Martin Luther – Scripture Translation as a Panacea to Violence in Medieval Times

By

Amadi Enoch Ahiamadu PhD
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Port Harcourt

Abstract
Although Martin Luther’s reforms pointed out the unscriptural practices of the Roman Catholic Church, they generated reactions from the official church which cut across both church and society in medieval times. While dodging the violent attacks aimed at eliminating the German monk, Luther’s supporters considered ways in which the eyes of the German nobility could be opened to the new realities of correct teachings of Scripture. Luther produced a new translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate, with his knowledge of Biblical Hebrew as a very valuable asset. With the Scripture translated into German it became a subject of vulgar dialogue at various levels of German ecclesiastical life and helped dowse the tension and conflicts unleashed on recalcitrant members of the Holy Roman Empire. This article articulates the problems associated with Martin Luther’s reformation, and uses a methodology of tradition-historical analysis in evaluating the violence of medieval resistance to the reformation as well as the Scriptures as a panacea to its negative impact. Its findings include the positive impact which Scripture translation could have on a religiously restive society, and it recommends that contemporary approaches to the settlement of denominational acrimony and religious violence should include support for the ministry of Bible translation and local language literacy.

I. Background
A young German who yearned to please his biological father by studying Law, but ended up pleasing his heavenly Father by studying Theology at Leipzig. He was born on 10 November 1483 in a German city of Eisleben. On a journey one day from his secular school he faced a thunderstorm
which nearly claimed his life, but he narrowly escaped but not without having made a vow to become a Monk if God Almighty would save him out of this unusual storm. When his life was spared he took a vow and joined the Augustinian monastery, and so began his long and arduous journey into the Priesthood of the Catholic Church. The young German in question is known as Martin Luther.

As a monk, Luther desired to please his superiors, as much as he desired to please his heavenly Father. He was ready to serve and as a Monk he was committed to decency and order. He served as a prefect and was always there to sweep the floor and arrange the hall in which meetings were to be held – at devotions and at lectures, seminars or symposiums. It is often told of Luther that he would lie at the entrance to the assembly hall and let others march through and over him. In this way he was convinced that he could feel the burden of others as well as provide others with needed reassurance. It was also his way of satisfying one of the sacraments of the Church – Penance – regular doing of which contributes to one’s peace of mind.

While he was reading through the commentary on the book of Romans and meditating, he stormed upon the revelation that all his hard work to please the Lord would earn him no merit as “the just shall live by faith.” Christ has paid for all our sins and iniquities and only by faith in him can we appropriate his pardon, his justification and his righteousness without any merit on the part of human but all on the merits of and by the grace of Christ and Christ alone.

With this understanding his heart was greatly illuminated. He felt like someone who discovered a gold mine, and all of Scripture – both Old and New Testaments began to fit together for this young but curious German divine. As he shared his thoughts with both his superiors and with other colleagues, he seemed to them like someone telling an idle tale. On a
subsequent occasion when he was sent to Rome as part of a delegation to forward some contributions to the Roman friars, Luther witnessed to his dismay the lax and casual manner in which the Priests performed the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. According to him it took them more time to complete one Mass, than it took him at Leipzig to complete five or six. Coupled with the fact that the Romans treated the outposts of the Catholic Church as dependencies and as repositories of all that Rome needed for “life and godliness”. He was even more angered by the practice of simony and its associated idolatrous saying that “as soon as your coin drops into the offering tray, a soul slips from purgatory into paradise”.

II. Martin Luther and the Problem of Reformation

On his return to Leipzig he was transferred to the University of Wittenberg as a Lecturer and a superior monk, and he continued to lecture on the books of both the Old and New Testament. Within eighteen months of his new lecturing experience he prepared his famous “95 thesis” on the errors of the Roman Catholic Church and posted these in the chapel doors of the University of Wittenberg. On that Sunday morning of October 31 1517 all those who came to attend the chapel services that morning were spell bound by the depth of insight and reproof contained in Luther’s “95 thesis” and many milled around the church premises in tears and lament where several Catholic faithful returned back home to await the judgment which in their opinion was long overdue on the church as a result of these abuses enunciated in the “95 thesis”.

When the news of the “95 thesis” reached Rome, the Pope issued a bull ordering the immediate arrest of Martin Luther, but this order was disobeyed and Martin went around preaching his newly found faith in the finished work of Christ Jesus on the Cross. He maintained that the Church’s “true treasure is the Gospel; that a Christian may share in the good works of Saints without the Pope’s certificate; that God’s divine pardon can be obtained only after true repentance; that an indulgence in the proper sense
is only a release from the ecclesiastical penalties of sin, but not from those inflicted by God in another world; and that in any case it is unscriptural to grant an indulgence except where repentance has gone before.

