

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

## Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

---

ConcordiaPages

Resources for Ministry

---

1-1-2018

### Sola Fide The Relevance of Remembering the Reformation

Erik Herrmann

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, herrmanne@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/concordiapages>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Herrmann, Erik, "Sola Fide The Relevance of Remembering the Reformation" (2018). *ConcordiaPages*. 6. <https://scholar.csl.edu/concordiapages/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Resources for Ministry at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in ConcordiaPages by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

# **SOLA FIDE**

## *THE RELEVANCE OF REMEMBERING THE REFORMATION*

ERIK HERRMANN

**concordiapages**





# **SOLA FIDE**

## ***THE RELEVANCE OF REMEMBERING THE REFORMATION***

ERIK HERRMANN





## About the Author

# Erik Herrmann

**D**r. Erik Herrmann is associate professor of historical theology, chairman of the Department of Historical Theology, director of Concordia Theology, and director of the Center for Reformation Research at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Herrmann joined the faculty of Concordia Seminary in 2005 after serving as an assistant pastor at Timothy Lutheran Church in St. Louis. He received his Ph.D. (2005) and Master of Divinity (2000) from Concordia Seminary. He earned his bachelor's degree (1995) from Concordia University Wisconsin.

His areas of interest and expertise include the history of biblical interpretation, with a particular focus on Martin Luther and the Reformation period; history of Medieval and Reformation/early modern Europe; 20th-century interpretations of Martin Luther and his theology; and the history of American Lutheranism.

His writing works include "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" in *The Annotated Luther: Church and Sacraments*, vol. 3 (Fortress Press); "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings, 1539" in *The Annotated Luther: Pastoral Writings*, vol. 4 (Fortress Press, 2016); "Living in the Promises and Places of God: A Theology of the World" with Dr. Charles Arand in the spring 2015 issue of *Concordia Journal*; and "Luther's Absorption of Medieval Biblical Interpretation and His Use of the Church Fathers" in *The Oxford Handbook to the Theology of Martin Luther* (Oxford University Press, 2014). He also edited the "Preface to Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Defense against the False Charge of Rebellion (1525)" and "Preface to Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Explanation of How Karlstadt Understands His Teaching concerning the Lord's Supper and Other Teachings, and How He Wants Them to Be Understood, (1525)," both of which were published in *Luther's Works*, volume 59 (Concordia Publishing House, 2012).

Herrmann and his wife, Aliasha, have five children; Augustine, Constans, Mathias, Tobias and Elspeth. They live in Eureka, Mo.



# Sola Fide

*Erik Herrmann*

In October 1518, in the city of Augsburg—almost exactly one year after Martin Luther posted his famous Ninety-five Theses—Luther stood before the pope’s official representative, Cardinal Cajetan, and defended the following assertion: “it is not the sacrament, but faith in the sacrament, that justifies.” When pushed on this point, Luther refused to budge, for in this, he said, “lies the whole summary of salvation.” And the Cardinal, with keen observation, replied: “but this is to build a new church!” The Cardinal was right, but not in the way we might think. Not the creation of a new denomination like Lutheranism or Presbyterianism or Methodism. What’s new is faith itself, and the great mystery that this faith makes all things new.

Why did Luther make such a fuss about faith ... indeed about faith alone? Couldn’t he just be satisfied with Scripture alone, or grace alone? Why faith? It’s a good question. It would certainly have softened the debates in sixteenth century if faith and faith alone was less of a prominent theme. Isn’t faith too weak, too facile, too subjective to lay such stress and weight upon it? If it’s just our faith, if its faith alone that justifies and saves us then what’s the point of church, what’s the point of the sacraments, what’s the point of trying to do good, what’s the point of popes, and bishops and funny hats, and altars and organs and fancy vestments and little envelopes with our name on them? This was the fear back then. This was the great scandal of what Luther seemed to be suggesting with faith alone. And frankly it’s still a scandal.

In every philosophy of life and every world-religion that has not been influenced or shaped by the Bible, “faith” is simply not a very central concept. Other religions have scriptures, holy writings and traditions. Other religions have special sacramental rites and practices. Other religions can even have a notion of grace. But faith ... faith finds a place of preeminence only in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, the root word for “faith” is one that we are all very familiar with: “Amen.” In the Old Testament, when we come across this word it has to do with faithfulness—that what someone says will actually happen, will actually come about. When you come across faith (Amen) in the Old Testament it is not believing some general statement. It’s not about “truth” or “belief” in an abstract sense. It is not a cognitive concept detached from a relationship. Rather faith is rooted in a personal encounter—a person speaks to another person

---

## *Editor’s note*

*Erik Herrmann preached this sermon for the Reformation 500 service at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.*



and his words are held to be true, because he faithfully carries it out, he does what he says he will do. Faith is something that a person awakes in another by being faithful to his word. When his words do not disappoint, when they are dependable, then and only then does one “believe” him. Only then does the believer say “Amen.”

