

Power play

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

In a recent lecture on the exercise of political power, David R. Young claimed that although much attention is paid “to the physical and intellectual dimensions” of the exercise of political power, little or none is paid today to “the emotional, nonrational or spiritual dimension.” And yet, argued Young, “it is the spiritual character of the individual human being as a whole . . . that has the greatest impact on how such power is wielded—for better or worse, for good or ill.” If Young is right—and I think he is—then all will depend on how one understands the spiritual character.

Consider Martin Luther and the Reformation he set in motion. True, he was not a politician. He saw himself as a professor of the holy scriptures and a teacher of the church. Yet he set in motion epochal changes in the culture and politics of 16th-century Europe, changes that helped shape the history not only of Europe but of the world. Leave aside for a moment the debate about the merit of his accomplishment—whether he was a God-sent prophet of true Christianity in an age of religious decadence (as Protestants liked to believe for centuries); a “sex-crazed monk of furious temper, a liar and fraud willing to tumble down the great and beautiful edifice of the Catholic Christianity for no better motives than lust and pride” (as Catholics traditionally insisted); a revolutionary figure in the history of human freedom (as Hegel and Marx thought)—and whether, remembering especially the religious wars of the 17th century, he brought more misery than well-being into the world (as biographer Richard Marius argues). What is significant here is to note that the magnitude of events depended on this one man.

In his book *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, Gerhard Ebeling comments on Luther’s role in the dramatic events of the years 1517 to 1521:

The real drama of these years consisted only in a secondary sense of impressive, tense and critical scenes such as the hearing before Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg in 1518, the disputation in Leipzig with Johannes Eck in 1519, the burning of the bull of excommunication in 1520. . . . This course of events was not one which, once set in motion, continued

automatically. Each further step depended to an astonishing degree upon the word of a single person, who had unintentionally presented a challenge to the contemporary world. If he had recanted at Augsburg, if he had been more cautious at Leipzig, if he had not rejected the judgment of the Pope, and if he had followed the advice of numerous well-intentioned friends and had been prepared to compromise, and if in some way he had come to an arrangement with the Imperial Diet, the course of the Reformation would have been different. . . . During these years, Luther's responsibility for the word of God resolved itself simply into clinging firmly to this word—something that was simple and straightforward in essence, but which represented for Luther, who stood alone and whose endurance was being tested, an ordeal by fire with a thousand trials and temptations, in a constantly changing situation.

Incredible as it may sound, Luther's *word* determined the course of history. But what made him cling to that word, all the religious and political pressures notwithstanding? Many explanations can be given, but ultimately we have to fall back on the mystery of his character. He became a reformer not because of his physical stamina or intellectual prowess, although these were formidable, but because of his character, because of his unique blend of emotional and spiritual traits.

Ultimately we cannot be concerned simply about the scale of Luther's impact. We must assess its value. And it is here that the spiritual dimension in the exercise of political power becomes significant in a different and much more important sense. For spirituality can be merely a means of maintaining power and of better achieving political ends, whatever their moral content. Like Machiavelli's prince, a politician will then strive to appear "to those who see him and hear him talk, all mercy, all faith, all integrity, all humanity, all religion." Or she will sincerely strive after such qualities but will apply them only to the limited circle of her family, friends and political allies; she will act like a leader of the gang of robbers who is aware that her success depends on the loyalty, honesty and self-sacrifice of its members. If what ultimately matters is not naked political success but the well-being of a political community in the context of the larger world, then politicians must have not only spiritual character as individual human beings but also character that is infused with a moral political vision.

Some years ago, I heard Alex Bourain of South Africa speak about Nelson Mandela's role in dismantling apartheid. He confirmed the importance of the single word of a single individual in critical situations. In delicate but hard negotiations with the apartheid regime, when things could have gone either way, it was often Mandela's demand to press on and not to give up that made all the difference. The "word" dismantled apartheid because it was an outgrowth of the spiritual character of a person who was guided by a compelling moral vision.