

# Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

Issue 22.2, Time After Pentecost 2017

## Reformation Jubilee 500

## Table Of Contents

<b>Reformation Jubilee 500</b> . . . . .	3
<b>Martin Luther, The Peasants' War, And Anti-semitism: A Quincentennial Ruminati</b> . . . . .	7
<b>Why Did Luther Demonize His Theological Opponents?</b> . . . . .	15
<b>More Than Just Table Talk</b> . . . . .	19
<b>“Are you ignorant of what it means to be ignorant?”: Luther’s Insults</b> . . . . .	22
<b>An Appreciation of Luther’s Pastoral Writings</b> . . . . .	25
<b>Indulge Me: About the Lollards</b> . . . . .	27
<b>Indulge Me: Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522), Christian Humanist and Hebrew Scholar</b> . . . . .	28
<b>Indulge Me: King Johan III</b> . . . . .	30
<b>Indulge Me: The Book of Common Prayer</b> . . . . .	33
<b>Unity and Reconciliation Challenges Chronic Homelessness in Lake County</b> . . . . .	35
<b>Evanston Reformation 500 and Beyond: The Proof is the Beyond....A Joint Reflection</b> . . . . .	37

## Reformation Jubilee 500

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee/>



Pop art Martin Luther

The whole Lutheran world is absorbed this year in the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, and much of the rest of the world is also taking note to a greater or lesser extent. The editorial council of *Let's Talk* is providing an opportunity, especially for the members and friends of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA, to reflect on what's important about the Reformation to them.

We propose to devote several issues of *Let's Talk* to the Reformation Jubilee. In each issue we offer three different categories of articles to help stir the creative juices of church leaders and lay persons. Articles that relate to the Reformation Jubilee but don't fit these categories are also welcome.

### 1. Appreciating Luther

The Reformation begins with Martin Luther's calls for reform of church and society. Luther is unquestionably the Great Reformer. We invite readers to respond to the question: what do you appreciate (or not appreciate) about Luther?

There's an obstacle, however. Luther, like many great historical figures, had clay feet, and this undoes the ability of some people to appreciate his genuine and enormous contributions to theology, Christian life, church practice, and social renewal. Frank Senn recently taught a graduate student who had difficulty giving a class presentation on Luther's German Mass because she had read his anti-Semitic writings in another class. Is there a way to deal with this and other issues up front and head on?

For this issue we invited a veteran professor of history with a sometime association with this journal, Dr. Gregory Singleton, to write an article precisely dealing with this problem of how to handle heroes with clay feet. Although he is not an expert on Luther or the Reformation (but not ignorant of this history

either), he has experienced over forty years of teaching American history, frequently dealing with cultural icons who have fallen from their pedestals. [Singleton's "Martin Luther, the Peasants' War, and Anti-Semitism: A Quincentennial Ruminations," provides an approach to dialogue on the hermeneutic of dealing with the whole Luther](#), who would be the first to claim that he was a sinner as well as a saint.

Another article also deals with what some people regard as an unsavory part of Luther's character. Robert Saler, who teaches in an interdenominational seminary in Indianapolis, points out how offended his colleagues are about the way Luther demonized his theological opponents. [In answering the question "Why Did Luther Demonize His Opponents?" Saler draws us into traditions of how the church has sometimes regarded heresy as a moral failing](#). Luther's own real belief that the Devil was at work in the contemporary church to undermine faith and doctrine, sometimes even among one's friends, drew utterances from Luther were not unlike exorcisms.

Two additional articles also deal with what could be regarded as unflattering aspects of Luther's speech. These are characteristics many Lutherans chuckle over even though the pressure is strong not to emulate the Great Reformer in these ways. Francisco Herrera takes a look at the earthy remarks found especially, although not exclusively, in Luther's *Table Talk*: the sheer earthiness and body-orientation of his language. [Herrera proposes that this provocative speech was "More than Just Table Talk."](#) It was needed to provoke reform and renewal. Herrera sees parallels between Luther's provocative talk and methods of the burgeoning [#decolonizelutheranism](#) movement.

What began as a class project for Tyler Rasmussen, of ferreting out "Luther's Insults" from his voluminous writings, and posting them on a blog, the [Lutheran Insulter](#) website, became an instance of internet celebrity. Overnight this site was getting tens of thousands of hits. Maybe Luther's insults provide models for people today who are living in a highly contentious culture, but Luther said things about people that we wouldn't dare say today---and he said it print! [The trick, Rasmussen proposes, is to show how Luther used insults to draw people from error into truth.](#)

[Anna Marie Johnson appreciates the more positive aspect of Luther's career in his pastoral writings.](#) Luther wrote innumerable tracts laying out an agenda for the reform of the Christian life. His proposals were often based on the Ten Commandments. Discouraging the more ostentatious good works, like going on a pilgrimage, Luther gave guidance to ordinary Christians on helping their needy neighbors.

[We invite readers to submit articles for our forthcoming Reformation Jubilee issues on what they appreciate or don't appreciate about Luther.](#)

## **2. Indulgences**

The *Let's Talk* editorial council established a second category of articles: in which writers indulge in their favorite Reformation figures, documents, or ideas.

We need to be reminded that there were precursors to the 16th century Reformation. [Benjamin Dueholm writes about the 14<sup>th</sup> century Lollards who anticipated many later Protestant ideas.](#) The Lollards were hunted down and suppressed by kings and church hierarchy in England, yet they made a profound contribution to the development of the English language in their Bible translation (from the Latin

Vulgate) and other writings.

[Theodor Dunkelgrün writes on the humanist Hebrew scholar Johann Reuchlin.](#) What would Reformation Bible translation and scholarship have been without Reuchlin's critical edition of the Hebrew Bible and Erasmus' critical edition of the Greek New Testament? Neither Reuchlin nor Erasmus left the Catholic Church, but their work was essential to the work of the Protestant reformers.

[Frank Senn writes about another humanist, the Swedish King Johan III, who pursued ecumenical relationships between the Lutheran Reformation and the papacy.](#) His "high church" inclinations are evident in an evangelical catholic Liturgy he prepared for the Church of Sweden. It was promulgated in 1576, although not without anti-liturgy antagonism from the theologians.

[Episcopal rector Pamela Dolan tells of acquiring the 1549 \*Book of Common Prayer\*](#) when she was a Roman Catholic and what the Prayer Book has meant to her over the years. Yes, *The Book of Common Prayer* is a Reformation liturgical book. It reflects the enduring editorial and translation skills of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

[We invite readers to submit brief articles about a favorite Reformation figure, document, or idea.](#) Kathrine von Bora Luther? Philip Melancthon? John Calvin? The Formula of Concord? The Heidelberg Catechism? Justification by faith? Write and we will grant you an indulgence.

### **3. Commemorative Projects**

A number of activities and programs are occurring in synod congregations or in ecumenical clusters. We would like to spread the word about what is happening in and through our synod. We include in this issue of *Let's Talk* two reports.

[Dawn Mass Eck reports on the Castle Church Door project at Messiah Lutheran Church in Wauconda](#) and how unity and reconciliation among local churches led to them jointly dealing with the challenges of chronic homelessness in Lake County.

Pastors Betty Landis (St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Evanston) and Joseph Tito (St. Nicholas Catholic Church, Evanston) report on how [four ELCA congregations and four Catholic parishes in Evanston, plus Lutheran and Catholic campus ministries at Northwestern University, entered into dialogue that resulted in ambitious programs of joint study](#) with guest presenters, joint worship, and joint social action.

Both of these activities were a response to the ELCA's Reformation 500 initiative. [If your congregation is engaged in a special commemorative activity within the parish or with other churches, please send us a report.](#)

---

**Help us celebrate Reformation Jubilee 500**

Articles on what I appreciate/don't appreciate about Luther, indulgences, and projects, or articles that don't fit any of these categories, may be sent to [fcseenn70@gmail.com](mailto:fcseenn70@gmail.com) or [eamussel@uchicago.edu](mailto:eamussel@uchicago.edu). We plan to publish two more issues of *Let's Talk* devoted to the Reformation Jubilee 500: in the fall before Reformation Day (deadline September 1) and after Reformation Day (deadline November 15).

---

# Martin Luther, The Peasants' War, And Anti-semitism: A Quincentennial Ruminaton

by Gregory Holmes Singleton

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/martin-luther-peasants-war-anti-semitism-quincentennial-ruminaton/>

**(with a bit of ersatz theology thrown in for good measure)**

In the past, [centennial](#) celebrations were times for rejoicing and celebration. Quincentennial celebrations were times for over-the-top rejoicing and raucous celebration. For the last few decades, however, these milestones have often been the occasion of less than flattering revisionist historical treatments. Cultural icons and iconic events, previously re-canonized every one-hundred years, now almost always have their clay feet exposed.

In this quincentennial observance of the (perhaps apocryphal) nail pounding heard around the world (or at least throughout Christendom) we have the iconic Martin Luther with at least two clay feet: his strongly (one might say deadly) worded advice to political authority in the matter of the Peasants' War and his indisputably anti-Semitic utterances toward the end of his life. To these we could add a number of lesser, but still bothersome, incidents of Luther's hot-headed rhetoric where an irenic tone (perhaps in the manner of Philipp Melanchthon) may have served the cause of Christian unity better.

The editors of *Let's Talk* kindly extended an invitation to me to write a piece considering the implications of these clay feet, particularly the extent to which they might cause us to refrain from seriously engaging his copious other writings. Does the bile of these unfortunate tirades compromise and/or corrupt Luther's discourses on various theological and liturgical issues as well? The invitation came specifically from one of the editors who is my former pastor, fellow scholar, and good friend. He knows that I am neither a Luther scholar nor a specialist in the history of Central Europe in the sixteenth century. However, he suggested that in my thirty-nine year career of teaching at the university level I have most likely dealt with the generic "cultural icon with feet of clay" issue in a wide variety of specific forms. Indeed I did. It came up multiple times in every class in every term from 1966 to 2005. Specific examples included, but are by no means limited to: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery, Andrew Jackson and Cherokee removal, Abraham Lincoln and equivocation on both equality of races and full unconditional emancipation, Martin Luther King, Jr. and plagiarism.

I responded to the invitation with a quick and resounding "YES!" because I am presently working on a book manuscript about the problem of knowledge generally and in the discipline of History specifically, the roles of projection and perception in our social and individual constructions of reality, and how all of this impacts hermeneutical considerations.

