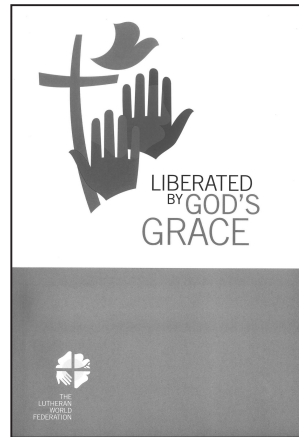


**Burghardt, Anne, ed., *Liberated by God's Grace*. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015, 103pp.**



The above collection of essays has recently been published on behalf of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) as a memorial to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and it consists of seven contributions, a preface, an introduction and a Bible study. *Liberated by God's Grace* was one of the four booklets prepared by the theologians from various parts of the world under the auspices of the LWF to commemorate the forthcoming Reformation jubilee.

The aforementioned collection afforded diverse theological perspectives on the Christian concept of justification within the Lutheran tradition and included the Anglican view (p. 83-94) as well. A diversity of voices and a genuine attention paid to the cultural and social context certainly enhanced the value of that relevant theological project. None of the essays prescinded from an existential context of theological discourse. The contributions were pregnant with the illustrations or applications anchored to specific settings of their authors. Moreover, a set of questions was appended to every essay in order to initiate further discussion and to foster a theological thinking transcending the current comfort zone of those practising Protestant theology worldwide.

Nonetheless, the booklet under review was deeply flawed as far as theological foundations were concerned. First, the phenomenon of the Wittenberg Reformation in its formative years was misconceived

and misrepresented. Second, Luther's attitude to Jews and Judaism was whitewashed over. Third, an impact of the 18th- and 19th-century Protestant luminaries such Kant or Hegel upon Protestant theology was completely overlooked. Now, let us elaborate on those demerits of *Liberated by God's Grace*.

First, treating of the origin of the Wittenberg Reformation, all the essays referred to and cited Luther only, implying that the formation of Protestant theology could be traced back solely to him. Thus, Melanchthon's decisive contribution to the origin of Protestant theology as an academic discipline and to the construction of relevant theological concepts (e. g. forensic doctrine of justification, the Law and Gospel distinction, the doctrine of the means of grace) was disregarded except for a statement that Melanchthon "played an important role in the compilation of the *Confessio Augustana*" (p. 68). In another essay, the Augsburg Confession (*Confessio Augustana*) was depicted as "the confession [...] published [by the Lutherans] in Augsburg in 1530" (p. 24) as if it had no author at all. Actually, Melanchthon fully authored the Augsburg Confession to the same extent as Luther wrote his Catechisms by himself. Since Melanchthon's authorship of *Confessio Augustana* has never been questioned, the remarks cited above sound detrimental to his theological standing. To do justice to the author of "Education and the Reformation" (p. 68-69), it should be noted that in the aforementioned essay the Melanchthonian heritage in the sphere of education was duly highlighted.

Speaking of Melanchthon's theological contribution, which was ignored in *Liberated by God's Grace*, it must be admitted that in many respects Melanchthon formulated what is now commonly known as a doctrinal legacy of the Wittenberg Reformation. Between 1518 and 1519 he invented the essentials of his future Loci and outlined the structure of them in his *Lucubratiuncula* (CR, vol. 21, 11-48) and in a synopsis of his lecture on the Book of Romans (CR, vol. 21, 48-60). In the texts mentioned above Melanchthon enunciated the Reformation concepts of the free will, of the Law and Gospel, of the forensic

nature of justification,<sup>1</sup> of the Christian freedom and of the means of grace which subsequently solidified into a mature and comprehensive presentation found in the first edition of his *Loci* published in 1521. It is difficult to identify such doctrinal formulations in Luther's works prior to 1519/1520 because when in 1518 Melanchthon joined the University of Wittenberg, Luther's theological programme was quite rudimentary and it was focused on combating the Catholic theory and practise of indulgences and on defending the idea of justification for Christ's sake appropriated through faith. From the historical perspective, the reception of Melanchthon's writings including his renowned Catechism (*Catechesis puerilis*), which was published countless times in Latin and in various German renditions (CR, vol. 23, 103-14), for instance in Scandinavia,<sup>2</sup> overshadowed that of Luther's tracts. Granted that Luther was intrinsically incapable of creating any textbook of systematic theology, which he himself humbly confessed (WA, vol. 50, 657-658; vol. 54, 179), Melanchthon's *Loci* became the standard compendium by means of which a next generation of the Protestant divines were instructed and illuminated. Luther did not object to this fact but rather appreciated the potential of *Loci*, realising that without Melanchthon's theological and educational insights the Wittenberg Reformation could not be fortified and thus might not expand beyond German territories (WA, vol. 18, 601; WA BR, vol. 2, 382-386; WA TR, vol. 5, 204-5 [No. 5511]).

