

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

Excelsior Classical Covenantal Community

November 2008

www.excelsiorclassical.org

“Lessons for Today from Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation” by John Snyder

In the midst of educating our children (and ourselves) according to the classical model, we are often reminded of the fact that humanity has not really changed. I find this encouraging as a parent and teacher because I do not have to reinvent the wheel with each of life's new crises. As we are studying the Protestant Reformation this semester, I thought we might ask ourselves: What do the views of Martin Luther concerning the Bible and its authoritative role in our lives have to say to us in 2008? While we could as easily apply Luther's discoveries to our marriages, child-rearing, education, or the workplace, I want to illustrate his views by looking at his words about the Church.

Few people, in or out of churches, would look at the American Bible Belt and think that we have no need for a fresh reformation. Sadly, we do not seem able to come to a consensus on how we are going to decide what and how we should do this. Some wish to reinvent the whole concept of a church, while others place their confidence in a nostalgic return to the traditions of the 1950s. To make matters worse, we cannot seem to agree on which guides we ought to be following. There are so many voices clamoring for our attention, and all of them claim to be aiming at the highest ideals.

Luther can help us here. He lived on the brink of great changes. The “modern” was swiftly approaching, calling accepted views into question in every field. The Church was in a crisis. There were a number of authoritative voices to choose from: popes, ecclesiastical tradition, market pressures, political expediency. Luther rejected

Medieval Faire

Saturday, November 15th

Union County Fairground Arena

Please be sure that you have signed up for this event! Each family will be asked to bring a medieval dish - recipes to be provided by Jennifer Smith. Please contact her to let her know what dish(es) you will be bringing. In addition, you will be asked to host a carnival-like booth for the event. Heather Duley is in charge of the booths. Here is a listing of the booths still available: candle making, weaving, jousting, juggling/jester, monks/monasteries, armor/sword, Viking invasion, broom making, pottery, soap making, leather curing/tooling, jewelry, book binding, printing press, blacksmith, making paper or scroll, writing ballads, medieval footwear

There will be a \$25 fee per family to cover the cost of renting the facilities and for decorations.

Nichole Hardin is in charge of the decorations. Please contact her if you are available to help in this area.

Be sure to wear your medieval costumes!



them all. He refused to allow that any pope or prince could speak authoritatively about the Christian life. He even rejected the experience-intoxicated mystics who were rising up in the early days of the Reformation, as well as market pressures and marketing techniques, promoting religion on the back of the sales of indulgences and relic-viewing. Luther put in their place a book—the Bible. It seems quite logical to us looking back, but it is easier to approve of Luther's choices than to imitate them.

Right or wrong, Luther's

exaltation of a book, albeit a divinely inspired one, brought with it a number of obvious consequences that shaped the character of the early Reformers and their churches and that ought to still influence us today. One consequence was that personal study of a written text became imperative for every Christian. No longer could a priest's opinion suffice. If God revealed Himself in an authoritative text, then every person was obligated to study that text. All experiences, all doctrines, all Church practices were to flow out of the study of this book. Luther was a good example for us. As a busy adult he carefully studied through the entire Bible twice a year. He realized the value of reading books other than the Bible—most of his life was devoted to writing them. However, he feared that the Bible was being replaced by the books that were meant to lead people to it.

One might think that Luther's approach to the literary source of Christianity was an expression of a classicist, a purist; but it was much more. Luther was a classicist. He could quote whole sections of the writings of the Church Fathers and the medieval authorities. Luther's devotion to the Renaissance cry "to the sources" (*ad fontes*) was rooted in a confidence that God could be known only through the diligent study of a book. John Piper writes, "He had found life at the *spring* in the mountain, not the secondary *stream* in the valley."