Given the nature of the invitation I proceed with the assumption that I am under no obligation to shed any new light on the specific problem of Martin Luther's dyspeptic remarks—indeed, I am neither qualified nor competent to do so. For those who are interested in well researched treatments of Luther, the Peasants

War, and the Anti-Semitic remarks toward the end of his life *placed within the context of his life as a whole*, I would recommend Heiko A Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (pp. 18, 49, 66, 84, 205, 283 for the Peasant Peasants' War; pp. 289, 290, 292-297 for the anti-Semitic remarks), Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (pp. 414-435 for the Peasants' War; 377-380 for the anti-Semitic remarks), and Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (pp. 171, 248-58, 261-63, 276, 293, 298, 311, 336 for the Peasants' War; 378-85 for the anti-Semitic remarks).

What I can do is discuss how we approach the generic "cultural icon with feet of clay" issue and how that *might* impact our approach to Luther's other writings. In order to do this with integrity I need to lay all my cards on the table (there are lots of cards in my hand, so I'll spread them out over the following pages). Historians come in a variety of packages and perspectives. Some construct straight-forward narratives; some enter into the realm of analysis. Some assume that the truth of the past is located in original documents; some consider each document the result of someone else's subjectivity and thus simply a perspective on an experience in the past and not a capsule of the past pure and simple. Some are on a quest for historical truth that will stand the test of time; some are on a continuing quest for historical understanding with the caveat that at any given time that understanding is at best only partial and may indeed be so diluted with the historian's own cultural bias as to be of little use.

My approach to the discipline of History (and thus to the "cultural icon with feet of clay" issue) is informed by the second characteristic in each of the three variables in the above paragraph. That summary needs a little elaboration. For me History is not "what happened in the past." It is the analysis of thoughts, actions, and behaviors of the species *homo sapiens* in the dimension of time and the settings of diverse cultures in order to discover (insofar as possible) that which is persistent and that which is mutable in the human condition.

In short, the content of what follows may strike some as overly academic (though I will try to keep that perspective to a minimum) and the style will strike those of an academic bent as a bit too colloquial, but I hope to make this as accessible as possible and engage as many people as I can in a brief conversation about the thorny world of historical inquiry, hermeneutics, and interpretation.

First, let's tackle inquiry. In a case like this (and all cases dealing with cultural icons) inquiry begins with a consideration of the relevant primary sources, including prevailing interpretations of that icon by his or her contemporaries. Luther became a cultural icon (positive or negative depending on where a commentator stood) soon after his career as a reformer began. (See Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe—and Started the Protestant Reformation*) Luther may have been born in obscurity, but rapidly following October 31, 1517, he was known far beyond Wittenberg and Saxony. He was considered important (and dangerous) enough for Pope Leo X to promulgate his encyclical *Exsurge Domine* in June 1520, for Henry VIII to publish *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* in 1521, and for a group of critics (including heavy hitters such as Thomas More and Johann Eck) to launch a steady stream of refutations of Luther's arguments from 1518 to 1525; even negative reviews can contribute to iconic status. (See David V.N. Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists 1518-1525*) Add to this the crowd at Worms and the widespread publication of the Ninety-Five Theses and treatises that followed and we can make a case for considering Luther something akin to a sixteenth century rock star, complete with a "bad-boy" reputation among both friends and foes.

The second step in our inquiry has more to do with us than with the cultural icon, but it is a crucial step that requires a high degree of rigorous honest self-evaluation on the part of the investigator. We need to survey the literature about our subject written in our own time and in past decades and centuries. We may do this in part for quick references to the primary materials, but of greater importance we need to each ask ourself what predilections and prejudices we may have gained through direct or indirect exposures to this body of literature. Have we been more impressed by the literature that comes close to canonizing Luther? Conversely, have we been more impressed by recent literature concentrating on his allegiance to secular power and lack of support of the populist masses during the Peasants' War, and/or his anti-Semitic remarks in the 1540s? If we are of the latter disposition, we need to take a look at some of the positive accomplishments, but not lose sight of the darker side. If we are of the former disposition, we need to take a closer look at the darker side but not lose sight of those contributions upon which we wish to build.

Yes, we are talking about balance—hard to achieve and even harder to maintain, and thus a lifelong task that is never achieved with perfection, but is a goal to be sought anyway.

And that brings us to hermeneutics, a big word for keeping some common sense principles in mind as we work our way from a consideration of the relevant evidence to an interpretation of the phenomenon, movement, or (as in this case) the cultural icon under investigation. What do we bring to the reading of a document? How do we attempt to enter the document from a world outside of that document? Decades ago I developed two primary hermeneutical assumptions that have served me well (let's not be coy and call these assumptions "principles." I am guessing, and scholars do that more often than not.)

The first assumption is that we must always remember that authors who were not basically different from us wrote these texts. Thus we need to be open to universal themes even in the face of significant conceptual and stylistic differences. This assumption is based primarily on Carl Gustav Jung's conceptualization of the "Collective Unconscious." Just as human beings have basically the same physical structure over a vast expanse of space and time, we should not be surprised to encounter some non-physical attributes that we share with persons across both of those expanses. Can we not identify with a tragic hero or heroine in a play by Sophocles written over two millennia ago? Though separated by almost three millennia, most of us can empathize with the grief of David as he cried out over the loss of his son. Some common elements of the human condition do not need contextualizing.

The second assumption is that we must always remember that these are texts written in a variety of cultural contexts that are often quite different from ours. Thus we always stand in need of historical, linguistic, and anthropological continuing education. This is not the inverse of the previous assumption, which has to do with themes of the human condition that transcend time and space. This assumption has to do with differing modes of conceptualization and expression over time and space and our need to be mindful of this as we encounter the documents.

But there is more, and the "more" takes the form of musing or thinking out loud. Bear with me as I bare my scholarly soul. Every historian is aware (though some try hard to forget) that the record of evidence is woefully incomplete; is skewed toward the interests of various factions, parties, and other categories of people; is created by human beings with preconceptions, assumptions, and a variety of other subjective factors impacting the final outcome of each document. We then are engaged in our subjective interpretations of the subjective reflections of those who generated the original documents. If we attempt

to tell stories as the primary mode of history our narratives project at least as much of our predilections on the documents we use as we perceive in those documents. Obviously the same can be said of analytical approaches to history, but concentrating on the question (which is what makes analytical history analytical) forces us to at least confront our own biases. Thus we need to be very cautious about rushing to answers.

One could, of course, throw one's hands in the air and conclude that history is impossible, at least history that is accurate. But some sense of history will most likely be part of both our collective conscious and unconscious for as long as the species persists. In spite of the epistemological and methodological problems I think it quite important that we, both individually and collectively, come to terms with our pasts. Or, more precisely, that we continually come to terms with our pasts by refusing to adopt a firm and final "standard" or "orthodox" interpretation of any given historical question. Indeed, one of the problems I have with narrative history is that the emphasis is usually on the answer rather than the question. The answers become concretized, whereas the questions are usually broader than a specific historical moment and the questions need to be kept in play over generations: revisited, revised, revisioned, and reframed.

To summarize the preceding overly long paragraph (and to court the charge of heresy), questions give rise to discussion—a good thing. Answers give rise to dogma—a questionable outcome, at least in critical scholarship. And yes, that is fair warning that I am not going to get anywhere near giving an answer to the question of what we do with our shared icon with admittedly clay feet. Rather I will offer a perspective about how we might fruitfully enter into a conversation about Luther's faults, and how that might broaden into a more general discussion about all of us—past, present, and future—who live within the constraints of the human condition, bounded by freedom and necessity, and riddled with complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction.

All of this I covered in far greater detail when I regularly taught a graduate course on historiography and historical methods. That took place in a secular university. In this venue I feel compelled to explore these matters further from a specifically Christian perspective. We all have predilections, pet theories, and perspectives we would like to promulgate as absolutes. We are aware of some of them, but most likely not all of them. We do indeed project at least as much as we perceive. Add to this my strange combination of Christian anthropology (equal parts of Luther's *simul justus et peccator* and Calvin's innate depravity) and I come to the conversation aware of my own sinful nature and thus am neither surprised nor shocked (as some Christians evidently are) that sinners often sin. Put another way, I am aware of my subjectivity which cautions me against passing judgment based on my biased evaluation, but that very limitation gives me empathy for other sinners.

I warned (promised?) I would give no answers but I will offer a perspective, which is neither an answer nor knowledge (a word used far too often and far too loosely). It is an informed perspective, but not "authoritative," a word I would like to see removed from the language.

I have serious problems with Luther's siding with the princes in the Peasants' War (and his obeisance to political authority in general), but I am mindful of two important factors (whether they are mitigating I can't yet say). First, his position was not unequivocally supportive of the nobility. Second, and most important when it comes to my continuing wrestling with this problem, I am acutely aware that I was able in the 1960s and early 1970s to speak out vehemently against American policy in Southeast Asia without

having all that much to fear. Luther lived in a different place and time. He was alive thanks to the patronage and protection of the Elector of Saxony. Support of princes had pragmatic survival value for him. On the other hand, others such as Zwingli did side with the peasants. I continue to wrestle with this, but I do not find echoes of this problematic stance in the larger corpus of Luther's work.

Luther's negative remarks about Jews—particularly *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543)—I find highly offensive, and somewhat enigmatic. In the 1520s, he wrote a few pieces that chastised Christian treatment of Jews in Europe. From time to time he sought to convert Jews to Christianity, or more precisely he hoped they would be so impressed with his reframed Christianity that they would come in droves to the fold. Luther's later anti-Semitic remarks were limited to non-theological rants during the last few years of a life that now seemed to him an abysmal failure. His name was known throughout Western Christendom, but he was geographically isolated in Saxony. His circumstances did not allow him to participate in the presentation and defense of the Augsburg Confession. He had rhetorically painted himself into a corner with his over-the-top attacks (sometimes *ad hominem*) on both the office and person of the Bishop of Rome, Erasmus, and a host of others. By the time of his last years he was not the only great reformer on the scene. Actually, he seemed rather mild in comparison to some of the newer voices (or even such contemporaries as Karlstadt) in spite of his "Brand." Jews had not converted in great numbers, as he was sure they would have done. By this time Luther was something of an Ishmael—his hand was against every man and every man's hand was against him in his view. He lashed out with bitter anguish and took aim at a wide variety of targets. It is instructive that the penultimate chapter in Roper's *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* bears the title, "Hatreds." None of this is offered as an excuse for the despicable words he wrote, but I do not consider his other writings invalidated by these regrettable utterances of an obviously very unhappy and disturbed man facing the end of his life. That having been said, I continue to struggle with what to do with such a hotheaded contrarian who had flashes of great insight, grace, and wisdom.

