

**The Pacific Theological College**

**500 YEARS OF REFORMATION – A CELEBRATION**



**17 - 18 March 2017, Friday and Saturday**



## Workshop Church History: Demonizing Dissenters

### 1. An example of Luther's „hate speech”

“... not one good Christian conscience can believe anything but that the pope is not and cannot be the head of the Christian church and cannot be God’s or Christ’s vicar. Instead, he is the head of the accursed church of all the worst scoundrels on earth, a vicar of the devil, an enemy of God, an adversary of Christ, a destroyer of Christ’s churches; a teacher of lies, blasphemies, and idolatries; an arch church-thief and church robber of the keys and all the goods of both the church and the temporal lords; a murderer of kings, inciter to all kinds of bloodshed; a brothel-keeper over all brothel-keepers and all vermin, even that which cannot be named; an Antichrist, a man of sin and child of perdition [II Thess. 2.3]; a true werewolf. Whoever does not want to believe this may keep on riding with his god, the pope; I, a qualified teacher and preacher in the church of Christ responsible for telling the truth, have herewith done my share. He who wants to stink may stink; he who wants to be lost, may be lost – his blood is on his own head.” (LW 41, 357f.)



Image: Martin Luther: Wider das Papsttum zu Rom vom Teufel gestiftet. Wittenberg: Hans Lufft 1545. Title page with woodcut adapted from Lucas Cranach d. Ä. (1472 - 1553). <http://www.payer.de/religionskritik/karikaturen17.htm>, acc. on 1. March 2017.

This example taken from **Luther's 1545 writing "Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil"** addresses the primary and supreme adversary of the Reformation. There were other "enemies" attacked by Luther in a similar or in an even worse way.

How can a man who has searched and found the merciful God speak such words and treat his adversaries without any mercy?

## 2. *Conflicts, opponents and threats*

Luther's career as a reformer was not a calm development. It was characterised by severe conflicts. He challenged the dominant system of the Roman Catholic Church of his time and was led to deny the spiritual authority of the Pope which caused his excommunication.

He refused to recant his opinions in the face of the Emperor and the Estates of the Holy Roman Empire at the **Diet of Worms 1521** which made him - and his followers with him - outlaws under the imperial ban. Although Luther's teaching found support in an increasing number of cities and principalities the antagonism of the Emperor and the Roman Catholic Estates never ceased.



Martin Luther's appearance before the Diet of Worms. Woodcut, Germany 1521.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Diet-of-Worms-Germany-1521>, acc. 1 March 2017.

The spread of the Reformation movement happened despite and against the ongoing oppression by Church and Empire. And it was not a uniform movement. It brought forth new internal conflicts and divisions. Luther's struggles with opponents from within his movement were of no lesser intensity than the arguments with the representatives of the papal church.

- While Luther in 1521 was hiding on the Wartburg and translating the New Testament a party of radical reformers took over in Wittenberg and forced changes on a congregation that in Luther's eyes was not yet ready to bear these novelties. Luther's colleague **Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt** was the leading spirit behind these actions. It soon became noticeable that Karlstadt differed not only in terms of the speed of the reform but had a different approach and understanding of faith and scripture.



Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and a scene of iconoclasm, anonymous copper print, <http://www.br.de/mediathek/video/video/reformation-karlstadt-wittenberg-100.html>, acc. 1 March 2017.



Thomas Müntzer, <http://www.mdr.de/reformation500/orte/person-vorstellung-thomas-muentzer-refjahr-100.html>, acc. 1. March 2017.

- The connection of immediate experience of the Spirit and the readiness to act violently that Luther ascribed to Karlstadt, in his eyes was also significant for **Thomas Müntzer**, a spiritual leader of the rebellious peasants, as well as for the Anabaptists and other Spiritualists.

- Conflicts and divisions arose with the Swiss reformer **Huldrych Zwingli** and his partisans in the South of Germany, concerning the presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper.



Huldrych Zwingli, <http://christianity.about.com/od/Christians-In-History/a/Ulrich-Zwingli.htm>, acc. 1. March 2017.

- A scholarly debate in 1525 revealed the deep gap between Luther and **Erasmus of Rotterdam**, the head of the Humanists who earlier had written in support of Luther.



Albrecht Dürer; Bildnis des Erasmus von Rotterdam; Kupferstich; 24,9 x 19,3 cm; 1526; Kopenhagen, Den kgl. Kobberstiksamling, Statens Museum for Kunst, <http://sander-gaiser.de/ru/bilder/luther/duerert1.htm>, acc. 1 March 2017.

In addition to these external and internal struggles of the Reformation movement – only a part of them could be mentioned here – the **Turks** created a serious threat to the empire from outside. It seemed to be a realistic perspective that the entire Christian world would be conquered and would come under Islamic rule.



Turkish leadership at the siege of Vienna (1529) <http://www.mihaloglu.com/Belagerung1529.html>, acc. 2 March 2017



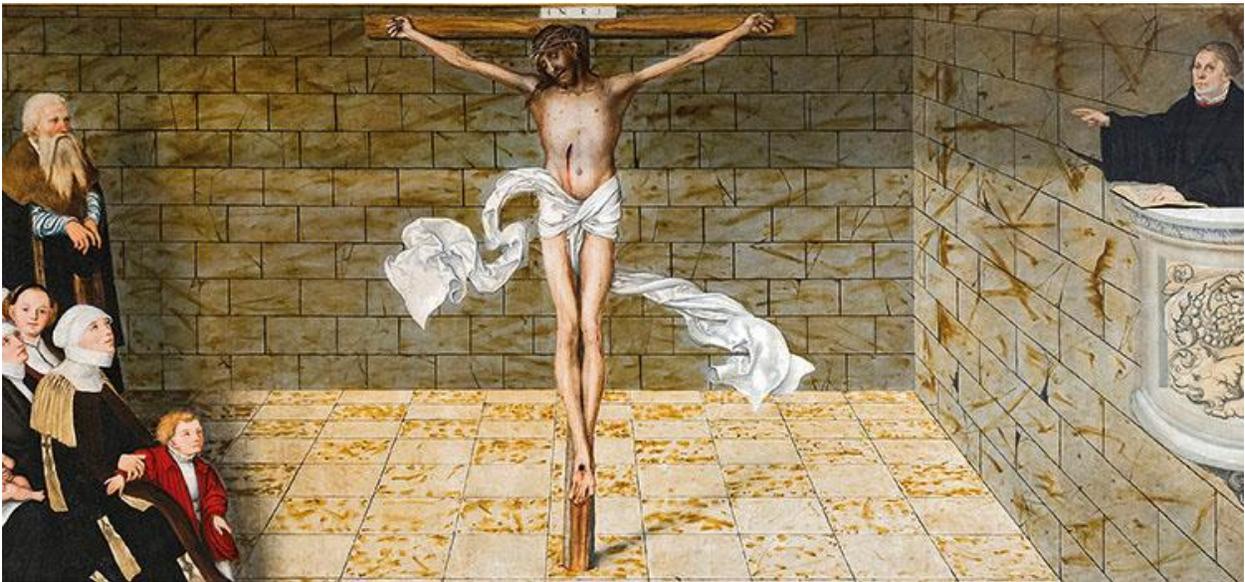
On the other hand social tensions within the society of the empire erupted in violence. Luther managed to stay out of the upheaval of the imperial knighthood. In the case of the **peasants war (1525)** this was not possible because the insurgents explicitly referred to Luther's ideas – an unavoidable involvement with severe consequences for the reputation of Luther in the lower classes.

Armed Peasants (Woodcut 1525), <http://www.lexikus.de/bibliothek/Kleine-Historische-Schriften-Band-I-09-Der-Bauernkrieg>, acc. 2 March 2017.

All these struggles were completed by Luther's various physical illnesses and times of mental depression. This all might create not an excuse but some explanation for the polemic outbursts which indeed became more and more characteristic for Luther in his later years. Was it just the

frustration of an old exhausted man? One could take in account the sometimes rude habits of his time as a general background, the way he himself was treated by his opponents, or the fact that several times he experienced life threatening situations caused by his adversaries. He was a theologian who did not want to be anything else and yet he was pushed into the world of politics where his words were heard with different ears.

There is some truth in all of these. But this is not enough. Doing justice to Luther would mean to take him serious as a theologian and to ask how this behaviour relates to his core topic, the **justification of the sinner through Christ alone**. Considering his theological approach it would be even more adequate to ask how this language and behaviour relates to the *experience* of being justified by Christ alone.