An essay titled "The Liberating Word of God" (p. 41-56) examined the origin and evolution of the *sola Scriptura* principle again without mentioning Melanchthon's programmatic expositions of the authority

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<sup>1</sup> Lowell Clark Green, *How Melanchthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel: The Doctrine of Justification in the Reformation* (Fallbrook: Verdict Publications, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Günter Frank and Martin Treu, ed., *Melanchthon und Europa*, vol. 1-2 (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2001-2002). Birgit Stolt, ed., *Philipp Melanchthon und seine Rezeption in Skandinavien* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998).

of the Scripture in the church which were enshrined in the prefaces to all versions of his ever-evolving Loci. In the analysed essay a verbal infelicity occurred (p. 50) because the Formula of Concord did not venture to represent the "Protestant churches" but only those church bodies which espoused that document and which were later denominated as "Lutheran". As a matter of fact, in the Book of Concord, to which the Formula of Concord belongs, half of writings were composed by Melanchthon, while the other half - by Luther, given that the Formula of Concord was regarded as a collective work. Actually, the Book of Concord rose to prominence as an influential collection of Lutheran confessions in 1580 due to the historical circumstances. Earlier, the monumental, bilingual *Corpus Philippicum*, which was published in 1560 and comprised only of Melanchthon's masterpieces, held sway.

Second, in the essay "The Church and the Public Space" we encounter a statement that "some of [Luther's] writings were most unfortunate, i. e., his statements about the Jews [...]" (p. 30). To call Luther's attitude to Jews and Judaism unfortunate, it is simply intolerable even with reference to his writing of 1523 titled *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* in which Luther declared that in the past the Christian mission to Jews was inefficient because it was focused on putting a religious and social pressure upon them instead of preaching what he labelled as a pure Gospel to them. Consequently, Luther assumed that if Christians tempered their persecutions against Jews, the latter could be more amenable to conversion which in his opinion would be caused by preaching in accord with the Christian Scriptures and could be facilitated by a Christian appeal to the Jewish ancestry of Jesus. Therefore, Luther clarified that lack of favourable Jewish response to a new Christian approach would necessitate a change of strategy on his part which really happened later in his programmatic anti-Semitic tracts.

In exegetical terms Luther regularly denounced "the Jews" for fabricating the biblical text which matched his allegation that due to the "unbelief", which he imputed to Jews, they were unable to understand

Hebrew and were inclined to pervert the sense of the Scripture and were destined to obscure the messianic threads thereof (WA, vol. 42, 258-61; vol. 44, 101). Accordingly, Luther stipulated that the Christian church, which in his view superseded Israel, was called to restore a genuine text of the Tanakh corrupted by Jews, purging it of the "Jewish distortions" (WA, vol. 42, 222-23; vol. 54, 79-80) by which he meant primarily the Masoretic vocalisation as well as the grammatical and lexical knowledge treasured by the Jewish divines (WA, vol. 53, 646-48). Luther's assertion that Jews lost their ability to study the Hebrew Bible (WA, vol. 42, 598-601; vol. 44, 31-40, 135-37, 459-62, 505-12, 790-92) was concomitant with his espousal of the supersessionism (WA, vol. 8, 60-62; WA DB, vol. 11/1, 393-405). He reasoned that since Israel was entirely replaced with the church, the sacred writings of the Israelites were repossessed by Christians who on that account became the only legitimate expositors of the Tanakh to the same degree as Israelites were the custodians thereof in the past, to wit, prior to Jesus' appearance. Therefore, in Luther's opinion even if the Jewish scholars could retain some miserable and feeble grammatical or lexical knowledge of Hebrew, for spiritual reasons, as those "possessed by Satan" (WA, vol. 44, 216-18; vol. 53, 491), they were incapable of and ineligible for capturing the "true" meaning of the Tanakh. Moreover, Luther stated that since Jews were collectively "those who crucified Christ", the Jewish divines were doomed to "crucify" the words of the prophets, who in his view were Christ's, as well (WA, vol. 40/III, 662-68; vol. 42, 218-19).