If my brother Martin had shared his 1540s remarks about Jews with me in person, I hope I would have followed the advice in the Gospel according to Matthew 18:15-18. I would have placed his advice to the nobility in the 1520s and his remarks about Jews in the 1540s alongside the criterion of the Gospel and asked Martin to consider the extent to which he had stepped way outside the Gospel. And I would further have pointed to many of his other works (*Bondage of the Will, On the Freedom of a Christian, Commentary on Romans, Commentary on Galatians*, among others) and encouraged him to stay in that groove. Given that we encounter Luther only in absentia we can regret his writings that fall short of his work that we honor for its service to the Gospel. We should not ignore the sinful nature of his remarks and try to cast him as a Christian Super-Hero. On the other hand we should not condemn him. We can accept Luther as a brother, who like each of us, is flawed and broken. And we can and should continue to interpret the meaning of what he wrote and what he did (for better or for worse) in community with others as we try—individually and collectively—to discern what it means to be in Christ as both saint and sinner.

I offer no answers here. This is only a rumination about how one person continues to wrestle and struggle.

So where do we go from here?

I know you have been paying attention, so your response is likely, "Conversation." That exchange of

perspectives between sisters and brothers is far more important than anything I have opined in the previous paragraphs. What follows now is a recommendation for an approach to faithful continuous conversation about matters of importance in how we interpret the Gospel in the context of a given time and place, recognizing that the conversation is ongoing. I nominate a great guide for us as we do so.

Josiah Royce (1855-1916) was an American philosopher on the faculty of Harvard University. In 1913 he wrote a book entitled *The Problem of Christianity*. I would place this tome in the hands of every Christian if I had the financial resources to do so. Royce writes a great deal about the Church as both the body of Christ and the creature of the Spirit. He speaks of the Church, in both its congregational and universal manifestations, as the “Beloved Community.” He defines the Church in terms of neither dogma nor organization. It is “. . . a progressively realized community of interpretation.” In Royce’s conception of the Church we are to enter into serious conversation in which we interpret both the Gospel and the world in which we are called to minister, and this is a prelude to ministerial action. Given that our understanding is progressive, in the sense that it is dynamic and must adapt constantly to new realities, our understanding of the Gospel will be protean and the contexts in which we live out the Gospel are similarly mutable.

In the specific set of concerns which gave rise to this brief article, Royce’s “community of Interpretation” invites us to enter into an ongoing conversation. Our entry point may be with a piece or pieces of Luther’s writing, but it is not a conversation *about* Luther. It is a conversation *with* Luther, as well as each other. It takes into account those with whom Luther was in conversation when he wrote the documents under consideration. It also takes into account others who have joined the conversation since Luther (which puts us into interpretive conversation with Hegel, Dilthey, Kierkegaard, Berger, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Küng, Bratten, Jenson, Marty, Senn, and Hauerwas among others).

A community of interpretation works best when we ask new questions and continue to refine and reconsider old questions. Put another way, a community of interpretation functions only through conversation and ceases to exist if we think we have found the correct answer (or, perhaps, more precisely when we have grown weary of thinking about difficult questions and wish to opt instead for a “definitive” answer).

Royce took the Communion of Saints seriously. From this perspective, the body of Christ is perpetuated in part by the conversation that both maintains and propels community. In this sense, one can imagine ecclesia as an expansion of that perpetual conversation suggested by Rublev’s famous 14th century icon of three angels, often also interpreted as the Trinity.

If we take Communities of Interpretation seriously as a sort of ecclesiology in action, we can more intentionally follow the mandate to love one another as Christ has loved us. This has implications for how we deal with our sisters and brothers in our own time, in the past, and in the future. If we engage the Gospel, one another, and the super-persona of ecclesia in this continuing conversation, we will continue to engage those who have gone before us as well as those who are with us now. By so doing we also keep faith with our sisters and brothers who have yet to be born. If we do this, we will have prepared a forum of faithful dialogue that they will be able to engage.

## **A Pendantic Addendum**

While writing this brief rumination, I encountered a recently published book synthesizing cutting-edge research in Cognitive Science. It is worth reading for its own sake, and also as an empirical buttress for Royce's philosophical argument published 104 years ago: Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017). We all know far less than we think we know, and one of the most important bits of knowledge we can acquire is a reckoning of the profundity of our ignorance. We borrow the summary of knowledge from each other without comprehending how shallow that summary is. The authors advocate intentional "communities of knowledge" in which we distinguish between what we think we know and what we actually know, share perspectives with each other, and resist the conversation squelching settlement on a singular orthodoxy. While not identical to Royce's "communities of interpretation," the two concepts are compatible. Indeed, I would argue that neither concept has much utility without the other. In both cases, the emphasis is on conversations that continue to wrestle with important questions. One must, of course, take my recommendation of this book with a grain of salt. It very nicely confirms my predilections about preferring the concept of "perspective" over the concept of "knowledge."

### Full Citation of Referenced Works

David V. N. Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth (ed.), *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. New York: Doubleday, 1992. (Originally published in 1982 by Severin und Seidler, Berlin as *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel*)

Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe—and Started the Protestant Reformation*. New York: Penguin Press, 2015.

Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*. New York: Random House, 2017.

Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*. Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 2001. (Originally published in 1933 by Macmillan)

### For more on the problem of historical interpretation and Josiah Royce see:

Gregory Holmes Singleton, "Is History Possible? A Prolegomenon to an Agnostic Epistemology"  
<http://homepages.neiu.edu/~ghsingle/IHPr4.pdf>

Gregory Holmes Singleton, "Josiah Royce and 21st Century Theology"  
<http://homepages.neiu.edu/~ghsingle/ROYCE.pdf>

Both of the above are more useful for the recommendations for further reading than they are for the substance of the arguments.

---

## Why Did Luther Demonize His Theological Opponents?

by Robert Saler

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/luther-demonize-theological-opponents/>

For the last five years, I have been the only Lutheran teaching at my ecumenical seminary. Having taught at a Lutheran seminary prior to coming here, I was surprised by the negative reaction of other Protestants (evangelicals, Disciples of Christ, Reformed, Methodist, Episcopalian, etc.) towards the mention of Luther. This negativity has less to do with Luther's theology and more to do with how he treated his theological opponents. According to these students, the flaws in Luther's theology are intimately tied to his intolerance of other viewpoints, which he stretched to the point of literally ascribing the intentions of his opponents to the devil and the devil's minions.

Luther's horrific statements late in life about Jews in Germany, as well as his regrettable reaction to the peasant uprising, are well known. While Lutheran apologists sometimes treat these as missteps within Luther's theology (which they were to a certain extent), we have to be honest and acknowledge that Luther's harsh rhetorical treatments of his interlocutors in theological matters is of a piece with a number of key trends that underpin not only the reformer's own theology but his theological milieu as a whole. Luther's [demonization](#) of his theological opponents, in other words, is not a bug but a feature of his theology. Those of us who theologize in his trajectory and in his name need to be honest about that. While scholars such as Mark Edwards and Paul Hinlicky<sup>1</sup> have taken great strides in explaining how Luther came by his easily-deployed rhetorical demonology in polemics, the damage of that legacy remains—as my students' skepticism attests.

The stakes for not being honest are too high. The history of Lutheran theology is littered with writings from his successors in which the harsh polemics that characterized the 16th century bear fruit, in later centuries, of doctrinal rigidity, condescension towards rival viewpoints, and an anti-ecumenical spirit in many quarters. Lutheran theology has rarely been known for being irenic. However, 500 years after Luther, we are also witnessing the fruit of Lutheranism's engagement with ecumenism, interfaith work, science, and human rights. Even as Lutheran confessional documents continue to identify the office of the papacy with "the antichrist," in our day global observances of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation are being planned in conjunction with Roman Catholic, Mennonite, and other erstwhile opponents of the Wittenberg theologians. We are in an unsteady but steadily improving territory of theological and ecclesial relationality with formerly bitter enemies. If there is any celebration to be had in this 500<sup>th</sup> year, surely it is that.

### Can Diversity of Theology be of God?

If Lutheran theologians and pastors wish to continue to extend this positive trajectory of drawing on specifically Lutheran resources to foster hospitality towards others, then we must come to terms with the conditions by which Luther felt comfortable ascribing malicious, even demonic, intent to his opponents. What we see when we examine these broader trends is that Luther was, in this respect as in so many others, largely a creature of his age. The key question that separates his time and ours is this: can theological diversity be understood as good-faith disagreement among well-meaning Christians, or must

significant theological diversity represent cleavage born of moral weakness at best and demonic influence at worst?

We can notice the following features about Luther's theological milieu as it relates to the question of how theological diversity was itself theologized:

- 1). As Heiko Obermann and others have pointed out, Luther (and his contemporaries) lived in a spiritually thick world. While Luther himself might have been a virtuoso in recognizing the fingerprints of both God and the devil in various events and institutions, the notion that the devil actively tries to mislead believers into spiritually disastrous delusions is readily found in monastic literature, spiritual assessment of mystic visions, papal pronouncements (including a number related to Luther himself), and medieval art. The world of the reformers, in other words, was not “disenchanted” in the ways that Max Weber would later diagnose the modern age. But with enchantment comes demonology—positive spirits always have their match in malicious ones.
- 2). From the patristic era forward, the Christian tradition largely assumed that heresy was synonymous with moral failing. While it was not strictly heresy to teach a theologically non-orthodox idea initially, heresy came in when the teacher refused to submit himself or herself to correction by the church. Such stubbornness (the same argument that Luther would eventually wield against the Jews) was easily elided into demonic influence. Heretics are not simply incorrect, on this count; they are actively at enmity with God, which could of course ultimately only be traced to the direct or indirect influence of demonic/satanic forces. Wrong belief, to the extent that it persists despite the church's efforts to correct it, is not simply Christians of otherwise good faith agreeing to disagree; it is active capitulation to demonic influence. As stark as that may sound, it is a point that Luther makes consistently.
- 3). Despite the reformers' insistence that salvation is a gift from God granted by grace through faith apart from works, the Reformation was caught in a dilemma well summarized by those scholars who point out that, even as the reformers were busy insisting that the Bible is sufficiently clear as to transmit knowledge adequate for salvation to any reader, they were also frantically writing a variety of prefaces and commentaries—“scripture is clear, but make sure that you read it this way.” This and other tensions around the relationship between right faith (orthodoxy) and grace as they both relate to salvation created a difficult instability in nascent Protestant theology: having abandoned the notion that good works have any efficacy in contributing to salvation, the soteriological status of the notional content of “right faith” remained vague. This fuzziness contributed to a difficult emerging situation: how much does “faith” entail right belief? To the extent that true faith in the Lutheran sense and orthodox belief in the classical sense become intermixed in the mechanics of salvation, then any diversity in theological opinion that touches on key matters of orthodoxy becomes so fraught with salvific import that to disturb them—say, by questioning the Trinity—could only detract from salvation, and detracting from salvation is the work of the devil. Thus, Lutheranism, for all its key insights about justification, did not enact as significant a soteriological break from views of salvation centered upon holding to the orthodox faith as even its Roman Catholic interlocutors might have supposed. And this, too, paved the way for Luther's own ongoing contention that the introduction of significant theological diversity was the work not of the faithful, but of the devil.
- 4). We need to take seriously the existential and theological violence wrought by church division in the Reformation. Due to the interpretive ambiguity of right faith noted above, the question of which church

could assure the anxious conscience that its teachings were sufficiently orthodox to comprise saving faith was thrown into confusion by the split among Western churches. One of the cruelest aspects of this split was this: at no point during the Reformation was the notion challenged that salvation depends upon being in communion with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The question was now, where is this church? In the visible, concrete Roman church—or in the seemingly invisible, purer Reformation church? For a given peasant not trained in the subtleties of debates around ecclesiology, sacramentology, hermeneutics, and so on, the Reformation was experienced largely as existential chaos (that soon became material chaos through iconoclasm, uprisings, and eventual war). While Luther was an apocalyptic thinker in that he expected the world to end relatively soon in or after his time, he was also easily able to attribute this turmoil to demonic influence as well.