Martin Luther preaching, by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1537 <http://www.lutherpedia.de/verstehen/handgemalte-bilder-wie-vom-flieβband>, acc. 2 March 2017

### 3. *God's grace and the devil*

Looking at his adversarial career one might ask: What gave him the strength to endure all the afflictions he went through? It can't be wrong to refer to the very heart of his Reformation discovery: the certainty of God's grace in Christ which he did not find in himself but in God's word and sacrament. Not the strength of the own conviction but the reliability of God's promises and the objectivity of the sacraments is the fundament and stronghold of Christian faith. The ultimate remedy against the ultimate affliction is not "I believe ..." but "I have been baptized!"

This certainty was a source of joy and a reason to enjoy life in the midst of all hardships and afflictions. Luther is well known for his ability to celebrate life in eating, drinking, singing, playing and joking and having a good time with his wife. In his understanding this was not a

concession to the sinful flesh but it meant honouring God's good creation. With this attitude he would have well fitted into a pacific context. Much better than the later puritan minded stern protestant missionaries who rallied around sanctification and preached and practiced the restriction of so called worldly desires.

The background of Luther's ability to enjoy life as God's gift was the certainty of God's grace in Christ. Saying this we have to recognize that this certitude itself was won in conflict and could only be obtained in a permanent spiritual struggle.

The recognition of the unlimited grace of God in Christ was given to a man in deep desperation about himself, a man who was searching for a loving and forgiving God and who felt himself permanently threatened by his sin, death and the image of a judging God. Luther found himself entering the open gates of paradise when he got aware of the meaning of God's righteousness as God's gift in Christ. However, this did not mean that from now on all troubles were past and overcome. Actually right the opposite was the case:

Luther was convinced that there was a power that tried to keep people away from God's grace in Christ and that this power would try to make Christians break away from their certainty of faith at any time. He was convinced because this was his experience. **Faith in Christ had to be gained and obtained against the attempts of the devil to create unbelief and despair.** In this perspective feasting is an act of faith, because it means to reject and to contempt the devil and his assaults.

H.A. Oberman<sup>1</sup> has pointed out Luther's belief in the reality of the devil as decisive key to an adequate understanding of the reformer – an aspect that has been treated with embarrassment in the western tradition after the so called enlightenment, the “age of reason” that abandoned the devil as a superstitious medieval idea.

“Attempts are made to offer excuses for Luther by pointing out that he never doubted the omnipotence of God and thus determined only narrow limits for the Devil's activities. Luther himself would have been outraged at this view: **the omnipotent God is indeed real, but as such hidden from us. Faith reaches not for God hidden but for God revealed, who, incarnate in Christ, laid himself open to the Devil's fury.** At Christmas God divested himself of his omnipotence—the sign given the shepherds was a child “wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12). To Luther Christmas was the central feast: “God for us.” But that directly implies “the Devil against us.” This *new* belief in the Devil is such an integral part of the Reformation discovery that if the reality of the powers inimical to God is not grasped, the incarnation of Christ, as well as the justification and temptation of the sinner, are reduced to ideas of the mind rather than experiences of faith. That is what Luther's battle against the Devil meant to convey”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Oberman, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Oberman. 1990, 76.

It was Luther's firm conviction that where Christ is preached properly the devil is present as well. The Gospel stirs up the devil. So it is a sign of true faith when there are lots of afflictions caused by the devil. "When the Devil harasses us, then we know ourselves to be in good shape!"<sup>3</sup>

The devil's actions are strictly related to the Gospel. This is the dividing line to all the superstitious stories about devil, demons and witchcraft that were very common in Luther's time as they are today in many parts of the world. The *serious* devil is the one who stands and works against the Gospel<sup>4</sup>. Confusing the doctrine of Christ and making people trust in their own abilities, subjecting people to false commandments, making rules where God has placed freedom, pretending that there is no forgiveness for our sins - these are his predominant actions. "He seeks to capture the conscience, can quote the Scriptures without fault, and is more pious than God—that is satanical."<sup>5</sup> And the only way to cope with this kind of affliction is to run back to Christ and to respond in the way Luther did when he once was attacked by the devil:

"Tell me something new, Devil! I already know that perfectly well; I have committed many a solid and real sin. Indeed there must be good honest sins—not fabricated and invented ones—for God to forgive for His beloved Son's sake, who took all my sins upon Him so that now the sins I have committed are no longer mine but belong to Christ."<sup>6</sup>

- *Devil, demons, spirits and witchcraft were common perceptions in the late medieval world. Luther held them as well. However, he introduced a theological criterion of what to take seriously and what to regard as a superstition. The serious thing is the certainty of God's grace in Christ. The serious devil works against it. At least spirits and witchcraft are widespread perceptions in the Pacific Islands as well. How do our pacific Churches relate to this topic?*

#### 4. *The devil and the opponents of the Gospel*

The initial and basic conflict between Christ and the devil that in Luther's view is going on in every believer was the pattern that shaped Luther's perception of all the other more external controversies around the Reformation teaching.

Luther finds the satanic characteristics of his adversaries in their attempt to darken the truth of Christ and to shake the certainty of salvation. His basic reproach against the Pope is that he would make people believe they could be justified by their own good works. Luther identifies this same error in the teaching of almost every other opponent. His analysis that those who separated themselves as true committed Christians from the multitude of those who had not really experienced the spirit would finally end up in violence was proved true in several cases – however, not in any case. Karlstadt was the prototype of these Spiritualists or as Luther called

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Barth 1967, 201.

<sup>5</sup> Oberman. 1990, 76.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., cf. WAT6, Nr. 6827: 215, 39 – 216, 8

them “Schwermer”. Their fault was to rely on their inner revelation rather than on the external word of the Gospel and the factuality of baptism, bread and wine. Karlstadt's denial of the real presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper reappears in the argument of Zwingli and disqualifies him and his followers in the eyes of Luther. To him their theological position made them instruments of the devil.

The devil had to be fought not by violence but only by the word. For a long time Luther did not agree to a punishment of heretics as it was usual in the medieval society. **“It is against the will of the Spirit to burn heretics.”**<sup>7</sup>

It was Luther's primary concern to preserve the certainty of the Gospel. His opponents appeared to him all together as instruments of the devil against the Gospel. This assumption had serious consequences for his treatment of all who dissented to his view. Luther showed an inclination...

- ... to refuse any compromise. Thus he became an impediment to all attempts of unity among the different wings of the Reformation movement.
- ... to reduce the position of opponents to simple patterns, e.g. to identify the work-righteousness that he attributed to the Pope and the Roman Church in the argument of any other adversaries.
- ... to treat groups of opponents in an undifferentiated way, e.g. not to make a difference between the groups of pacifistic Anabaptists and the representatives of a violent spiritualism.
- ... to use a rude and contemptuous language as it was the devil himself whom he meant to address. In his famous table talks he gave drastic examples of how the contempt for the devil had to be expressed in rude words and actions. It is the same language that is often used in the polemics against his human adversaries.

➤ *Please have a look at the effects of Luther's demonization of his opponents: refusing compromise, simplification, generalization, contempt. Are there similar patterns to be observed in the Pacific (Church and society) today?*

*(Possible examples:*

- *Dealing with so called new religious groups.*
- *Dealing with so called western ideas:*

*Western influence and lifestyle (reduced to materialism and individualism) in the Pacific are often addressed as manifestations of an evil power. Isn't this at times a way of demonizing developments, ideas, people ... with all its implications?)*

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<sup>7</sup> “Haereticos comburrere est contra voluntatem spiritus.” Assertio omnium articulorum per bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum, WA 7, 139.

### 5. *The devil, violence and rebellion*

The principle that the devil and his instruments had to be fought only by means of theological argument could persist as long as there were no violent acts against the public order based on theological reasons. The outbreak of unrest and the interpretation that the devil would sting people to act violently<sup>8</sup> created a new situation.

The first turmoil in Wittenberg during Luther's "exile" on the Wartburg in 1522 could be settled by his return and his vigorous sermons against Karlstadt and his partisans.

When the peasants of southern Germany started their revolt against the princes referring to Luther's teachings and theologically encouraged by Thomas Müntzer the situation was different. Luther eventually called the authorities to act violently against the rebels even though he had acknowledged many of their demands as righteous. In his first writing on the topic he openly accused the princes that they had caused the situation by their repressive and exploitative treatment of the people under their rule. He admonished them to take the demands of the peasants seriously in consideration and he called both parties to sort things out peacefully. This did not stop the rebels. However, when his writing "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hords of Peasants" was published the princes already had taken action in a very cruel way. So Luther's words were taken as an endorsement for their outrageous brutality.