It is legitimate to assert that Luther's theological perspective on Judaism and on the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible was indivisible from his personal anti-Semitism which he himself articulated by calling Jews of all ages "devil's children" (WA, vol. 44, 754-55; vol. 53, 446, 530) and by accusing Jews of their unquenchable thirst for the blood of Christian children. Consequently, Luther kept on denouncing Jews for kidnapping and murdering Christian children (WA, vol. 53, 482, 529-30, 538). For that reason, Luther appealed to the Germans of his day to slay all the Jews in revenge for the blood of Christian children which in his opinion was gulped down by Jews and which according to him

made the Jewish eyes and skin shine in a devilish way (WA, vol. 53, 520-22). In 1543 Luther proposed to solve the "Jewish question" in Saxony, commanding the secular authorities to burn all the synagogues and Jewish books, to plunder all the property of Jews including their houses, to enslave Jews and to exile them from Saxony unless they accepted the Christian religion (WA, vol. 53, 412-552). Since at that time the conversion of Jews, even under threat of death, appeared to Luther implausible, he preferred to envisage the flames consuming Jewish movables and immovables and their Jewish owners as a blessed and holy means by which the Christian piety and devotion could finally come to light and please God (WA, vol. 53, 523).

Given that Luther considered Judaism to be a repository of all evil, he demanded that the secular government execute rabbis as the custodians of the Jewish tradition to stifle the propagation of the "pure evil" (WA, vol. 53, 523-24). In fact, Luther not only urged German princes to exile or to exterminate Jews but also adjured the princes to do so in the LORD's name, indicating that if they refused to enact God's wrath against Jews proclaimed by him, they would be cursed by God as the enemies of Christ. Thus, Luther claimed that every minister should threaten his government with the eternal damnation if they did not purge completely the territory of "devil's worshippers" by whom he meant Jews. In Luther's opinion, his prophetic announcement of the divine vengeance upon Jews abrogated the state laws which were to some degree protecting their life and property so that German princes could freely obey his clarion call (WA, vol. 53, 529-30). Although earlier Luther was willing to spare copies of the Hebrew Bible, in 1543 he was relentlessly calling for their annihilation because they were utterly "Jewish" (WA, vol. 53, 536). In addition, Luther was planning to "disarm" Jews in spiritual terms before their exile or extermination (WA, vol. 53, 536-37). For this purpose, Luther requested to penalise every form of the Jewish worship or prayer and to prohibit Jews from uttering God's name which in his view was always blasphemous. Realising that such activities were hard to detect, Luther implored every German citizen including women and children to sniff out the

"Jewish blasphemy" in the air. From the perspective of the author of the present review Luther's attitude to the Jewish religion, to the Jewish people and to the Hebrew Bible, as recapitulated above, can under no circumstances be termed "unfortunate".

Third, the booklet *Liberated by God's Grace* did not reflect the fact that with the emergence of the Enlightenment Protestant theology became much more pluralistic than previously. Therefore, the reduction of the entire Protestant theological discourse to the 16th-century documents cannot be applauded. For instance, Kant's ethical interpretation of religion and Hegel's abstract view on the universe engulfing the Godhead were fully embraced by some Protestant theologians and left an imprint upon Protestant theology as such. Thus, those propositions, like it or not, are an indelible part of the Protestant identity and should be referred to while describing the evolution of religious concepts in historical terms. It is remarkable that in the presentation of the *sola Scriptura* principle (p. 41-56) no mention of Schleiermacher's redefinition both of the authority of the Scripture and of the function of the confessions was made. Regardless of one's personal preferences, the multi-faceted and unobvious nature of the contemporary theologising cannot be denied or neglected. Rather, the diversity accruing from the 500 years of practising Protestant theology, which over time disengaged itself completely from external, non-academic limitations, gives us the incentive to celebrate the year 2017 as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

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