

Reformation Sunday

The Just Shall Live By Faith

Michael H. Hart is a Jewish astrophysicist who has written several books on history as well as a number of very controversial articles on a wide variety of subjects. One of his claims to fame is that he taught astronomy and history of science at Anne Arundel County Community College. His first book was *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, which has sold more than 500,000 copies and been translated into 15 languages.

Number 25 on his list, right above George Washington and Karl Marx, was the man Martin Luther.

Timothy Sexton has a different take on Martin Luther. He puts him at number one. At least for everyone who's lived in the past 1000 years. Sexton, who was Associated Content's writer of the year and has published over 7,000 articles on everything from politics to philosophy wrote piece titled, *Is Martin Luther the Most Influential Person of the Last Millennium?* He writes:

The mystery in question is what the world might look like today had the authority of the Church remained unchecked. The darkness that spread across the world with the shadow of the church's unremitting reluctance to accept scientific progression turned western civilization from the cradle of knowledge into a place where minds like Socrates and Galileo were placed into submission behind adherence to religious beliefs at odds with facts and evidence. The importance of Martin Luther to contemporary civilization therefore rests upon the genuinely frightening concept of what the world might look like had he not hammered a nail into the unquestioned authority of the Church.

Martin Luther was a change agent for our world in more ways than one.

One biographer has written, "Luther's mental, moral and religious qualities and his practical ability in securing marvelous results from his efforts made him a genius of the highest order. His activities – literacy, epistolary, professional, pulpit, pastoral, musical and social were enormous."

That in itself makes Luther a fascinating study. But beyond that, Martin Luther, who used by God to change the western world, is an illustration of the contrast between the impotence of religion and the life-giving power of faith in Jesus Christ.

See, Satan not only uses depravity and corruption to destroy people but very often and very successfully he uses religion.

If you had a fatal disease and medical science held the cure, but I could convince you that you could cure yourself, I would eventually be responsible for your death.

Our world has a terrible plague running throughout it. It's as old as the Garden of Eden and absolutely fatal. It's called sin.

The Bible says that you and I, and everyone else has sinned. The Bible says, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* (Romans 3:23) Everyone of us has fallen far short of the perfect, absolute standard of a holy and righteous God.

The Bible goes on to say, *The wages of sin is death.* (Romans 6:23)

The whole chaos of people struggling and fighting to find meaning, purpose, and reality in our world is a testimony to the fact that we have been alienated from our creator.

We live in a state of separation from God and the Bible says, if we die that way we'll spend eternity in the emptiness and blackness and devastation of what the Bible calls "outer darkness."

Now God proclaimed a solution of this alienation all the way back in the Garden after man's fall. He promised a redeemer would be raised up out of humanity to defeat death.

The man Christ Jesus would one day come and at the cross stand in our place and bear our sins. Satan's purpose would be defeated.

Only God could rescue us. Only God has the cure for our deadly disease.

But the god of this world, the angel of light, that old serpent the Devil has offered another way. He said to Eve in the garden, "You won't die, you can cure yourself."

And his great design is called religion. Four things I'd like you to see this morning and the first is this.

I. Religion Promises Peace And Life

Shortly before midnight on November 10, 1483, a son was born to Hans and Margaret Luther of Saxony. The following morning, Hans bundled up his child against the cold and took him to the town church where a priest administered the sacrament of baptism and christened the boy Martin. It was the Feast Day of St. Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier turned monk.

Hans Luther had high hopes for his first born. Hans was a peasant's son who toiled for years in Saxony's cooper mines and eventually becoming a mine owner and respected town councilman. He dreamed that Martin would rise even higher by studying law and marrying into a good family.

Martin started Latin school at four and a half.

Latin was the language of the educated class and the church, and young Luther made excellent progress, singing in choirs, and learning to play the lute and flute as well.

In 1501, he entered Erfurt, Germany's oldest and most prestigious university. He earned his BA in 18 months and his Masters degree three years later. Martin was well on the way to fulfilling his father's dream.

A few months later, Luther was on the way to visit his parents when he was caught in a violent storm. A lightning bolt struck nearby, sending him sprawling on the ground. "Help, St. Anne!" he cried, swearing to become a monk in return for protection.

So against his father's will and in spite of his own misgivings, Luther sold his law books, gave one last party for his friends, and on July 17, 1505 entered Erfurt's Augustinian monastery.

Luther took his monastic vows as seriously as he had his studies. He was compelled by a terror of God's judgment. He tried to appease God by all kinds of works. He mortified his flesh with starvation and abuse. Once he was carried unconscious from his cell. He'd spend hours in prayer.

Luther would spend as long as 6 hours in the confessional confessing every sin, real or imagined. I can imagine when it came time for confession the other priests would do anything to avoid being assigned to hear Martin!

Looking back later he said, "If every a monk got to Heaven by his monkery, I was that monk."

