread between Luther of the 16th Century and our own selves in the 21st Century through the pen of Alexander Campbell.

One of the prominent figures of the 19th Century American Restoration Movement, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), had a real attraction to the life and writings of Martin Luther. There is absolutely no doubt that Campbell was interested in and intrigued by Luther. Evidence of this is present in his own publication the *Millennial Harbinger*. Campbell edited this journal from its beginning in January 1830 until January 1864. The publication then was edited by W. K. Pendleton until its last issue in December 1870. Between January of 1830 and May of 1868, there are no fewer than twenty-three articles from Campbell and others that touch on Martin Luther in some way or another. Consider just a sampling from Campbell's prolific pen; beginning with the first issue.

In the "Prefatory Remarks" of the very first issue of the *Millennial Harbinger* (1830), Campbell writes these revealing words, "The Bible was brought out of prison, and Luther bid it march. He made it speak in German, and thus obtained for it a respectful hearing." Later, in September of 1832, under the heading of "Reformers of Popery" Campbell listed a number of men beginning like this, "Martin Luther-was born in Saxony in 1483, and died in 1546, aged 63 years." Two months later in November of 1832, Campbell quotes from "Luther's Catechism" on baptism where Luther says, "Baptism is...a water of God's institution, and combined with the word of God." And later in the quotation Luther affirms from Romans 6:4 that baptism is immersion. It would appear that the last thing Campbell wrote, with his own hand, about Luther dates to December of 1861 and is titled, "The Character of Luther". Here Campbell discusses Luther's home life as being full of music, pets, and friends. Near the end of the short article Alexander Campbell writes of Luther, "He is as great here as when burning the Pope's bull, or standing before the diet, at Worms." How remarkable are all these words and thoughts from Martin Luther and from Campbell about Luther.

So, what significance does Martin Luther hold for us as Christians of the 21st Century — after all its been 500 years? Let me suggest just two points of significance from among many more. First, there is the matter of the Ninety-five theses itself. This is a document that directly challenges the religious leaders of Luther's day. And it does so by questioning the authority of the Pope, by challenging the validity of an indulgence system, and by charging the "church" of which Luther was a part with greed. This is a man who was willing not only to discuss in writing his doctrinal differences with his Catholic leaders, but was also ready, willing, and wanting to publicly debate the matter. Luther wasn't a New Testament Christian — we are! However, we must ask ourselves if we are indeed ready to defend the gospel (Philippians 1:16/17)? And do we understand where our religious authority actually comes from (Colossians 3:17)?

Second, there is the fact of Martin Luther's personally translating the Bible into the German language beginning in 1522 — a process that would not be completed [the whole Bible] until 1534. Author Erwin Lutzer is correct in noting, "*If Martin Luther had no other accomplishment than translating the Bible into German, he would have deserved a prominent place in the stream of history.*"³ You will recall the previous quote from Alexander Campbell praising Luther for his Bible translation work. And in doing so Campbell said, "*the Bible was brought out of prison.*" He was reminding us that before Luther, the Bible for Germans was primarily available only in Latin to the elite, scholarly, and wealthy of that country. The Bible is so easily and readily available to us today, that we perhaps regularly fail to recognize that this was certainly not the case 500 years ago. And again, where Bibles were available most were only in Latin which was not understood by the majority of the German population.

In Wartburg Castle, Martin Luther utilized a small room with a stone floor, having one window, and one table from which to do his work of translating the Bible into German. For his work in translating the New Testament he had access to Erasmus's 1519 edition of the Greek New Testament. He completed the translation of the New Testament out of the original Greek into German — and did so in only eleven weeks.⁴ Today, we have numerous essentially literal translations of the Bible in English from which to choose. This is a circumstance that was unknown 500 years, even 200 years, in the past. How grateful we ought to be to have God's inspired, inerrant word (2 Timothy 3:15-17), in our own native tongue!

Martin Luther's legacy lives on not because he was inspired, or an apostle — he was neither. He was very much human with more than his share of shortcomings which we have not dealt with in this article. Yet in my

judgment, his legacy lives on mostly because of his boldness about the Bible. His desire to see it in the hands of the common man and to be read, known, and lived by all. His embarrassment of and criticism of the corrupt religious hierarchy of his day, who fought his Bible translation efforts, is noteworthy even down to our own day. May we all desire to be and work to be bold believers that others might recognize us as true followers and disciples of the Christ (Luke 9:23; Acts 4:13).

ENDNOTES

1 Metaxas, Eric, Martin Luther, Viking Press, 2017, p. 107.

2 Ibid, pg. 108.

3 Lutzer, Erwin

Think about it.

Here's hoping you'll make the "*most of your minutes*" this week.

Hope to see you at Bible Study tonight.

In Christian Love,

Bob Strickland