

SHOCK AND AWE: THE REFORMERS AND THE STUNNING JOY OF ROMANS 1–8

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Abstract: *In response to the suggestion of some scholars that the Reformers' understanding of the gospel was unhelpfully skewed by the idiosyncrasies of their time period, this address (delivered at a plenary session of the 2017 ETS conference) argues that there are four factors in the late medieval world that prepared the sixteenth-century Reformers to understand the gospel at a deep level and respond to it with great joy. It draws on the life of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli's sermon preached to nuns in a Dominican convent, the Romans commentaries of the Reformers, and the art of Roger van der Weyden, the Lucas Cranachs Elder and Younger, and Michelangelo, to illustrate the transition from medieval to Reformation understandings of the gospel.*

Key words: *gospel, Romans, justification by faith alone, Reformation, medieval, Martin Luther, sola fide, joy, art*

I wonder if you've had a similar experience, where you've spent a long time studying something, engaged with it intensely, and then taken it into the classroom—or pulpit—and failed to elicit the reaction you expected.

I was in the midst of editing the Romans 1–8 volume of InterVarsity's Reformation Commentary on Scripture series.¹ This past January, I spent four long days reading through an early but very thick manuscript draft of it that I had been working on for several years. It was a massive translation project since most of the excerpts had never appeared in English, so I had assembled a small team of gifted translators to assist me with the translations.

I had been prepping one Reformer at a time, perusing each commentary or sermon series or set of treatises in order, choosing the excerpts that were interesting, intriguing, inspiring, edifying. Now, for the first time, I would get to read a full draft where they all came together. It was as if I had spent months getting to know each member of an orchestra, but now, for the first time, I was sitting in the front row of the performance hall as they debuted a symphony. There were over a hundred performers in this orchestra, playing from a score of a thousand pages. And reading it indeed felt like listening to a symphony. There were themes, and variations on themes, repeating motifs of *sola fide* and gratitude, of law and impossibility,

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¹ Parts of the presentation are adapted from Gwenfair Walters Adams, ed., *Romans 1–8* (Reformation Commentary on Scripture; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, forthcoming 2019).

of grace, of sin and sacrifice, and love. It began in the dark tones of the early chapters, and built slowly but surely from the law, to David and Abraham and Adam, to the second Adam, Christ, and in crescendo to a climax in Romans 8, where nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from God's love. The beauty overwhelmed me.

At first, I didn't know what to do with the emotions. Fortunately, I had recently discovered a piece of instrumental music that seemed to me to capture the powerful beauty of the gospel in metaphor through call and response, of intense longing for God, and his repeated reply. At the end of each 18-hour day of reading the Reformers, I would listen to that piece of music—and weep. I could not believe that a holy God, fully aware of my sin, would send his Son to die an excruciating death for me. The Reformers were driving these concepts deep into my heart. I was like a sponge being wrung out each night and then refilled with the powerful presentation of the gospel and the intensity of emotion of the Reformers each day. I read for four days in a row. By the end, the gospel had entranced, enthralled, and enraptured my soul. Reading Paul through the eyes of my Reformation brothers and sisters had changed me forever. It sounds corny, but I could no longer hear the word “gospel” without feeling a sob rise up within me.

I couldn't wait to share this with my CH502 class. I had taught about medieval church history in 501, so I just did a brief review session to start off the new semester and set up for the Reformation. I approached the Reformation as an enormous paradigm shift comprised of a series of smaller shifts. So, I set up the medieval review as if setting up tin ducks all in a row at a carnival booth. Ready to be knocked down, in order, with, as it were, a Reformation BB gun. Scripture plus tradition, *de congruo* and *de condigno* merit, purgatory, Latin Vulgate, the Mass, and so on. ... Ping, ping, ping.

Then I started to tell the story of Martin Luther. I got to the part about Luther's tower moment, where he discovers the doctrine of justification by faith alone. I paused and waited to see the reaction. Nothing. Crickets. I even came around the podium and said, “Let's take a moment to ponder the importance of this doctrine.” They all looked at me with a “Well, isn't that nice? She's so excited about this.”

Somewhat deflated, I returned to the podium. Why had I not been able to communicate to the students the same level of excitement that the Reformers had given to me? I went back home that night and tried to figure out what I'd done wrong. These are students who are giving their *lives* to proclaim the gospel. If I can't get *them* to be excited about *sola fide*, the problem is definitely mine, not theirs.