For all of these reasons, Luther had at hand a ready demonology to which the theological divisions that he saw as impacting salvation could be indexed. While we should not paint Luther as a modern-day fundamentalist brooking no matters of dissent and disagreement in the faith, when it came to the encounters with true theological otherness—Jews, Zwinglians, the papacy, etc.—his tendency to demonize has deep theological roots.

## Moving Forward

Can the salutary aspects of Luther's theology and polemics against what he took to be toxic understandings of the faith be redeemed from what we must surely regard as both a relational and theological failing on his part? As global Lutheranism continues to expand in contexts that, like Luther's, are thickly "enspirited," and as Western epistemologies meet genuine (and genuinely Lutheran) otherness in the form of African, Latin American, and Asian theological configurations, this question is particularly vital. If demons are making a comeback in Lutheran theology, then so too could demonization.

To be sure, a return to demonology could in principle have the opposite effect. As Richard Beck has pointed out in his recent book *Reviving Old Scratch*,<sup>2</sup> while a robust belief in Satan can cause thinkers like Luther to demonize opponents, theoretically it could also remind us that demons are demons and people are not—indeed, we are all in sway to demons however we conceptualize them ontologically. A strong demonology could breed compassion and communication among those of us in the sway to forces both of our own making and beyond our control.

And a key ongoing theological task—one that can only be pursued within the ecumenical contexts with which God has gifted us in recent years—is to continue to live in the tension between "the faith that believes" and "the faith that is believed" as regards the trust that Luther and the other reformers saw as having such salvific import. To go more deeply into the radicality of salvation as God's gift can only, in my estimation, push Lutheran theology in the direction of treasuring theological orthodoxy for its wisdom but also treating it as the contested and diverse field that it has always been, so that fierce trust in God's saving actions opens us up to seeing beauty in places where our own theological categories must be stretched to find it.

---

## Notes

1. <sup>△</sup>Cf. especially Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after*

Christendom (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) and Edwards, Luther's Last Battles (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

2. [^](#)Beck, Reviving Old Scratch: Demons and the Devil for Doubters (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).
-

## More Than Just Table Talk

by Francisco Herrera

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/just-table-talk/>

When Frank Senn asked me to write an essay on what I appreciate/don't appreciate about Luther I practically jumped at the chance. Why? Because writing out my answer gave me the chance to share one of my most perplexing observations of Lutherans. For what confuses me about Lutherans is not so much what they appreciate or don't appreciate about Luther, *but rather how little of Luther's bold witness (which they claim to appreciate) actually influences their lives and ministries.*

For Lutherans often talk about their affection for Luther's earthiness, his bluntness – and they're right. In *Table Talk* (the focus of much of this essay) he has doozies, like calling St. Jerome "leprous" because he "believed that breaking wind was a sin."<sup>1</sup> Though I haven't been able to find it this time around, there's one conversation in which Luther refers to the sad state of a self-castrated monk, who now, without his *pudenda* to play with, had no outlet at all for his carnal frustrations. Luther wryly commented, then, that his sad state proved that it was "better to have two of those things than none of them." And as for drinking, he also once said that if God can pardon him after having "crucified him for about twenty years [presiding over communion]" he can also approve of Luther "occasionally taking a drink in his honor... no matter how the world may wish to interpret it."<sup>2</sup> And of course who could ever forget that time that Luther said that he chases the devil away "with a fart?"<sup>3</sup>

However, standard Lutheran tittering about these stories gives me the impression that for all of its power and impact, many see Luther's forthrightness mostly as a charming, if sometimes questionable, quirk. But this just is far from the truth.

For instance, take a look at this rather insightful comment he makes about sex and respectability:

*[The papists teach that] the Act of concupiscence [sex] is illicit; that the marital act is an act of concupiscence; therefore [marriage is illicit]. I reply to the minor premise: The marital act is not an act of concupiscence. Rather, the act that attracts sex to sex is a divine ordinance. Even if by itself the act is impure on account of original sin, in itself it's still pure and licit.*<sup>4</sup>

So here not only is Luther speaking pretty boldly against any kind of self-righteousness or prudishness around sex, he even goes so far as to say that sex itself is a "divine ordinance... pure and licit," even if the impulse for sex is corrupted by sin. Still more shocking, and in one of his most respected treatises – *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, no less – Luther states that if a woman is married to a man who does not satisfy her sexually, that "divine law" stipulates that "the man ought to concede her right [to marital exclusivity] and give her up to somebody else" who isn't dedicated to his wife only "in outward appearance."<sup>5</sup> And who could forget Luther's approval of Phillip Landgrave of Hesse's marriage to two women – as he shared the Hebrew Bible's preference for bigamy over divorce – despite the fact that such offenses were technically illegal, even worthy of death?<sup>6</sup>

So now tell me, what percentage of contemporary Lutheran leaders do you think are willing to make such bold statements and such bold acts around sex, sexuality, and relationships?

Similarly, remember that earlier quote about chasing away the Devil “with a fart?” Well, it actually comes from an extended reflection – one of many in *Table Talk* – where Luther shares his thoughts on dealing with depression. If you feel like this, you “ought to be very careful not to be alone, for God created the fellowship of the church and commanded brotherliness” as a way to help you.<sup>7</sup> In a similar passage he shares that God personally “hate[s]” depression because “it is destructive to the body,” and that when we feel the darkness winning, to remind ourselves that God’s love and support is constant and secure.<sup>8</sup> Even on such a controversial topic as suicide, Luther defied common convention, saying that people who took such drastic measures to escape suffering were not damned, but rather “overcome by the power of the devil... like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber,” and should not be shamed in death.<sup>9</sup> Luther’s entire oeuvre is littered with such painfully frank discussions of life’s most intractable quandaries, and does so with an honesty and intensity that would make many, if not most, Lutherans squirm with discomfort and confusion.

And there-in lies my own observation and critique of many Lutherans on this matter.

Because when you really start to read him you soon see that his brusque assessment and diagnosis of the world's ills is not some playful and innocuous protest of churchly stuffiness – as it is often presented. ***Rather, his willingness to baldly defy convention through unvarnished observation and decisive action is central to his Christian being and praxis - not only as a theologian, but also as a pastor and a human being.*** And his predilection to disrupt how we do church wasn't just because he liked to rile feathers, but rather because ***he understood that this disruption was necessary in order to dispel the self-delusion and prudery that so often undermines the work of the Gospel and saps the vitality of the Church.***

Like my title suggests, his ‘table talk’ didn’t stay just table talk – but found its way into church reform and revitalization that is as remarkable now as it was back in the early 16th century.

These thoughts have been weighing especially heavy on me these days as I travel the country in my capacity as the Convener of #decolonizeLutheranism – a group of insurgent Lutherans dedicated to making our churches places of genuine welcome and understanding. And just as Luther hesitated to violently rattle the then-pillars of church and community, I wonder what would happen if today’s church leadership would use similarly reliable boldness when confronting today’s problems; pushing their communities to accept the people of color in their neighborhoods and in their midst; embracing parishioners with disabilities as having a unique voice, not as a cause for charity; screaming bloody murder that women make up less than 19% of all senior pastors and less than 15% of all bishops despite being 35% of those ordained to word and sacrament in our church – and this after more than 40 years of having women ordained in Lutheran congregations across the United States.

See where I’m going with this?

For Luther, flawed-but-filled with the power of God, forever testified to what God’s love had done for and to him, and that love gave him the persistence necessary to incite the church to change – dynamically, impatiently, scandalously, and passionately. ***We do Lutheranism a horrible dis-service if we reduce***

***Brother Martin's fire for social iconoclasm and religious reform to a funny anecdote or a fart joke, as opposed to seeing it as it truly is – a challenge and inspiration for how we live our call to ministry, and how the church is always at its best when these fires of death and rebirth burn ever hot.*** Only then may genuine reform and renewal happen in our communities. Only then will all of the ubiquitous talk of the 500 year anniversary of the Reformation in the US have more than self-congratulatory meaning – not when we use it as an facile excuse to make Lena and Ole jokes and reminisce about Norwegian sweaters and Luther League, but as a reminder that no matter how glorious the changes have been, there is still so much work to do.

And that the love of God will be there with us every step of the way!

What's more, it's fair to say that if Luther put his full faith and power into being a witness for Grace – and subsequently changed the world – surely God will do the same through us when we “go and do likewise” where *we* live (Luke 10:37). Luther lived big, laughed big, and messed-up big too (anti-Semitism and the Peasant War, anyone?), but by doing so released the power of God among hundreds of thousands throughout Europe, and then later millions throughout the world. Surely God will do the same for us, too?

This is most *certainly* true!

---

## Notes

1. <sup>^</sup>Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, (Fortress Press and Concordia: Minneapolis, MN. 1957), 16.
2. <sup>^</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.
3. <sup>^</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
4. <sup>^</sup>Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 1955. 324.
5. <sup>^</sup>Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1970), 234.
6. <sup>^</sup>Eric Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism – Second Edition*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 75.
7. <sup>^</sup> *Ibid.*
8. <sup>^</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
9. <sup>^</sup>*Table Talk*. 29.

