

John MacArthur on the Legacy of Martin Luther

Scripture: Romans 1:17

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Last fall, John MacArthur contributed a foreword to R.C. Sproul and Stephen Nichols's book, [The Legacy of Luther](#). We thought it appropriate to share John's words with you here, both to coincide with Carl Trueman's guest lectures at The Master's Seminary on the Reformation this week (which you can watch live [here](#)), and to encourage your further study of Luther and the other Reformers in this, the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's Ninety-five Theses. –GTY Staff

Much of the discussion about Martin Luther these days seems to focus on his flaws rather than his faith, and that's a pity. It's quite true that some conspicuous blemishes mar the great Reformer's reputation. His most glaring faults arose from a brooding disposition. He seemed naturally prone to melancholy, impatience, a vehement temper, and a sharp tongue. Even Luther's most devoted friends recognized those traits as serious shortcomings. At the Reformer's funeral, his lifelong friend and best-known colleague, Philip Melancthon, noted in his eulogy that Luther had a reputation for "too much asperity"—then added, "I will not affirm the reverse."

So there's no denying that Luther had feet of clay.

In fact, to be completely candid, some of Luther's more infamous transgressions were downright reprehensible. We are rightly appalled, for example, at his fondness for scatology, the cutting sarcasm that characterizes his polemical writings, and his crass xenophobia—especially his anti-Semitism. Those were colossal defects in Luther's character, and it would be folly to pretend they did not exist.

But Luther was, after all, a product of his times. It is a sad fact of history that parochial points of view, illiberal opinions, and harsh rhetoric were quite common features in the discourse of the early Reformation—on all sides of the debate. Sir Thomas More, for example, published a blistering critique of Luther's teaching so full of scatological invective that key parts of More's anti-Lutheran tract are unquotable. The English statesman called Luther many defamatory names, dismissing him as a liar, a "pestilential buffoon," a pig, an ape, a dolt, "a piece of scurf," and a "lousy little friar." (Ironically, Thomas More has been canonized as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, and he is highly venerated by many of the same critics who cite Luther's own intemperate language as a way of discrediting the Reformer.)

Luther was of course influenced by some of the quirks and superstitions that infected the entire culture of sixteenth-century Europe. He and his contemporaries all stood with one foot in the Middle Ages and one foot in the Enlightenment. The vernacular of that time was frequently earthy to the point of obscenity—even in supposedly genteel settings such as courtrooms, palaces, and ecclesiastical settings. Death was always imminent. Minds were rife with irrational fears.

Indeed, some of Luther's most disturbing imperfections were rooted in a naive, lingering attachment to certain medieval superstitions. His obsession with the devil, his fear of sorcery, and his occasional

gullibility regarding tales of monsters and magic all reflect a mind swayed by the folklore of that time.

Nevertheless, it would be grossly inaccurate to categorize Martin Luther as a slave to superstition. His opposition to the Roman Catholic system began when he rejected (and openly challenged) the Papal mythology regarding relics and indulgences. He especially objected to the Roman Church's practice of preying on the foolish superstitions of common people. Any objective evaluation of Luther's legacy must take *all* of that into account.

Luther himself was keenly aware that he was a fallen man with sinful proclivities. To his friend George Spalatin, he wrote, "I cannot deny that I am more vehement than I ought to be." He acknowledged that his temper and the sharpness of his pen sometimes carried him "beyond the decorum of modesty." But he was trying to walk a fine line. Luther firmly believed it was necessary for him to challenge the artificial refinement that squelched theological debate. He knew many men in positions of authority in the church who clearly saw and abhorred how corrupt the papacy had become, but they were too fainthearted to confront even the grossest ecclesiastical wrongdoing. In that same letter to Spalatin, Luther wrote, "I wonder where this new religion arose, in which *anything* said against an adversary is labeled abuse."

Luther's best-known intellectual adversary was Erasmus, the famous humanist, theologian, and Catholic priest. When someone complained to him about Luther's harshness, the Catholic scholar replied, "God has sent in this latter age a severe physician because of the gravity of the existing ailments."