Then I realized that I'd set it up all wrong. By setting up ducks in a row ready to knock over, I'd unwittingly given the impression that the Reformation was primarily about correcting a series of theological errors. That it was nothing more than a signpost pointing to the medieval world and saying, “Don't go there!” I'd basically—and unintentionally—turned the Reformation into an historical anomaly.

So, I tried to figure out a better approach. I tried to pinpoint what it was about the Reformers' commentaries on Romans that had so deeply affected me. I started to realize that with the exception of one highly significant theological concept—what I'm going to call “Factor X,” for the moment—what had helped their presentation of the gospel to go in deeply to my heart was not what the Reformers

had left behind but what they had *preserved* from the medieval church. Perhaps the key was not to focus on what the medieval world got wrong, but on what it got right? Applying this new approach, I noted four bedrock ideas that the Reformers carried with them from the medieval world, which, when combined with the X Factor, brought forth the intense joy of the gospel.

The next week, I returned to the class and shared them with the students. And this time, I could see it on their faces. The Reformers had connected with their hearts.

Today I want to outline for you the four foundational, underpinning realities in the late medieval world of the Reformers that I believe prepared them to grasp the gospel at a profound level. And these four realities are sometimes missing in parts of our evangelical culture today. And their absence—whether partial or complete—may contribute to our not appreciating the stunning joy of the gospel as fully as our Reformation forbears did. The Reformation can be viewed as a huge paradigm shift, some would say the largest in church history. It brought tremendous change in doctrine, hermeneutics, worship, the sacraments, church polity, marriage, and Christian living. But if we focus only on those changes, we may be in danger of seeing the Reformation merely as correcting errors that were significant to the sixteenth century and therefore irrelevant to our understanding of the gospel today. Instead, we need also to pay attention to the factors in the piety of the late medieval world that prepared the Reformers to do their groundbreaking soteriological work.

So, I will divide our time into two major sections. We will first mention the four underpinning realities—I'll use the term “factors” as shorthand—and how they prepared the Reformers to understand and appreciate the gospel at a profound level. And then we'll see how Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and a new factor, the X Factor, changed the way the Reformers applied the four factors or foundational concepts to theology and life.

I. THE FOUR INHERITED MEDIEVAL FACTORS

1. *Factor #1: God is holy.* We start with Factor 1, which is the theological concept that God is holy. It can be difficult to grasp this, or remember it, for it is a somewhat abstract idea, invisible to us. What medieval piety did was to take that abstract idea and concretize it so that it was impossible to ignore. It gave medieval people experiences that made the holiness of God tangible, visceral. We will look at just one of them: the cathedral.

All the tallest buildings in Europe in the Middle Ages were cathedrals. There were sixteen of them in England alone. It used to be that no one would erect an edifice taller than the tallest church tower or spire in their city or town. And the cathedrals were the largest and most magnificent churches.

When I was studying in England, I would occasionally take the train to Ely to spend retreat time in the cathedral. As we approached the city, I could see the cathedral soaring above all the other buildings. I didn't need a map to get from the train station to the church. All I had to do was look up and head towards it. There's

something about being in a cathedral that makes it easier to catch a glimpse of God's majesty. One feels very small, and reminders of God's immensity are everywhere. The sheer magnitude of the space and the ethereal beauty of it provide wings for worship.

All of the Reformers grew up in towns and villages where parish churches and cathedrals towered over everything else. For example, by the time John Calvin wrote his Romans commentary, he had lived in at least six cities that had cathedrals. Calvin's father worked at Noyon Cathedral, so one can assume Calvin would have spent quite a bit of his childhood in that large space. He studied in Paris and Orleans, visited Bourges, was a pastor in Geneva for a brief while—all of which had cathedrals—and he was working on his Romans commentary while he was in exile in Strasbourg, which had one of the tallest cathedrals in all of Europe.

What are the tallest buildings in the world today? The current tallest building is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. It is 2,717 feet (828 m) high. That's more than half a mile high! If you place the tallest cathedral in medieval Europe, Lincoln Cathedral, next to it, the cathedral suddenly looks *very* short!

The medieval cathedrals focused on the worship of God. What about the tallest buildings today? It turns out that all of them are owned by corporations or financial institutions or are luxury hotels and residences. Medieval cathedrals "housed" *faith*. Today, the penthouses that dwarf them house billionaires. What does it say about us as a human race that our tallest buildings are no longer dedicated to worshipping our God? And what are the implications for us? Perhaps it is harder to worship God in a world in which we have demoted majestic cathedrals with buildings dedicated to *our* power and wealth, not *God's*.

