

DID LUTHER THINK HE LIVED DURING A TIME OF APOSTASY?

by Kevin L. Barney

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches the doctrine that the ancient prophets and apostles foretold a day of general apostasy, and that such an apostasy would occur before the second coming of the Lord. It is common for LDS apologists to quote scripture and the words of the ancient church fathers in supporting such a position.

One quote that has often been used to support the concept of an apostasy is the following, which is attributed to Martin Luther:

I have sought nothing beyond reforming the Church in conformity with the Holy Scriptures. The spiritual powers have been not only corrupted by sin, but absolutely destroyed; so that there is now nothing in them but a depraved reason and a will that is the enemy and opponent of God. I simply say that Christianity has ceased to exist among those who should have preserved it.¹

This quote has been used in a number of Mormon sources, apparently beginning with a pamphlet written at least thirty years ago. One version of that pamphlet is available on-line here:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8413/RESTORATION.HTM>

This quote is actually an amalgam of three unrelated statements. This was originally demonstrated by Bill Barton in a discussion on the Zion's Lighthouse Message Board in July 2001.² Although Barton saw the use of this quote as an attempt at intentional deception on the part of the Church, I simply see it as an egregiously sloppy effort by a Mormon tract writer. The origins of the composite quote used in the pamphlet have not yet been determined, and it remains possible that the tract writer was quoting a bad secondary source. Dis-

cussion of the underlying motive is available on the ZLMB; here I simply wish to try to put a stop to any further use of this quotation in Mormon sources.

The first part of the quote dates to 1521 and derives from Ernest Schweibert's book *Luther and His Times*. Schweibert was a prominent twentieth century Reformation historian, who recently passed away in Florida at the ripe old age of 104. The following, courtesy of Barton, is the relevant passage from Schweibert's book. In context, Luther has just attended a council at the city of Worms to which he had been summoned to answer for his views:

That same evening Luther wrote a communication to the Emperor and the Estates, thanking them for every consideration shown him and especially for honoring the safe-conduct. (75) Recalling the experience of John Hus, it is doubtful if Luther believed he would live through the Worms experience. He regretted, however, that the interview had been fruitless:

I have sought nothing beyond reforming the Church in conformity with the Holy Scriptures. I would suffer death and infamy, give up life and reputation for His Imperial Majesty and the Empire. I wish to reserve nothing but the liberty to confess and bear witness to the Word of God alone. (76)

(75) W.A., VII, 856; Spalatin, "Annales," pp. 47–48; Kalkoff, "Depeschen," p. 153 f.; Kuehn, Wormser Reichstag, p. 92.

(76) W.A., VII, 856; Spalatin, "Annales," pp. 47–48.³

W.A. indicates "Weimar Ausgabe" which is the edition of Luther's works published at Weimar in 1883. It's a huge work, some 40 plus volumes.



The second part comes from Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*. In commenting on Galatians 2:20, "who loved me and gave himself for me," Luther notes the following (I give first the Latin text, then Barton's translation, then my own):

Et distinguo naturalia contra spiritualia et dico spiritualia non esse integra sed corrupta, imo per peccatum prorsus extincta esse in homine et diabolo, ita ut nihil ibi sit quam intellectus depravatus et voluntas inimica et adversaria Dei, quae nihil cogitat quam ea, quae contra Deum sunt.

And I distinguish between natural faculties and spiritual faculties; and I say [the spiritual faculties are not intact but corrupted, indeed are entirely corrupted by sins in man and demon, so that nothing remains there but a depraved mind and a will hostile to and opposing God] which esteem nothing other than things which are hostile to God. [Barton's translation]

I distinguish natural impulses from spiritual faculties, and I say that these spiritual faculties are not intact, but have been corrupted. Indeed, through sins they [IE the spiritual faculties] are utterly destroyed in both men and the Devil, so that nothing remains but a depraved mind and a will hostile to and against God, which thinks about nothing other than those things which are contrary to God. [Barney's translation]

The tract translates the phrase in brackets above as follows:

The spiritual powers have been not only corrupted by sin, but absolutely destroyed; so that there is now nothing in them but a depraved reason and a will that is the enemy and opponent of God.

This passage has been taken out of context in the tract and is not talking about an apostasy. The citation for the Galatians quote above is Weimar XL P. 1, 293, 24–27 (Weimar edition, volume 40, part one, page 293, lines 24–27), which is apparently the source for the corrupted citation Weins IX, P.I. 293, 24–27.⁴

The third part of the quote is taken from something Luther wrote 1520–1521:

I do not say that I am a prophet. I simply say that they will have to be afraid of this as long as they scorn me and heed themselves...If I am

not a prophet I am at least sure of this, that the Word of God is with me, and not with them, for I have the Scriptures on my side while they have only their own teachings...But do I not preach a new doctrine? No. [I simply say that Christianity has ceased to exist among those who should have preserved it]—the bishops and scholars...I do not repudiate the Church Fathers. But like all men, they, too, have erred at times. I believe them only in so far as they can prove their teachings from the Scriptures, which have never erred (Grund und Urasche). (1)

(1) Bohmer, p. 392⁵

CONCLUSION

The composite quote presented at the beginning of this paper would not have been out of character for Luther. There was a strong "fallen church" tradition underlying the Reformation. Some groups were restitutionist in outlook, and others were successionist (believing that the Church had been preserved since the beginning in various dissident movements), but the notion of an apostasy of the Holy See of Rome was certainly well established in portions of the Reformation. Luther was less drastic in this than the Anabaptists; he saw the fall more with Pope Gregory VII than with Constantine. But he clearly acknowledged decline and apostasy in Church history.

How one responds to such an apostasy is an open question. Luther and others attempted to "reform" the Church. The biblical restorationists, such as Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, were really just radical reformers; the Mormons were restorationist in a fundamentally different sense than the Campbellites. Nevertheless, it was a common belief among all of these groups that an apostasy had occurred.

Even if the basic idea portrayed in the quote given at the outset of this paper is correct enough, however, this particular formulation is not a correct quotation and should no longer be used. The misuse of this particular quote is a prime example of why I believe tracts should contain the author's name and should not be anonymously written. An author needs to be accountable for his or her use of sources. Although I disagree with Barton's attempts to see some grand conspiracy in the wording of this quote, I do thank him for bringing the problems with it to our attention. It is my hope that responsible apologists will no longer use this particular quote as written, and that tract writers in the future will show a greater care with their sources.

NOTES

1 The citation given for this quote is usually something like the following: “In Galat. Weins IX,P.I. 293,24-27, 50; Luther and His Times, 509; Martin Luther, 188.” As we will see, this citation is problematic.

2 The discussion is available under the Roundtable folder, in a thread entitled “Weins.”

3 Ernest George Schweibert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 509.

4 Extensive searching has failed to turn up any editor or edition of Luther’s writings that would go by the name “Weins.” It remains possible, however, that such an edition exists. If, however, it is this difficult to find, then simply citing “Weins” is totally inadequate.

5 John M. Todd, *Martin Luther: A Biographical Study* (Newman Press, 1964), 188. Ellipses are in original.

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