

The Secret of the Reformation

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Introduction

First of all: I am the least to tell, what the secret of the Reformation is all about. There is no need to mention that the one who can spell out the secret of the reformation reveals that he obviously has not fully understand even its basics implications. I want to avoid that.

Secondly: As I will take you into some of my personal reflections about the reformation, I am well aware of the fact that I am just considering a small fraction of it. Since I was raised in my early years of faith in the sphere of Lutheran Pietism and later on *theologized* (socialized) in the context of more Lutheran theology, I feel more comfortable talking about some aspects of the Lutheran reformation. Please forgive me my „sectarian“ approach.

Let us now dive into the adventure to unveil some aspects of the reformation. Why the reformation has become such a powerful event? An event we still talk about, even after 500 years. Somehow the reformation has indeed changed the world.

1. „Get a friend and change the world“ - The principle of complementary ministry

Martin Luther had a huge number of enemies. We all know that. He had quite some patrons and companions in the church and in the political sphere. Martin Luther had but only one intimate friend. This friend was Philipp Melanchthon. In German, his name is called *Schwarzerd*, translated: black earth. His German name was converted from the Greek language: Melanchthon.¹

Further on, to make it easier: I will call him Philipp. His dearest friend, I will call Martin.

Both men were personally close to each other. But they were not at all similar in character. Martin wrote of Philipp, in the preface to Melanchthon's Commentary on Galatians (1529):

„I had to fight with rabble and devils, for which reason my books are very warlike. I am the rough pioneer who must break the road; but Master Philipp comes along softly and gently, sows and waters heartily, since God has richly endowed him with gifts.“

Martin was the warrior, Philipp the peacemaker. Martin exemplified strength of faith. He was some kind of a revolutionary visionary.

Philipp on the other hand was the incarnation of caution and temperance. He exemplified a mind of moderation. He was blessed with a conscientious and irenic, a peace-making character.

Martin Luther once in a while mixed it all up. Philipp restructured the chaos, reshaped thought and theology, recreated order. Re-formed things.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Melanchthon

Both, Martin and Philipp, shared a common task. The reformation. But they adhered to a slightly different but - I think - still complementary hermeneutical approach to Scriptures.

The distinction between Martin and Philipp is well brought out in Martin's letter to Philipp (June 1530):

„To your great anxiety by which you are made weak, I am a cordial foe; for the cause is not ours. It is your philosophy, and not your theology, which tortures you so, as though you could accomplish anything by your useless anxieties. So far as the public cause is concerned, I am well content and satisfied; for I know that it is right and true, and, what is more, it is the cause of Christ and God himself. For that reason, I am merely a spectator. If we fall, Christ will likewise fall; and if he falls, I would rather fall with Christ than stand with the emperor.“

Martin was a powerful preacher to the people. Philipp - a thoughtful teacher to the scholars. Philipp systematized Luther's ideas. Defended them in public. Structured them to become a manual for religious education. Philipp became the „Teacher of Germany“, as he has been called ever since. Even until today Liberal Arts Colleges get back in constructing a curriculum to Melanchthon's ideas.²

One of the secrets of the reformation was this powerful complementary ministry of those two men. God called Martin. Gifted him. Sent him. So did God with Philipp. And put him at the side of Martin.

God has done this before. With Moses. He put Aaron at his side. Moses was the microphone towards God. Aaron was the loudspeaker towards the people. God called David. He put Jonathan at his side. A friendship of sacrifice and loyalty. God called Naomi. Put Ruth at her side. A friendship of provision and protection. And they indeed influenced history. God called the Apostle Paul. He put Barnabas at his side. Paul - the speaker, and Barnabas - the moderator of things.

If you feel that God has given you the task to change the world - we all should in a sense feel like this - pray for a friend at your side. Do you want to change our world today? Get a friend and change the world.

2. „Let the light shine“ - Re-discovering the Gospel

Let us fly back into the Middle Ages, the „Dark Ages“. Those centuries were indeed dark: there was no education for common people. The vast majority of people couldn't read or write. In the church of the middle ages there was basically no Bible, no sermon in a language ordinary people could follow and understand. Indeed dark ages.

There was, however, in the midst of broad darkness but one beacon: Judaism. The synagogue. Judaism had it all: the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew language. The source of revelation and truth. The basis for faith and ethics. The synagogue - a beacon of intellectual illumination and spiritual formation.

