Luther’s Gifts

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When we hear the word philanthropy, we often think of large gifts of property – land, buildings, cash – from wealthy individuals to individuals and communities. In fact, however, because human life can be enriched in many ways beyond the transfer of property, philanthropy can take many other under-appreciated forms. We believe that one of the most profound and far-reaching gifts in history did just this – namely, the dramatic increase in literacy spurred by the writings of the 16th century German theologian, Martin Luther. In fact, Luther’s writings not only increased levels of literacy, but also helped to change our understanding of the transformative potential of reading in ways that reverberate down to the present day. Whether or not Luther intended or even foresaw the impact his writings would have on how we read, his philanthropic impact has been immense. By gaining a better understanding of Luther’s contributions to literacy, we can broaden and enrich our understanding of giving at its best.

Luther’s Writings

As is usual with milestones, the 500th anniversary of Luther nailing his ninety-five theses, the common reference for Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences (1517), to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg has occasioned an extensive series of examinations of the meaning of the Reformation attributed to him (by some) and the impact of his writings and his creation of the set of religious communities and practices now generally referred to as Protestantism, a term introduced in English in 1553. Some of the results of Luther’s protest and his unceasing work to develop first a set of religious practices that would incorporate the five central tenets of his theology – sola fide (salvation by faith alone), sola gratia (by grace alone), sola Scriptura (by Scripture alone), solo Christo
(through Christ alone), and soli Deo gratia (Glory to God alone) and then a workable religious context within which believers could follow their faith in the manner Luther saw as based on his reading of Scripture and the insights provided through God’s grace. Luther’s writings convey a sense of someone fiercely dedicated to finding the true way to God and eternal salvation and committed to ensuring that his own discoveries about God’s truth as revealed in Scripture should be accessible and valuable to every individual eligible to live in communion with God’s grace. Luther began as one person on a search to find a way to be saved by God. His search put into play a series of forces that changed his world radically and created the basis for much of what we recognize as fundamental to our world.

Gutenberg’s earlier introduction of the printing press in 1439 made possible the rapid dissemination of Luther’s works throughout much of Europe, and their impact was staggering.

Luther’s collected works run to 55 volumes. It is estimated that between 1520 and 1526, some 1,700 editions of Luther’s works were printed. Of the six to seven million pamphlets printed during this time, more than a quarter were Luther’s works, many of which played a vital role in propelling the reformation forward. Thanks to Luther’s translation of the Bible, it became possible for many German-speaking people to stop relying on church authorities and instead read the Bible for themselves. Luther argued that ordinary people were not only capable of interpreting the scriptures for themselves, but that in doing so they stood the best chance of hearing God’s word. He wrote, “Let the man who would hear God speak read Holy Scripture.” This view, combined with the wide availability of scripture, shifted responsibility for scriptural interpretation from clerics to the laity. Luther wanted ordinary people to assume more responsibility for reading the Bible. In promoting
his point of view, Luther helped to provide one of the most effective arguments for universal literacy in the history of Western civilization. At a time when most people worked in farming, reading was not necessary to maintain a livelihood. But Luther wanted to remove the language barrier so that everyone could read the Bible “without hindrance.” His rationale for wanting people both to learn to read and to read regularly was, from his point of view, among the most powerful imaginable – that reading it for themselves would bring them closer to God.

Luther’s Intentions

Much of what Luther started, and what we recognize as important consequences of his work, soon spiraled out of his control and often appalled him as it took shape in his own world. A dramatic example of the split between Luther’s intentions for his work and its actual consequences arose very early in his deepening challenge to the established church. On the heels of the popular reception of his writings, and the quickly spreading attempts to put them into practice, German peasants revolted against their lords in protest over the terrible conditions of their lives. In his “Introduction” to Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings (1962), John Dillenberger describes the moment as follows:

When the peasants interpreted the new freedom of the Christian man as favoring their own plight, and revolted, Luther showed himself at his worst. While sympathetic to their situation, his own judgment on theological and social grounds was that their actions would open the world to anarchy and that constituted authority must therefore be supported at every point. Some of his most vindictive writing came out of this period. (xxv)

Luther’s intense focus on finding spiritual truth left him unprepared for some of the directions and consequences that arose from and followed from his success. Similarly, Luther
was passionate about founding schools to teach children to read so that they would have
direct access to Scripture, but he soon followed with a call for a catechism containing what
these new individual readers should expect to find in their reading. Luther had developed
an absolute conviction that every individual should interpret the Scripture for themselves,
but he was not prepared for readers who might create heterodox understandings from that
reading. After the “Ninety-five Theses” gained popular readership, Luther wrote “Explan-
nation of the Ninety-five Theses” (1518) to make sure that he was understood correctly
(Dillenberger, xxi). Luther was very much a medieval person who pursued his work dili-
gently and passionately without a vision of the ways it would change his world and ours.

