

GUEST EDITORIAL

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Perhaps most ETS members were encouraged, inspired, or otherwise buoyed by events in 2017 celebrating the 500th anniversary of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses. Most evangelical denominations (as well as non-denominations) own some connection, whether loose or tight, to either precursors of the Reformation (like Hus or Wycliffe), to a magisterial Reformer, to a radical Reformer (like Menno Simons), or to one or more of their descendants (like Jonathan Edwards). In or around 2017, these names and connections were highlighted in any number of observances and books.

Other books singled out the Reformation *solas*. Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* comes to mind.¹ I joined with a colleague in South Africa to write a short book that featured both the *solas* and selected Reformation or post-Reformation leaders: Martin Luther, William Tyndale, John Calvin, Zacharias Ursinus, and Francis Turretin.²

And, of course, the theme of the 2017 national ETS meeting in Providence, RI, was “The Heritage of the Reformation.”

Yet at the core of the Reformation, I would argue, was something beyond its greatest leaders and most trenchant truths. I am reminded of God’s declaration in Isaiah: “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa 66:2 ESV). Or from another angle there is Jesus’s accusation in Mark: “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?” (Mark 12:24 NIV). It is these Scriptures “which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15; ESV = NIV). In fact, all that we know for sure pertaining most directly to God and the world over which he reigns is rooted in the Bible.

Reformation leaders, history, truths, and heritage are priceless in what they mediate. But what they mediate most fundamentally is, in the end, focus on the writings of the OT and NT which (along with Trinitarian belief) have formed the primary basis of ETS affiliation since its inception.

This Scripture focus is dramatized in a fascinating account by Brian Cummings: “Luther in the Berlinka.”³ Cummings tells of Luther’s long-lost handwritten

¹ Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016.

² Victor Kuligan and Robert Yarbrough, *In Christ Alone* (Vereeniging, South Africa: Christian Art Publishers, 2017).

³ *Times Literary Supplement*, December 12, 2017; online: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/luther-in-the-berlinka>. I am indebted to Eckhard Schnabel for calling my attention to this.

Romans commentary composed in 1515–16. It had gone missing for some three hundred years but turned up in Berlin in 1905. By that time a (Catholic) historiography had emerged in which Luther was captivated, not by the Scriptures, but by late medieval scholasticism, to which he responded with eloquence and insight. This understanding, in which Scripture falls into the background as the prime impetus for the Reformation, influenced Barth, Bonhoeffer, and even Heidegger.

An even more pernicious view of Luther and his salvation experience arose with Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958), a book I recall being taught as truth at the University of Montana when my wife and I took up studies there in 1973. For Erikson, drawing on Freudian psychology, Luther's insights owe most to perceptions associated with excretory release—we should attribute Luther's spiritual breakthrough not to a *Turnerlebnis* (mountaintop experience) but to relief in the outhouse. While Erikson's account has been rightly scorned by many, it seems that today even the most distinguished scholars of Luther explain him along complex lines associated with the complexity of his towering intellect, haunted soul, sometimes sinister convictions (like his fulminations about the Jews), and tortured times. But what about Romans? What about the word of God which, Luther would later say, held him captive?

Cummings tells the fascinating story of being just the third person to gaze on Luther's Romans manuscript since its removal to what is now Cracow, Poland, at the height of World War II. Deciphering Luther's own tiny but precise scrawls extending over some 150 pages, Cummings notes: "Luther's first concern is the word in the text in front of him. Theology only comes after. This completely reverses the order of mind in the mainstream of Lutheran theology, where systematic theology comes first and hermeneutics later. But Luther thinks like a reader." Indeed: a reader of Scripture.

Cummings goes on to note how Luther's breakthrough idea comes "not from philosophy lessons in the schools of Erfurt, but from reading, in noting how Hebrew and Greek and Latin mean things in different ways."

In fact, Luther's notes as he wrestled with Romans (in Greek), and with the underlying Hebrew verses quoted there (notably Hosea's "the righteous shall live by faith" in Rom 1:17), justify Cummings's observation: "In a profound way, Hebrew grammar changed the course of European history." Hebrew grammar, that is, applied even to a minute portion of the canonical Scriptures, with all the acumen, intensity, reverence, and passionate desire to know and honor God for which study of his word written calls.

My point is that the most seminal factor in the Reformation was ... simply the Bible. Luther's particular experience was of course unique. But it has analogies in any number of figures of that era over which a fresh vision blazed, like a sudden brilliant meteor, of the saving gospel truth they read and preached from the Scriptures.

Do we not, then, best affirm the Reformation heritage by reaffirming our commitment to the study of the Bible, not just by applauding what happened in 1517 and since, much less by defining a reformational identity by veneration of this

or that leading name of the tradition? To be faithful to the Reformation is to emulate its trademark *ad fontes* impulse to search the Scriptures.

The ETS is well positioned to renew and carry on with that search as we begin, if the Lord tarries, the next 500 years leading up to a Reformation millennial celebration. Christian numbers in the Reformation birthplace of Europe (where sceptical regard for Scripture still holds sway among the cultured elite) continue to decline in comparison with parts of the world where the Bible is more commonly read with openness to the God who gave it: in 2014 Latin America eclipsed Europe as the continent with the most Christians. Just four years later, in 2018, Africa (599 million Christians) has overtaken Latin America (597 million) and Europe (550 million). “By 2050 there will likely be more Christians in Africa (1.25 billion) than in Latin America (705 million) and Europe (490 million) combined. By then, Asia (588 million) will also have passed Europe in its number of Christians.”⁴

Most of these regions of Christian growth are places where people believe, study, learn, and seek to live out the Bible, often in the face of adverse and sometimes lethal opposition. In contrast, regions like Europe and North America that once affirmed the high view of Scripture that birthed the Reformation have widely abandoned veneration of the Bible and are suffering the consequences.

May it never be said of ETS members and constituencies, “You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (Gal 5:7 ESV), the truth affirmed in the ETS doctrinal basis: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.” And not just some word from some god conceived in any old way: “God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”

Any enduring blessing of the Reformation just celebrated is apt to be attended by the pursuit of mastery of, and being mastered by, the living truths of Scripture that changed world history half a millennium ago, and that seem poised to continue to do so where the Bible and the Christ to which it points are honored, to the great good of humans and to God’s eternal glory. This is surely at the core of what the ETS doctrinal basis in its best and highest application is intended to foster.

Editor’s note: Many thanks to Robert W. Yarbrough for contributing this Guest Editorial at my request. Readers of this issue of the *Journal* may be interested to know that Sam Storm’s ETS presidential address delivered at this past November’s annual meeting could not be included because it will be published in another publication in the future. The three plenary addresses from last year’s annual meeting will be included in the June 2018 issue.

⁴ All figures in this paragraph are from Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing, “Christianity 2018: More African Christians and Counting Martyrs,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42 (2018): 20–28, esp. 21.