## “Are you ignorant of what it means to be ignorant?”: Luther’s Insults

by Tyler Rasmussen

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/ignorant-means-ignorant-luthers-insults/>

“Are you ignorant of what it means to be ignorant?” (LW 33:254)

That’s my favorite Lutheran insult. I’ve used it often. It’s wonderful when people look at me after I say that to them and go, “Huh?”

\*\*\*

It all began in Kurt Hendel’s “Theology of Martin Luther” class. Dr. Hendel’s final project had two requirements: it should be about Luther and it should be creatively you. One day during break between classes, I found myself on a website called “The Shakespearean Insulter”. A classmate looked over my shoulder and said, “Luther’s insults are better. You should make one for Luther”. That’s how it all started.

At first, the project was simple: search for insults to make reading Luther interesting. He’s spectacular at times, and other times he’s theologically dense, as all theologians are from time to time. And you really had to read Luther to find his better insults; they didn’t just pop off the page. So I read Luther and highlighted every insult I found. Of course, that means someday someone’s going to inherit the volumes of Luther’s Works that I own, and they’re going to find every insult throughout the books highlighted. Nothing else; just the insults. Imagine opening to “The Bondage of the Will” and the only thing highlighted is: “You are dumber than Seriphian frogs and fishes” (LW 33:77).

After collecting enough insults, I made the website. That was easy. Then came beta trial time. I emailed 3 friends – just 3 – and said, “Made something new; looking for feedback. Tell me what you think.” No one replied to my email. Instead, they shared it. Within 24 hours, I was so popular that I’d received an email from Concordia Publishing House about not having proper citations (I don’t know how they found me... the only personal information on the site was my name). I wasn’t actually ready to launch, but the site had gone viral already.

I had thousands of hits that first day. Within a few weeks, the site had been cited on numerous websites, some in love with it and some using it to show how backwards Luther and all of Christianity is. Soon pastors had tweeted it, renowned historians had quoted it, reputable newspapers had articles on it, and someone even made mugs out of it. I was just having fun with a final project, and suddenly this little site was popping up everywhere.

\*\*\*

I imagine Luther as a man who knew that sometimes God has to kick the mule in order to get it to turn, to

use one of Luther's more famous images of the bound will, where humanity is ridden by God like an ass (LW 33:65-6). It's apparent Luther was kicked many times by God before he started walking the direction God wanted. "How are we going to turn Luther into a monk? Kick him with a lightning storm. Then that stubborn donkey is sure to move!" And Luther used the same method from time to time in the form of insults when he thought someone was going the wrong direction. Whenever he came across anything he found to be theologically erroneous and ruinous of the faith, he wasn't afraid to kick them in order to get them to turn.

To put it more theologically, Luther knew that God, who is good, cannot act in an evil way; and yet uses evil as a tool (LW 33:176-8). This use of evil for good is summed up in Luther's concept of God's alien work of judgment; wrath for the sake of grace (LW 16:233-4). It's not God's proper method, but from time to time God has used wrath as a tool for grace. Luther did the same with insults. Not that you're going to find a writing by Luther that's pure insults; you won't even find one that's 25% insults. It's not his main tool; it's an alien work. Luther is mostly arguing and persuading and proving his points. But he's not afraid to rip into someone to make it clear how atrociously heretical they're being at the moment, and the more heretical you're being, the more he's going to diss them out. You want to SELL grace!? Well, I think "you are the most insane heretics and ingrafters of heretical perversity" I've ever met! (LW 31:88). "What you say is a blasphemy that has made you worthy of a thousand deaths" (LW 31:154).

Maybe our theological hearts can't make sense of such insults in light of Jesus' words, "anyone who calls another an idiot shall be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22). But Luther always did prefer to "sin boldly, but trust the Lord thy God all the more boldly." Besides, he didn't just reserve this tool for his enemies. You could be his best friend, but if you're straying from the path, be prepared for Luther to conjure up a visceral image of your heresy.

The longest insult I have found to date wasn't aimed at some theologian or the Roman Catholic Church of the 1500s or anything like that. It was in a sermon on keeping kids in school. A sermon! That thing pastors do for the sheep in their care. But Luther felt free to insult his own flock if that's what it took to get them to turn and go the right direction. Sometimes you've got to kick the mule. And what an insult! Here's a sample of the full thing: You know how much of "an accursed, ungrateful wretch" you are for not keeping your kids in school? You who "have everything, all of it free of charge", are causing the kingdom of God to go to ruin. You're causing pestilence and syphilis to spread like wildfire, tyrants to rise up and destroy us, and God to "pelt and shower us with nothing but devils [and] let brimstone and hell-fire rain down from heaven and inundate us one and all in the abyss of hell, like Sodom and Gomorrah" (LW 46:254). Now are you going to get your kids back in school or not?

In terms of rhetoric, it's an effective tool that maybe ought to come back into our arsenal in one form or another. Or as many people say to me today in relation to raising youth: Punishment is never a first resort nor is it the ultimate goal, but if we can't or aren't willing to punish our kids when they do wrong, they'll never learn. Or, as the dear Dr. Hendel once said to a class of future pastors: "You're being given the office of the keys, dear people, to bind and to loose, the keys to heaven and hell, and you better be willing to use both of them." The alien works of God ought to be the alien works of humans as well, but the Law and its results have their place in the realm of calling people to the Gospel.

\*\*\*

I'm not sure what Luther would think of my site if he were alive today. Maybe he used such rhetoric in his day-to-day fully-sinner moments, but from what remains in his works, what I see are insults that are hyper-contextual. They were a rhetorical tool, not a quotable-quote. But Luther also knew that once the printers got ahold of his works, they weren't his anymore. I'd imagine, at least during those table talks, he'd pull up the site for a laugh. I can imagine him and his friends having a merry round throwing Luther insult after insult at each other, knowing that when people can laugh with each other we've reach one of the points at which humor is holy.

It's with that image in mind that I created this site. So it greatly bothers me when people use this site to show that Luther was a vindictive ass (donkey) and that all of Christianity is backwards. Because this site isn't that at all. At its best, this site lets me tap into Luther's underappreciated rhetoric and use it to take the Devil and all the works of Evil, throw some good insulting feces in their face, and laugh at the fact that Satan is an "ass to cap all asses" (LW 41:212) whose best words come out of the mouth "from which the farts come" (LW 41:280). That's truly holy Lutheran humor.

After five years, I'm still getting about 200 visitors daily. Occasionally I find it mentioned in articles, most recently this March in the magazine *First Things* in an article called "Pope Francis as Historian" by Bronwen McShea (who again simplifies these insults to creative name-calling and doesn't recognize them for the tool they are). Every few months I get a spike of 1000 to 5000 hits in a day. Once in a while, so much more than that. My favorite moment was when Reddit crashed my site. My web host only allows 75,000 database queries in an hour. Suddenly friends are messaging me that my site's down. I was able to find a work around rather quickly and get it back up, but 75,000 visits in an hour! It ain't as good as the Reformer himself by any means, but if the way you get into Martin Luther is by reading the salty parts of his Twitter feed, well – it's a start to some of the best theology in history.

\*Insults quoted from *Luther's Works*, copyright © 1957, Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press.

Rev. Tyler Rasmussen, the [Lutheran Insulter](http://ergofabulous.org/luther) website ([ergofabulous.org/luther](http://ergofabulous.org/luther))

---

## An Appreciation of Luther's Pastoral Writings

by Anna Marie Johnson

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/appreciation-luthers-pastoral-writings/>

Martin Luther became a historical figure for a set of academic theses, but most of his German contemporaries knew him for his pastoral writings. By the time he was excommunicated in 1520 he had already written 25 pastoral writings, most of them in German. According to historian Mark Edwards, his German pastoral writings were printed and sold much more often in the sixteenth century than the texts we often read today.

I find his pastoral works captivating because they show a different side of Luther, tender and forceful all at once. In his pastoral writings, Luther is clear about the reason for his protest: to protect vulnerable souls from the demands of late medieval piety.

He worried that the practices of late medieval Christianity—pilgrimages, processions, set prayers, penance, and, yes, indulgences—taught Christians that God's favor could be earned and that good fortune could be negotiated with God. He worried that prescribing these devotions put Christians on the path to despair since they would always wonder if they had done enough. He also worried that all these practices took time, attention and resources away from loving one's neighbor.

His pastoral writings show that the primary reason for his protest was pastoral; he thought the papacy was leading souls astray, not shepherding them. This was his initial and abiding objection to papal authority. Only when church officials asked him to defend traditional arguments on papal authority did he begin to explore and question those arguments.

Luther is known for his lively, pithy prose and his use of everyday German to make his point. This flair is on full display in his pastoral writings. For example, when encouraging readers to use shorter prayers, he wrote, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer. The more words, the worse the prayer. Few words and richness of meaning is Christian. Many words and lack of meaning is pagan."

He was critical of the use of prayer books and prayer beads because he thought they allowed one to go through the motions of prayer even while the mind wandered and the heart was insincere. For Luther, true prayer is defined by its sincerity; it is "the lifting up of the mind and the heart to God."

Luther saw late medieval modes of prayer as attempts to gain favor with God and to avoid God's punishment. Luther cautioned that self-imposed works are not virtuous because they are a misguided attempt to redeem ourselves from sin. (Rejoice, all ye who dislike the practice of giving things up for Lent!)

In place of obviously pious works, Luther recommended good works that go unseen. In every devotional act, he saw a danger of insincerity, either out of boredom or out of a desire to look good in front of others. No work, however pious it appears, is free of this danger. This is one reason why Luther liked to recommend less visible works: if they are invisible and unpleasant, then they can only be done in sincere

faith.

Instead of going on pilgrimages and the like, Luther insisted that we follow the Ten Commandments and serve others, however unglamorous. His explications of the Ten Commandments lay out a very demanding ideal of how to love neighbors—one that involves protecting their rights, their reputation, and their material needs. Again and again Luther pointed to these acts as truly Christian works. He condemned those who say they want to do good works, yet always chose more showy devotional acts over the very routine (and often unnoticed) acts of love toward the neighbor.

Luther's pastoral works paint the life of faith in vivid, rich colors. In his vision, we can live out of deep conviction and commitment rather than narrow self-interest. We are animated by love and joy, not fear and shame. We serve others in the ways that help them most, not the ways that make us look good. We live without fear because we can trust God's good promises.

As Luther put it in *The Freedom of a Christian*, "Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death and hell, and it serves, ministers to and benefits all people."