2. *Factor #2: We are sinners.* The second area where the medieval world turned an abstract concept into visceral, experienced, concretized form was with the theological reality that we are sinners. There were many rites and rituals that worked together to remind people of that reality.

The first was the sacrament of penance. The believer had to keep track of all his sins, whether venial or mortal, to confess them to a priest at least once a year, and to be absolved and then do the assigned penances such as certain numbers of Pater Nosters, fasting from meat, giving alms to the poor, going on pilgrimage, and so forth. Books, images, and sermons detailed the seven deadly sins. Many believed that every person had a demon and angel following them around everywhere, keeping track of their bad deeds and good deeds, to be weighed in the scales on judgment day. Images and stories of purgatory reminded everyone what awaited them if they did not make satisfaction for their sins while still on earth.

This constant reminder of our sinfulness is largely missing today. Our culture, at least here in America, tends not to teach us that we are sinners. Actually, in many ways, it teaches the contrary, trying to explain away sin. One of my relatives saw this firsthand a while ago when she was on a jury. It was an assault and battery case involving the violent use of a bat. After deliberation, the jury was leaning towards acquittal, but my relative was a holdout. She strongly believed the defendant was guilty. One of the jurors, a young woman, was frustrated with her for wanting to give a guilty verdict, and said, "Who are we to judge?"

Who are we to *judge?! They were the jury!* That was their job!!

In contrast to this, although the Reformers would eliminate the sacrament of penance, purgatory, the idea of demons keeping records, and so forth, they would carry with them an enduring awareness of the ubiquity and seriousness of sin.

3. *Factor #3: Jesus suffered.* The third aspect was the focus on the suffering of Christ on the cross. Everywhere one looked in the cathedral or parish church, one saw—in tangible, visible form—in illuminated manuscripts, sculpture, stained glass, and altarpieces—the crucifixion. And the focus was on Christ as the suffering servant. The images presented his wounds, his blood, the pain on his face. They invited the Christian to meditate one by one on the tools used in his torture and death. When the mass was said and the host was elevated, to many medieval believers it was as if Christ were being sacrificed again—as Roger van der Weyden’s *Seven Sacraments* altarpiece illustrates by bringing the crucifixion into the cathedral as if it were happening at the same time that the mass was being said by the priest at the altar behind.

Again, this appreciation for the suffering of Christ is missing somewhat today. As evangelicals, many of us tend not to focus on the suffering of Christ. We become doctrinal and abstract. This struck me the first time I went to my first Good Friday service back as a college student. I was hoping for the seven last words of Jesus, or something about the narrative of his death, to help me meditate on the Passion. And instead I found a sermon on the doctrine of the atonement. I love the doctrine of the atonement, but it was rather abstract for the day in which we were to focus on the event itself.

At the same time, even when we stay with the narrative, we often jump quickly away from the crucifixion to the resurrection. Even our *crosses* are symbolic of the resurrection.

4. *Factor #4: Feel something!* So far, we’ve seen three medieval factors that took abstract theological concepts or past events and brought them into the present, in concrete, visceral fashion. The fourth factor modeled how one was supposed to respond to the other three factors. And that was to “*feel something!*”

This was the era of Franciscan affective devotion in which believers were exhorted to sorrow at the suffering of Christ. Leading the way in modeling this devotion were the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist at the crucifixion. They taught the medieval person to feel Christ’s pain. Paintings showed the Virgin swooning at the cross or weeping tears. In some, John the Evangelist cried as well.

This is another area somewhat missing today. As evangelicals, we sometimes are uncomfortable expressing deep emotions about the gospel. As children of the Enlightenment, especially as scholars, we may feel a bit awkward about having strong feelings of passion or being moved or excited about spiritual things. Perhaps you were as uncomfortable as I was when I admitted at the beginning of my talk that I wept when reading the Reformers on Romans! It feels a bit unseemly, unacademic, lacking in objectivity, to express feelings in an academic conference. The Reformers, as inheritors of medieval affective piety, had no such compunctions. Their scholarly commentaries and treatises, reaching the height of intellectual prowess, overflowed with intense passion and emotion.