III. Methodological Presuppositions
The tradition-historical method is the oldest methodology in re-reading the Scriptures and became extant during the period of ascendance of the German-Scandinavian school in the 1920s. It was embraced by the British-American school which used it extensively during the period of the post war recession of the 1920s and 30s. The tradition-historical methodology presupposes the inerrancy of Scripture in its original languages and accepts both the Old and New Testament as authentic, infallible and inspired in all of its original renditions. Thus building on the legacy of the reformation which upheld the Divine origin of Scripture and its spiritual values in addressing various levels of human degeneracy. Interestingly, the business of Textual criticism in Biblical research was taken at face value until the late era of Julius Wellhausen, Martin Noth and a host of other scholars of the German-Scandinavian school. In re-reading the Bible with ordinary users, this methodology is the most fitting because of the contemporary belief that the Bible is a supernatural book and capable of addressing various societal problems if used in line with the tradition-historical methodology.

Although Scripture translation came later in the scheme of the reformation, it was a direct attack on the monopoly of the Biblical text by the clergy and the Papacy for more than ten centuries. One of the reason for a vehement attack on the publications and teachings of the reformers was their liberal and democratic view of the Scripture as a book meant for ordinary peoples, and not an exclusively elite document. In fact the Reformers in encouraging a vulgar use of the Biblical text came up with the aphorism “the simplest interpretation usually is the correct interpretation”.

Martin Luther – Scripture Translation as a Panacea to Violence in Medieval Times...
III. Violence Reactions to the Reforms by Martin Luther

The “95 thesis” apparently aroused the religious and moral sense of the German faithful who had become wearied by the heavy burden of the Roman Catholic Church. It steered the truly religious into a revolution against the rituals, and truth rose up against falsehood, just as the Bible stood up against official church unconventional practices such as the sale of indulgences. Moreover, the ordinary worshippers stood up against the clergy in the sense that they preferred the ordinary readings and simple interpretations to the professionally correct and papal pronouncements. On a more serious note it pitched the German nation against the Romish Church. Many have today heard of the “95 thesis” but not many have actually read them. The heart and essence of the thesis was to depict the errors of the established Church which has over the centuries stultified spiritual growth and maturity; obfuscated the task of missionary evangelism; and promoted an idolatry which displaced the grace of God with the grants of a Papal mandate as a solution to the sin equation and the judgement of God. Luther used Scripture vehemently in denouncing the errors of the Church and translated it to enable ordinary readers see for themselves the authenticity of the reforms demanded by the Reformers.

In June of the previous year, 1520, Pope Leo X issued the Papal bull *Exsurge Domine* ("Arise, O Lord"), outlining forty-one purported errors found in Martin Luther’s Ninety-five Theses and other writings related to or written by him. Luther was summoned by the emperor. Prince Frederick III, Elector of Saxony obtained an agreement that if Luther appeared he would be promised safe passage to and from the meeting. This guarantee was essential after the treatment of Jan Huss, who was tried and executed at the Council of Constance in 1415 despite a promise of safe conduct.

Emperor Charles V commenced the Imperial Diet of Worms on 23 January 1521. Luther was summoned to renounce or reaffirm his views. When he appeared before the assembly on 16 April, Johann Eck, an assistant of the
Archbishop of Trier (Richard von Greiffenklau zu Vollrads at that time), acted as spokesman for the emperor.

Although Rome did everything it could to reverse the losses sustained by the established church consequent on the reforms advocated by Martin Luther, it did not succeed. Rather, the reform consciousness spread like wild-fire into the neighbouring nations of Europe including France and Switzerland. A few years later Ulrich Zwingli published his own “67 articles” which went further in highlighting the inadequacies and errors of the Catholic Church.

On several occasion Martin Luther was called upon to a public debate in which the two opposing views were marshalled before excited and curious audiences and Luther’s arguments often won the day.

The main events of the Diet of Worms relating to Luther took place from 16 to 18 April 1521.

On 16 April, Luther arrived in Worms. Luther was told to appear the following day before the Diet at 4 p.m. Dr. Jeromee Schurff, Wittenberg professor in Canon Law, was to act as Luther’s lawyer before the Diet.