Much of the conversation over the past anniversary year has engaged the question
of what Luther intended and what he did not intend. Luther did not intend to create a new
church, but within two decades a number of new churches, or what would later be recog-
nized as denominations, had arisen. Luther had a deep regard for the sacraments of the Ro-
man Catholic Church, but he very quickly had to engage in disputations with groups con-
vinced that their reading of Scripture led them to want to dispense with all or most of the
liturgical elements off the Roman Catholic tradition. Luther, who became the best-selling
author of his time, contributed significantly to the rise of literacy and a book culture alt-
ough he was convinced that well-trained theologians were the only appropriate readers of
his writings. He was dismayed to learn that copies of his ninety-five theses, which he had
distributed to a small group of friends and colleagues, had been translated into German by
printers and were selling like hotcakes. The prospect of what we would call a mass audi-
ence bewildered and infuriated Luther.

A recent book by Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation, How a Religious
Revolution Secularized Society* (Harvard, 2012) creates a compelling argument for what
must be the greatest unintended consequence of Luther’s work. Gregory argues that it was Luther who created the first split between religious life and the social, economic, and political aspects of a person’s life, and that it was this split that led to the secularization of life in our world. Gregory is careful to elaborate on all the extraordinary benefits that secularization has bought to life in Europe and America and the deep changes that allow modern people to envision and pursue the life, liberty and happiness promised in documents such as the United States Declaration of Independence. The enormous impact Luther has had on our world in how we approach reading has gone unrecognized in recent conversation surrounding the anniversary of the publishing of the ninety-five theses, discussions of Luther’s importance in general, and the extensive discussion of the meaning and traditions central to the humanities.

Luther’s Unintended Consequences

That many acts of giving have unforeseen consequences that exceed the intentions of the donor is both surprising and obviously true. Consider a parent who reads to a child at bedtime. The parent is likely interested in entertaining and educating the child, but the uses to which the child might someday put such stories to use, the ability to read, and the character formation it may spawn are difficult and often impossible to predict. The child might go on to put such gifts to use in writing a great novel, crafting an important piece of legislation, or wooing a future spouse, with additional downstream consequences that are even more difficult to foresee. The ability to read can serve many purposes beyond the mere transmission of information, and in some cases people’s lives are transformed by books, such as when a person discovers a new life calling or embarks on a new program of personal or communal transformation. No one can tell where a book’s influence stops, and it is quite likely that even today, after hundreds and even thousands of years have passed,
we still cannot assay the full impact of such great works of world literature as the King James Bible and Shakespeare’s plays – or, for that matter, Luther’s writings.

We claim that one of the most extraordinary and important gifts the modern world has received from Luther and one of the most significant examples of its unintended consequences is the wide-spread and deeply-held conviction that reading is a transformative experience for readers and for the difference that these transformations make in and on their worlds. This element of shared experience among readers represents a central aspect of modern approaches to reading that look to reading for more than basic literacy that enables people to manage in a text-centered world and qualify for entry-level positions in a workforce. Our claim looks to those advocates for reading who see it as promising a new view of a world, a deep and profound change in what happens to a person while reading. Andrew Carnegie, for one, seems to have recognized this power of reading in one of his most important philanthropic projects: the funding of libraries in communities throughout America, a project that paid homage to the generosity of Colonel James Anderson, who had opened his private library to working boys in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Reading transformed Carnegie’s life and suggests the important dimension of reading we can ascribe to the revolution begun by Martin Luther.

Luther’s Personal Encounter

Luther’s teachings on salvation and the centrality of an individual’s reading of Scripture created the emphasis on reading as transformation that has shaped modern experiences and regard for reading. Luther’s insistence on the deep and palpable relationship men have with God created the expectation that an individual could be transformed by an encounter with God’s grace and especially in the most direct encounter with God in receiving God’s Word in Scripture. For much of the religious upheaval in the sixteenth century,
the consequences of Luther’s teaching were limited to doctrinal disputes and political negotiation. But the lasting impact of Luther’s work may have been its stress on an individual’s encounter with God through Scripture at a time when that encounter increasingly meant a reading of Scripture instead of merely hearing the Word as presented in sermons, stained glass, and morality plays. As the technology of the printing press became increasingly prominent, the association of reading with personal transformation became more important and central to modern life. For Luther, the exercise of faith, while still deeply connected to community worship and activity, was a solitary experience of God occasioned by an encounter, preferably by reading, with Scripture. Luther translated the Bible into German so that everyone would have direct access to it. Luther’s focus on the direct and very personal connection with God brought the solitary experience of reading to the fore in deciding what was important for people to do.

