

There was an opinion piece in yesterday's *Star Tribune* in which author Stephen Young makes a rather bold claim about Martin Luther. He claims that the development of modern science, capitalism, and constitutional democracy can all be traced to a common source – Martin Luther. He doesn't claim that Luther intentionally laid the groundwork for the modern world. Luther was a theologian. He didn't do any scientific experiments, start a business, or challenge the authority of kings or princes. But Young claims that Luther's small act of insubordination in posting the 95 theses and requesting a debate on the sale of indulgences and the basis of our relationship with God, unintentionally set off a chain of events that, step by step, produced our modern world. If you'd like to read the whole article, a copy is attached at the end of this sermon.

Here is what I think is the most important sentence in the article: "With his questions, Luther precipitated the... revolution in Christian understanding of what it takes for us in this world to know the will of God."

"Knowing the will of God" has two components, one flowing from God to us and the other flowing from us to God. Among the questions that arise about the first component are: What is God's will toward us? Does God care about us? Is God's relationship with us based on us pleasing God by what we do or refrain from doing? To these questions Luther lifted up a new way of understanding the "gospel," the "good news" that proclaims that God's will is always "for us" – that God loves us and keeps his promises not because of what we do, but in spite of what we do. Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises to humankind, and because of Jesus we know that God loves each of us always and forever. That is God's will **toward** us.

The second component of God's will concerns God's will **for** us. It asks the question, "How then shall we live?" If our relationship with God is based on God's love shown in Jesus Christ, then does it really matter what we do each day? How do we determine God's will in our daily lives?

In the centuries prior to Martin Luther, there were two sources for learning God's will – the text of the Bible and its commandments or the institutional church and its leaders. But Luther's focus on the gospel good news that there is nothing we have to do to earn God's love led him to recognize that each individual has a responsibility for discerning God's will, and this is what I believe is portrayed by the new sculpture that now stands in our narthex and is pictured here.

The panel of this sculpture contains Martin Luther's famous dialectic on Christian freedom. Many of you have heard me speak of dialectics before because Christian theology is full of them. A dialectic is two seemingly contradictory statements which are both true. It is an "either/or" choice that is answered with a "yes". One does not resolve a dialectic by trying to find some middle ground, but one lives with the tension of maintaining the truth of both statements.

Luther states the dialectic of Christian freedom this way: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all subject to none." That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? We're the boss. No one can tell us what to do. Total independence. The other half of the dialectic is this: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Ouch! That one's tough to swallow. A servant of all? I am responsible for others? Luther says that both of these statements are true.

The sculpture conveys the truth of Luther's dialectic of Christian freedom in a most interesting way. On the tree trunk that anchors the piece are painted abbreviated versions of what Jesus says are the two parts of the Great Commandment from our gospel reading today. At the top is "Love the Lord your God," an abbreviated version of "I am the Lord your God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." At the bottom is painted, "Love your neighbor as yourself." These two commandments are fixed in



Luther's Dialectic of Christian Freedom

This sculpture is inspired by a similar sculpture that stands in the *Stadtkirche* (City Church) in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther often preached in this church.

The oak tree from which it is made grew approximately where Pastor Wayne's office is located until 2005, when it had to be taken down for the building expansion.

The sculpture is the work of three talented artisans:

- Carpenter **David Sather** took a 9' section of the trunk, had it milled, and let it dry in his garage for ten years. He made the rotating panel out of the other half of the trunk.
- Artist **Kristi Pierro** designed the text layout and painted the letters.
- Sculptor **Nick Legeros** figured out how to safely mount the 600+ pound sculpture and created the Luther Rose medallion that serves as the pivot point.

place. They do not move. They are foundational for the Christian faith. In other words, whenever we face a decision on what we should do in a given situation – how we should act or how we should vote – we begin by reminding ourselves that it is God’s will that we are to love God with all our being and love our neighbor as our self.

To this foundation of the commandments to love God and neighbor is attached a panel on which is painted Luther’s dialectic: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Now it is important to recognize that there is something unique about this sculpture -- the panel rotates and you are invited to move it! I love the way this describes the Christian life, for it indicates that each of us as individuals have a responsibility in the process of discerning God will. We have our foundation, the commandments, which do not change. But as we try to apply them to our everyday life, we have this dialectic for which we have the responsibility to hold in proper tension, and our response to any given situation may vary depending on the dynamics of the situation.

For example, making time for worship. We are free to not worship God. God doesn’t love us more or less based on our Sunday morning worship attendance or our frequency of personal devotions or our financial stewardship. God loves us because we are his and because God is “righteous”, that is, God is faithful to God’s promises. Yet at the same time, knowing that God loves us, how can we not respond to that love by giving God our worship and praise and showing our thanks through our offerings?

Or take the example of seeing someone in need. We are free to not help others. God doesn’t love us more or less based on whether or not we visit someone in a hospital or nursing home, or send them a note telling them we’re thinking of them, or donate to a food shelf. God loves us because we are his and because God is righteous, faithful to his promises. Yet at the same time, knowing that God loves us, how can we not respond to that love by helping our neighbor with their physical and emotional needs?

We can quickly come up with a long list of ethical questions for which we Christians are called on to use this process. How does a community address the need for affordable housing or universal health care? How does a community respond to those who because of natural disaster, war, or violence ask to come to a better, safer place? How does a community respond to issues of climate change and pollution when the neighbor who will be affected by our actions is not even born yet? You and I will each ponder the questions and each will turn the panel as seems right to us. Most times we’ll agree, but sometimes we will disagree, with one of us emphasizing our freedom a bit more while the other puts greater emphasis on our responsibility to our neighbor.