Luther was ordained a priest in 1507. He earned his doctorate in Sacred Theology at age 28 and three days later was appointed Professor of Holy Scripture at Wittenberg University. Not long after, he was elected district vicar of 11 scattered Saxony monasteries. Hard-pressed for time even to pray at the prescribed hours, he skipped meals and prayed all day Saturday.

There was only one problem. He had no peace with God.

Religion promises peace and life but it can't deliver. It seems so logical to us. We are cut off from God because we do wrong so the way back must be by doing good.

The problem is, God never asked anybody to be good. He asks them to be perfect. A righteous God cannot and will not accept unrighteousness.

Turn to James 2 page 700

Last week I received a letter in the mail from the state of Maryland. It was a very nice letter. They even included a picture of my license plate and a \$40 ticket. Apparently I was speeding in a work zone.

(Hey, it was raining so there wasn't anyone working so I just went the regular speed.) But I was guilty. They didn't need 5 different pictures from 5 different work zones.

Read verse 10

You only have to break the law once to become a law breaker. That's true of man's law and it's true of God's law.

Now turn to Galatians 3 page 673

Religion says, "Be sincere, do your best, follow the rules and you will have peace."

Read verse 10

The reason we don't have peace if we think we can get to God through the good works of His law is that we can't keep it all. So we're lawbreakers. We're under the curse of the law. You can keep 95% of it and break 5% and you're still under it's curse.

Religion dethrones God and puts an unrighteous God with no firm standards in his place. Religion makes all kinds of promises. The problem is, the promises of religion ring hollow.

I. Religion Promises Peace And Life

II. Religion Is Based Upon Human Merit

All of his emptiness and lack of peace with God lead Luther to look to the Bible instead of "the church." A powerful thing happened when Martin turned from man's traditions to

God's holy Word.

He spent hours in Wittenberg tower studying. Two New Testament books challenged him in particular – Romans and Galatians.

There he read:

Romans 1:16 & 17, *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."*

Romans 4:5 *But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.*

Romans 5:1 *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Romans 10:13 *Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.*

Gradually like the dawn, the light began to arise on Luther's heart. Suddenly it was like a sunburst. It was around the year 1510.

Martin realized that none of his works could satisfy God. All his works were imperfect at best. None of his works could pay for sin. Only a perfect sacrifice could do that. Only a perfect sacrifice could satisfy a holy God and the only perfect sacrifice had already been offered.

Luther would later write. "Finally by the mercy of God, as I pondered the connection of the words, In it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, the just shall live by faith. I began to understand what the righteousness of God means. It is the righteousness by which a just man lives by the gift of God, namely by faith. In other words, that by which a merciful God justifies us through faith. I felt that I was completely reborn, that I had entered through open gates into paradise itself."

At that point Martin Luther had grasped the most important and foundational spiritual truth that every one of us needs to recon with.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

By 1512 Luther was made a doctor of the Holy Scriptures, which entitled him to lecture

and write on the Bible. He swore “to teach purely and sincerely according to the Scriptures.” What he didn’t realize was, a mega conflict was brewing and he was going to light the fuse

In 16th century Europe, to most people, including Luther, “the church” meant the Roman Catholic church. Now, he had found salvation by simple faith in Christ, but he hadn’t been taught it by his church. His church taught, as it always had, that its religion is based on human merit.

A lot that he saw bothered Luther, but the real clincher came in the fall of 1517. Pope Leo X was trying to finish financing St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome.

The church had come up with a religious theory. Since they believed you go to heaven by good works they said there was like a good works “bank” filled with all the extra good works that didn’t get used as payment for heaven.

They said if you paid money, you could receive a pardon from the penalty of sin called an indulgence. People even bought indulgences for sins they were planning to commit in the future.

All of this disturbed Luther but when a Dominican Friar named Tetzel came through hawking indulgences Luther couldn’t keep silent any longer.

On October 31, (Hallowed Eve, the night before All Saints Day) 1517 he posted 95 Theses (or topics for discussion) on the North door of Wittenberg’s Castle Church inviting others to discuss what he saw as false religious practices.

This was before Twitter and FaceBook. Posting on the door in a university town was the common way for inviting people to a discussion.

Those 95 thesis included statements like, “Those who assert that a soul straight way flies out of purgatory as a coin tinkles in the collection box, are preaching an invention of man.” “The Pope’s’ riches as this day far exceed the wealth of the richest millionaires, cannot he therefore build one single basilica of St. Peter out of his own money, rather than out of the money of the faithful poor?”

Luther’s debate never took place. But instead a storm was released that changed the course of human events. Within a month, copies of the 95 thesis had circulated all through Europe.

As Luther and others studied the difference between religion based on human merit and

the grace of God spoken of in the Bible, the whole system that Luther had originally been so committed to began to crumble before his eyes.