Of course, we know that no single person is entirely dependable. Only God can perfectly carry out what he has promised. And so more often than not, the concept of “faith” in the Old Testament has to do with God being faithful, and people believing that what he says will come to pass, no matter how strange or how unlikely. Thus when God told Abraham that he would be the father of many nations even though he and Sarah were old and childless, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Throughout the many stories that we read in the Scriptures, again and again, it becomes quite clear that only God can claim faith in such an absolute and unconditional sense. Only God can elicit a perpetual “Amen.”

But then we come to the New Testament ... and “faith” is all over the place! There’s “you of little faith” and “I have not seen such faith” and “will the Son of man find faith” and “your faith has made you well” ... “go in peace, your faith has saved you” ... “according to your faith, be it done unto you” ... and “O woman, how great is your faith!” ... and “where is your faith?” and “increase our faith!” ... and “if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, even if you say to this mountain, ‘move from here to there’ ... ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen.” Faith is everywhere—it appears with such intensity in the words of Jesus and he ascribes such power to faith that it becomes the central religious concept of the New Testament.

But Jesus also says something else. He has this really strange phrase that he says over and over again, “truly, truly, I say to you.” Well that’s how we usually see it translated. But if we left it in the original, it would sound even stranger and more remarkable to our ears. Because the phrase is really “Amen, Amen I say to you.” All the Gospels record him saying it over and over again, “Amen, I say to you...” This way of talking was not normal. It is utterly and completely unique. No one uses “Amen” in this way. Even in ordinary Christian usage, “Amen” comes at the end, as a response. Only Jesus begins his words with “Amen.” His words flow from the “Amen”—like a river that makes glad the city of God. Well, as a Lutheran might ask, “What does this mean?”

It seems to mean that faith and Jesus belong together. It means the simple fact that the prominence of faith in the Scriptures, the power, centrality and importance that is ascribed to faith is ultimately and only in its conjunction with the person of Jesus Christ. “Jesus is the essence of faith and faith is the essence of the work of Jesus.” It means that Jesus isn’t just the object of our faith, he is the very ground of faith, its beginning and end. It is as St. Paul notes in Galatians 3 that the coming of Christ is the coming of faith, or as the epistle to the Hebrews puts it, “[Jesus:] the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2).

When Jesus speaks his words he asserts a kind of conviction, a trustworthiness and authority that strikes those who hear him as astounding, indeed almost blasphemous. When Jesus sees the faith of the paralyzed man’s friends and says, “take heart, my son, your

sins are forgiven,” those present wondered, “what does he mean?” How can this person make such a lavish promise that only God can make and fulfill? What is he playing at? If one could do this then what would be the point of the temple and the sacrifices, the priesthood, the careful avoidance of all that would make one ritually unclean, and the special attention given to the holy rites and statutes of the law of Moses? What would be the point of it all, if this man could just look at faith and say ‘you’re forgiven’? “But which is easier,” responded Jesus, which is more likely to be true, to be a faithful saying, to be words that don’t disappoint but yield to an Amen—“your sins are forgiven” or “get up and walk”? And of course we know exactly how dependable Jesus’s words were. And as the paralyzed man ran home praising God, the people were astonished at this Jesus who spoke with such authority.

It has been said that in many ways the Reformation was a dispute about authority. Who has the authority to determine the truth about God and ourselves? Who has the authority to interpret the Scriptures? Who has the authority to mete out grace? Who has the authority to take away sins? Was it the pope? Was it a church council? Was it the emperor? Was it Luther? Who can really come through for us on these questions each and every time? And so when Luther said *sola fide*, by faith alone, what he was really saying was that Jesus is the trustworthy one. He is the one who can carry out fully what he promises. Jesus and Jesus alone is the one who will come through for us.

Jesus is the one who says, “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” What have we to add to this, but to believe he who has died for me and risen again just as he said? How can I doubt him who says “Amen, Amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life”?

