

Reformation and the Bible

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Introduction

It is a well known fact that the Protestant Reformation has to do very much with the Holy Scriptures. But what does that mean? I would like to speak about four issues which seem to be very important. They are all proven by historical events as well as by the Scriptures themselves.

When Luther nailed his famous 95 thesis to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, he neither expected to become the great Reformer of the Church nor did he know the Gospel. He was a Roman Catholic monk in the order of the Augustinian hermits in Wittenberg and professor in Biblical exegesis at the university of that city. He was alarmed by the abuse of the indulgence letters. These letters were sold by representatives of the church. Their primary aim was fund raising – in part for the construction of St. Peter's Church in Rome, and in part for the sum a German clergyman had to pay for becoming the archbishop of Mainz. And people were ready to pay for the idea, "if I get an indulgence letter, I will not have to suffer in the purgatory after death. And if I can get another letter in favour of my father, who is already burning in purgatory, his punishment may be reduced so that he can go to heaven very soon. So I can do good things for me and for him." So they were willing to spend much money to safeguard their future entrance to heaven.

Luther was upset by that commerce in spiritual things. He was preaching at that time: Repent! If you accuse yourself of your sins, if you choose the lowest way, if you don't claim to be good and having done many good works, but if you agree with God that you have sinned and if you confess them, if you accept the cross of Christ upon your life, you are on the way to become righteous. This was not yet the Biblical way, the way of the Gospel. Luther was still Roman Catholic. So, where and how did he become Protestant? How did he get along with the Scriptures? How did the Scriptures get their due position in Reformation? I would like to speak about four aspects to show you the relationship between the Scriptures and Reformation.

1. The Authority of the Pope or the Authority of the Scriptures

In October 1518, less than a year had passed after the publication of Luther's 95 theses. The Pope Leo X., a typical Renaissance Pope, who loved hunting more than preaching, had discovered that a problem had arisen far away in Germany. However, he didn't realize the significance of that problem. He was not aware of the fact that this type of opposition was a substantial threat to the Roman system itself. It was a threat because that German monk Martin Luther stood up in the name of the Bible and reclaimed its authority against the Pope himself. But Leo X. did not realize that by that time.

It was his desire to solve the problem in the average way: He summoned Luther to Rome, and, once proved his disobedience towards the Pope he wanted to have him burnt at the stake. But Luther's prince, Frederic the Wise from Saxony, insisted that Luther was inquired on German soil, not in Rome. So the Pope engaged his ambassador in Germany. This was a man called by his Latin name Cajetan. He was a Dominican monk, a cardinal of the Roman Church and a famous theologian. The Dominicans had been appointed by the Pope in the middle ages to lead the so called inquisition. They were watching over Christian Europe to secure that

everything was working according to the will of the Popes. They discovered when people taught other doctrines or became disobedient to the Pope or to the Roman system, they caused people to be tortured by the police in order to recant, they condemned people to be burnt at the stakes. They were feared like the secret police in a totalitarian state. Cajetan was empowered to arrest Luther and keep him in jail as long as he didn't revoke.

Luther had to appear before Cajetan in Augsburg in Southern Germany in October 1518. He was aware of the danger of captivity and stake and expected that his days were counted. Cajetan was a bitter enemy of the emerging Reformation. He had received an order from the Pope not to discuss theological questions, but to urge Luther to revoke. That is a very common strategy. Theological issues are prohibited to be discussed, because it may become clear, that not Luther, but the Church is false. So the whole system of Roman power simply urged its disobedient son to surrender to the church. But Luther didn't revoke. He urged Cajetan to show him where he was erring. He insisted that he first should be convinced by the Scriptures that he was false before he could revoke anything. He had not come to Augsburg to be told that he was wrong, but, if at all, to be shown wherein his error lay. So Cajetan had to respond against his will with a theological discussion. He insisted upon "the absolute and inerrant power of the Papacy" (Schwiebert). Here we can see that already at that time the dogma of papal infallibility was taught in its material sense. Luther on his turn asserted that the Pope not only *could* err, but *had* erred in the past. So it became clear that there was a great gulf between both of them concerning authority in the Church. Luther clearly and earnestly sought the truth in God's Word, Cajetan in Rome.

The same became clear in the Leipzig debate in July 1519. A famous professor from the theological faculty of the University of Leipzig in Saxony, Dr. Eck, wanted to dispute with Luther and to defeat him. This debate was more academic in character. However, Luther showed his profound knowledge of the Scriptures as well as of the Church fathers. While Eck was interpreting the Bible according to the Roman Catholic tradition, Luther already there insisted that the Bible is clear in itself and that it must be taken at its face value. Again the question was dealt with, whether the Pope has been given power by Christ himself or whether papal primacy was only a product of history, only about four hundred years old. Luther maintained the latter and was able to show it by the Scriptures as well as by the early Church fathers. So he could not be defeated by his opponent. In fact, a couple of his former critics became his co-workers or students. After the Leipzig debate in July 1519 Luther recognized that the Roman Church was resting on weak foundations. He then became aware of the principle that the *sola scriptura* – the Scriptures alone – must be the measure for all decisions of councils and papal bulls and decrees. This is a very significant difference. This difference has become still clearer by the dogma of papal infallibility in 1870.

A few years later, in 1525, Luther had a literary debate with the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. In his most famous book "On the Bondage of the Will", Luther extensively explained the clarity and authority of the Scriptures. It became clear, that the Reformation in stressing the *sola scriptura* not only stood in opposition to the Roman system, but also against its critics, the humanists. By that, we can see clearly that the *sola scriptura* became a central feature of Protestant identity.

2. The Discovery of the Gospel in the Scriptures

Let's get back to the year 1518. The discussions of that year were still dealing with the subject of Luther's 95 thesis, with the indulgence problem and the supreme authority in the Church. Luther by that time had not yet gained correct insight in the Gospel. He was still believing in

the Pope, the sacramental system, purgatory and other typical Roman-Catholic elements. He was still a monk, living in a cloister. But what happened in Winter 1518/1519?

The theology of the early Luther was a monk's theology. Luther was propagating self-denial, self-humiliation, self-accusation and the willing confession of one's sins. There was no insight in what the righteousness of God really was. The Gospel appeared to him still as an accusation, an uncovering of human sin. So Luther apparently was still seeking the real meaning of the great passages in the New Testament. Let us hear, what he has written towards the end of his life in the preface of his Latin works, in the year 1545 about those decisive years:

„Meanwhile in that same year, 1519, I had begun interpreting the Psalms once again. I felt confident that I was now more experienced, since I had dealt in university courses with St. Paul's Letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Letter to the Hebrews. I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: "The justice of God is revealed in it." I hated that word, "justice of God," which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust.

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, "Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?" This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The just person lives by faith.'" I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.“ (Luther, Preface to his Latin works [1545]; from <http://www.anselm.edu/academic/humanities/lutherlatin.html>)

Luther by this testimony tells us, that he felt “a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans” and that he “meditated night and day on those words”. He had already lectured on Paul's epistles to the Romans, the Hebrews and the Galatians, but he was still uncertain about their message. I would like to call your attention to the fact that this man did not develop his reformational position by a particular theological method or with the help of a particular philosophy. He simply was reading the Bible and trying to understand it. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that it was God in His mercy, who gave him right insight and

understanding of the words of Paul. By that, he honours God to be the Lord of the Scriptures who gives right insight according to His gracious will.

It also shows that Luther is not willing to understand the Scriptures in the light of the tradition, of the Church fathers and of other human authorities like Thomas Aquinas or Peter Lombard, the great mediaeval dogmaticians. He became convinced that the Scriptures alone are the light. That's why he is looking into the Scriptures in order to understand them. We can clearly prove by this passage, that the reformational insight which Luther has gained, stems from the Scriptures.

3. The Translation of the Scriptures

The insight that God is speaking to man by a book, by the Holy Scriptures, was a revolutionary insight. In the Middle Ages, mysticism was frequently accepted by pious people. The mystics were not so much interested in God's written word, but in the mystic union with God, whom they considered to be the fountain of all being. It was their highest aim to get united with this universal and all permeating being. So they were looking for some kind of ecstasy. Others simply looked to the sacraments as the place where God could be met. Others would perhaps accept that God was speaking through the church, its councils and through the Pope. Consequently, they were hearing to the representatives of the Church. But that God is really speaking through the Bible was new, although the Church always had confessed that the Bible is God's word and therefore the authority for doctrine and life. But nevertheless, this truth was covered and buried in the life and the doctrines of the church. It was no longer in practice.

The insight that God is speaking to man by a book, therefore, meant that God was really present in His word and that His word could be read, preached and taught. God is no longer accessible through the intermediate service of the church, but He is present in His word. He can be known by His word, He can be believed and He can be adored by every single believer. The main task of the church is, to preach the word and to administer the sacraments, which no longer are automatically working religious rites, but the visible word of God.