This sculpture reminds of us that being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is a daily process. It is important to know what Luther did 500 years ago, but it is more important to understand what his insights mean for our daily life today and tomorrow. Each day we recall our baptism and God’s promise that his love for us is always and forever, then we set about trying to discern God’s will, what God would have us do. We start with the foundational, unchanging commandments to love God with all our being and love our neighbor as our self. And then we wrestle with the dialectic that we are free and need do nothing while at the same time we are expected to be a servant of all. We rotate the panel to the point that it seems to us that God would be pleased and then we act or speak or vote as we think is God’s will for us, fully aware that we will mess up at times and need God’s forgiveness, but also fully aware that the next day we will return to our daily starting point that God love us always and forever.

It is my hope that this sculpture will prompt many thoughtful conversations with yourself and others as you strive to be a disciple of Jesus in a complex and changing world.

Thank Martin Luther for our modern world

From the monk's symbolic act 500 years ago spring science, capitalism and constitutional democracy.

By Stephen B. Young *Star Tribune*, October 27, 2017

On Oct 31, 1517, 500 years ago next Tuesday, Martin Luther posted on a church door in the small town of Wittenberg, Germany, 95 questions about Catholic theology that he intended to debate in public.

With that small act of insubordination, Luther unintentionally set off a chain of events that, step by step, produced our modern world.

With his questions, Luther precipitated the Protestant revolution in Christian understanding of what it takes for us in this world to know the will of God.

The ensuing conflict between Protestants and Catholics gave rise to science.

Science and its stepchild, technological innovation, when combined with new arrangements for raising funds and organizing work, in turn gave rise to capitalism in Holland, Scotland, England and their colonies in North America.

On a parallel track, the Calvinist version of Protestantism in England gave birth to constitutional democracy.

Science, capitalism, constitutional democracy — all thrive because of individuals, the work they do and the responsibilities they assume.

When Luther concluded that God's priesthood embraced all who would believe, he created modern individualism where each of us has a personal responsibility to act for the best. We individuals, not the institutions above and around us, have the right and the power to create the world.

Science, capitalism and constitutional democracy have given us longer lives, better diets, powerful medicines and sophisticated surgical interventions; freedom from polio and smallpox and many other scourges of old; electricity, running hot water and flush toilets; skyscrapers, suburbs, football and baseball; and atomic power, plastics, the internet, cellphones, movies, middle classes, education for all and human rights.

First, the rise of science. After Luther empowered individual inquiry, belief in natural law emerged as a new, third way of finding truth — a path set apart from religious revelation via the priesthood, as proposed by the Catholics, or through the old written text, as favored by Protestants. Seeking to understand natural law was more practical and grounded in reality than was making a leap of faith as demanded by the two rival church theologies. Natural law was objective. It did not depend on the fluctuations of human faith but rather on observation of facts.

As inquiring minds began to examine nature and its laws, science was born. The founders of this new method all came after Luther: Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Francis Bacon, Descartes, the English Royal Society for Improving Natural Knowledge, Leibniz, Newton.

Protestant thinkers Grotius and Pufendorf wrote the first treatises on international law as the application of natural law to constrain the ambitions and aggressions of sovereign nation states. From their work we now have the United Nations and international human rights.

Second, capitalism. Max Weber's thesis that the Protestant ethic gave rise to capitalism has been criticized, especially by Marxists, but never refuted. It is a fact that capitalism — the combining of technology with financial investment and active management to make goods and provide services for sale in quantity — started only in Calvinist cultures. Full-blown capitalism did not emerge independently in Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist or African societies.

For me, the primary explanation of this connection between Protestant values and the birth of capitalism is that Luther's advocacy of a vocation for each and every person gave moral dignity to middle-class occupations and so provided social status to those in business, commerce and finance. After Luther, producing useful goods and services — and not only being a landowner, a priest, a soldier or an aristocrat — became a potentially noble achievement in life.

A second reason is that Calvinism, especially, empowered individuals to take risks on their own authority. John Calvin established the premise that in this life we are ministers for God with a duty to work hard and advance his common grace. Through enterprise we do God's work in the world so we must be trustworthy and diligent and faithful. New Protestant beliefs brought forth new economic behaviors.

Third, constitutional democracy. The English Calvinists rebelled against the kingly autocracy of Charles I to defend the rights of parliament and the people. Charles was executed for abuse of trust. Later, when his son James II attempted to restore royal absolutism, he, too, was denied the kingship.

Then the Dutch Protestant William of Orange accepted the English Bill of Rights in 1688 establishing limited royal government under parliamentary supervision with elections. He was therefore made king of England and constitutional democracy came fully alive in principle.

In 1689, the scholar John Locke defended the legitimacy of this form of state organization using Protestant reasoning about natural law and individual trustworthiness. In 1776, American colonists used Locke's arguments to justify their breaking away from English royal sovereign authority. In 1789, the American political elite used Locke's prescription that public office is a public trust as the framework of their Constitution for the new nation of the United States of America.

So let us remember Martin Luther — a stubborn monk who did not have the nicest things to say about the pope, Anabaptists, Jews or the prophet Mohammed — with more than a little gratitude for his contributions to the individual opportunities we have to secure for ourselves life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Stephen B. Young, of St. Paul, is global executive director of the Caux Round Table, a network of business leaders working to promote a moral capitalism.