

Luther's legacy justifies stature in tale of reform



Martin Luther is a towering figure in church history whose influence remains profound.

Martin Luther's writings gripped me at two points in my life. The first was as a young man reading his commentaries on Romans and Galatians – it was as if a light was turned on in my head and heart. The second was on study leave in Germany in the late 1990s when I was helped greatly by his insights into the subject of my research.

Luther (1483–1546) was a German monk, theologian and dissident whose impact on the world can be felt up to the present day. His translation of the Bible standardised the German language and provided impetus for Bible translation into the everyday languages of people across Europe, including the King James Version in English. His hymns, such as *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, popularised congregational singing. His marriage to Katharina von Bora reintroduced married clergy into the church. But most importantly, his rediscovery of the truth of justification by faith alone, the doctrine that God declares believers righteous solely on the basis of Christ's death for our sins, sparked the Protestant Reformation.

Justification by Faith Alone

Luther's story is well known. A brush with death during a thunderstorm in 1505 when he was a law student led Luther to make a vow to become a monk. He then sought to secure his own salvation through careful observance of the monastic rule, constant confession and voluntary self-punishment in order to atone for his sins. In his own words, during this time of intense spiritual struggle, he "raged with a fierce and troubled conscience". Despite his many prayers, vigils and fasting, Luther remained uncertain of his standing before a holy and righteous God.

Luther found relief through his study of the Scriptures. Seizing upon Paul's words in Romans 1:17, he learned that "in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last". Luther came to understand justification, our right standing before God, as being entirely the work of God, simply to be received by faith. Against the teaching of his day that the righteous acts of believers are intended to secure God's forgiveness, Luther asserted that Christians receive that righteousness entirely from outside themselves: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Luther wrote that "the first and chief article of religion is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans 3:24-25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood" (Romans 3:23-25).

Luther found that the rest of the Bible confirmed his discovery. Jesus pitted the Pharisee who boasted to God of his piety against the tax collector who prayed for God's mercy and concluded that the latter "went home justified" (Luke 18:11-14). Jesus assured the thief on the cross who put his faith in him that "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). David prayed: "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32:1).

The truth of justification by grace through faith transformed Luther. "Faith alone" as the means of our acceptance with God became the liberating message that spread like a bushfire across Europe. This same message took me by surprise as a young man and continues to inspire me to this day. It's a message of hope for all. It's what makes the Christian Faith unique. And it magnifies the generosity and kindness of God, without diluting his own righteous character and opposition to sin.

A common response to the message of justification by faith is that it appears to leave the door open for people to live sinful lives. If salvation is a gift, to quote Paul, “why not continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1). Luther’s answer to this question was that “we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” Good works are to flow from faith as its fruit. Far from giving us permission to sin, justification by faith is the firm basis for our moral renewal.

Greed as Idolatry

To take an example of Luther’s concern that those who are justified live lives that are pleasing to God, consider his teaching on the sin of greed.

Luther’s opposition to greed runs deep. In 1517, at the very beginning of the Reformation, he wrote his famous *Ninety-Five Theses* objecting to the sale of indulgences by church officials, the practice of soliciting funds with the promise of the forgiveness of sins: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Luther’s pamphlet was nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, but, with the aid of the printing press, it was published throughout Germany in two weeks and across Europe in less than two months. Later on Luther nicknamed the Pope who supported indulgences, Avarice of Rome!

In 1996, I spent 12 months in Germany on study leave doing research for a book on Paul’s intriguing judgement in Colossians 3:5 and Ephesians 5:5 that “greed is idolatry”. I read widely in church history and no one proved more helpful than Martin Luther.

In what sense does greed constitute a religion? Luther believed that the sin of greed consisted in *placing confidence and trust in one’s possessions rather than in the living God*. In this way, money is the greedy person’s god and he or she is therefore guilty of idolatry. His comments on Ephesians 5:5, where Paul brands the greedy person an idolater, explain his understanding of the words “greed is idolatry”. Speaking of the greedy miser, Luther explains: “Since his confidence and loyalty is based on money and not on the living God, who has promised him sufficient nourishment, only money is his god and he may well be called an idolater.”

The foundation for Luther’s understanding of greed as idolatry is laid in his treatment of the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me”. Luther does not limit the definition of worship and its counterpoint idolatry to religious adoration and devotion, but takes it broadly to include the idea of trust. In the *Shorter Catechism*, he explains how to have no other gods before the Lord: we are to fear, love and trust God above all things.

The extensive exposition of the first commandment in Luther’s *Larger Catechism*, however, expands on the verb to trust. He defines what it means to have a god in a way that fits both true and false worship: “A ‘god’ means that from which you expect to receive all good things and to which you flee in times of need. ‘To have a god’ means nothing other than to believe and trust from the heart in something.”

Luther regards the teaching that greed is idolatry not as a piece of intriguing speculation but with all seriousness and, as a consequence, he has much to say about fighting against greed in the human heart by faith. He took the fourth request of the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us our daily bread”, as a call to shun greed.

From Luther, we learn that in the fight against greed, we need more than just the help of psychology, sociology and economics – greed is at root a theological problem. The driving motivation of greed is our need to find security and confidence in a dangerous and uncertain world. Money is a god from which we expect to receive all good things. But like any other idol, money is a god that fails to deliver and is not worthy of our trust. The god of money inevitably leads its worshippers to disappointment and humiliation.

A Colourful Character

Martin Luther was a colourful character with a quick wit and a memorable turn of phrase. When asked about lust, he quipped: “You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” With his life on the line, he purportedly stated: “To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I cannot, and I will not recant. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.” His advice to theologians is sobering: “It is not understanding, reading or speculation, but living – no, dying and being damned – that makes a theologian.” Ever the realist, when confronted with an ethical dilemma, he wrote: “God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and sin boldly, but let your trust in Christ be bolder still, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.”

Luther was not without his foibles and failings, like the rest of us. His dealings with the peasant revolts and with the Jews were not exemplary. But his convictions that the just shall live by faith and that good works will flow from that faith mark him out as an outstanding and inspiring church leader for whose insights and example I give thanks to God.

The Revd Dr Brian Rosner will be commissioned as the ninth Principal of Ridley Melbourne by Archbishop Philip Freier on 27 July.