Luther faced his own sins honestly. He sought (and found) grace and full forgiveness in Christ alone. No one ever seriously accused Luther of unchastity, dishonesty, greed, or any other manifestation of the wanton lasciviousness Scripture points to as the key identifying mark of false teachers (2 Peter 2:17-22). Impartial readers of the firsthand historical data will discover that Luther was a humble, generous, hospitable, respectable man of high principles, profound compassion, a tender conscience, unflinching truthfulness, and (above all) a passion for God. He was deeply beloved by those close to him, universally admired by his countrymen, and well respected (though perhaps reluctantly) even by many of his theological adversaries. Erasmus stated emphatically in a letter to Cardinal Wolsey that Luther's personal life and conduct were above reproach.

Nevertheless, Luther's more militant enemies have always emphasized and exaggerated his flaws. Some have even suggested that he may have suffered from some kind of mental illness. A simple reading of Luther's life and writings should disabuse any fair-minded person of that notion. Unfortunately, like any oft-repeated lie, the long-term, systematic defamation of Luther's character has attained the status of truth in the minds of many—especially those who can't be bothered to investigate history for themselves and have no real clue what Luther was genuinely like.

Getting to know the real Martin Luther is not terribly difficult. Few men's lives were more thoroughly documented than Martin Luther's before the development of electronic recording technology. Practically everything he said was dutifully noted and logged in journals and notebooks by Luther's regular dinner guests and students. Even offhand comments made in private conversations were taken down and collected. Those who made the notes originally intended them for their own private use. But two decades after Luther's death, a large anthology of these notes was assembled from multiple sources, edited, and published in German under the title *Tischreden*, which translates as *Table Talk* in English. The work fills six volumes in the German Weimar edition.

Table Talk is a fascinating window into the mind and personality of Martin Luther. His wit, his keen insight, his boldness, and the strength of his convictions are clearly discernible. He is, as we would expect, passionate, opinionated, articulate, provocative, and zealous for the truth. Somewhat surprisingly, he is also jovial, engaging, well-versed in many subjects, and full of good-natured mischief. Unlike the younger Luther of the monastery, the Luther of *Table Talk* comes across as confident, mature, and secure in his faith. He was clearly a fascinating dinner host.

On the other hand, *Table Talk* is the source from which Luther's most objectionable remarks and absurd opinions are generally drawn. It must be borne in mind that Luther himself had no hand in the publication of *Table Talk*. Different versions of the work were published by friends of Luther, and it is clear by comparing them that Luther's sayings have been heavily paraphrased and embellished by those who compiled the collection. It is also clear that Luther himself never intended most of these comments to be published. Though he was always a deliberate provocateur, Luther the writer was much more guarded than Luther the dinner host.

But it's *not* necessarily clear in the *Table Talk* entries when Luther is joking, purposely overstating his case, speaking satirically, playing devil's advocate, or just trying to get a rise out of his dinner guests. Luther's critics tend to read *Table Talk* through the same critical lens they use to appraise his more thoughtful publications. That is not fair to Luther. If our idle words were all recorded and subjected to the judgment of our adversaries, none of us would fare very well. We *will* one day give account for every careless thing we have said (Matthew 12:36). But we will answer to the just and merciful judge of all the earth, not to an unfair or hostile jury of worldlings.

Despite all the publicity given to his flaws, Luther's indelible legacy will always be the example of his faith. His heroic courage, deep passion, steadfast integrity, infectious zeal, and all his other virtues are the fruit of his faith. This one man made an impact on the church and on the world that still influences all Bible-believing Christians today.

Luther would not have sought any honor for himself. By his own testimony, he owed everything to Christ. The story of his life confirms that testimony. Conversion utterly transformed Luther from an anxious, fainthearted monk into a paragon of confident, contagious faith. The more he faced opposition from Rome, the more his biblical convictions deepened. Everything positive in Luther's life points back to his life-changing encounter with the righteousness of God and the glory of Christ in the gospel.

Of course, we can't affirm all the distinctive doctrines Luther taught. Virtually no one follows Luther's teaching slavishly today. In fact, some of my own disagreements with his teaching are profound. But on the core principle of gospel truth—namely, the doctrine of justification by faith—Luther was sound and biblical. More than that, he was instrumental in recovering that biblical precept after it had long lain buried under an avalanche of Roman dogmas and papal traditions. Moreover, Luther held firmly to the authority of Scripture, the work of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the promises of God. For his firm stance in defense of all those truths, he deserves our profound gratitude and respect.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Mark". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "J" and "M".

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