

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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By the Rev. John T. Pless, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Beginning in 1518, Martin Luther frequently preached a sermon series on “the catechism,” that is, the basic components of Christian doctrine as they had been arranged and handed down from earlier generations of Christians. Eventually, these catechetical sermons would become the basis for the Large Catechism and would be crystalized in the Small Catechism.

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By Paula Trimpey, Member of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Do you attend church on Sunday morning, or are you attending a Jesus Theater? Just how should a member of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod discern the difference and choose a church with integrity and regard to the Scripture?

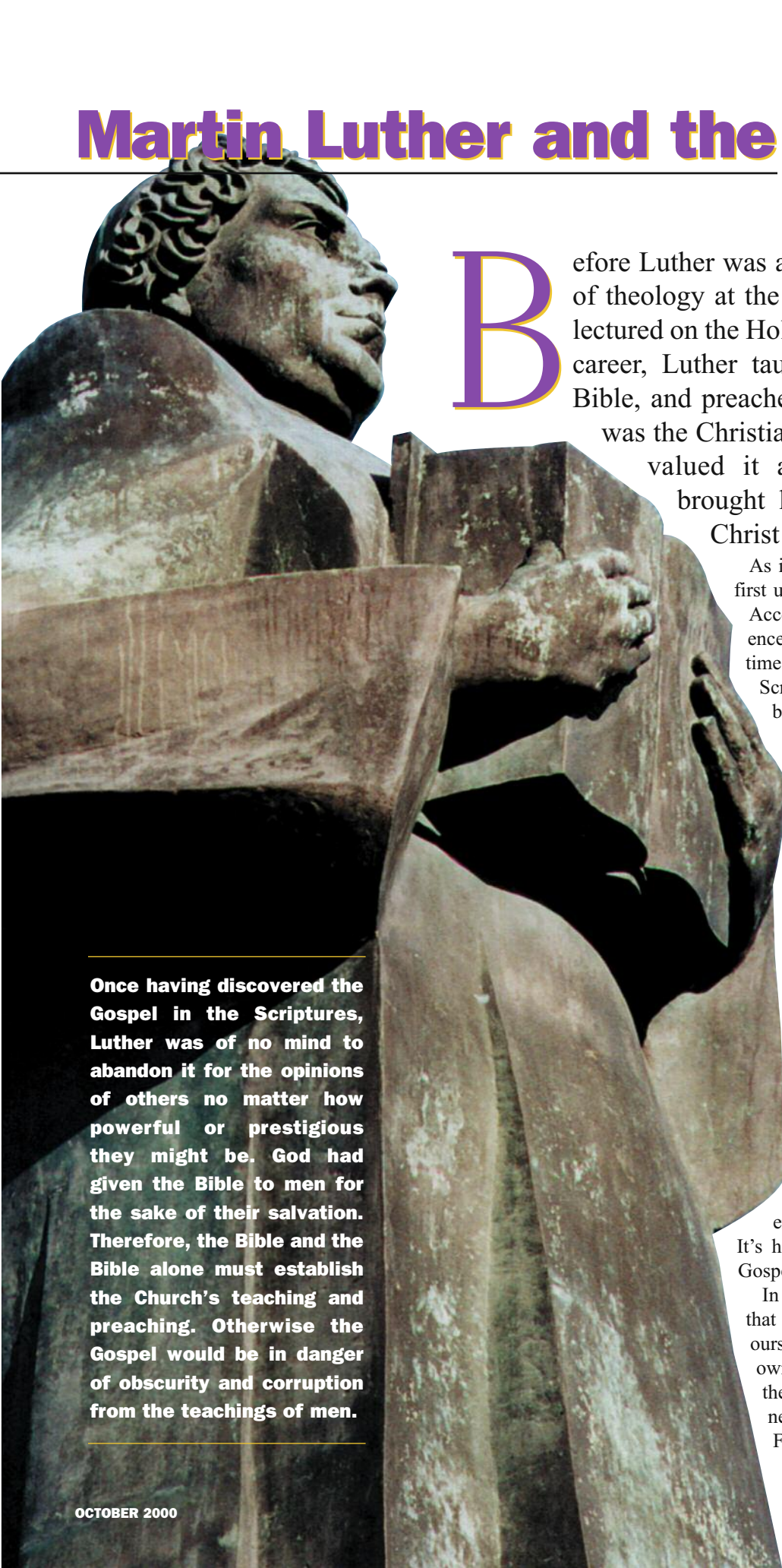
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Martin Luther and the Bible

By Rev. Dr. Cameron A. MacKenzie



Before Luther was a Lutheran, he was a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg and lectured on the Holy Scriptures. During his entire career, Luther taught the Bible, translated the Bible, and preached from the Bible. For him, it was the Christian book *par excellence*, and he valued it above all others because it brought him the good news of Jesus Christ the Savior.