5. “*Shock and awe.*” If we step back from the four medieval factors and look at them all together, however, we discover that there were many people who felt fear, some even terror. The sacramental system as a whole could function a bit as a “shock and awe” tactic. According to the *Oxford Treasury of Sayings and Quotations*, “shock and awe” is a term for “a military strategy based on achieving rapid dominance over an adversary by the initial imposition of overwhelming force and fire-power.”² It is a form of psychological warfare, overwhelming the enemy with a display of tremendous power meant to bring them to submission.

The pervasive medieval sacramental system—brought together in Van der Weyden’s painting—combined with the specter of purgatory, could have that effect, causing uncertainty and fear, particularly in relation to one’s eternal destiny.

Some have suggested that the Reformers’ medieval background *skewed* their understanding of Romans, that they were living in an idiosyncratic era and that in responding to the particular theological issues of their period, the Reformers misshaped the gospel. My time immersed in the Reformers on Romans has led me to conclude that it’s exactly the opposite. Indeed, it’s possible that the Reformers were living in a time that prepared them to understand the gospel better than any other time could have. Therefore, we need to pay special attention to their writings.

6. *Parallels to the OT law.* What intrigues me is that the four factors—present in the Middle Ages and relatively absent now—happened to be present in the OT also. They were there in different forms than in the Middle Ages, of course, and the Reformers would discard certain aspects of the medieval concretizations in light of *sola Scriptura*. But the central theological concepts were in both the medieval world and in the OT. The first three concepts paralleled the invisible realities that the law made concrete, visceral, and tangible:

a. *God is holy:* As in the Middle Ages, one of the ways that this was concretized was through the creation of sacred space, the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and temple. The danger that surrounded the place was palpable. Sudden death awaited those who entered unauthorized.

b. *We are sinners:* The sacred rituals of purification and the presentation of offerings for dozens and dozens of ever-present, constantly repeated infractions and sins, continuously reminded one of one’s uncleanness and guilt.

c. *Christ suffered:* The Suffering Servant was prophesied and foreshadowed at every turn, through the endless sacrifices on altars of stone and brass, in field and tabernacle and temple.

d. And the fourth factor—“*Feel something!*”—was modeled by the Psalms, demonstrating the expression of a wide range of emotions in the presence of God.

Therefore, is it possible that what the medieval world had done was to recreate some of the conditions of the OT? The Reformers themselves made clear that they saw significant parallels between the medieval church and the conditions that the OT law had set up. Erasmus Sarcerius, a Lutheran theologian, described the

² Susan Ratcliffe, ed., *Oxford Treasury of Sayings and Quotations* (4th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 484.

fear-inducing character of the law in his commentary on Rom 7:11. He said: “The law kills. That means that the law terrorizes, passes judgment on, and condemns the conscience on account of sin and the wrath of God concerning sin. . . . Until the law reveals sins, judges, terrifies, condemns, and kills, it is not truly the law.”³ Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther’s pastor and confessor in Wittenberg, drew a direct parallel between this psychological impact of the law and the experience of being in the medieval church:

Are we not driven by papal decrees [etc.] to “good works” because of our sins? We have done many things, in fasting, praying, singing, building the temples of the saints, now for St. James, now for Veronica, or in making pilgrimage to some other extravagant marvel—but what has it done for us? We were not able to be absolved from our sins. For it was only the spirit of bondage; we never felt our consciences being set at ease.⁴

II. ROMANS, THE X FACTOR, AND THE SHIFT FROM FEAR TO JOY

But then a new factor—the X Factor I mentioned earlier—was introduced that dramatically changed the way the medieval factors were interpreted. And that X Factor—when combined with the four factors—turned sorrow and fear into joy.

1. *Martin Luther’s journey from fear to love.* So, how did this happen? Well, that brings us to the story of Martin Luther.⁵ We start with his first mass as a young priest, May 2, 1507, an event in which the full brunt of “shock and awe” landed on Luther. In the middle of the mass—to put it colloquially—Luther freaked out! He had prepared diligently for this day. He had scoured Gabriel Biel’s 89 chapters on the Mass, which went, painstakingly, through every aspect of the liturgy. It had not been an easy read, emotionally, for Luther. He said later of Biel’s book, “When I read in it, my heart bled.”⁶ And now he was in the midst of carrying out what he had learned about this service. What had shaken his heart was now shaking his hands.

The high point of any mass was the moment of the elevation of the Host, where the priest would say, *Hoc est corpus meum* (“This is my body”). At that moment it was believed that the Host was transubstantiated into the body of Christ. Which meant that, in Luther’s mind, Christ would suddenly be *really* present.

