

THE GREATEST OF THESE

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

All truths are equally true, but not all truths are equally important! Let us assume, for example, that a pile of trash is on fire and your house is also on fire. While both statements may be equally true, they are not equally important. It would be irrational to put out the trash fire and let your house burn down. The importance of selecting the wrong priority in spiritual matters is much more serious. It can have eternal consequences. While we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let us focus on the life of Martin Luther as it relates to faith and love. While it is not our purpose to besmirch this great reformer, reviewing his life can provide a teachable moment. As you know, those who do not know history are often doomed to repeat it.

When Martin Luther was on trial for heresy he made this legendary statement: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.” Luther was correct in “standing” on what the Bible teaches about faith. Let us hold him to the same standard when it comes to what the Bible says about love. R. C. Sproul, in his book, *The Holiness of God*, states that these famous words were not uttered with a loud voice and a clenched fist raised defiantly in the air. In fact, he says, it was a rather subdued Luther who spoke on that occasion. The following account is adapted from Sproul’s book, pages 108 - 115.

The first session met on April 17. The air was filled with electricity as Luther had been described as a wild boar in the vineyard of the Lord. His books had been burned and he would soon be on trial for his life. Before arriving at the trial he had written: “This shall be my recantation at Worms: ‘Previously I said the pope was the vicar of Christ. I recant. Now I say the pope is the adversary of Christ and the apostle of the Devil.’”

When the trial opened Luther was standing in the center of a great hall with his controversial books by his side. When asked if he had written those books, he answered in a voice barely a whisper: “The books are all mine, and I have written more.” When asked to recant his writings Luther replied in a voice that was almost inaudible, “I beg you, give me time to think it over.”

The emperor was shocked by the request but granted clemency for twenty-four hours. That night Luther went through his private Gethsemane and wrote this beautiful prayer: “O God, Almighty God everlasting! How dreadful is the world! Behold how its mouth opens to swallow me up, and how small is my faith in Thee! Oh! The weakness of the flesh, and the power of Satan! If I am to depend upon any strength of this world - all is over. The knell is struck. Sentence is gone forth. O God! O God! O thou, my God! Help me against all the wisdom of this world. Do this, I beseech thee; thou shouldst do this by thy own mighty power. The work is not mine, but Thine, I have no business here. I have nothing to contend for with these great men of the world! I would gladly pass my days in happiness and peace, but the cause is Thine. And it is righteous and everlasting! O Lord! Help me! O faithful and unchangeable God! I learn not upon man. It were vain! Whatever is of man is tottering, whatever proceeds from him must fail. My God!~ My God! Dost

thou not hear? My God! Art thou no longer living? Nay, thou canst not die. Thou doest not hide Thyself. Thou hast chosen me for this work. I know it! Therefore, O God, accomplish thine own will! Forsake me not, for the sake of thy well - beloved Son, Jesus Christ, my defense, my buckler, and my stronghold. Lord - where art thou? My God, where are thou? Come! I pray thee, I am ready. Behold me prepared to lay down my life for thy truth, suffering like a lamb. For the cause is holy. It is thine own! I will not let thee go! No, nor yet for all eternity! And though the world should be thronged with devils - and this body, which is the work of thine hands, should be cast forth, trodden under foot, cut in pieces, consumed to ashes, my soul is thine. Yes, I have thine own word to assure me of it. My soul belongs to thee, and will abide with thee forever! Amen! O God send help! Amen!"

Late the next afternoon Luther returned to the hall. This time his voice did not quake or quiver. He said: “. . . Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen!"

What Luther did was an act of great courage and conviction, and it was not done capriciously. Some have heard the story and concluded that Luther was insane. How could any rational man dare to stand alone against the pope, the emperor, the councils, the creeds, the finest scholars, and the entire organization of Christendom? That, of course is precisely what Luther did! There he stood! God did help him! And from his convictions came a great reformation!

While God used Luther in remarkable ways, as we have said, his propensity for violence provides a teachable moment. Please consider this quote from *volume 2 of A Manual of Church History* by Albert Henry Newman. During the Peasant's War of 1524 - 1525 Luther urged that the peasants be "*crushed, strangled, and stabbed, privately and publically by whomsoever can do it, just as one would beat to death a mad dog*" In Germany alone more than 100,000 men died in this deluge of blood in less than ten weeks. Since love works no ill to its neighbor, it is hard to reconcile Luther's words with love. The harsh reality of history forces the honest follower of Jesus to take another look at Luther's life with regard to the priority of love.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment in the Law He immediately emphasized the priority of love. He could have correctly pointed out that Abraham was justified by faith (Gen. 15:6) but He did not! While there are literally hundreds of commandments in the Law, Jesus said that love was the most important. Jesus summarize the Law and the Prophets with only two commandments, and both of them involve love. He said that the first and most important commandment was a proper love for God, and the second most important commandment was a proper love for your neighbor. He then stated that on these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets (Matt. 22:36 - 40). Note that Jesus gave no third priority!