A couple of years ago, a young lady, a professor of philosophy actually, came to the seminary to share with a few of us her story of how she became a Christian. She grew up in a loving family and environment that was nevertheless entirely secular. In high school, she tried reading the Bible once—at the very least it was important literature for Western history and she thought she should probably read it at least once. And she started in Genesis but by the time she got to the “begats,” (so-and-so begat so-and-so) she got lost and disinterested pretty quickly. And since she didn’t know you could actually skip over that for the time being, she left the Bible to itself. But as she got older a few events and relationships brought her to asking questions again about Christianity. And then one day a friend, a Christian colleague, let her borrow his New Testament. So here she was, an adult professor of philosophy, a teacher of all of the great ideas of Western civilization, and yet for the first time she read the Gospels and met Jesus. And he was unlike anything or anyone she had ever met. She was immediately overwhelmed by this person who on the one hand was clearly a person from the first century in Roman-occupied Palestine. Yet he was also beyond all that somehow. She was struck how he could speak with such confidence and authority and exhibit such patience and compassion for the outcast, for

women, for the poor. She knew that he had to be something more. And at first she didn't believe all of the stories, the miracles, etc., but she couldn't escape how Jesus talked. And finally she realized that this person was so worthy of being trusted, that she had to believe that he had risen from the dead. Because Jesus said he would, was confident that he would, believed that he would—she had to believe it too. On the strength of Jesus's faith and Amen, she found her own faith to believe in him who died and rose again.

And so here we are—not 500 years later, but over 2000 years later—laying hold of this Jesus. Faith alone because faith is the gift of Jesus himself. And Jesus is the summation and culmination of all God's word and work—Jesus and Jesus alone. As saint Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1: “For all the promises of God find their “Yes” in [Christ Jesus]. That is why it is through him that we utter our ‘Amen’ to God for his glory.” Amen.



# The Relevance of Remembering the Reformation

*Erik Herrmann*

In 1983, for the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth, Michael Mathias Precht painted a portrait of Luther entitled, "*Martin Luther, inwendig voller Figur*," "Martin Luther: Full of Figures Inside." I first saw this print in Peter Newman Brooks's office in Cambridge, (it is now in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England's Westfield House, a gift from Brooks). Professor Brooks often held his lectures on Reformation history in his office and he had the delightful habit of breaking away from his notes and carrying on brief dialogues with the portrait of Luther that hung behind us at the back of the room. I even remember once he suddenly shot up from his chair and then dramatically dropped to the floor to bow the knee in genuflection to this painting of Luther, this icon of the Reformation! Of course it was all in jest but it does raise an interesting question—*can one still carry on a conversation with Luther?* Does he have anything relevant to say to us in this time of tech and Twitter, or can we only look at Luther in admiration from a distance and genuflect to a relic from the past?

Another commemoration is now just around the corner. On October 31, 2017, the world will remember the 500th anniversary of what is often recognized as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther's posting of the 95 *Theses against Indulgences* in Wittenberg. For various reasons this moment catapulted Luther into the public eye and he became the lightning rod for the reform of the church. As with many big anniversaries, questions of relevance will arise: Why does the Reformation matter? What was at stake? What was it all about? Was it worth it? Does anything that Luther said or taught have meaning for us today? How should Lutherans and the heirs of the Protestant Reformation view Luther?

## ***Images of Luther and the Reformation***

In 1529, Johannes Cochlaeus, one of Luther's vocal opponents, published a pamphlet entitled the "Seven-headed Luther."<sup>1</sup> In it he depicted Luther as beast with a head of a doctor, a saint, a heretic, an enthusiast, a priest, a church visitor, and Barabbas. All of these were given an interpretation that made Luther look unreliable and dangerous. Since then there have been many images and interpretations of the reformer—some complementary, others less so. Today, with perhaps more books having been written on Luther than any other historical figure (except for Christ), you can be certain Luther's "heads" have increased well beyond seven. In his own day, Luther's admirers and followers hailed

him as a prophet, an instrument of God, and a German hero and Hercules battling the tyranny of Rome.<sup>2</sup> But both then and after his death, the emphasis of the next generation of Lutherans was not on Luther's person or life—he was not to be venerated or emulated, and certainly there were no stories of miracles like the stories of the medieval saints. Rather, the focus was on what Luther taught, the strength of his message, his insight into the Scriptures and the blessed rediscovery of the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Later centuries saw Luther and the Reformation through different lenses.<sup>4</sup> The rationalists of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century—who had little time for religion of any stripe—lamented that so much turmoil in Germany was caused by Luther's "superstitions" and in England by King Henry VIII's love for Anne Boleyn's deep brown eyes. Others, however, could express a more romantic view, casting Luther as the father of the free individual who threw off the shackles of tradition and the church's institutional power. For example, the assessment of Francois Guizot who lived just after the French Revolution:

The Reformation was a vast effort made by the human race to secure its freedom; it was a new-born desire to think and judge freely and independently of all ideas and opinions, which until then Europe had received and been bound to receive from the hands of antiquity. It was a great endeavor to emancipate the human race and to call things by their right names. It was an insurrection of the human mind against the absolute power of the spiritual estate.<sup>5</sup>

In Germany, Luther became a symbol for the patriot and a national hero. The Reformation was deemed Germany's "consummate achievement" and Luther was the leader of liberty into the life of Europe. Into the nineteenth century and early twentieth, the Reformation was often interpreted as an inevitable movement driven more by social and economic forces than by religious ideas. The Peasants' War of 1525 was more significant to the direction of the sixteenth century than Luther's speech before the emperor at the Diet of Worms.<sup>6</sup>

So which is it? Of course, the Reformation is too complex a time and movement to be only about one person or one thing. Its causes and effects touch on a wide range of social and political factors, theological ideas, unique personalities, and churchly pressures. Some would even argue that it is better to speak of *Reformations* rather than a single, unified movement.<sup>7</sup>

Yet in spite of the complexity of the Reformation, October 31, 1517 marks a very specific event with a relatively narrow scope. Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses was admittedly a match that set off a firestorm, but the nature of this event is often obscured by the tumult that follows rather than its original intent. To put it succinctly,

*Photo: Michael Mathias Prechtl, Martin Luther, inwendig voller Figur, 1983 (collection of Westfield House, Cambridge, England).*



*Luther's Ninety-Five Theses were written as a protest against bad pastoral care*, and it is from this perspective that one should try to understand what Luther was up to in those early years of the Reformation. As the Reformation scholar, Jane Strohl, so wonderfully put it, "One could describe Luther's career as the mounting of a life-long pastoral malpractice suit against the church's authority at every level of the hierarchy."<sup>8</sup>

*"Pro re theologica et salute fratrum"*—"For theology and the salvation of the brethren." Luther wrote these words in a letter to his friend Georg Spalatin on October 19, 1516, almost a year before the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses. The letter was a critical assessment of the famous scholar, Erasmus, and his recently published annotated Greek New Testament. On the one hand, Luther greatly appreciated Erasmus's scholarly work—Luther had just finished his lectures on Romans during which he consulted Erasmus's text and was about to begin a new series of lectures on Galatians. However, he was not too impressed with Erasmus's understanding and interpretation of the apostle Paul. Luther wanted Spalatin to convey his concerns to Erasmus even though he knew that his criticisms might fall on deaf ears. After all, he was a "nobody" and Erasmus was known throughout Europe, a "most erudite man." Still, Luther said that he felt compelled to say something since this was not merely an academic difference of opinion—an obscure point that could be debated in the ivory tower of the university. No, Luther was only interested in matters that touched on the heart of everything—the whole of theology and the salvation of all was at stake. When Luther began to change things in the university curriculum at Wittenberg where he taught, he did so because of how it would affect the weekly preaching, teaching, and pastoral care on the parish level. That was the goal of reformation for Luther.

But what was pastoral care on the eve of the Reformation? Of what did it consist? The formal, ecclesiastical, that is, priestly aspects of pastoral care could be largely subsumed under the following: (1) the sacrament of penance, (2) the selling/buying of indulgences, and (3) private mass. On the other hand, there were many less formal but wide-spread practices aimed at the care and comfort of souls: stories of virtues and vices; devotional literature such as the Fourteen Consolations, Art of Dying (*ars moriendi*), and the Lives of the Saints alongside a variety of other spiritual practices such as relics, pilgrimages, and prayers patterned after the monastic life. These *Geistlichkeiten* (literally, "spiritualities"), as Luther called them, became the focus of much of Luther's reform efforts.<sup>9</sup>

It is more customary to think of Luther as a reformer of doctrine (perhaps a specific doctrine like justification or the Lord's Supper) and as an ardent opponent of papal authority. But questions of doctrine and theological authority arose for Luther as means

*Luther's Ninety-Five Theses were written as a protest against bad pastoral care.*

to a greater end: the pastoral care that nurtures a genuine Christian life. Beginning with his own personal search for consolation and hope, Luther urged practices that would saturate one's life with the word of Christ. Only in this deep connection to Christ did Luther find freedom and strength to live

in a world shaped by the contradiction of God's providence and the continual presence of sin and suffering.