And who was this Christ who was suddenly present? Was he the figure, clad in suffering and blood, on wooden crucifix or in crimson glass? Yes, but in a way that haunted and accused Luther and made him feel even more guilty. For him,

³ Erasmus Sarcerius, *In Epistolam ad Romanos. pia et erudita scholia, pro rhetorica dispositione, ad perpetuum coherentiae filium, conscripta* (Frankfurt: Chr. Egenolphum, 1541), C7r, in Adams, *Romans 1–8*.

⁴ Johannes Bugenhagen, *In D. Pauli ad Romanos Epistolam interpretatio* (Hagenau: Iohan Secer, 1531), 86r–87r in Adams, *Romans 1–8*.

⁵ For an expanded version of Luther’s journey, see Gwenfair Walters Adams, “*Solus Christus*: Martin Luther’s Journey to the Singular Focus,” in *Reformation Celebration: The Significance of Scripture, Grace, Faith, and Christ* (ed. Eckhard Schnabel and Gordon Isaac; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, forthcoming).

⁶ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521* (trans. James L. Schaaf; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 71.

Christ was first and foremost the Holy Judge depicted in the Last Judgment scenes. These were often painted above the western door of the church. So, as one left the church each Sunday morning, a dramatic depiction of judgment confronted one. You can imagine how terrifying it would be to see Christ primarily this way, sending people, vulnerable in their nakedness, down to hell on his left. And although he was also sending people on his right to heaven, you could never be sure where he was going to send *you*. This was a potent form of “shock and awe” and had a profound impact on Luther. We know there was one of these paintings in the church where Luther had spent much of his childhood.

This Judge was the one that set the bar high for priests who celebrated the Mass. He required priests to make sure that their vestments were all in order, to read the Words of Institution perfectly, to be in a state of purity, having confessed all their sins in detail.⁷ Luther was highly cognizant of these exacting standards. And he was terrified of violating them. So, given all this, when he approached the moment in the liturgy when he had to say, “We offer unto thee, the living, the true, the eternal God,” terror touched down.⁸ This line finds its home in the prayers for the living, which are only a page away from what Luther knew was coming; that moment of consecration, when Christ would suddenly be in his lifted hands. Luther said later:

At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, “With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little [person], say ‘I want this, I ask for that?’ For I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.”⁹

So, Luther turned to the prior that was assisting him and said he had to leave the altar. But the prior said, “Go ahead, faster, faster.”¹⁰

It wasn’t the last time that Luther’s fear would overcome him. Because a priest was meant to be in a state of purity before offering up the Mass, Luther, being plagued by scrupulosity, was often in a state of consternation during his masses. One time, during the mass itself, he asked a confessor to come and hear his confession in the middle of it! He sometimes had a hard time going for a couple hours without confessing. Such was the intensity of his fear of Christ the Judge.¹¹

After earning a doctorate in theology and adding university professor to his monk and priest roles, in 1513–1514, Luther took his first foray into lecturing on a biblical book, and he plunged himself and his students into the Psalms for a year.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1950), 21.

⁹ Quoted and translated by Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 21.

¹⁰ Quoted by Graham Tomlin, *Luther and His World: An Introduction* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2013), 20.

¹¹ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 74.

There, applying an Augustinian, Christological approach,¹² he started to discover the humility of Christ, which may have enabled him to begin to overcome his fear.

However, in 1515, while participating as a priest in a Corpus Christi procession, Luther felt horror again at the thought of the presence of Christ in the monstrance that loomed ahead of him, carried about by a fellow priest. He still seemed to see Christ primarily as a Judge, at least when in the presence of a consecrated Host.

Given the intensity of his fear of Christ, it is perhaps a bit surprising to read a letter he wrote to his confessor, Johann Staupitz, in 1518, asking him to forward to the pope a defense he had written of the 95 Theses. In the letter, he says, "For God's commands are sweet, when we find that they are to be read not in books alone, but in the *wounds of our sweet Saviour*."¹³ He had come to see Jesus as his "sweet Saviour." And the crucifixion was no longer something that haunted him but rather something that *drew* him to Christ.