Of course no one can be saved without faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). This fact, however, does not prove that faith is more important than love. In fact, you

can have faith that moves mountains but if you do not have love it will profit you nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). Unfortunately, later in life Luther wrote some statements about Jews that are even more vicious than his words against the peasants. Eric Metaxas in his book “Bonhoeffer” points out that the Nazis exploited these statements to the utmost. Earlier in life, Luther had a more biblical and charitable view of the Jews. Metaxas seeks to explain Luther’s later rants by pointing out: *“For much of his adult life Luther suffered from constipation, hemorrhoids, a cataract in one eye, and a condition of the inner ear called Meniere’s Disease, which results in dizziness, fainting spells, and tinnitus. He also suffered mood swings and depression. As his health declined everything seemed to set him off. When a congregation sang anemically, he called them ‘tone deaf sluggards’ and stormed out. He attacked Henry VIII as ‘effeminate’ and blasted his theological opponents as ‘agents of the devil’ and ‘whore mongers’. His language waxed fouler and fouler. He called the pope ‘the Anti-Christ’ and a ‘brothel keeper above all brothel keepers and all lewdness, including that which was not to be named’ He blasted the Catholic church’s regulation of marriage and accused the church of being a ‘merchant selling vulvas, genitals, and pudenda’. Expressing his contempt for the devil, he said that he would give him a ‘fart for a staff’. He viciously mocked Pope Clement III’s writings: ‘Such a great horrid flatus did the papal arse let go here! He certainly pressed with great might to let out such a thunderous flatus –it is a wonder that it did not tear his hole and belly apart. (Bonhoeffer p. 92).*

While many are unaware of Luther’s writings about the Jews, even a cursory review of history will reveal them like an elephant in the room. The following quotes from the Wikipedia Encyclopedia will make this clear. Since the article is rather lengthy, I have taken the liberty of selecting only short quotations. If you question whether these quotes are taken out of context, please feel free to Google the entire article and make up your own mind:

“Luther’s attitude toward the Jews changed over the course of his life. In the early phase of his career—until around 1536—he expressed concern for their plight in Europe and was enthusiastic at the prospect of converting them to [Christianity](#) through his religious reforms. Being unsuccessful in that, in his later career, Luther denounced [Judaism](#) and called for harsh persecution of its followers, so that they might not be allowed to teach. In a paragraph from his [On the Jews and Their Lies](#) he deplors [Christendom](#)’s failure to expel them. Moreover, he proposed “What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews”:

“First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools ... This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians ...”

“Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed.”

“Third, I advise that all their prayer books and [Talmudic](#) writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.”

“Fourth, I advise that their [rabbis](#) be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb ...”

“Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they

have no business in the countryside ..."

"Sixth, I advise that [usury](#) be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them ..."

"Seventh, I recommend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow ... But if we are afraid that they might harm us or our wives, children, servants, cattle, etc., ... then let us emulate the common sense of other nations such as France, Spain, Bohemia, etc., ... then eject them forever from the country ..."

*"... The prevailing scholarly view_ since the [Second World War](#) is that the treatise exercised a major and persistent influence on Germany's attitude toward its Jewish citizens in the centuries between the [Reformation](#) and the [Holocaust](#). Four hundred years after it was written, the [Nazi Party](#) displayed *On the Jews and Their Lies* during [Nuremberg rallies](#), and the city of Nuremberg presented a first edition to [Julius Streicher](#), editor of the Nazi newspaper [Der Stürmer](#), the newspaper describing it as the most radically [antisemitic](#) tract ever published. Against this view, theologian Johannes Wallmann writes that the treatise had no continuity of influence in Germany, and was in fact largely ignored during the 18th and 19th centuries. Hans Hillerbrand argues that to focus on Luther's role in the development of German [antisemitism](#) is to underestimate the "larger peculiarities of German history."*

"... Writing in [Lutheran Quarterly](#) in 1987, Dr. Johannes Wallmann stated: The assertion that Luther's expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment have been of major and persistent influence in the centuries after the Reformation, and that there exists a continuity between Protestant anti-Judaism and modern racially oriented anti-Semitism, is at present wide-spread in the literature; since the Second World War it has understandably become the prevailing opinion."

"... Since the 1980s, some Lutheran church bodies have formally denounced and dissociated themselves from Luther's writings on the Jews. In 1982 the [Lutheran World Federation](#) issued a consultation stating that "we Christians must purge ourselves of any hatred of the Jews and any sort of teaching of contempt for Judaism."

... In 1983 The [Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod](#) denounced Luther's "hostile attitude" toward the Jews. At the same time, the LCMS in convention also rejected the use of Luther's statements to incite "anti-Lutheran sentiment". The [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#), in an essay on Lutheran-Jewish relations, observed that "Over the years, Luther's anti-Jewish writings have continued to be reproduced in pamphlets and other works by [neo-Nazi](#) and [antisemitic](#) groups, such as the [Ku Klux Klan](#)."

... In 1994 the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America publicly rejected Luther's antisemitic writings, saying "We who bear his name and heritage must acknowledge with pain the anti-Judaic diatribes contained in Luther's later writings. We reject this

violent invective as did many of his companions in the sixteenth century, and we are moved to deep and abiding sorrow at its tragic effects on later generations of Jews."

LOVE SHOULD BE OUR TOP PRIORITY

The Corinthian church came behind in no spiritual gift (1 Cor. 1:7). Some of these spiritual gifts are listed in 1 Cor. 12:4 - 11. These spiritual gifts include the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecies, tongues and interpretation of tongues. Even though they had all of these spiritual gifts Paul proceeded to show them a more excellent way (1 Cor. 12:31). Here it is:

“If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have *the gift of prophecy*, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And if I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long, *and* is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall be done away; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child: now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know fully even as also I was fully known. But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13 ASV)

“Owe no man anything, save to love one another: for he that loveth his neighbor hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not covet, and if there be any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: love therefore is the fulfilment of the law.” (Romans 13:8-10 ASV)

YES! THERE ARE MANY “ESSENTIALS” THAT ARE “NECESSARY” TO HAVE A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE!

This article was written by Boyce Mouton and can be used in whole, or in part, to bring glory to Jesus Christ and advance His Kingdom.