---

## Indulge Me: About the Lollards

by Benjamin Dueholm

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/indulge-me-about-the-lollards/>

Please indulge me as I share my own odd Reformation-era enthusiasm: the Lollards. Originating in the work of priest and Oxford scholar John Wycliffe (d. 1384), Lollardy flourished as a movement for church and civil reform from the 1370s and the Peasants' Revolt. After rebellions led or inspired by Lollards in 1414 and 1431 were suppressed, the movement scattered, but it never disappeared. Its influence was evident in the reforms of Jan Hus in Bohemia, Luther in Germany, all the way to the English Puritans.

In theology, Wycliffe and his followers blazed the trail for ideas that would go further in the 16th century, as well as some that would end up in eccentric dead ends. They taught that the sacrament was "very Goddis body" and yet bread at the same time; they criticized the temporal power and wealth of prelates; they criticized the use of pilgrimages, images, and prayers to saints. Rightly or wrongly, Lollard views of church and state were considered dangerous to public order, as well as heterodox in theology. Specific Lollard views were condemned by the church in the 1370s and 1380s. Suppression by the civil authorities followed as Lollard preaching continued and was intermingled with civil unrest.

This suppression was effective enough to limit the number of original Lollard texts available today. But it was far from total. Apart from their specific theological claims, the Lollards changed the shape of Christianity in England by translating the Bible partially into English and stressing vernacular preaching. Archbishop Arundel forbade the possession of any Bibles by Wycliffe or later translators in 1407, as well as English tracts.

And it is in this surviving vernacular literature that we can sense the real import of the Lollard movement. Wycliffe's translations, unlike later efforts, did not return to Greek or Hebrew, but rendered the Vulgate in homely, vivid English. Of the Prodigal Son: "And aftir that that he hadde endid alle thingis, a strong hungur was maad in that cuntre, and he bigan to haue nede." The tradition of editing and translating that would swell majestically through Tyndale to the Authorized Version owes little to Wycliffe except his belief that English was a suitable language for Scripture and theology (or politics!) at all. As one scholar of the Lollards says, it is not their literary merit, but this attempt to create a vernacular public discourse that was "their greatest achievement." For decades, simply to write in English--then a language of commoners, not the clerical elite or the Norman rulers--was nearly to be suspected of heresy or sedition.

I appreciate both the insight and the eccentricity of the Lollards. Even more, I admire their brave commitment to preach and teach directly to a new public in a language whose rapid evolution they would help to advance and shape. An early critic lamented that the language of angels (i.e., Latin) was being supplanted by the language of Englishmen. Leaving aside the status of Latin, he was not wrong. From those few radical seeds, a whole vernacular theology and literature has grown.

## Indulge Me: Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522), Christian Humanist and Hebrew Scholar

by Theodor Dunkelgrün

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/indulge-johann-reuchlin-1455-1522-christian-humanist-hebrew-scholar/>

From the fourteenth century onwards, the Italian proponents of the movement we have come to call Renaissance Humanism boldly sought to uncover the textual, artistic, and material remains of antiquity: to renew the use of the Latin language by imitating the elegance of ancient Roman rhetoric; to explore the ancient sources of wisdom; and thereby to renew Christian life and learning. The invention of the printing press in the 1450's was critical to the spread of Humanist learning. So, too, was the arrival of Byzantine Greek and Iberian Jewish refugees, following the catastrophes of the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, at the very time when Humanists were turning to the Greek and Hebrew source texts of Christianity.

Like his contemporary, Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466-1536), the German jurist Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) was a pioneering figure of Renaissance Humanism, and both men served as vital links in the transmission across the Alps of Humanist ideals and practices. From the early sixteenth century onwards, colleges and universities from Alcalá de Henares in Spain to Krakow in Poland and from Leuven in the Low Countries to Luther's Erfurt and Wittenberg formally incorporated Greek and Hebrew alongside Latin into their curricula. (It was Reuchlin who hellenized, in typical Humanist fashion, his great-nephew and student Philipp Schwarzzerd's name to *Melanchthon*, just as the young Augustinian Martin Luder changed his name to *Luther* after the Greek word for freedom, *eleutheria*). Where Erasmus was engrossed in studying the Scriptures in Greek, Reuchlin also devoted himself to Hebrew. If both men looked to St Jerome as the ideal Christian scholar, Erasmus was happy to admit that it was Reuchlin who truly possessed the 'trilingual erudition' that had enabled the Church Father, a thousand years earlier, to produce his epochal Latin translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek.

While on diplomatic missions to Italy, Reuchlin visited the court of Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence. There he met such leading figures of the Italian Renaissance as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a devotee of esoteric Jewish traditions known as Kabbalah, which he believed contained hidden evidence for the truth of Christianity. Reuchlin would go on to dedicate much of his scholarly life to Christian readings of Kabbalistic literature. He sought out Jewish teachers to study Hebrew in earnest—among them Jacob Jechiel Loans, a physician to the Holy Roman Emperor—and built a collection of Hebrew manuscripts. By the early sixteenth century, Reuchlin was probably the most accomplished Christian Hebrew scholar outside Italy. His groundbreaking *Rudiments of Hebrew* (1506), a Latin Hebrew grammar and dictionary, was one of the most important tools by which Christian scholars of the time acquired the linguistic skills necessary to read the Old Testament in its original language.

Humanistic scholarship, however, had unforeseen consequences. Knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew sources of the texts of Sacred Scripture could be a very dangerous thing, as Erasmus discovered when his own new Latin translation of the New Testament from the Greek (1516) departed from the Latin Vulgate in ways that directly challenged Church doctrine. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the Church's attitude

towards Jews and Judaism was implicated too. Trusting the Hebrew Biblical text meant trusting the Jewish tradition through which it had been transmitted throughout the Christian era and engaging with the library of Rabbinic exegesis that explained it.

Soon after he published his *Rudiments of Hebrew*, Reuchlin became caught up in what would become known as the “Battle of the Books,” or the Reuchlin Affair. The Inquisitor Jacob van Hoogstraaten, the Flemish prior of the Cologne Dominicans, together with a Jewish convert to Christianity, Johannes Pfefferkorn, sought to outlaw, confiscate, and destroy all post-Biblical Jewish books throughout Christendom. Reuchlin drew upon his legal, theological, and Hebrew expertise to argue against the persecution both of Jews and their books and he became their chief defendant. Drawing upon Augustine and Aquinas, Reuchlin argued “the Jews are our book-bearers, our copyists and librarians, who safeguard those books from which we take the witness of our faith.” Hebrew learning, the Hebrew Bible, and its custodians and transmitters, the Jews themselves, were indispensable to Christianity. In turn, Reuchlin’s champions mocked his detractors in a collection titled *The Letters of Obscure Men*, which Anthony Grafton has called the first work of academic satire. In 1520, against the backdrop of nascent attempts to resist Luther’s work, the Pope condemned Reuchlin, but by that time Humanist ideals and Hebrew studies had taken root across Europe.

While he never joined Luther’s movement, historians have long seen Reuchlin as a harbinger of the Protestant Reformation, the beginnings of which coincide with the Reuchlin Affair. Luther himself learned Hebrew from Reuchlin’s *Rudiments*. Further, long before the noxious anti-Judaism of his later years, Luther shared Reuchlin’s arguments in favor of the toleration of Jews. Like Luther, many of Reuchlin’s students and adherents became early Reformers. And the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew learning that Christian Humanists championed became prerequisites for the kind of direct, unmediated access to sacred Scripture that would be a pillar of Protestantism.

Further Reading:

David H. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books* (2011)

Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther’s Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism* (2017)

---

## Indulge Me: King Johan III

by Frank C. Senn

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/indulge-king-johan-iii/>

Indulge me. One of my Reformation heroes is a Swedish King, Johan III (1537-92; reigned 1568-92). Why? Because of his liturgical interests. He authored, with the help of his secretary Petrus Fecht (a student of Melancthon's), a Liturgy that included offertory prayers and a full Eucharistic prayer, elements long considered not acceptable in a Lutheran liturgy. Lutherans were debating these things in the mid-1970s as the Inter-Lutheran Commission of Worship was doing the work that would lead to *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978). I was a doctoral student in liturgical studies at the University of Notre Dame and after discovering this king's liturgy in the Notre Dame library I knew I needed to find out more about it. Who was this king? Where was Sweden theologically at the time of his reign in its journey into Lutheranism? Could this liturgy have a place among Lutheran liturgical orders?

Johan was the second son of King Gustaf I Vasa (reigned 1523-60), who had won a war of independence from Denmark and broken ties with the papacy. Johan wasn't expected to succeed his father to the throne. That honor went to his older brother Erik XIV (reigned 1560-68). Erik was a fair-haired boy who dispatched his second brother Johan to England to try to win for Erik the hand of the Protestant Elizabeth I (who had just succeeded her sister, the Catholic Mary Tudor). Johan was a learned humanist who seemed to have an interest in patristics and liturgy. He was present in England when the *Book of Common Prayer* was restored by a Parliamentary Act of Uniformity. Of course, Elizabeth rejected every hand offered to her with a marriage proposal, including Erik's.

Perhaps to keep Johan out of his older brother's way, Gustav Vasa had made him Duke of Finland. Once Erik came to the throne Johan began carving out a sphere of influence on the eastern side of the Baltic, including marrying Katarina Jagellonica, the sister of King Sigismund II Augustus of Poland. On a visit to Stockholm, Erik apprehended Johan and Katarina and had them incarcerated in the Gripsholm Castle. Erik was showing signs of dangerous paranoia and insanity, so the Swedish nobility deposed him and swapped the royal brothers. Erik was made a "guest" in the Gripsholm (it's believed that he was later poisoned, although by who remains a detective story) and Johan was placed on the throne.

In terms of geopolitics, Johan had nearly turned the Baltic into a Swedish lake long before his grandnephew Gustaf II Adolf came to the throne. He had bastions in Livonia (modern Estonia and Latvia), and kept the Russians in check. His son Sigismund was the heir apparent to the Polish throne. But the deal was that he had to be raised as a Roman Catholic. Queen Katarina was also a Catholic and had Catholic chaplains at the court. Her father was the fabulously rich Bona Sforza, but her inheritance was frozen in Naples. Johan dispatched emissaries to Rome to enlist the pope's intervention in releasing the funds. Did he think that pursuing a more "high church" direction in the autonomous Church of Sweden (which was not yet officially Lutheran)—and allowing secret Jesuits like Laurentius Norvegus to teach in the Royal Theological College Johan set up in Stockholm to counter the gnesio-Lutheran influence of the theological faculty at Uppsala—would serve his cause? Sometimes it's difficult to sort out our own commitments from what seems politically useful.