He seems to have come quite a distance from his *terror* over Christ. What happened to change him? There were a number of factors, but two significant ones involve Romans. The first was the year he spent lecturing on Romans to his students at Wittenberg, from 1515–1516. The second was his famous "tower moment." We don't know the date of the event, but I suspect it was before the letter we just mentioned to Staupitz. And here you see him shifting in his attitude toward the four factors on which we've been focusing:

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. ... I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant. I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith." I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates.¹⁴

2. *The X Factor*. What had changed? Luther discovered the X Factor. *Sola fide*. And it turned the world upside down. It didn't change the core of the four factors,

¹² Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 51.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 1 (trans. C. M. Jacobs; Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1915), 40.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works" (trans. Andrew Thornton; Manchester, NH: St. Anselm Abbey, 1983). From the "Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe. 1545," in *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 4 (ed. Otto Clemen; 6th ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 421–28, <https://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/preflat-eng.txt>.

but it completely changed the way the four were interpreted, shaped, and experienced.

Which is why I was initially surprised by something he wrote the next year (1519). It was called “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion.” Reading it, I was startled to hear Luther saying that we should be terrified when we meditate on Christ’s Passion. When I first saw that, I thought Luther had slipped back into his old way of viewing Christ through a lens of fear. But as I read further, I saw his reasoning, and also found that he didn’t get stuck in the terror. His reasoning was that contemplating the crucifixion should make us aware of our sinfulness, of God’s holiness, and of the severe penalty that was required to bridge the gap between the two. But Luther did not stay at the foot of the cross. He did not want the reader to be in despair. So, he led the reader to Easter. He said, “But pass beyond that and see his friendly heart and how this heart beats with such love for you that it impels him to bear with pain your conscience and your sin. Then your heart will be filled with love for him, and the confidence of your faith will be strengthened.”¹⁵ Luther was, in effect, leading his readers through the same transition he had made in the three or four past years, from terror to love.

3. *The Reformers, Romans, and the shift from fear to joy.* By the time Luther would come to his deathbed a quarter century later, all the major Reformers would have, in essence, taken that journey as well. And for all of them, Romans would be critical in guiding them through that transition. All of them, except for Cranmer, I believe, would lecture and/or write commentaries on Romans.

And Romans 1–8 is the key place where you can see the journey from fear to joy unfold in the Scriptures themselves. Thus, there is something quite interesting about reading the Reformers on Romans. For you see simultaneously the shift that takes place *within* the text from OT to NT, from law to gospel, from sinful, unregenerate humanity to the redeemed, and in the Reformers, you see the transition from medieval Catholicism to Reformation Protestantism, from faith plus works to *sola fide*—from fear to joy. So, when you read the Reformers on Romans, you are reading Paul’s words about the enormous, salvific paradigm shift made possible by Christ, through the eyes of people who were themselves going through a major paradigm shift that directly echoed, and was directly caused by, what they were reading in the text.

The Weimer altarpiece, called the *Allegory of Salvation*, and painted by Lucas Cranach, captures this. There’s a theological shift from background to foreground. In the background are the OT scenes, and in the foreground, the NT and the Reformation present. In the background: the fall, the raising of the brass serpent, and Moses holding the law. In the foreground: the crucifixion, the resurrection, John the Baptist pointing simultaneously to the Lamb of God and Christ on the cross, and Luther pointing to the gospel in the Bible.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Devotional Writings*, vol. 42 (ed. Martin O. Dietrich; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1986), 13.

Romans did two things with this shift. It pointed *out* the shift. And it introduced the Reformers to what *caused* the shift. The OT sacrificial system and the medieval sacramental system had both modeled implicitly that no human could ever do enough. The way that *sola fide* shifted both—with *sola gratia* and *solus Christus* necessarily implied—was by showing that it wasn't about what the humans did. It was about what Christ had already done. And what Christ had done was sufficient. The price he'd paid on the cross did not need to be paid again—not through sacrifices offered, not through penances performed. What *sola fide* said was that the shock and awe of the law was meant to lead us to the *cross*, not enslave us. The Reformers agreed with the theological concepts of God being holy, with us being sinners, with Christ having suffered. But they came to see the medieval world as stuck back in a state that paralleled the OT law. They became passionate, therefore, about calling people forward into the fullness of the gospel. *Sola fide* reconfigured the four factors. It used to be: God is holy, we are sinners, Christ suffered, feel something! ... Sorrow and fear.

But now it was God is holy, we are sinners, Christ suffered—*sola fide!*—feel something! ... Joy!