Consequently, Luther did what was necessary: He translated the Scriptures. A few weeks ago, I visited together with another minister of our Confessing Churches the Wartburg Castle. It is about 140 kilometres away from my home, close to the former German-German border, near the city of Eisenach. We saw the "Lutherstube", the room where Luther according to the tradition was living from May 1521 to March 1522. It was an involuntary stay, just after the great days of Worms, where Luther had spoken the famous words, "Here I stand, so help me God, Amen." Luther had been outlawed by the Emperor. Everybody could kill him without being punished. His prince, the elector Frederick the Wise had recognized the danger for Luther's life. So he decided to take him in prison in order to protect his life. The Wartburg castle was very apt for that purpose: a lonely castle, among deep forests on a mountain in Thuringia. The stormy early years of the Reformation movement had passed. A Protestant Church hadn't yet been established. But the movement was strong. Now Luther had the opportunity to think about it from the distance. Until now, he had been the chief actor. But now, he was set aside. What did he do?

My friend and I remembered that Luther was very busy during that time. We simply admired him for the fact that he translated the whole New Testament within eleven weeks. Few scholars would dare to do that in the same lapse of time. But it shows that Luther had gained much experience in reading the Greek New Testament and that he had meditated upon it for many hours. So the German translation was like a ripe fruit in the reformer's work. After he

had left the Wartburg against the will of his prince, back in Wittenberg, he revised the translation together with his fellow worker Philipp Melancthon, who was professor of the Greek language. The New Testament was printed and published in September 1522. So the Germans for the first time in their history could read the everlasting and powerful word of God in their own language. The translation of the Old Testament was taken up immediately, but it lasted until 1534, when the whole Bible was published in German for the first time. Many other translations in other European languages followed in the sixteenth century: in the Baltic languages, in English, Finnish, French, Spanish and others. Many of these translations have their proper and often moving history. So the Reformation gained its power by the word of God, which was now accessible to the average citizen.

Although the average citizen hardly was able to purchase a printed Bible, the Bible nevertheless became a widely read and popular book. It became an incentive to learn how to read and to own a Bible. Many Protestant families got their family Bible and assembled at home to read it. In many Protestant houses, the Bible was the only book. Through the Bible, Protestant – and that is Biblical – thinking became rooted in the minds of the church members. The Bible itself hindered people to get back into the darkness of Roman Catholicism.

Consequently, the Reformation became a Bible movement. The Bible was read and it was preached. Martin Luther was engaged in showing how the average minister should preach the Bible. John Calvin gave a lucid example in preaching regularly on entire Biblical books. As long as the word of God is preached purely, Protestantism will be strong. So I would like to urge you to preach the word, if you are a minister, and to read it day by day in your house, if you are housefather or mother. Let the word of God be present in your homes and churches.

But don't do that only by tradition or in order to remain Protestant. There is still a more important reason why we should adhere to the Scriptures.

4. The Scriptures are a Means of Grace

One of the most important insights of the Reformation is that the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, are the means by which God is saving man. There have been many discussions already at the time of the Reformers whether God is saving man by the Holy Spirit or by the word. The enthusiasts, in German: the *Schwärmer* (= swarmers), were already present at Luther's times. When Luther was hiding on the Wartburg, the so-called Zwickau prophets came to Wittenberg. Zwickau is another Saxon city, where these enthusiasts had gathered before. They were teaching that man must directly get in contact with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was eulogized against the Word of the Scriptures. A bit later, an enthusiast accused Luther that the Bible to him was as a pope of paper. Instead of hearing the word of God, they propagated religious experiences, the feeling to be close to God and to hear his voice directly. They were not interested in faith. In their assemblies, ecstatic elements were very common.

This again was a substantial threat to the new movement. It was the reason why Luther left the Wartburg. He answered in an extensive writ against these so called heavenly prophets. He maintains that God does not give the Spirit without the outward means, which is the word. There is no direct communication between sinful man and the holy God by the Spirit, but God wants to deal with man by the word. The word has been spoken by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, we receive the Holy Spirit by receiving the word. So the word, the Scriptures, is most important and valuable because by them, Christ is coming to us. By them as the living seed, we are led to faith, we are born again and we get assurance of our salvation.

Conclusion

These four aspects show us the relationship between the Reformation and the Bible. It's the fact that the Reformers claimed the authority of the Scriptures against Roman Catholic tradition, the fact that they discovered the Gospel in the Bible, that they translated the Bible and that the Bible consequently was read by vast numbers of Protestant Christians, and the fact that the Bible is a means of salvation, that is, that we are saved by the word being read, preached, heard, understood and believed. So let us cherish and hear again God's Holy Word!