The fact is that Johan III was a disciple of the mediating theologian Joris Cassander and believed that the reconciliation between Rome and Wittenberg might be achieved by returning to the “consensus of the first five centuries” (*consensus quinquasaecularis*), a concept later popularized by Lutheran theologian Georg Callixtus. He authorized the promulgation of the Church Order of Archbishop Laurentius Petri in 1571, which Erik would not authorize because of his Calvinist leanings. The old archbishop died in 1573. A year later, Johan laid before the synod of the Church ten articles concerned with showing greater reverence in the conduct of church services. One might say that Johan was embarked on a course of “reforming the reform.” In 1575, Johan got the synod to ratify a new church order (*Nova ordinantia ecclesiastica*) that claimed to build on the Church Order of Archbishop Petri but was in fact a weighty piece of theological argumentation drawing on the writings of the church fathers. This was followed in 1576 by the Latin-Swedish *Liturgia svecanae ecclesiae catholicae et orthodoxae conformis* (Liturgy of the Swedish Church Conforming to the Catholic and Orthodox Tradition). It was accepted by the Estates (Riksdag) in 1577, but only barely by the clergy estate. The theological faculty at Uppsala University damned the Liturgy, and Johan told them to either accept the liturgy or go to Germany.<sup>1</sup>

The pope began to see some possibility of reclaiming Sweden to the Roman Church and dispatched the former Jesuit Secretary-General Cardinal Antonio Possevino to negotiate with King Johan. Johan laid down some conditions which Possevino took back to Rome. In the meantime, the king was told he could listen to Lutheran sermons if he had to but he was not to receive communion at Lutheran altars. Possevino returned in 1579 with bad news. The Roman Curia would not accept Johan’s three minimal conditions: communion in both kinds for the laity, the mass in Swedish, and the marriage of priests. They would only consider Johan’s request that the tomb of his father, Gustaf Vasa, in Uppsala Cathedral not be violated. They also insisted that Johan should not attend Lutheran worship—which was, of course, the liturgy he had designed from ancient, medieval, and Reformation sources.

For Johan, this was the last blow. He told Possevino that the deal was off. Possevino then overplayed his hand by blowing the whistle on the secret Jesuit teachers in Stockholm. A riot broke out and Johan sent Possevino and the Jesuits packing. He also returned to receiving communion at Lutheran altars. Pope Gregory XIII responded by saying he would reconsider Johan’s three minimal conditions if France and Spain would go along with them. But it was too little too late.

The so-called Red Book Liturgy (*Den röde Boken*), so-called because of the color of its binding, continued to be used in the Church of Sweden. Johan even sent a copy of it, translated into Greek, to Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople, although nothing came of this initiative. 1583 was the high point of Johan’s church policy when newly-elected bishops agreed to wear cope and mitre, carry the crozier, and submit to anointing at their consecration. Unfortunately, it was also the year when his beloved Queen Katarina died. Their son Sigismund III Vasa was secure on the throne of Poland and destined to become King of Sweden as well upon Johan’s death.

Johan III married a Swedish Lutheran girl and spent the rest of his reign in relative peace and good will among the people, except for the anti-liturgists who continued to disavow this liturgy which they considered part of a Jesuit plot. But although a few anti-liturgists lost their livings, no one in Sweden lost their lives over liturgical or theological issues.

The Liturgy did not survive Johan III’s reign. In anticipation of the Catholic King Sigismund coming to claim his throne and bringing the forces of the counter-Reformation with him, a synod of the national

Church of Sweden was convened in Uppsala in 1593 that adopted the Augsburg Confession and restored the Church Order of Archbishop Lars. What happened next when Sigismund arrived with Polish troops is another exciting story.

All this and much more is what I got into when I discovered a strange Liturgy in the stacks of the Notre Dame library. And do you know what? Lutherans in Sweden wouldn't think the Liturgy of King Johan III is so strange today. And the pope himself went to Sweden and signed an agreement to work toward communion between Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches. I think Johan III would have approved. Liturgically and ecumenically he was four centuries ahead of his time.

---

## Notes

1. <sup>^</sup>For a full analysis of this liturgy, see my book *Christian Liturgy—Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 427-47.
-

## Indulge Me: The Book of Common Prayer

by Pamela Dolan

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/indulge-book-common-prayer/>

The first time I bought a copy for myself, I tucked it away at once, as if it were illegal, or a bit naughty. It didn't look like much on the outside—a black cover, with a simple gold cross embossed on the front. I wasn't really sure what I was supposed to do with it, but just holding it made my heart race and my palms sweat. I headed home from the bookstore, queasy with the knowledge that a line had been crossed.

I was a Roman Catholic lay person, and I had just purchased my first Book of Common Prayer.

Little did I know how much my personal journey mirrored the trajectory of the English Reformation. The publication of the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 was arguably of more significance for the English church than even the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. In those first decades of tumultuous change after the initial break with Rome, the content of the Prayer Book was a matter of the utmost import for the nation; it contained the only authorized forms of worship, so to deviate from its dictates was to rebel against both church and state.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of the Book of Common Prayer in the history of Christianity in England. Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, who was the primary author and editor of the book and its greatest champion, literally gave his life to the cause. In 1556 he was pulled from the pulpit and burned at the stake because he refused to return to the Catholicism required of him by Queen Mary, which would have meant rejecting the doctrinal changes embodied in the Prayer Book.

Episcopalians in the United States use a Book of Common Prayer that has its own history and yet retains much of the content and structure of Cranmer's masterpiece. We still call the 1549 book "the first Prayer Book," which might explain why we can keep a straight face while calling our current BCP "new"—it was adopted officially in 1979! Episcopal priests can face disciplinary action for violating Prayer Book rubrics. Touchingly, every Sunday Eucharist includes the Collect for Purity, modernized only slightly from Cranmer's own words. Most Episcopalians can rattle it off by heart: "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid..."

Many Episcopal churches today use service bulletins that replicate the words of the liturgy in a handy, compact, easy-to-follow format. It is supposed to be friendly to newcomers, and I suppose it is. But those books lingering in the pew racks contain so much more than just an order of worship to be followed on any given Sunday. There are daily offices that can be led by laity or even said at home, services from baptism to burial (including a truly beautiful litany to be prayed at the time of death), and even a rite of reconciliation. There are prayers for all occasions and a calendar of saints, not to mention the entire Psalter.

That first day with my own first Prayer Book, I took it home to my bedroom and opened it in solitude. Rummaging hungrily through its contents, I found a line that has stayed with me. It referred to the Catechism—perhaps the most underutilized section of the BCP—as a "brief summary of the Church's

teaching for an inquiring stranger who picks up a Prayer Book.”

It felt like someone from ages past was reaching out to me, a frustrated, struggling, church-hurt woman looking for a place to call home. I was that inquiring stranger. Reading through the Book of Common Prayer was a like a self-guided tutorial in understanding Episcopal theology. I could read all four Eucharistic Prayers to learn what they believed about that sacrament. I could infer a great deal about the hierarchical structure of the church and the limits of clerical authority. It wasn't a substitute for attending an Episcopal church, but it made the transition from one tradition to the other that much less daunting.

Since that day, my life has changed immeasurably; I became an Episcopalian, and then went through the discernment process and ultimately was ordained to the priesthood. I have held in my hands more copies of the BCP than I can count. The one I use every Sunday as I celebrate the Eucharist is slowly losing its luster; the edges of the leather cover are wearing smooth and the gold letters that spell out my name are beginning to fade. Inside, there is a smudge of wax from a recent Easter Vigil. The pages that contain the service of Holy Baptism are water-stained and puckered, marked as my own forever.

Today I cherish the Book of Common Prayer less for what I can learn from it privately and more for what it accomplishes corporately—it is a book of common prayer, after all. In large part its purpose is to shape a people, not just to form individuals. It amuses my children that I always include it when we play the “what five things would you want with you on a desert island” game. But it's true. It has become as much a part of me as any book ever has, and now when I do read or pray from it alone, I feel that I am part of something larger, a great cloud of witnesses perhaps, stretching back to Cranmer himself (with whom I happen to share a birthday).

## Unity and Reconciliation Challenges Chronic Homelessness in Lake County

by Dawn Mass Eck

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/unity-reconciliation-challenges-chronic-homelessness-lake-county/>



Messiah Lutheran Church's "A Path Home" model house

On January 1, 2016 Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauconda starting counting down to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. We calculated this date as 95 weeks prior to this commemoration (October 31, 2017), constructed a replica of the Castle Church Door in Wittenberg, Germany, and began nailing, one each week, not Luther's 95 thesis, but 95 acts of unity and reconciliation in the church. This idea was inspired by the [July 8, 2015 Christian Century article, "Repent and Celebrate."](#) which called God's people to prepare for this worldwide moment by focusing on Christian unity.

A few examples of our postings include, "The Augsburg Confession was an attempt to restore religious and political unity in the Holy Roman Empire at the time of the Reformation;" "German Theologian George Calixtus attempted to unite all of Christianity, but especially Lutherans and the Reformed communities; during the first half of the seventeenth century on the basis of what he perceived to be an agreement regarding essentials during the first five hundred years of the church's history. Thus it was called 'consensus quinquesaecularis;'" and "On the 23rd of August 1948, in Amsterdam, the World Council of Churches was officially founded. 147 churches from different confessions and many countries came together to commit themselves to the ecumenical movement."

Our postings include mergers, ecumenical agreements, harmony among church leaders, interdenominational worship, and local partnerships and activity. For example, "On Tuesday, June 14, 2016, the Wauconda Island Lake Ministerial Association (WILMA) met at the Transfiguration parsonage. Father Ron Gollatz prepared a meal for us and Pastor Ben Dueholm said a blessing upon Father Ron's

retirement.”

Yet of all our postings, posting 61, from the 2016 Metropolitan Chicago Synod Assembly, has had the greatest impact on our congregation, the ministerial association, and the county. “Augsburg Fortress CEO Beth Lewis encouraged congregations to work ecumenically on new projects and efforts in the year leading up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.” When I attended the 2016 synod assembly, I was so excited about Messiah’s “Castle Church” door and I have always felt blessed by our local partners in faith, the Wauconda and Island Lake churches, with our monthly support and fellowship, ecumenical worship services, and annual community picnic and bake-off. But in her workshop on observing Reformation 500, Augsburg Fortress CEO Lewis challenged attendees to work together in local ministerial associations on new and visible community efforts. “Try something new together” was her challenge.