4. *Zwingli preaches the sola fide shift.* One example of the impact of the dramatic shift from old to new that *sola fide* caused shows up in a story about Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer who discovered Reformation principles around the same time as Luther—and it would seem, was a little annoyed that Luther got all the credit! It was 1522, and Zwingli had been preaching from God's Word in Zurich and the people were taking it very seriously and the city was being transformed. Zwingli wanted the Dominican nuns in the local convent to hear the Word of God as well. So, he visited the Oetenbach Convent and preached a sermon on the "Clarity and Certainty of the Word." At one point in it he sets out to illustrate the concept that was taught in Rom 3:24 and 5:1: that of justification coming to those who are enclosed in Christ. The published version of the sermon is 80 pages long! One can only hope that it is an *expanded* version—or those poor nuns! At one point in the sermon, Zwingli had the nuns imagine a man who was trying to figure out how to live in a way that most assuredly pointed to salvation.¹⁶ He first asks a Carthusian, who tells him to enter his order since he will certainly be saved there, for it is the most "rigorous" order. (The Carthusians spent the vast majority of their days in cells by themselves, being allowed to speak with one another only once a week on Sunday afternoons. It was indeed quite rigorous.) Next, he asks a Benedictine, who claims salvation will be "easiest" there, for their order is the "most ancient." (The Benedictine order traced its heritage back almost one thousand years to the sixth century when Benedict crafted its rule.)

Third, he asks a Dominican, who says that salvation will be "certain" in his order since it comes from "Our Lady." Now, one can imagine the nuns perking up on this one. They were, remember, Dominican nuns. They may have thought that

¹⁶ Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, *Zwingli and Bullinger* (ed. G. W. Bromiley; Library of Christian Classics 24; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1953), 83–84.

Zwingli would end with this one, as the correct answer to the man longing for salvation. Certainly, with the pedigree of having been founded by order of the Blessed Virgin Mary, would not this be the certain way of salvation? But, Zwingli did *not* stop there. He mentions the Franciscans as the “greatest and most famous” order. (The Franciscans were indeed highly influential in the Late Middle Ages, as they were out and about amongst the laity, shaping their piety in profound ways.) And he refers to the Pope’s indulgences and Santiago de Compostella’s pilgrimages.

The questioning man is in consternation. With all these different orders and options each claiming to be the right way to God, whom is he to follow? So, he is left to turn to God and ask him which order or approach is the most certain. To our surprise, the narrator berates him for turning to God to judge which *human* option is the most dependable when he should be asking him straight out what the way to salvation is. Only with God will he find clarity. Zwingli finishes the story as follows: “And the Gospel gives us a sure message, or answer, or assurance. Christ stands before you with open arms, inviting you and saying (Matt. 11): ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’”¹⁷

One can only imagine what was going through the nuns’ minds as they listened to this, the senior priest of their city, under the authority and at the direction of the city magistrates, introducing this paradigm shift to them. *Sola fide*. No need to go through a priest or a saint. Jesus himself invites you. No need to keep track of sins and do penance for each one. Christ has taken on all penalties himself. No fear of purgatory. Christ has promised eternal life with him. “Come unto me ... and I will give you rest.”

5. *The sola fide and Romans ripple effect*. From Luther and Zwingli, the doctrine of *sola fide* and the writing of commentaries on Romans spread across Europe. As a starting point to illustrate the ever-expanding circles, I’ll begin with a drawing by Michelangelo, the *Pietà for Vittoria Colonna*—it is near here in Boston in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. We’ve been speaking of medieval things that concretize abstract concepts. Well, this piece of art concretizes the Reformation. What makes it a Reformation piece is the purpose for which it was created. Most religious pieces in the Middle Ages were commissioned by wealthy patrons for use in the church, and often for the purpose of earning merit to get out of purgatory faster. This piece, on the other hand, was a religious work, but one made simply as a gift for a friend, not to earn merit as part of the sacramental system. Michelangelo drew it for Vittoria Colonna, who was a well-known lyric poetess and close friend. They were both part of the reforming movement in Italy that believed in *sola fide* but tried to stay within the Catholic Church. While he was working on the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo was in frequent correspondence with Vittoria, and they wrote poems back and forth to each other, expressing awe at the very idea of *sola fide*. They had been influenced by Juan de Valdés, a reform-minded Catholic from Spain. He had been introduced to Reformation ideas while still in Spain and then had to leave because of the Spanish Inquisition. After Valdés died, two other

¹⁷ Zwingli, *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 84.

members of his group—Peter Martyr Vermigli and Bernard Ochino—would flee Italy, write Romans commentaries, and meet Calvin, who had recently written his own commentary on Romans, having read the Romans commentaries of Melancthon, Bucer, and Bullinger. And so on and on it went.