On 17 April, the imperial marshall, Ulrich von Pappenheim, and the herald, Caspar Sturm came for Luther. Pappenheim reminded Luther that he should speak only in answer to direct questions from the presiding officer, Johann Eck. Eck asked if a collection of books was Luther’s and if he was ready to revoke their heresies. Dr. Schurff said, ”Please have the titles read.” There were 25 of them, probably including The 95 Theses, Resolutions Concerning the 95 Theses, On the Papacy at Rome, Address to the Christian Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and On the Freedom of a Christian. Luther requested more time for a proper answer, so he was given until the next day at 4 p.m.
On 18 April, Luther, stating he’d prayed for long hours, consulted with friends and mediators, presented himself before the Diet. When the counsellor put the same questions to him, Luther first apologized that he lacked the etiquette of the court. Then he answered, “They are all mine, but as for the second question, they are not all of one sort.” Luther went on to place the writings into three categories: (1) Works which were well received by even his enemies: those he would not reject. (2) Books which attacked the abuses, lies and desolation of the Christian world and the papacy: those, Luther believed, could not safely be rejected without encouraging abuses to continue. To retract them would be to open the door to further oppression. "If I now recant these, then, I would be doing nothing but strengthening tyranny". (3) Attacks on individuals: he apologized for the harsh tone of these writings but did not reject the substance of what he taught in them; if he could be shown from the Scriptures that he was in error, Luther continued, he would reject them.

Luther concluded by saying: ‘Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.

V. Translation of the Bible as a Panacea to Violence
According to tradition, Luther is said to have declared, "Here I stand, I can do no other, and “before concluding with” God help me. Amen.” However, there is no indication in the transcripts of the Diet or in eyewitness accounts that he ever said this, and most scholars now doubt if these words were spoken.
Eck informed Luther that he was acting like a heretic:

"'Martin,' said he, 'there is no one of the heresies which have torn the bosom of the church, which has not derived its origin from the various interpretation of the Scripture. The Bible itself is the arsenal whence each innovator has drawn his deceptive arguments. It was with biblical texts that Pelagius and Arius maintained their doctrines. Arius, for instance, found the negation of the eternity of the Word—an eternity which you admit, in this verse of the New Testament—*Joseph knew not his wife till she had brought forth her first-born son*; and he said, in the same way that you say, that this passage enchained him. When the fathers of the council of Constance condemned this proposition of John Huss—*The church of Jesus Christ is only the community of the elect*, they condemned an error; for the church, like a good mother, embraces within her arms all who bear the name of Christian, all who are called to enjoy the celestial beatitude."

Private conferences were held to determine Luther’s fate. Before a decision was reached, Luther fled. During his return to Wittenberg, he disappeared. An ambush that was laid for him on the orders of the Roman pontiff also failed, because those who believed in the views expressed by Luther halted the ambush, took him into a hide-out and nourished him for more than 90 days.

The Papal nuncio at the diet, Girolamo Aleandro, drew up and proposed the denunciations of Luther that were embodied in the Edict of Worms, promulgated on 25 May. The Edict declared Luther to be an obstinate heretic and banned the reading or possession of his writings. In the Edict of Worms issued on 25 May 1521 by Emperor Charles V it declared that:

“For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as
he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work”.

It was the culmination of an ongoing struggle between Martin Luther and the Catholic Church over reform, especially in practice of donations for indulgences. However, there were other deeper issues that revolved around both theological concerns:

- On a theological level, Luther had challenged the absolute authority of the Pope over the Church by maintaining that the doctrine of indulgences, as authorized and taught by the Pope, was wrong.[6]
- Luther maintained that salvation was by faith alone (*sola fide*) without reference to good works, alms, penance, or the Church's sacraments. Luther maintained that the sacraments were a "means of grace," meaning that while grace was imparted through the Sacraments, the credit for the action belonged to God and not to the individual.[7]
- He had also challenged the authority of the Church by maintaining that all doctrines and dogmata of the Church not found in Scripture should be discarded (*sola scriptura*).

To protect the authority of the Pope and the Church, as well as to maintain the doctrine of indulgences, ecclesiastical officials convinced Charles V that Luther was a threat and persuaded him to authorize his condemnation by the Holy Roman Empire. Luther escaped arrest and remained in seclusion. When Luther emerged from the hide-out he had published more of his writings to sensitize the German nobility, and to highlight the importance of absolute dependence on the merits of the Cross for the salvation of souls aside of the Pope’s ministerial antics.
Despite the agreement that he could return home safely, it was privately understood that Luther would soon be arrested and punished. To protect him from this fate, Prince Frederick seized him on his way home and hid him in Wartburg Castle. It was during his time in Wartburg that Luther began his German translation of the Bible. Martin Luther's powerful testimony of faith at the Diet of Worms in 1521 made an indelible impression upon the mind of George, Margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach, who turned his eyes to the new faith earlier than any other German prince or any other member of the House of Hohenzollern. Moreover, Luther entered into correspondence with him, discussing with him the most important problems of faith. The edict was temporarily suspended at the Diet of Speyer 1526 but then reinstated in 1529.