As is well known, however, Luther did not at first understand the Gospel as truly good news. According to his own recollections, he experienced his Reformation “breakthrough” some time after he had first begun lecturing on the Scriptures at the university. For years, he had been laboring personally under the weight of sin without finding a satisfactory remedy in the ministrations of the contemporary church, and even his study of Paul’s epistles did not initially bring him peace, for he kept stumbling over Paul’s phrase, “the righteousness of God” in Rom. 1:17. What did it mean to say that in the Gospel God reveals His “righteousness”?

Initially, Luther understood the phrase as a reference to God’s holiness—the idea that God is righteous and so punishes unrighteous sinners. But this would mean that the content of the Bible was Law—and more Law! Luther wrote, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” It’s hard to find “good news” in that kind of Gospel.

In point of fact Luther did not yet understand that the Gospel directs us to Christ and not to ourselves, to His saving work and not to our own sin-filled works. But, as Luther said, “by the mercy of God,” at length he came to a new understanding of God’s righteousness. For in that same passage from Romans,

Once having discovered the Gospel in the Scriptures, Luther was of no mind to abandon it for the opinions of others no matter how powerful or prestigious they might be. God had given the Bible to men for the sake of their salvation. Therefore, the Bible and the Bible alone must establish the Church’s teaching and preaching. Otherwise the Gospel would be in danger of obscurity and corruption from the teachings of men.

Paul (quoting Hab. 2:4) explains, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” In other words, the righteousness of God in the Gospel is not God’s demand but God’s gift, not condemnation but life; and it is ours simply through faith in Christ. God counts us righteous when we believe in Him.

When Luther finally realized that this was the good news, he also came to a new appreciation of the Scriptures as first and foremost God’s instrument for bringing us all the comfort, consolation, and power of this Gospel. Almost immediately, he tells us, he began using it as a key to understanding the entire Bible; and in all of his work thereafter, the Gospel became the center of his preaching and teaching the Scriptures, and the Scriptures became his norm for understanding the Gospel.

Luther was surprised to find out that this approach to the Bible provoked all kinds of controversy. In the wake of his attack upon the indulgence trade in the 95 Theses, Luther’s opponents tried answering him with ecclesiastical authorities—church fathers, papal decretals, conciliar decisions, and canon law. Although Luther had great respect for Christian theologians of the past like Augustine or Bernard of Clairvaux and confessed the ancient creeds of the church, he accepted the fathers only as witnesses to the truth of Scripture and the creeds merely as statements of what the Bible taught. He understood the Scriptures alone as the ultimate touchstone of what constituted Christian doctrine.

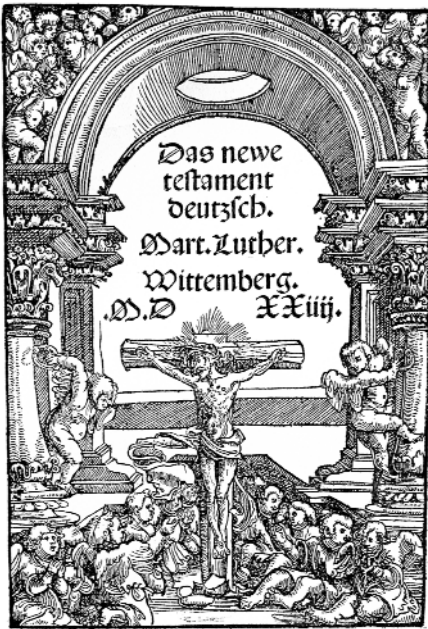
So, in his great debate with the Catholic controversialist John Eck in 1519, Luther maintained, “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it”; and ten years later at Marburg against Ulrich Zwingli, the Reformed theologian, Luther said, “Let us gladly do the dear fathers the honor of interpreting . . . their writings . . . so that they remain in harmony with Holy Scripture. However, where their writings do not agree with God’s word, there it is much better that we say they have erred than that for their sake we should abandon God’s word.”

Once having discovered the Gospel in the Scriptures, Luther was of no mind to abandon it for the opinions of others no matter how powerful or prestigious they might be. God had given the Bible to men for the sake of their salvation. Therefore, the Bible and the Bible alone must establish the Church’s teaching and preaching. Otherwise, once again the Gospel would be in danger of obscurity and corruption from the teachings of men. People needed to hear and to believe God’s Word; and therefore, it became one of the great objectives of the Lutheran Reformation to make that Word available to all people.

Luther began his work of translating the Bible from the original languages into German when he was at the Wartburg in 1521-22 and continued it for the rest of his life in cooperation with his colleagues at Wittenberg. He published the first New Testament in 1522 and the first complete Bible in 1534; but there were many other editions, including in 1546 one more edition of the entire Bible published posthumously. For these editions, beginning with the very first, Luther composed introductions to various books of the Bible and prefaces for the Old and New Testaments. In virtually every one of them, Luther emphasized the evangelical purpose of the Bible.

In his preface to the 1522 New Testament, for example, although Luther admits that it would be fine if no prefaces were attached to the scriptural text at all, he says that he has composed one in order to rescue the reader from mistaken interpretations that are current. In an apparent reference to his own experience, Luther proposes to direct the reader to the Scriptures’ real theme and purpose “so that he may not seek laws and commandments where he ought to be seeking the gospel and promises of God.”

This understanding of the Bible’s purpose led Luther to value some of its books more highly than others. In particular, Luther treasured the Gospel of John, 1 Peter, and the epistles of Paul, especially Romans. Regarding these, Luther writes, “In them . . . you . . . find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes



Luther believed that God had inspired prophets and apostles to write the books of the Bible over centuries of time for the sake of His people. But what did people need? Fundamentally, they needed Christ the Savior. To bring us a sure and certain message about the saving work of Jesus in all of its consequences and ramifications for self-understanding and life, God had given the Scriptures. Luther not only believed this and valued it for himself; he devoted his life to bringing this Bible message to others.

sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel.”

But if Luther ranked some books of the Bible high on his list, there were others for which he had far less appreciation, and in fact, in his 1522 preface, he calls James “an epistle of straw.” Why would Luther say such a thing when elsewhere he writes, “I praise [James] and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God”? But that is just the point—compared to others like Romans, James falls short not for what it says but on account of what it does **not** teach, i.e., “the Passion and resurrection and office of Christ and to lay the foundation for faith in him.” For Luther, the Law is not enough. God gave us the Scriptures for the sake of the Savior.

Compared to James, Luther’s appreciation for Romans is unbounded. Luther calls Romans the “chief part of the New Testament and . . . the purest gospel” and urges Christians to know it by heart and to treasure it as the “daily bread of the soul.” Although he never wrote a commentary on Romans nor did he return to lecturing on it after his “breakthrough,” his 1522 preface to the book is not only a good introduction to its contents, it is also a concise description of the major themes of Luther’s own theology and shows how the Gospel functions as the heart and center of the Bible’s message.

But to value Romans for its gospel content does not mean for Luther that the book contains no Law. In fact, quite the contrary, and part of why Luther appreciates Romans so much is that here Paul explains the Law at its deepest level and teaches its true purpose, viz., to reveal sin and the need for a Savior. Apart from God’s grace, man often deludes himself into thinking that he’s “ok,” that by observing certain external proprieties he can enjoy a right relationship with God. But the Apostle teaches that this is folly. God’s Law demands an inner holiness that none can accomplish so that by the works of the Law none can be saved. To demonstrate the desperate condition of man’s sinfulness is the task of the Law.

Luther also shows how Paul teaches the Gospel in Romans—that God is gracious to us on account of Christ, that He gives us the gift of faith through the preaching of Christ, and that by this faith we are confident of God’s love and forgiveness. But Paul does even more. He also teaches about the Christian life that proceeds from faith. Although Christians continue to experience the “flesh,” the sinful human nature, by the power of the Spirit they also work to please God by serving their neighbor, for they have been reborn in Christ. All this the Christian reader will find in Paul’s epistle to the Romans.

But what Luther found in Romans, he found in the Bible as a whole, both Old and New Testaments, because he believed that God had inspired prophets and apostles to write the books of the Bible over centuries of time for the sake of His people. But what did people need? Fundamentally, they needed Christ the Savior. To bring us a sure and certain message about the saving work of Jesus in all of its consequences and ramifications for self-understanding and life, God had given the Scriptures. Luther not only believed this and valued it for himself, he devoted his life to bringing this Bible message to others.

Today, the church that bears Luther’s name has many reasons to thank God for the great Reformer—the witness of his life, his hymns, his books, his theology. But among all of God’s gifts to His Church through Martin Luther, none is more important than Luther’s understanding of the Bible. For in spite of all that has changed since the days of the Reformation, the Word of God remains to address an unchanging human condition with the eternal Gospel of God’s grace in Christ. As Luther realized and taught, that is the heart and soul of the Scriptures; and human beings still need to hear it.

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