And so we see Luther repeatedly and programmatically attack what he believed to be false *Geistlichkeiten*—spiritual practices that tried in various

ways to overcome the contradiction of Christian existence by pushing God back up into heaven away from the world and mitigating the unpleasant realities of life with the lesser “deities” of saints and other spiritual securities. The intermediary position of the saints had the double benefit of preserving God from blame for sin and people from suffering. That Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the eve of All Saints' Day was perhaps a coincidence, but there is a certain seamliness in the proximity of his attack on a saintly treasury of merits and a feast celebrating that pantheon of holy intercessors. For Luther such efforts at keeping God and affliction at bay was wishful thinking and fostered a way of living that made faith in a good God and faithful Father inconspicuous if not unnecessary. But because Luther found in Christ a God who entered into the breach between goodness and sin—suffering and salvation—Luther was also able to bring the saints back down into the secular. For Luther, the saints were now those who found hope in life's contradiction by holding fast to the promises of a God who deigned to suffer for and with humankind. And in that hope the saints found courage to live life in God's creation—to marvel in it, to find beauty in it, to plant, to harvest, to marry, to raise children—though plagues and peasant wars raged.

It is here that we touch upon perhaps the most far-reaching impact of the Reformation; namely, its subversion of the saint, *its redefinition of the religious life, its sacralization of the secular*. And Luther did this through a single, brilliant assertion: neither ordination nor religious vows make one spiritual or religious; rather, it is baptism and faith. Against prevalent piety, the common people are spiritual. The common people are the priesthood.

In the late-medieval context, Christendom could be divided into what was essentially a two-tiered Christianity. The top tier was the spiritual elite represented by members of the monastic life and, by derivation, the priestly office. After martyrdom, monasticism was long regarded as the religious ideal of Christianity. In an attempt to embody the more sacrificial, radical tenets in the Gospels, the monastic distinguished himself from the ordinary Christian by his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The Ten Commandments were important, but “if you would be perfect” said the Lord, “sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me.” To be fair, the monastic usually did not make such a distinction between the ordinary Christian and the “perfect”; he regarded his vows and life as intrinsic to the call to discipleship. For the monk, genuine Christianity looked like monasticism. It would be the church's conscience, an ideal in the midst of Christian mediocrity.

*Neither ordination nor religious vows make one spiritual or religious; rather, it is baptism and faith.*



As such, monasticism was frequently both the catalyst and benchmark for reform. More often than not, reform was contained by simply establishing a new monastic order, but sometimes it would spill over into the broader church. For example, the Cluniac reforms of the tenth century would among other things bring the mandatory vow of celibacy into the priesthood, giving priests a deeper share in the same spiritual estate. The common people too, when seeking a more religious, devoted life, approached monasticism as the standard. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, lay piety grew into a “modern devotion” (*devotio moderna*), modeling itself after certain habits and practices found in the monastery. In short, religious life was not common life. The common and ordinary was de facto not spiritual.

It was thus a revolutionary assertion when Martin Luther (an Augustinian monk!) argued that all ordinary Christians were spiritual and religious. Only faith made one spiritual, and the life of the common, lay person was a true religious sacrifice and worship when shaped by God’s commandments. Living as a faithful father or mother, an obedient worker, a responsible citizen or temporal ruler was the real religious life, more pleasing to God than all the vows and daily offices together. Monasticism was neither the ideal nor the moral mediator for the church. Likewise the priesthood. The ordinary Christian did not need a priesthood to stand in the breach between the common and the holy. In baptism, all Christians participate in a spiritual priesthood (1 Pt 2:9) having direct access to God by faith.

The result was a genuine lay piety with secular life as a self-referential spirituality. Everyday vocations were divine callings. When coordinated with other vocations and ordinary works, the neighbor was served and loved and the community flourished. The body of Christ had many members, each with its own function and role. Even the weakest and least was to be honored as a special and important member of the same body of Christ.

### ***A Premodern Luther for a Postmodern World***

The image of Luther as a theologian engaged in the reform of pastoral care is compelling and his picture of the Christian life in this world sounds beautiful, yet we know that life isn’t like that. The contradictions between the presence of God, the presence of sin, and the presence of suffering continue to exist. Vocations have lost their moral compass and are continually being redefined by social norms, and a whole host of “isms”—capitalism, individualism, consumerism, materialism, and . . . postmodernism.

Postmodernism is often used to describe our present context in the West, though it is not always understood. Often it is defined as relativism—nothing is true except what is true for me. But relativism as such is not really that new of an idea. One can find such views in a variety of movements in late antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment—often called Skepticism.<sup>10</sup> While postmodernism can lead to skepticism there is more to it than that. Simply put, postmodernism describes that, whether we like it or not, the old reliable norms have been called into question. Our so-called foundations—those assumed bases for authorities and power structures, truth claims and ethics—have been crumbling. In this context nothing is objective, everything is relative to

our perspective, everything is an interpretation, all conclusions are necessarily provisional. There is no longer a single frame of reference for our understanding of ourselves or the world, rather it is increasingly argued that we live in a network of *narratives* and *stories* each competing with one another to define us and explain our world. We have personal stories, but also societal, and cultural stories and narratives—large metanarratives. All of these narratives and stories shape us, define us, give us meaning and identity even if the “truth” of them is not demonstrable.

