Remembering Luther 500 Years Later

Women and Society

Previous scholarship on Luther’s legacy in regard to women portrayed his influence as “saving marriage” and women from the Catholic obsession with chastity (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 2003, 7). However, the recent scholarship investigating women’s roles in history inspired by the increasing influence of feminism since the mid-20th century provides a deeper insight into the effect on women place in society. Modern scholarship does that under Luther’s teachings women gained an improved role and status on society as a group by telling diverse opportunities for the individual, creating a homogenized female population whose place in society was reliant upon obtaining a husband with whom to beat children and to whom they must comply.

95 Theses

A mythology has been built around Martin Luther’s posting of his Ninety-five Theses on the doors of All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg. Rather than posting them to the church door himself, as commonly thought, it is likely that they were instead distributed by a student.[i]

One of the primary targets of Luther’s Ninety-five These was the practice of indulgences, in which a Christian could lay aside their Catholic Church in order to shorten a loved one’s time in purgatory. This practice helped fund many Catholic projects, including the construction of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome.[ii] Luther was primarily attempting to limit the scope of indulgences, not totally abolish them.[iii]

Historians have found that at least fifty-nine of Luther’s Ninety-five Theses mirror comments he made in his earlier writings.[iv][v]

Politics

Today the legacy of Luther can be found across myriad social, political, and religious movements. On issues ranging from gender to LGBTQ, Luther and the 95 Theses serves to grant legitimacy and heritage to any call for reform, where reform is sought or needed. This comes from his defiant, and increasingly radical opposition not only to the Papacy, but to Government authority as well. Here in USU Special Collections, we have in our possession a document entitled Zwei Kaiserliche uneinige und widerwärtige Gebot den Luther Betreffend. In English: Two Imperial Orders Concerning the Offensive and Contradictory Works Of Luther. Wherein, Charles V, echoes the resolution of Pope Leo X, who condemned Luther’s works as heretical. Charles V calls for the banning of all materials printed by Luther, as being a heretical trixter. Thanks to the printing press, and Luther’s increasing radical opposition, Luther could not be contained in his popularity. So much so that even he was surprised, “in the same way in our modern age, stories of protest and defiance go "Viral".

Luther strongly upheld the claims of political authority, citing scripture to condemn peasants who rose up against oppressive landlords. The Gospel granted legitimacy to the Medieval Hierarchical system. Thanks to cutting edge scholarship, we know that it was for this reason that Lutheranism resonated so well with princes of Germany and Scandinavia. This shows that Reform does not necessarily mean Progress.

Luther and Religion

While having originally sought to reform within the Church and change things to be in line with the scriptures, Martin Luther went on to be the face of the Protestant Reformation. This event still remains one of the biggest events in Christian history, as we see the biggest divide within the Church since the breakaway of the Greek Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church. Luther’s teachings of salvation through only grace, reading and learning the Bible through personal study, and having a clergy be allowed to marry and have families are all practices that are held by millions of Christians today. Though he was just a humble monk from Germany, many do and will remember Luther as one of the greatest reformers in human history.

Citations