Much is made of the moment that Luther had his breakthrough insight that it was God’s urge to have a direct relationship with every individual person, the experience usually referred to as the “tower experience.” What is important to the present case is that this breakthrough came while Luther was reflecting on his reading and his view of what reading should be echoes his own transformative experience. In the “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings, 1545,” Luther describes a specific moment:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely, by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with
which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me (Dillenberger, 11)

Although biographers and historians have not been able to corroborate Luther’s claim about this moment, it seems a moment of transformation began Luther’s career and the process of personnel transformation became a central element of Luther’s vision. That is, that moment of profound insight for Luther might have become the defining dynamic of his teaching and his theology. Luther had experienced a breakthrough in his understanding of how he could be in communion with God while reading and that moment of transformation for Luther became his gift to introduce all Christians to the way to salvation.

Luther’s Transformation of Reading

Luther’s theology of God’s direct relationship with individuals led to a clear sense of an experiential dimension to salvation. That experiential dimension was engaged when Luther defined salvation as an inner reality as opposed to the external dynamics of believing that works were what made the difference for salvation and/or reconciliation with God. Luther’s focus on the individual’s engagement with Scripture becomes the active moment of experiencing God’s presence. That engagement for most of Luther’s followers was Scripture as heard in the readings at services and in the commentaries offered in sermons (when the sermons focused on readings). But Luther’s work to re-establish the relationship of God to men was occurring at a time when people were beginning to associate connections to Scripture as reading texts.
Luther may not have intended to revolutionize the world that we have inherited, but his focus on reading created a set of changes that act as corollaries of his theological positions. Certainly, these changes occurred in conjunction with many of the movements we now recognize as the Renaissance. Reading becomes an occasion for personal growth and inspiration in all areas, including quite secular activities, and reading became a valuable activity in its own right. Furthermore, there seems to be no inherent limit to the growth and personal development in reading and no limit on the number of times a reader can go back to a text and still receive benefit. The focus on reading the Bible provides a model for how to use this new technology of the printed word and some license to pursue it without limit or fear of where it would lead. The enthusiasm for what reading Scripture can do may have transferred to what readers could expect from all printed texts. The prospect of an individual engaging in a direct and powerful relationship with the writer of a text enables the wholehearted embrace of reading and learning that meshes perfectly with the emerging enthusiasm for ancient and modern texts that characterizes what we refer to as the humanities.

Luther’s Enduring Gift

Perhaps in this secularized world, split as it is according to Brad Gregory, the authority that had been tied up with wealth, land, and titles now acts unanchored in religious belief and influences much of what happens in the world. Luther makes authority in matters of salvation independent of religious authority, a step that seems to have extended to all worldly things. So being free and empowered within leads to an impatience with keeping one’s place in external relations. Transformation within leads to an expectation of an enhanced experience without. The dynamics of independent thought and action lay the groundwork for the theories of individual right and entitlement that shape the work of the
Enlightenment (Gawthorp and Straus, 53-54). The spread of reading, advanced through Bible study, took on an added dimension in the eighteenth century, the second Luther Reformation, when the practice of reading was recommended as something that contributed to the higher standard of public morality and stoical acceptance of the status quo. (Gawthorp and Strauss, 55). Gawthorp and Strauss attack Halle as emblematic of the tradition that accepts Luther as the progenitor of literacy. Indeed, it’s a compelling case that Luther did not cause the rise in literacy although his translation of the Bible, his prolific writing contributed to the need for an increased literacy. But Luther’s theology and his own practice may have contributed something crucial to our experience of reading – the sense that reading enables, if not compels, a transformative experience for the individual.

We in the modern world have come to take unintended consequences in stride. We talk of the butterfly effect and the sensitive dependence on initial conditions. So, it’s something we accept and do not require direct and causal lines from one event to another to make it important or acceptable. Expecting that inventive and revolutionary ideas may arise from activities such as one person reading alone now looks to any act and prepares for the possibility of genius arising in any area of a community or society and, for the purposes of possible contributions, treats all men as created equal and capable of developing insights that rival the power of achieving salvation through reading the Bible. Those acts of reading connect to an ongoing conversation about human achievement and human possibility, and establish the basis for the work humanists do. Freed from the constraints of authoritarian control over ideas and conversation, individuals hold the prospect of constructing the next great idea for personal or public enhancement.
References