In Luther's view it is the basic duty of the state to preserve peace, security and the public order, if necessary, by using legitimate violence. Public unrest and rebellion is the work and aim of the devil. The secular authorities have to reprehend the devil in the way that they prevent chaos. This task is related to the Gospel because peace and order is seen as a necessary precondition for the spreading of God's word.

Secular authorities are not supposed to build up the kingdom of God here on earth. In fact God's eternal kingdom will be established by God himself and not earlier than at the end of times when the devil will finally be overcome<sup>9</sup>. Until that time Christ calls and rescues people out of the hands of the enemy by his word. This is the spiritual duty of the Church: to offer Christ in word and sacrament but without force or violence.

Making this world a better place by acts of neighbourly love is required from every Christian and in particular this is the meaning and the duty of every secular government. However, the final purpose of these acts is not an ideal society which could only be formed by true Christians and is not possible as long as sin and devil are present realities. It is strictly about creating a space of protection where people may live without being harmed or deprived of their goods. Luther apparently had no sensibility for the idea of political participation.

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<sup>8</sup> Barth 1967, p. 205f.

<sup>9</sup> Oberman 1982, 79.

In 1525 Luther had encouraged the princes to use violence against the peasants, because they were rebels, not because of the abuse of God's word which he recognized in their rebellious acts as well. It was clear to him, that preaching or protecting the Gospel was not the business of the secular authorities and that only violence had to be answered by the legitimate use of the sword<sup>10</sup>. In 1531, however, he consented to a survey of his colleague Melanchthon which endorsed death penalty for the spreading of Anabaptist teachings<sup>11</sup>. Luther's consent shows signs of reluctance<sup>12</sup>, but still it was given. He felt that this was a contradiction to his earlier statements and he was busy to bring it in line with them. He emphasized that nobody would be persecuted because of what he or she believed. It was only the *spreading* of blasphemous teachings which would finally create the spirit of violence that had to be prevented.

Although Luther later returned to views, which avoided the use of the sword against the Anabaptists, he had crossed a red line by including the secular authorities in the spiritual fight against the devil and making the punishment of blasphemy a concern of the government. He went further on in the line of this decision, when he later attacked the Jews and made suggestions to the secular authorities to burn their synagogues and to expel them from their countries.

This outrage against the Jews is shameful in many ways. The later anti-Semitism could refer to Luther and quote him as a prominent witness. His reasons were different, yet completely wrong. There was no threat to the public peace and order from the side of the Jews which could have justified any measures of the secular arm. Luther accused them to be blasphemers because they refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah. They rejected the understanding of the Scriptures that led to Jesus as the Christ. They offered a different interpretation instead. In Luther's view this made them companions of the devil who had to be fought by all means.

Our initial quote from Luther's 1545 polemics against the pope contains a passage that may shed some more light on his attitude during the years preceding his death: "I, a qualified teacher and preacher in the church of Christ responsible for telling the truth, have herewith done my share." Similar expressions are found in his writing against the Jews (1543) and elsewhere. Apparently Luther anticipated his end drawing near and he felt the necessity to defend the truth of the Gospel against the errors and ill intents of all its adversaries. By making final polemic statements he wanted to erect a fence against the devil's attempts to create confusion.

So the root of his polemic outbursts would be his unbelief because he actually doubted that the truth of the Gospel would survive against the assaults of the devil. This part of Luther's legacy in the light of his own insights should be called a solid and real sin, not a fabricated or invented one – nothing to be defended or justified, but something that needs to be forgiven by God for Christ's sake.

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<sup>10</sup> WA 18, p. 358; cf. Zschoch 2015, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Markgraf 1999, p. 205.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 206.

*And it needs to be corrected and not repeated.- It seems to be easy to avoid Luther's sin. Just let the state be secular and keep out of religious affairs. But what made Luther himself move away from this easy solution? He felt the need to protect the truth of the Gospel effectively.*

- *Do we need to protect the truth of the Gospel?*
- *How do we deal with violence that has a religious background? (E.g. how do we deal with Islam and Islamist terrorism?)*

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