6. *The joy of the gospel in the Romans commentaries.* What all these poems and commentaries have in common is the joy of the gospel. As I come to a close, allow me to use another Lucas Cranach painting, this one by the younger Cranach. It gathers together several Reformers whose excerpts offer a small sample of the panoply of joyful emotions that the Romans commentaries express.

The painting is called the *Reformers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, and there are a couple different versions of it. The vineyard is divided in two. On the left, the popes and monks and priests are pulling up vines and throwing rocks in the well, destroying the vineyard. Down below, the pope converses with Christ, offering him money—probably a reference to indulgences. On the right side of the vineyard, a dozen or more Reformers are raking, weeding, and planting. It's another concretization, in effect, of the transition from medieval to Reformation theology and life.

Caspar Cruciger the elder (1562) is about halfway up the hill. He was a German Lutheran and friend of Luther's. In his commentary on Romans, in which he spoke of both terror and the shift to rejoicing, he wrote in the preface:

Now the remission of sins is a liberation from real terrors and pains, a liberation in which the Son of God himself makes alive and comforts us by his Holy Spirit, whom we truly receive when the preaching of the Gospel is heard and laid hold of by faith. As a result of this comforting, our hearts experience a rejoicing and become acquainted with God's mercy and presence, and a true invocation is kindled within us. ... The Spirit ... moves our hearts so that they alight with confidence in the Mediator toward God.¹⁸

Comfort, rejoicing, moved hearts, alight with confidence.

In the pale red gown is Johannes Bugenhagen. His commentary on Romans was published in 1531. In it, when commenting on Rom 7:25, he speaks directly about the gospel and joy:

When I see that I am unable to overcome sin, I am driven to despair; but when I see that God is the Father of Christ crucified, and that insofar as he is Christ's Father, he is for this very reason my Father as well—how can I not be transported with joy? How can I not rejoice and exult, seeing that I now behold all that sin to be abolished and not imputed?¹⁹

Indeed, how can we not rejoice? How can we not be transported with joy?

The “shock and awe” of the OT law, the “shock and awe” of the medieval piety of their childhoods, has turned into shock ... and awe ... that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That by his love and sacrifice, by grace, by faith,

¹⁸ Caspar Cruciger, *In Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos Scriptam Commentarius* (Wittenberg: Iohannes Crato, 1567), 12–13 in Adams, *Romans 1–8*.

¹⁹ Bugenhagen, *In D. Pauli ad Romanos*, 78v–79r in Adams, *Romans 1–8*.

fear has turned into love, comfort, confidence, tranquility, happiness. The gospel is now a gospel of joy. And the Reformers cannot get over it.

7. *Luther's final words.* As we conclude, let's see how the journey we began with Luther ended. In Cranach's *Vineyard* painting, the Reformer who is drawing water, *ad fontes*, from the well that symbolizes God's Word, is Philippe Melancthon, Luther's colleague at Wittenberg, and the one who consolidated Lutheran theology and authored the Augsburg Confession. He was the one who wrote Luther's biography and who gives us the excerpt with which I want to end. The excerpt relates to the largest figure in the painting, who is Luther.

I wondered what Luther's last words might indicate about his attitude towards Christ and the gospel at the end of his life when he knew that he would soon be facing God. Would the Reformation stick? Would *sola fide* stand the test of impending death? Or would Luther call for a priest to give him last rites, just in case? Would the fear and terror of his early years return?

Melancthon indicates that Luther's final words were a prayer:

My Heavenly Father, eternal Compassionate God, you have revealed to me your beloved Son our LORD Jesus Christ whom I have known, of whom I have acquaintance, whom I love, and whom I honor as my beloved Savior and Redeemer, whom the Godless persecute, dissipate, and reproach. Take my Soul to you. This he said three times: "Into your hands I commend my Spirit, you have redeemed me God of truth. And God so loved the world, [that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.]"²⁰

Gone was the terror. Martin Luther died with the joy of the gospel on his lips. May we live with it on ours.

²⁰ Philip Melancthon, "History of the Life and Acts of Dr Martin Luther," in *Luther's Lives: Two Contemporary Accounts of Martin Luther* (ed. Thomas D. Frazel; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 38.