Much of this is a reaction to the self-assuredness of *modernity* (hence the “post” of postmodernity) which, building on the foundations of reason and that which can be known through our observations and senses, dismissed the importance of narrative and story altogether. Instead, narrative—including the Bible’s narrative—was regarded as an impediment. One must try to get *behind* the story in order to find some kind of verifiable, historical, rational, or reliable truth. Hans Frei, in his book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, essentially called this modern approach to narrative the “reverse of fit.”<sup>11</sup> Back in the days of the Reformation, before the Enlightenment, the premodern reader approached the Bible as an accurate description of his world—as Frei notes, the reader saw “his disposition, his actions and passions, the shape of his own life as well as that of his era’s events as figures of that storied world” of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> That is, the reader of the premodern era *fit* her world and her story back into the world of the Bible. But the great shift of modernity is a “reverse of fit”: “All across the theological spectrum the great reversal had taken place,” Frei remarked. “Interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story.”<sup>13</sup> Our present existence became the judge and norm and interpretive key to the story of the Bible.

However, we are said to live in *postmodernity*. And in this context, we are again seeing an *embrace* of narrative and story, and we can see it in almost every area: in philosophy and ethics and politics; and—over the last quarter century—narrative has also found an increasingly central place in theology. The narrative, the *story* seems to be all important to the postmodern condition . . . the story is king.

But then Luther always knew this. Or at least he came to fully know this as he struggled against his own doubts and uncertainties. In the end, it was the story of the Scriptures alone, the story of God and his people, the story of Christ that filled Luther’s horizon and replaced the false securities and crumbling foundations of his day with newfound certainty. I would like to suggest that the nature of Luther’s use of the Scriptures as narrative—as identity-shaping story—is a point of relevance worth stressing again in our time.

Luther is in many ways a typical premodern interpreter of the Bible (though the intensity of his occupation with the Scriptures sets him apart even from the monastic tradition). Still, like his contemporaries, Luther found the unity of the biblical narrative as the definitive explanation for his own world. The connection between world history and

salvation history was assumed even though it was not always clear. Early on he followed the traditional fourfold method of biblical interpretation that tried to make the connection between the two through a series of figural or allegorical readings of the biblical narrative. Later, however, Luther would eschew this method because it reinforced a view of salvation history that moved along a course of such graduated continuity that Christ and the gospel appeared merely as new and improved versions of Moses and of the law. Instead, Luther began to find a different metanarrative that pervaded the Scriptures beyond that of simply figure and fulfillment or type and antitype.

In any event, Luther gave more intentional thought to how the Scriptures functioned as the word of God. There is a saying that “there are some books that you read, and then there are some books that read you.” For Luther, the Bible was that second kind of book. He did not see the Scriptures primarily as the object of our interpretation, but rather *we* are the object as the Scriptures interpret *us*. Now this is not to say that Luther thought there is no need to try to understand the text, or that Scripture requires no study and no explanation. It’s simply that for Luther the primary function of the Scriptures is to shape us, form us, to lead us into a new creation, to kill us and make us alive again. Even from his very earliest lectures he held to such a view, “Note well, that the power of Scripture is this: it will not be altered by the one who studies it; instead it transforms the one who loves it. It draws the individual in—into itself—and into its own powers.”<sup>14</sup> The Scriptures draw you in—into its world, its history, its story—so that we read our world, our history, our story against the backdrop of the Bible. The biblical narrative becomes the key to understanding our life, the defining story that interprets our world. It’s not that we find the Bible meaningful to our life, but rather our life receives its meaning from the Bible. This, of course, runs completely counter to the *modern* approach, but interestingly it is not so foreign to the *postmodern* understanding of narrative.

For Luther the Scriptures are not merely a deposit of divine propositional truth. They do contain such truth, but the Scriptures are properly more than this. They are the story of the living God of Israel who brings kings and mighty men to naught and raises up the lowly and the orphan, who brings forth springs in the desert and gardens in the desolate places, who makes patriarchs out of pagans, who cuts down the olive tree and makes the stump blossom, who chooses the things that are not, who brings to nothing the things that are. And what’s more, this story confronts us with the remarkable claim that it is also *our story*.