² For example: <http://www.concordia-ny.edu/about/documents/OurIdentity.pdf>

The synagogue provided the chance of education for ordinary people. Reading and writing for all. Not only for selected celebrities who went into the monasteries and educated by the church.

On the one hand, the Jewish people has been humiliated and suppressed by the lofty church since many centuries. On the other hand, „as the elect and dearly loved people“ (Romans 11:28) - by God's provision - since „the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable“ (Romans 11:29) - Judaism remained the *only* place of true enlightenment for ordinary people during the Dark Ages. Some in the church appreciated this.

We write the year 1517. Biblical truth, the gospel, was widely not intelligible, not visible. The gospel was covered up by the tradition and superstition of the church. Augustini's theology of grace had been overgrown by Aristotelian Scholasticism. Moreover, there was no Bible written in a language ordinary people could read and understand.

Martin Luther has not invented the gospel, he has not discovered it. He just re-discovered it. He has been overwhelmed by the power of the gospel as he - being a professor of theology - turned in faith to God who accepted him in Christ alone. Luther was gripped by grace. He experienced the power of grace for spiritual liberation personally. And proclaimed it publicly. The rediscovery of the pure gospel sparked Luther to make it known to others.

Despite the authoritative, in a sense, divinely inspired Latin Vulgate (Latin translation of the Bible), Philipp Melanchthon advised Luther to translate the New and Old Testament into German language. He was Luther's principal assistant in translating the Old Testament into German.

The Jewish Virtual Library states the following:

„To translate the Old Testament, Luther needed help. He consulted Jewish scholars, and the great Christian savant Melanchthon was particularly helpful. Luther made wide use of the commentaries of Nicholas de Lyra, a French scholar who drew heavily on the commentary of Rashi "whom he transcribes almost word for word.“ So frequently did Luther draw from de Lyra that a well-known couplet asserts, „Si Lyra non Lyrasset, Luther non saltasset" (Had Lyra not played, Luther could not have danced).“³

For translating the Bible Luther drew on sources of Judaism. He sensed something about the value of this beacon of intellectual illumination and spiritual formation.

By translating the Bible Luther uncovered and brought to light the plain gospel, so that all people could know about it. In about a decade the complete Bible was reprinted eighty times and in one tenth of all German households there was at least a printed New Testament in German language.

The Bible Translation in consequence sparked education for all leading tenth founding of schools.

³ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/luther-s-translation-of-the-bible-judaic-treasures>;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_of_Lyra

In addition to that doctrine and teaching within the church could now be checked against the Scriptures. Lies about the Jewish people, anti-judaistic polemic could be detected and repudiated by the plain statements of the Bible. The German Bible was the unbiased arbitration judging even against Luther's own growing anti-judaistic misconceptions and polemic against the Jews.

The rediscovery of the Gospel by Luther created another beacon of light and hope at the end of the Dark Ages.

3. „*Euangelion* and Evangelism“ - Luther, the Gospel and the Jewish people

Luther has rediscovered the gospel. Romans 1:16-17 are the so called „reformation verses“:

„For I am not ashamed of the gospel,
for it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes,
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
For the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel
from faith to faith, just as it is written,
“The righteous by faith will live.”

Wonderfully interwoven in those two verses is both the nature and purpose of the gospel on the one hand and the challenge to proclaim it on the other hand. It is a challenge, however, to keep both distinguished: the message of the gospel on the one hand and the evangelistic mandate on the other hand. The power of the gospel does not evolve from my evangelism. The power is inherent in the gospel itself. Luther also knew that the gospel is not only for the Greek, the non-jewish people. He was challenged by his own reformation discovery to change his attitude towards the Jewish people. At the time of Luther, Jews were not residents in smaller cities like Wittenberg. He met just a few Jewish people, but never visited a synagogue. As he was rediscovering the gospel, Luther - at the same time - rediscovered the Jewish people as a distinct people, loved and elected by God and called to embrace the gospel about the Messiah.