When Luther eventually emerged from the Wartburg, the emperor, distracted with other matters, did not press for Luther's arrest. Ultimately, because of rising public support for Luther among the German people and the protection of certain German princes, the Edict of Worms was never enforced in Germany. However, in the Low Countries (comprising modern-day Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), the Edict was initially enforced against Luther's most active supporters. This could be done because these countries were under the direct reign of Emperor Charles V and his appointed regent, Margaret of Austria, Duchess of Savoy (and Charles's aunt). In December 1521, Jacob Probst, prior of the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp, was the first Luther-supporting cleric to be arrested and prosecuted under the terms of the Worms Edict. In February 1522, Probst was compelled to make public recantation and repudiation of Luther's teachings. Later that year, additional arrests were made among the Augustinians in Antwerp. Two monks, Johann Erch and Heinrich Voes, refused to recant; on 1 July 1523, they were burned at the stake in Brussels.[8]
VI. Conclusion

It is instructive to note the role that a translation of the Biblical text into the vulgar tongue of the Germans played in re-directing not only the focus of the German nobility towards the values of the Reformation but also the importance of avoiding the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1529 when Philip of Hesse arranged for a Conference at Marburg so that those awakened by Luther’s reforms could discuss the differences between Luther and the Catholic Church on the one hand, and Luther and other reformers like Ulrich Zwingli and other divines on the other. It was entirely based on what later came to be known as Sola Scriptura. Five hundred years since Martin Luther liberated the Church from doctrinal Papism and dogmatism, it lends itself to the credence of today’s society as one that desperately needs Divine intervention in resolving the numerous violent killings and kidnappings happening almost on a daily basis around most of the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria inclusive.

Luther and his associate Melanchthon stood on the side of the Germans, while Zwingli and Ecolampadius stood on the side of the Swiss inadvertently espousing the historical-tradition approaches. The Reformers disagreed with the Roman Church on nearly all of the fourteen points tabled at the Conference, but only on one point among themselves, namely on the Lord’s Supper. Even at that they were agreed as to the nature, purpose and mode of administration, but only differed on the point about transubstantiation. Apparently, Luther leaned on the more traditional view of transubstantiation while the other Reformers were more agreed that consubstantiation was more in agreement with the revealed Word of God. Once again the similarities and differences derived from interpretations of Scripture.

Both admitted that Christ was literally present in real Person, but Zwingli affirmed that the real presence is Spiritual, while Luther leaned on the view that it could be Corporeal.
In spite of the challenges posed to the Reformers generally by some minor doctrinal differences, and the more personal challenges posed to Martin Luther himself, the reformation movement has been put in motion and in an irreversible gear. The Catholic Church did everything to halt the move, including the Counter Reformation led by the Jesuits, and the 30 years war that ravaged the entire Europe. It took the peace of Westphalia which came in 1648 to put an end to all of that and to gain the freedom to practice Christianity in line cardinal principles of the Reformation – *sola Christos, sola fide, sola Deo Gloria, sola gratia, and sola Scriptura*.

We remember Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin as the theologians of the Reformation, and for the giant stride with which they led the Church of Christ out of the Dark ages. With the help of the enlightenment these men facilitated the reformation. The motivated the singular act of dethroning Roman Catholicism with all its idolatry, adulatory of Church rituals, and false elevation of Papal bulls above the authority of Scripture. By means of the Reformation of 500 years ago these divines foisted upon the Church and nations a renewed yearning for the Word of God alone, for Christ alone, Faith alone, Grace alone and of course the glory of God alone. We join forces with both the Triumphant and the Militant Church of God on earth in celebrating what was more or less a European struggle, but which had the wider impact of freeing human minds from the shackles of medieval Catholicism. Today the Church from the Reformation the Church from the civilized world have extended the frontiers of God’s wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and salvation to all parts of habitable the earth including Africa and especially here in Nigeria. *Sola Deo Gloria!*
References


Martin Luther (2000). "Life of Luther (Luther by Martin Luther)".


Oberman, Heiko (2006), Luther: Man Between God and the Devil, New Haven: Yale University Press