We can see this view of the Scriptures in how Luther continually understood the contemporary events around him in light of salvation history. Luther always saw more than just emperors and princes, peasants and popes. He saw their actions as well as his own against the eschatological backdrop of salvation history to which as St. Paul says: our striving is not against flesh and blood but powers and principalities . . . against this present darkness—Luther sees a world full of men but also full of devils!<sup>15</sup> Consider Precht’s portrait of Luther again—Luther is stuffed full with figures of his own particular history—peasants aligned against armored knights: The terrifying Peasants War of 1525! Yet for

Luther this was not just some social uprising, some class warfare—reading his own history against the backdrop of the biblical narrative Luther viewed these events in apocalyptic terms. Indeed, what could be more apocalyptic than such a complete upheaval of the world and its order.

But isn't Luther's apocalypticism usually highlighted as evidence of his distance from us rather than his contemporary relevance? And isn't such a view of history dangerous? After all, this is precisely what one of his contemporaries, Thomas Müntzer, did in leading the Peasants' War. Müntzer used the Scriptures to interpret the events of his day apocalyptically, being inspired by the stories of the Bible that describe the wars that will arise between good and evil in the final days. To be sure, at times we can see that Luther could also slip into such dangerous apocalyptic interpretations—his assessment of the Jews being the most egregious example.<sup>16</sup>

But more often than not, Luther's apocalypticism is nothing like Müntzer's or the other "prophetic" figures of the sixteenth century who tried to seize the reigns of political history in the name of God. The word *apocalypsis* means to unveil what lay hidden, to reveal what was before unknown to the world. It asserts that without such a revelation the world's true meaning remains closed. In his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* of 1517 and even more clearly in his *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, Luther rejected a theology that proceeded without *apocalypsis*, without revelation—that one could simply discern the hidden, invisible things of God from the visible things of this world.<sup>17</sup> Such a "theology of glory," as he called it, presses the biblical world into a world understood by logic, philosophy, and human experience. In effect, it tries to fit the narrative of Scripture into the narrative of the world, whether that be the world of philosophy or science, or the world of peasant and prince. With such a reversal of reason and revelation, of dialectic and the apocalyptic, the scholastic would try to fit the righteousness of God into the righteousness of man, and someone like Thomas Müntzer would search for the eschatological power of God in the power of peasant armies.

Yet Luther's apocalyptic view of the events of his own history was ultimately not governed by the injustices of pope or prince, the threat of peasant or plague, the wars and rumors of wars, nor even the raging of devils. Rather it is the mystery that was hidden for ages (Col 1:26), a wisdom kept from the wise but made known to the lowly (Mt 11:25; 1 Cor 1:18f.), a "theology of the cross" that reveals that the end of the ages has come upon us in Christ the crucified. This is the *apocalypsis* that, for Luther, interprets his world and its end: the crucified one has taken all evil and sin into himself and triumphs over them in his cross. Following Paul's summary of the biblical narrative, especially the grand sweeping history of salvation recounted in Romans and indicated by Galatians, Luther focused on the story of *promise*—God's promise. From the beginning of the biblical story until the end, Luther witnessed God's promise continually breaking into the lives of his people in order to claim the last word so that everything else is penultimate—sin, death, the devil, even the law. Only by the promise does Israel live in faith, and only through

faith in the promise do the Gentiles find their spiritual home, for “all the promises of God find their ‘Yes’ in Christ” (2 Cor 1:20). And this story of promise confronts us as *itself* a promise—*Christus pro nobis—Christ for us*. So it is that the Scriptures, confronting us as a promise, require and produce faith. Therefore, in the midst of defeat, the fear of death, the doubts and trials that seem to contradict the power and mercy and justice of God, it is nevertheless the death and resurrection of Christ that promises hope and gives meaning and purpose to one’s own story.

Without the revelation of this promise, without this other story, Luther’s statements and actions can sound absurd. Well known is the saying ascribed to Luther, “if I knew that the world was to come to an end tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today.” They are not his words, but they seem to get close to his thought. Perhaps more striking is something that he did say: in the midst of the darkness and tumult of the Peasants War, Luther does something even more absurd than plant an apple tree—he *decides to get married*.<sup>18</sup> Writing to a relative about his possible death at the hands of the peasants, he pauses and says, “If I can manage it, before I die I will still marry my Katie *to spite the devil*, should I hear that the peasants continue. I trust they will not steal my courage and joy.”<sup>19</sup> A remarkable moment: Luther paradoxically exhibits both resignation from the world and yet at the same time confidence and freedom to live and even invest in the world. He does this because the story of the Scriptures, stained on every page with the blood of Christ!—promises him that the God who destroys the power of sin, death, and the devil *is his God*. In this faith, the biblical story of salvation becomes his own story, interpreting and shaping every moment of his life. Only with his “conscience held captive by the word of God” does he find true freedom.

To be clear, Luther does not mean that every narrative in the Bible is simply to be reduced to the admonition “repent and believe.” God’s promise, and the faith that it calls into being, comes not in generalities but in the midst of the particularities of human life and history. (The saying, “the devil’s in the details” is really quite incorrect—the devil is much better at general platitudes; it is God who descends into the irreducible sweat and blood of human history—as Luther says, “into the muck and work that makes his skin smoke.”<sup>20</sup>) It is in real life, with all its contradictions and uncertainties that God speaks to us, that he draws near to us in the flesh of his Son.

It is here, in the story of God’s promise that Luther’s theology is even more important and urgent for our day. While it is true that the postmodern tearing down of traditional assumptions and foundations exposes the naïveté and arrogance of modern society, it has also left our society in a state of disorientation, disillusionment, and anxiety. There seems to be an ever-growing cultural “*Anfechtung*” that simultaneously rejects all authority but still longs for certainty. In the midst of this uncertain climate with all of life’s contradictions and doubts, that values authenticity more than authority and truthfulness more than truth, Luther’s theology points to, not another set of securities, handholds or objectively verifiable foundations, but a *promise*, a word that depends entirely on the love

and faithfulness of the one who speaks it. Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," says that it is just "a little word," but words and stories are all we have—and "though devils all the world should fill" against the prince of this world, this "one little word can fell him."

Story and promise—naturally, what we are talking about is Luther's theology of the word. After all, if Luther does still speak to us today it is not because *his* words are all that terribly important, but because he directs us to hear the one whose word promises the world hope and life. Before this word, as Luther wrote in his very last words, "*aller Bettler*"—we are all beggars. This is true.<sup>21</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Johannes Cochlaeus, *Sieben Köpffe Martini Luthers Vom Hochwirdigen Sacrament des Altars* (Leypsig: Schuman, 1529).
- 2 Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Baker Academic: 1999).
- 3 Irena Backus, *Life Writing in Reformation Europe: Lives of Reformers by Friends, Disciples and Foes*. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).
- 4 See Walther von Loewenich, *Luther und der Neuprotestantismus* (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1963); Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte mit ausgewählten Texten von Lessing bis zur Gegenwart*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970); and Preserved Smith, *The Age of the Reformation* (Harvard, 1920), 699–750.
- 5 François Guizot, *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (Paris, 1828), as quoted by Preserved Smith, *The Age of the Reformation* (Harvard, 1920), 714.
- 6 See for example Karl Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, trans. by J. L. and E. G. Mulliken. (London, 1897); Roy Pascal, *The Social Basis of the Reformation* (London, 1933); Harold J. Grimm, “Social Forces in the German Reformation,” in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*. Ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Lexington, MA, 1972), 85–97; Hajo Holborn, “The Social Basis of the German Reformation,” in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, 75–84; Henry Charles Lea, “The Eve of the Reformation,” in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, 98–118; Hartmut Lehmann, ed. *Luthergedächtnis 1817 bis 2017* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).
- 7 E.g., Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
- 8 Jane E. Strohl, “General Introduction,” in *Luther’s Spirituality* (Paulist Press, 2007), xxiii.
- 9 Scott Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation Spirituality,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 249–270.
- 10 Cf. Robert Rosin, *Reformers, the Preacher and Skepticism: Luther, Brenz, Melancthon and Ecclesiastes* (Mainz: Philip von Zabern: 1997).
- 11 Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Yale, 1980).
- 12 Ibid., 3.
- 13 Ibid., 7.
- 14 LW 10, 332.
- 15 See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Eerdmanns, 2008, )1–5.
- 16 See Mark Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–1546* (Fortress: 1983).





**Publisher**

Dale A. Meyer  
*President*

**Author**

Erik Herrmann  
*Associate Professor of Historical Theology  
Director of the Center for Reformation Research  
Chairman of the Department of Historical Theology  
Director of Concordia Theology*

**Executive Editor**

Charles P. Arand  
*Dean of Theological Research and Publication*

**Editor**

Travis J. Scholl  
*Managing Editor of Theological Publications*

**Assistant Editor**

Melanie Appelbaum

**Creative Director**

Jayna Rollings

**Graphic Designer**

Courtney Koll

**Design Assistant**

Amanda Hellwege

*The Relevance of Remembering the  
Reformation* originally appeared in  
the Winter/Spring 2017 issue  
of the *Concordia Journal*.

.....  
*All correspondence should be sent to:*  
CONCORDIA PAGES  
801 Seminary Place  
St. Louis, Missouri 63105  
314-505-7117  
cj@csl.edu









**concordia**  
**theology**