A few years after his personal gospel encounter Luther shocked Christianity with the notion that „Jesus was a Jew“. Some might have known this, but you were not allowed to say it within the catholic setting. In his essay 1523 „That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew“, Luther challenged pope and pulpit to reconsider the fate of the Jewish people under the rule of the oppressive catholic church.⁴

Thus he argued in his booklet:

„They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings... When they baptize them they show them nothing of Christian doctrine or life, but only subject them to popishness and mockery... If the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles ... When we are inclined to boast of our position [as Christians] we

⁴ https://www.uni-due.de/collcart/es/sem/s6/txt09_1.htm;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_and_antisemitism; <https://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/272-luther-1523>;

should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord. Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are... If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them not by papal law but by the law of Christian love. We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us, that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, hear our Christian teaching, and witness our Christian life.“

In the second part of this treatise, Luther tried to prove Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. He emphasized that God had honored the Jews by the gift of Torah and prophecy as no other nation.

At the end Luther recommended even a pedagogically graduated preaching of the gospel: the Jews should first be made known to the man Jesus as the true Messiah. Later, they should be taught that Jesus is also a true God, thus overcoming their prejudice that God cannot be man.

The former Rabbi Jakob Gipher, who was probably baptized in 1519 because of Luther's sermons and then taught Hebrew in Wittenberg, supported Luther in writing his booklet of „Jesus Christ was born a Jew“. ⁵ For both the goal was to integrate Jews into society in order to be able to convert them more successfully.

Luther didn't see any positive spiritual or cultural inherent value in Judaism or the Jewish people themselves. Luther continued to cling to the Augustinian notion that the Jewish people played a „negative role“ in relation to the „positive position“ of the church. ⁶

Luther's fervent desire was that Jews would hear the Gospel proclaimed clearly in his essay and by reading it be moved to convert to Christianity. Moreover, Luther wanted the truth of the Reformation to be proved biblically correct against the doctrines of the catholic church by the success of evangelical missions. This excessive expectation contributed to the later disappointment of Luther and his radical change of course in regard to the Jewish people.

In this way he put the gospel in front of his own „missionary motives“ without considering how his motives could possibly restrain the „power of the gospel“ itself. Luther intermingled „*euangelion* with evangelism“. He confused the gospel message with his zealous ambition for evangelistic results. By his zealous motives he covered up again the inherent power of the *euangelion* and eventually may have hindered its power to reach the hearts of the Jewish people.

Luther missed the opportunity to put his own evangelistic motives correctly into a wider biblical perspective. The apostle Paul knew something about the secret of the hardening of heart of his own Jewish people and the minimal results his own reasoning in Jewish synagogues would affect:

⁵ http://www.glk.uni-mainz.de/Dateien/B_Comtesse-DassJesusChristuseingeborenerJudesei1523.pdf; https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_und_die_Juden;

⁶ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2136-augustine>; <http://www.augustinus.de/projekte-des-zaf/epistulae-projekt/11-startseite-nachrichten/2-beispiel-einer-nachricht>; <http://www.theo-web.de/zeitschrift/ausgabe-2002-02/rothgangel2.pdf>

„Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Seeing that I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I could provoke my people to jealousy and save *some* of them.“ (Romans 11:13)

Paul knew deeply, not least from his own biography, about God’s loving patience for his chosen people and accordingly Paul exemplified this attitude in his own ministry towards the Jewish people. By visiting regularly the synagogues he was aware that he might only save *some* of his own people.

Conclusion

The challenges of the Lutheran Reformation are in front of us:

1. „Get a friend and change the world“ - Team up for change!

We will not change our world if we are cruising around alone or even in a team. Take on the challenge of a personal complementary ministry! Pray for a close companion beside you.

2. „Let the light shine“ - Communicate the Gospel in new ways!

Be yourself gripped anew by grace alone! Find new ways and ventures to communicate the true and pure light of the gospel!

3. „*Euangelion* and Evangelism“ - God is able!

Be aware of not mixing the power of the gospel with your well-meant motives and powerful actions as you reach out to the Jewish people. The gospel itself should be always clearly distinguished from well meant evangelistic motives. The gospel has power not our methods of communicating it. Let us keep always in mind:

„And even they (the Jews who still reject their Messiah) - if they do not continue in their unbelief - will be grafted in, for *God is able* to graft them in again.“ (Romans 11:23)

God is able! *Elohim yakol* (Hebrew)! God has the unrivaled patience and enduring and prevailing power to reach the hearts of his own chosen people. *Elohim yakol!* God is able. *This* is the secret of the reformation.