Not long before, I had attended a North Conference meeting for our synod at Joy! Lutheran Church in Gurnee and heard about an initiative their congregation was supporting called “Housing First.” This effort of PADS Lake County provides housing first for a homeless individual and then that person is better positioned to benefit from other needed services. I learned that it would take 90 people giving \$10 a month to house one homeless person for a year. I knew immediately that Messiah could do this ourselves, but then remembered the words, “Try something new together.” We had already built a door at Messiah, why not construct a small house? So we built a makeshift house with 90 small hooks. Then we hung 90 keys rings that read “A Path Home” on one side and “Churches Together for Housing First” on the other, and affixed to these key rings was a business card with a giving link. With our strong partnership already in place, it was not difficult to build support among the WILMA congregations.

We kicked off the project at the Service of Prayer for Christian Unity just before Lent of this year. We started transporting the house from church to church in my colleague’s mini-van, and by the fourth week in Lent, we had provided housing for not just one, but two, homeless individuals. We are currently close to housing a third.

This is only the beginning. There are approximately one hundred and thirty people in Lake County meeting the federal definition of chronic homelessness. Currently one hundred are housed using federal dollars, two are housed by Joy! Lutheran in Gurnee and two by our ecumenical ministerial association. Two others nearly have the funds to receive housing. This leaves twenty-four chronically homeless people needing an address and a key. A steering committee has been formed, made up of participants from PADS, Joy! and WILMA. We have determined that it will take 2250 people in Lake County giving \$10 each month to eliminate chronic homelessness in our county. With marketing support, our plan is to pick a month sometime between October 2017 (the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation) and the spring of 2018 to raise the funds for the remainder of this housing. Unity and reconciliation, a door and a house, are blessing the vulnerable of Lake County.

“My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places” (Isaiah 32:18).

For more information about PADS Lake County and Housing First, visit <https://padslakecounty.giv.sh/>

## **Evanston Reformation 500 and Beyond: The Proof is the Beyond....A Joint Reflection**

by **Betty Landis and Joseph Tito**

<http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/evanston-reformation-500-beyond-proof-beyond-joint-reflection/>

It all started in late January 2016 when a dedicated Week of Prayer for Christian Unity volunteer from an ELCA Lutheran church whispered into the ear of a dedicated WPCU volunteer from a Roman Catholic church, “Did you hear about the Pope and the woman Bishop?” The Vatican and the LWF had recently released news of the joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation in Lund, Sweden on October 31, 2016.

From that first conversation, we have seen grow an amazing effort between faithful, curious, and energetic Evanston neighbors. Initially led by laity from St. Nicholas (Roman Catholic) and pastors and lay leaders from St. Paul’s, Grace, and Immanuel (ELCA), we now have had the leadership and involvement from all four Evanston Roman Catholic parish members and priests, all four ELCA Lutheran congregation leaders and pastors, and the campus ministries and leaders at Northwestern University. Just recently, we received offers of assistance from Roman Catholic and ELCA Lutheran professors at Garrett Evangelical Seminary. As we look back on our work together, the forming and strengthening of friendships in the present, and the excitement and hope for the future, it is hard not to acknowledge the gifts of the Spirit being made manifest in this journey together into the “Beyond”.

Here are just some examples: we already had formed trusting relationships via the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; one lay leader formerly worked for the Chicago Archdiocese’s Office for Interreligious and Ecumenical Affairs and was very experienced in the Roman Catholic call for ecumenical dialogues; Evanston has a long history of active interreligious/ ecumenical families; a Roman Catholic religious studies professor and her ELCA pastor spouse were willing to dedicate significant time to the leadership team; and, long ago, many of the Evanston ordained clergy began answering the call to ecumenism in ecclesial and personal ways.

Fr. Joseph Tito, who arrived at St. Nicholas in the Fall of 2016, said, “It helped to have the work already started while I was learning about St. Nicholas’ context - I have never seen such a variety of ecumenical and inter-religious families in one parish!” However, nothing can match the impact of the number of congregation/parish members who repeatedly have expressed deep and profound longing for unity. Each time we meet in dialogue (service, learning, or sharing), it brings great joy to remind one another of the many aspects of our Christian faith we share as well as to respectfully give voice to the lament that we have not fully reconciled in Christ – especially at the Eucharistic Table.

We used the Spring and Summer of 2016 to form a leadership team, become better educated together as a leadership team, and plan a year-long effort in “dialogues” (a Roman Catholic term for exploring ecumenical relationships). We separated our plans into categories: Dialogue of Life (live in open and neighborly spirit, sharing joys and sorrows, interests and problems); Dialogue of Theological Exchange (deepen our understanding of and respect for each respective traditions/teachings); Dialogue of Religious

Experience (seek to grow in Christian unity, sharing spiritual practices); and Dialogue of Action (collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people and care for Creation).

Lutherans can see that these categories align with our baptismal promises: living among God's faithful people; teaching the faith; proclaiming Christ and participating in the Word and sacraments; and caring for others and God's world as well as working for justice and peace. We asked each participating congregation to donate a few hundred dollars to help us execute our plans (duplication costs, stipends, refreshments, etc.). The majority of our costs have been covered by individual donations. We originally thought we could aim for a covenant celebration by Pentecost 2017, but quickly realized that that was too ambitious. Instead, after the synod and archdiocese plans were announced, we hoped an Evanston-based covenant celebration might be possible on or before Reformation Sunday 2017.

Our shared emphasis on serving others and caring for Creation provided an easy entry into our year. We invited all to participate in the September 2016 God's Work Our Hands Sunday and chose projects that benefited the communities near both Catholic and Lutheran congregations. After eating lunch and being commissioned together, we split up into groups of both Lutherans and Catholics to complete the projects together. We received a Thrivent Action Team grant to help defray the costs. The stories shared, the memories made, and the friendships begun were priceless. It was so well received that we are planning a "2<sup>nd</sup> Annual" Joint God's Work Our Hands Sunday on September 10, 2017.

We spent three Sundays in October studying *From Conflict to Communion* with facilitation by Dr. Cristie Traina, Professor of Religion, Northwestern University Department of Religious Studies and Rev. Dr. Eric Bodenstab, ELCA Pastor and Lutheran Theologian. We experienced the benefit of ensuring both Catholics and Lutherans were present at the discussion tables. We were honored to welcome renowned religious historian and Lutheran pastor the Rev. Dr. Martin Marty on Reformation Sunday afternoon. While his lecture was very well received, the Q & A at the end provided strong affirmation for the planned dialogues and resulted in more involvement from our community. The next day, Reformation Day 2016, we together watched the telecast from Lund Sweden. There were more than a few tears shed and the variety of comments shared made this a most memorable and inspiring morning for all who were able to attend and stay to process its impact.

Although the timing had nothing to do with the national election (the date was set based upon Luther's birthday), folks found multiple reasons to appreciate our fun Hymns and Hops event at a local pub in mid-November. There is nothing like harmonizing together to help emphasize both the diversity of gifts we bring and the unity we share as we give glory and honor to God through the grace of Christ Jesus. We used another Thrivent Action Team grant to help pay some of the costs, but, rest assured, everyone paid for their own liquid hops! Based upon the positive comments, we anticipate this may be repeated in years to come.

A unique La Posadas Walk occurred during an Advent mid-week shared worship experience. Due to current events and bitter cold weather, Grace Lutheran hosted an interior walk and focused upon the Syrian refugee crisis as well as the ministries we share with other Evanston faith communities via RefugeeOne.

The deepening political divides provided a poignant backdrop for Evanston's annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity worship theme: Reconciliation – The Love of Christ Compels Us (2 Cor. 5:14-20).

Hosted by Immanuel Lutheran, we had a truly ecumenical representation of clergy and church members in attendance and a lovely time of fellowship following. In late February, we presented a Myth Busters forum with Lutheran pastor Keith Fry and Catholic theologian Dr. Susan Ross, Loyola University Chicago, serving together on a panel moderated by Lutheran pastor Bill Hutchison. It was well attended and helped set the stage for a 4-week Lenten Study of the *Declaration On The Way*. We were blessed to have Dr. Kathryn Johnson, the ELCA Director of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations and former LWF assistant general secretary for ecumenical affairs and acting director of theology and studies, share her insights at our first study session in Lent. She helped us set a firm foundation of always beginning from the agreements and enthusiastically showed us the fifty-year effort we were joining.

During Holy Week, there was another poignantly tangible “on the way” event when the members of Grace Lutheran joined the Easter Vigil at St. Nicholas Catholic (a joint experience that had begun years before), Fr. Tito blessed the whole Lutheran group together at the Eucharistic table. According to Fr. Tito, it was a “beautiful moment of both respect and communion in the larger sense.”

A small group of Lutherans and Catholics traveled together to St. Louis to participate in the Taize Pilgrimage of Trust (post-Ferguson) and enjoyed the opportunity to engage in all four types of dialogue in an intense four-day period – worship, living, learning, acting for justice, and sharing together. A forum is being planned to share the insights from such an impactful experience and to give voice to our young adults’ hopes.

The late Spring and Summer of 2017 is being used to draft an Evanston Covenant between as many Evanston Roman Catholic parishes and ELCA congregations as possible. At this writing, we are on the second draft and eager to hear the input from our many ministry leaders.

An organic gathering of Lutherans and Catholics will march behind a banner at the Evanston 4th of July parade and plans are underway for a facilitated gathering in mid-October to discuss the challenges and opportunities for greater Christian spirituality within Catholic/Lutheran inter-church families.

A gifted team of worship leaders is planning our shared liturgy on the afternoon of October 29 at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary’s Chapel. We plan to sign and celebrate our finalized Evanston Covenant as well as plant an Evanston tree in honor of our shared vision, affirmations, and commitments. Two days later, we hope to climb onto buses and share the journey from Evanston to Holy Name Cathedral – together witnessing Cardinal Supich and Bishop Miller renew the existing Archdiocese and Synod Covenant. Based upon the importance of breaking delicious bread together at each of our gatherings, we have no doubt that a few well-stocked picnic baskets will be present, too.

All along, we have been focused upon the “Beyond”. The commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation has been merely a jumping off point. In order to help us live into the “Beyond”, we have planned, prepared, and shared these dialogues in order to form the relationships and the commitments needed to be truly the Body of Christ on earth as in heaven. We have come to realize that the newer generations are not only asking for this, but they expect this depth of commitment to authentically and tangibly show how much we need each other, how clearly we hear and are willing to follow Christ’s call, and how desperately the world needs our unity – now and forever.

The Rev. Betty E. Landis, Pastor, St. Paul’s ELCA Evanston and the Rev. Joseph Tito, Pastor, St.

Nicholas Roman Catholic Parish, Evanston

---

## **Let's Talk**

### **Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod**

PDF generated July 01, 2017 at 3:14 AM by Kalin's PDF Creation Station WordPress plugin