I. Religion Promises Peace And Life

II. Religion Is Based on Human Merit

III. Religion Leads A False Sense Of Security

Luther saw that his church had been lulling people into a false security. Luther realized that in the Bible we have all things that pertain to life and godliness.

The Word of God is forever settled in heaven. So he began to reject those things that weren't taught in the Bible.

He rejected the teaching that the mass was a resacrifice of Christ and a way to God's favor. He rejected purgatory. If Christ's merit forgives all our sins there can't be a purging place for believers.

Because of justification by faith the meritoriousness of fasting, pilgrimages, crusades, penances, vows of celibacy and poverty, obedience to Ecclesiastes, alms deeds, endowments of masses, papal projects as a means of forgiveness of sins fell by the way side.

This led Luther to reject monasticism, praying to saints, and designating Mary as the Queen of Heaven. He took the Bible's declaration she wasn't queen but she was to be respected as blessed among women.

And then most important of all, he saw the biblical teaching on the priesthood.

He read verses like Revelation 1:5 *To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.*

And 1 Timothy 2:5, *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.*

Justification by faith destroyed the whole sacramental system in which it was taught that God's grace is obtained by our works in carrying out the sacraments.

The more Luther got into the Bible, the more the system that he had been so committed to unraveled before his very eyes.

On June 15, 1520 Pope Leo signed an edict giving Luther 60 days to recant or face

excommunication. Martin Luther answered that edict by burning it.

The following April he appeared before an assembly of German Rulers called by Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

Luther was asked 2 questions at that assembly. “Do you acknowledge that these books are yours? Will you recant or not?”

His answer: “The books are mine and I have written others. But, unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason I do not accept the authority of Popes or councils, since they have often erred and contradicted themselves. I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscious is held captive by the Word of God; and as it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience, I can not and will not retract anything. Here I stand. I can do nothing else. So help me God. Amen!”

With that Luther became an enemy of the church and empire.

What was it that drove Martin Luther? Was he just a rebel at heart? Did he get his kicks by causing trouble? Remember, he wasn't trying to start a new church, he sincerely thought the leaders in Rome would reform the church when they saw the clear teaching of the Bible. That didn't happen.

During the early 1980's a fascinating discovery was made. Two ecologists, one from Cornell and one from Yale, found that acid rain was increasing exponentially. It was anywhere from 100 to 1000 times what it should be. Ironically they discovered that most of the increase came from anti-pollution devices on smoke stacks.

The devices removed solid particles and let the gasses escape. The problem was the solids actually help neutralize the acids in the rain. So while the air looked cleaner it was actually hiding the fact that it had become destructive.

What was intended for good really masked and aggravated a problem. But that's just like religion.

The Latin word *religio* means to “bind back.” Every religion from Islam to Hinduism to what Martin Luther faced, is designed by people to try to bind themselves back to God.

The most insidious thing about religion is, it covers up the real problem so that people think things are fine.

It covers up sin with a veneer of spiritually looking actions. It may even help clean up people's lives. But it doesn't hit at the root of the problem which is the death blow of sin.

And if people die and face eternal judgment from sin but never knew they needed to be saved because religion convinced them they were OK then religion becomes not a good thing but a bad thing. Not a saving force but a damning force.

It wasn't religion that Luther needed. And it's not religion that you or I need. It is a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Luther ended up escaping those who were out to destroy him. He married Catherine VonBora (an ex nun), had 6 children, translated the Bible into German, wrote books, commentaries and thousands of sermons, stayed through the plague in Wittenberg to care for the sick, introduced congregation singing, and wrote scores of hymns.

Finally at age 62 Luther suffered a severe stroke. Shortly after midnight, February 18, 1546 he was asked, "Reverend, are you willing to die in the name of Christ and the doctrine you have preached?" He answered gladly "Yes" and died.

Biblical Christianity is far different from every religion. It isn't based on human merit. It's based on the merits of Christ.

It doesn't lead to emptiness and a false sense of security but to fullness, truth and life.

For a Christian death isn't really death at all. It is a graduation to a higher realm. It's stepping out of this mortal physical world into the presence of God.

Now, just to be clear. Martin Luther wasn't perfect by any means. We could point out some glaring things that he missed and did wrong along the way. But there's no doubt that we owe a tremendous debt to Martin Luther. But perhaps his greatest legacy of all is that of being a living Epistle, a living object lesson, of the grace of God in action.

Have you been set free? Have you been justified by faith? Have you been made right with your creator? Do you have peace with God?

You can. It will never happen through religion. It will happen through faith in the work of Christ on the cross. Jesus said, "It is finished."

His work of redemption was complete. The price for our sin was paid. Have you believed it's true for you?

(Heads bowed & eyes closed) If you died tonight and stood before God and He asked, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” What would you say?

Would your answer be, “Because I did this and I didn’t do that” or would it be, “Because Jesus Christ died and rose for me for me?”