Luther was convinced that the study of the ancient languages was indispensable as well. If God revealed Himself in a book, the teacher of that book would want to understand the very languages in which it was written. Luther writes, "Without languages we could not have received the gospel. Languages are the scabbard that contains the sword of the Spirit; they are the case which contains the priceless jewels of antique thought. . . . If we neglect the literature we shall eventually lose the gospel. . . . No sooner did men cease to cultivate the languages than Christendom declined, even until it fell under the undisputed dominion of the pope."

One other consequence might be mentioned. Luther opposed that lazy approach to the Bible that excused itself by claiming that one merely needed to depend upon the Spirit of God. He knew that the

Madrigal Feast

Tupelo High School Madrigals will be performing December 1-3 at the All Saints Episcopal Parish Fellowship Hall. Tickets will go on sale November 17 and are \$20 per person (including children). For more information call Tammy Young at 840-9318. This is a delightful event and a wonderful way to incorporate what we have been studying this year.

Ladies' Christmas Brunch

December 6th - 10 am
at the Moeller House
Virginia McCallum will be sending out details shortly.

Spirit of God would work in lives through the study of the written Word of God. Again, Luther writes, “It is a sin and shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God.” And at another place: “God wants to give you His Spirit only through the external Word.”

It would help us if we applied Luther’s world-shaking views of this divine book to our day. We too have many voices clamoring for our allegiance. In fact, they are not altogether different than those that Luther rejected: popular religious leaders, tradition, marketing techniques, cultural shifts. In short, we are being led in the Church and home by pragmatism. If a thing works, we are fundamentally convinced it must be right. If an approach fails to produce numbers, we think it must be essentially wrong. In this system, truth is shifted or discarded when it no longer appears expedient.

Luther rejected the voices we so often follow. In fact, I believe we would find Luther quite offensive—not the man: it is always safe to admire reformers from a distance of four centuries. Luther’s stubborn idea that the Bible must guide our choices is offensive. It offends our *intellect*. We think we are more advanced and clever than men and women that lived so many years ago. It seems a bit restrictive to teach that every program in the Church and every approach to raising our children has to be held accountable to a book. It offends our *spirituality*. I do not mean by this our godliness, but our addiction to indulgent religious sentimentalism. We do not find it easy to go to a book for directions when it is more exciting to do what we feel is best. It offends our American *activism*, that “just-do-it” mindset. We are a nation of doers. We like to organize ourselves and accomplish things. This is certainly a virtue in its place, but we do not like being told that our clever strategies need to be judged by a book. We would prefer to judge our newest program for church growth by a body-count and our strategy for educating our children by an SAT score. If it works in the marketplace, we think God should be pleased when we are clever enough to apply it to our homes and churches.

Not one of these issues is simple. Even agreeing with Luther about the authoritative role of the Bible is

not enough. I mention these things because I know how easy it is for us to secretly turn our back on the principles of our heroes. A little self-exam would not be difficult. Simply inquire: How much time have I spent this week sitting down and reading the Bible with some seriousness (not good books, not listening to sermons)? If I have not studied the written Word, then I am sure to be led by the very voices which Luther rejected even while I tell my children the stories of the Protestant Reformation. It is our constant temptation to admire men and follow at a distance.

John Piper writes, “We need to ask whether all the ground gained by Luther and the other Reformers may be lost over time if we lose this passion for study, while assuming that truth will remain obvious and available.” How much better to pass the *ancient* truths on to our children by mirroring them in our very *modern* lives.

(For a brief and helpful treatment of Luther and the Word of God, see John Piper’s work, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, pp. 77-114.)

Shakespeare Days

“As You Like It”

Tuesday, November 18th

Students who will be participating need to plan to come to Lit. class that day, 2-3pm. Then we will all migrate to the Moeller's house and settle in for some fun, some food, and a movie. If you expect your students will participate, please reply to Rachel Green as soon as possible.

Preparing for November...

November Clean-Up

November 7th - McCoy family

November 14th - Moeller family

November 21st - Morris family

November 7th - **Taco Bell**

November 14th - **Chick-fil-a**

November 21st -

Backyard Burger

November 28th - **No Class**

Lunch:

