Is the Reformation over? Yes and no.

Until Christians can all share the Lord's Supper, the rift continues. But there is no denying how massively the ground has shifted.

by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson in the March 15, 2017 issue

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Most towns in the former East Germany have gotten a face-lift in recent years, but none so diligently and lovingly as Lutherstadt Wittenberg. The would-be pilgrimage site was cut off from most of its constituency for 40 years, and when the Berlin Wall came down and the iron curtain was drawn aside, it was hardly ready to receive the flood of eager pilgrims.

A quarter century later, grimness has mostly given way to gaiety. Hungry visitors now can choose from stands dispensing döner kebabs, kitschy coffee-and-cake shops, and a Slow Food–approved inn. Luther and Melanchthon each get their own *Haus*-cum-museum, and the two famous churches—the Castle Church, where Luther, according to tradition, posted his 95 Theses, and the City Church, Luther's preaching

station—are polished to a high gloss.

Such is ground zero for the evangelical movement that would come to be called, against its founder's express wishes, Lutheranism. In the intervening 500 years, even while the medieval foundations have stayed put in a city that was and remains the definition of *Podunk*, Lutheran ideas, piety, music, and practice have traveled around the globe and back again.

It's one thing to access this fact by way of statistics. Such as, there are 4 million Lutherans in otherwise very Hindu India and another 5.7 million Lutherans in otherwise very Muslim Indonesia. There are nearly 20 million Lutherans in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Madagascar combined. Far more modest numbers are found in the Americas, and of course all kinds of Lutherans are spangled across Europe, from the ponderous folk churches of Scandinavia to the tiny but resilient minority churches in Slovakia, Serbia, and Romania.

But it's another thing to see the global face of Lutheranism in person, and in Wittenberg. Every November since 2009 my German colleague Theodor Dieter and I have taught a two-week seminar titled Studying Luther in Wittenberg, which collects the "diaspora" of Lutheranism for a high-octane fellowship of study.

Dieter and I approached the first seminar with trepidation. We were diehard fans ourselves but knew enough of the changing face of the world—not to say the church—to wonder whether our fandom was the result of our being so culturally close to the man himself. Maybe Luther only added up for those with some stake in northern European culture, either directly (in his case) or by extension (in mine). We braced ourselves to be disappointed.

What we encountered was an enthusiastic reception far beyond anything we'd dared to let ourselves dream. We've spent time at the seminar table with an Inuit pastor from Greenland who told us how she has to order a whole year's supply of communion wine because the ice prevents imports ten months of the year. And with a Senegalese pastor who, as an observant Muslim high schooler, read through a Finnish missionary's entire library before finally being granted access to the Bible—on the conclusion of which reading, he said to himself, "The Qur'an tells how to save yourself; the Bible tells how God saves you." And with a third-generation Lutheran pastor from Myanmar who was ecstatic to eat sauerkraut and sausages as well as to talk theology all day. Brazilian scholars laboring to translate Luther's

works into Portuguese and a Taiwanese pastor seeing unflattering parallels between 16th-century Christian practice in Europe and 21st-century Taoist practice in China.

The history that followed Luther is more divisive today than Luther himself.

Luther has traveled far indeed, and the farther he goes, the warmer his reception. The Africans and Asians we've worked with have found in this late medieval friar's writings on faith and grace, sin and law, left-hand and right-hand kingdoms the answers to the questions plaguing their churches, their people, and their societies. The western and northern Europeans are generally slower to warm up, a little bored with the theologian who taught the ubiquity of Christ but inadvertently became ubiquitous himself. By the end we could usually bring them around. Still, I postulate a Law of Luther Reception: there is an inverse relationship between Luther's cultural importance and that culture's ability to hear him.

Which brings us to the question of Luther reception in our own equally exotic, if all too familiar, United States of America. Let us pass over in dignified silence the ongoing tendency to confuse Martin Luther with Martin Luther King Jr. Who is this medieval German friar to an America of Reformed- and Methodist-inflected Prot-estantism, to an America with more Catholics than any single denomination of Protestants?

One measure of that is the impact of Lutherans in this country. It was not an auspicious start. Most of them arrived as indentured servants, bound for seven years' service. Those who did well enough for themselves to form churches were constantly beset with a now-defunct variety of charlatanism: the fake Lutheran pastor. Uncredentialed and soaking the faithful for funds, they undermined earliest American Lutheranism until the great patriarch (in both the literal and the figurative sense of the term) Henry Melchior Muhlenberg started something resembling a denomination to separate the wheat from the tares. The concept of denomination was a peculiar thing to the immigrants, fresh out of state churches, but in no-establishment America it was a necessary evil.

Growth was slow but steady from the 17th to 19th centuries. The great leap forward came with the massive influx of immigrants from both Germany and the Nordic countries between the Civil War and World War I. Contrary to the abiding myth, these newcomers did not obediently stream into the waiting arms of the church. Pastors invested massive effort in drawing them in, always hampered by an equally

massive lack of personnel, and even their best efforts captured only 25 percent of Norwegians and not even 10 percent of Danes. But that was enough to catapult Lutherans into the status of third-largest Protestant denomination in the United States, following the Baptists and the Methodists.

Lacking the Anglo roots of the top two denominations, Lutherans always came off as a bit exotic. They'd almost fully made the transition to English before the 19th-century immigrant flood, which turned back the clock for some decades. Two world wars ultimately cured them of the habit of foreign tongues, though a precedent-setting Supreme Court case, *Meyer v. Nebraska* in 1923, established the right of German-Americans to educate their children in German, accusations of treachery notwithstanding.

The earliest Lutherans on this continent had serious doubts, though, as to whether they could do Lutheranism in America, and in English. The question abides. In the latter case, semantic shift has obscured the theological bedrock of the tradition in the case of the word *justified*. Its connotations today are negative and self-serving: "the ends justify the means," "I was justified in my behavior under the circumstances." "Justified by faith" seems to suggest a kind of know-nothing works-righteousness of belief, a blind adherence that might excuse any number of appalling behaviors. This understanding is very far from Luther's joyful announcement of Christ's promise, received by hearts and minds recognizing the promise as true and life-giving, which God graciously counts as righteousness until the last day—but we anglophone Lutherans are stuck, it seems, with the unwieldy language of justification.

As for doing Lutheranism in America, the Achilles' heel was and remains denominationalism. Denominations allow freedom and flexibility, a particularly useful feature on the frontier, amidst multiple language groups, and in a time of cultural flux. By the same measure, though, denominations entrench differences and justify (in the bad sense!) divisions over matters petty as well as portentous. Observers of the ecclesiastical scene who associate predestination with Calvinists of the more dire sort may be surprised to learn that there was a major schism among Norwegian-Americans over this very issue.

As Lutherans Americanized culturally and anglicized linguistically, they became more and more willing to merge. Through the 20th century, the family tree for the most part narrowed instead of forking. And then, right at the moment exotic

foreigner Lutherans hit their cultural stride, got their church presidents on the cover of *Time*, and eagerly started building bigger barns, the winds shifted. Whether aggravated by their own choices or obediently following the way of all mainline Protestants, the growth transmuted into a free fall and has kept on falling ever since.

But for all the ways Lutherans have kept the faith, instructing their youth in the Small Catechism and singing their long, doctrine-heavy, home-country hymns, perhaps it's best not to harness Luther's place in America alongside that of Lutherans'. How "Lutheran" the various Lutheran denominations and congregations are has been a constant internal battle and one that is, no doubt, incredibly boring to outsiders. Luther is entirely too important a figure to restrict to Lutherans anyway. What is quite a bit more interesting is the coterie of Anglicans who are passionate devotees of Luther, the rediscovery of Luther by evangelicals tracking down the source material of their Reformation roots, the universal credit awarded to Luther by Pentecostals for being the first step of "restoration" after more than a millennium of darkness, and the profound change in the Catholic attitude toward this most contentious figure of church history.

A minor industry of the theology business likes to pose the provocative question of whether the Reformation is "over." In the most obvious historical sense the answer is, of course, yes—long since. The stalemate and mass destruction of the Thirty Years' War saw to that. And the final, forceful separation of church from state in the last century and a half has guaranteed that the conditions that made the political and social conflagration of the 16th century unavoidable are gone forever.

That isn't the real question at stake, however. It's meant to be a theological and ecclesiastical question, but the nuance varies with the person who poses it. One version asks whether Protestants are justified (!) in ongoing distrust and condemnation of Catholics. Another, twisting the matter only slightly, tacitly assumes that Rome still carries the distinction of being "the church" in such fashion that sufficient amends demand a return "home." Another inflection wonders whether Protestant churches themselves ever really got the memo—a lot of Protestant quarrels revolve around what exactly qualifies as successfully "reformed"—while still another has lost interest in conflicts of times past and wants to carry the blazing torch of reform on into a bold future, construed any number of ways.

Pope Francis has embraced the claim that "apart from God we can do nothing."

If anything signals the “overness” of the Reformation, at least symbolically, it has to be the star appearance of Pope Francis at the Lutheran World Federation’s formal inauguration of the year leading up to the October 2017 anniversary of the 95 Theses. This festive worship, which took place in Lund, Sweden, on October 31, 2016, featured the startling image of the pope—whose office was not infrequently identified by Luther as that of the Antichrist—processing up the aisle of the great cathedral flanked by two Lutheran pastors: Bishop Munib Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation, and Martin Junge, general secretary of the LWF. More startling still, Pope Francis was attired in a plain white alb, in no way distinguishing his office from that of his fellows, and a red stole—the liturgical color for Reformation Day. The visual cues, at least, witnessed a very different attitude on the Vatican’s part toward the former heresiarch.

To build on the astonishments, the sermons of Pastor Junge and Pope Francis were both delivered in Spanish, as the two men come from Chile and Argentina respectively, and their themes were all unity and reconciliation. Junge spoke of “the centripetal force of baptism,” a shift from the continued stalemate at a shared Eucharist to the common rebirth from death to life in the sacrament of baptism.

For his part, in a spirit of “recognizing error and seeking forgiveness,” Francis acknowledged that “our division . . . was perpetuated historically by the powerful of this world rather than the faithful people.” Now, however, the heavenly Father’s “gaze of love inspires us to purify our past.”

A generic “mistakes were made” approach is a stock-in-trade of ecumenism, but Francis pressed on to deal directly with the divisive person himself. Cutting to the theological quick, he said, “The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing.” In teaching grace alone, Luther “reminds us that God always takes the initiative, prior to any human response, even as he seeks to awaken that response.” He described the doctrine of justification—on which, Lutherans like to say, the church stands or falls—as the “essence of human existence before God.”

Is the Reformation over? As long as Catholics and Protestants (of whatever variety) cannot share the Lord’s Supper or acknowledge each other’s ministry without reservation, then in some inescapable sense the rift continues. And there is variety enough within the Catholic Church, and within and between the Protestant churches, to give any ecumenical Doubting Thomas more than enough evidence that the

battle must rage on.

But there is no denying how massively the ground has shifted beneath our feet. From the scholars to the dialogues to the popular press, Catholics hold Luther in a different regard from even 50 years ago, and Lutherans have a much harder time painting Catholicism with an unequivocally tarred brush. If anything still deters reconciliation, it is neither the theology nor the person of Luther but the investment each party has in its own history and structure. Not Luther, but the 500 years that followed him—and the 1,500 that preceded him—are far more problematic. In a certain sense, the commemoration of a single anniversary, even of something that rocked history as much as the 95 Theses, is easier than the task of sifting through all the rubble that cascaded in their wake.

Back in Wittenberg, there's one corner of the City Church that has been preserved not for its aesthetic or moral value but precisely because it is so profoundly lacking in both. On the facade is a sculpture of fat sow suckling her piglets, who are not actually piglets but Jews, and a rabbi peering intently under the sow's tail at her nether regions. The inscription over it reads "Rabini Schem HaMphoras," a corruption of *Shemhamphorasch*, a kabbalistic name for God. It dates from 1305 but represents a long and horrifying tradition of Christian disgust toward Jews. Luther commented on it late in his career, in keeping with his vitriolic dislike of rabbinic Judaism.

On November 11, 1988, the 50th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the monument was not removed but a commentary was added at the initiative of a local youth group. On the ground beneath the *Judensau* lies a metal plate sketched with a cross that seems to be breaking apart as something underneath boils over. The inscription around its edges reads in German (with parts in Hebrew): "The true name of God, the maligned Chem Ha Mphoras which Jews long before Christianity regarded as almost unutterably holy, this name died with six million Jews, under the sign of the Cross."

Debate has carried on for some time over whether the *Judensau* should remain. Some Christians and Jews feel it needs to stay there as a potent reminder and warning about anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Other Christians and Jews argue that it has no place in a house of worship and, further, that the memorial's extreme language about the death of God's name does little to improve matters. A renewed petition for the *Judensau*'s removal has grown in anticipation of the 2017

celebrations, stating that “it is time to remove this statue and replace it with something more honoring to the God of Israel, respectful of the Jewish people, and bringing dignity to a Christian place of worship instead of retaining a sculpture that is unseemly, obscene, insulting, offensive, defamatory, libelous, blasphemous, anti-Semitic and inflammatory.”

At this point it may well be worth asking if any of Luther’s message can be retrieved in light of his religious anti-Judaism (to be distinguished from racial anti-Semitism, which arose several centuries later). The sins of the fathers are acutely painful, and anyone in any way inspired by Luther’s teaching of the gospel has to grapple with this issue sooner or later.

Luther combined a deep love for Torah with a hatred of rabbinic Judaism.

A first point to be made is cold comfort at best, because setting Luther in context casts a pall over all of Christendom. The terrible truth is that Luther turns out to be representative, not unique, in his anti-Judaism. Ever since the schism of synagogue and church—which took place at the one brief moment in history when Jews had the advantage of both numbers and political protection—the church has been unable to construct its theology or identity without contrast to the despised traitors, Romans 9 to 11 notwithstanding. Already in the second century Melito of Sardis (died ca. 180) was pinning the blame for Christ’s death on the Jews: “God put to death! the King of Israel slain with Israel’s right hand!” And this set a trend that was all too eagerly taken up, leaving no major figure in the church’s history untarnished. Luther’s fame and eloquence, not to mention his being German and therefore charged with guilt by association with the Nazis, causes him to come under fire more often than others. But the truth is worse: the whole church has been anti-Judaic from the get-go.

Though here again a qualification is needed, as there are varieties of anti-Judaism. Some have found the entire deposit of Hebrew faith as found in the Old Testament beyond the pale: early church heretic Marcion, Enlightenment history-of-religions progressivism, and Dispensationalism.

For other Christians—and Luther falls in this camp—this issue is not the Old Testament at all but rather rabbinic Judaism. Ignorant of that which they slandered, Luther and others like him simply could not conceive of Judaism without land or temple. They inferred that destruction and diaspora were God’s definitive closure of that means of access to the divine. These Christians had no idea that what would

come to be called rabbinic Judaism was already, long before Jesus' birth, in development among Jews in Babylon, Alexandria, and elsewhere, already figuring out what it meant to be Israel apart from land and temple. What remained to them was the scripture, and in time its interpreter, the Talmud. One could easily argue that Christians, who had no land or temple at all, possessed in a kind of parallel the same scripture but a different interpreter thereof, the New Testament. Luther occasionally suggests that the Old Testament alone can claim to be "scripture," the New being merely a record to preserve an essentially oral proclamation.

So yes, Luther despised rabbinic Judaism and its adherents, whom he could only take to be willfully blind in the face of the evidence. But he was astoundingly pro–Old Testament. He called Abraham "the chief of all the saints," and not only because Abraham believed God and that was counted to him as righteousness. Luther praised Moses as "the fountain and the father of all the prophets and sacred books, that is, of heavenly wisdom and eloquence" and validated "the most beautiful ceremonies" of Deuteronomy as granting true contact between God and the faithful. Altogether the flip-flopping between Luther's hatred of the rabbis and his love of their Torah is extremely disorienting to the contemporary reader. But it is also a mirror of the church's ongoing existential uneasiness over the existence of the one group that, it seems, should have recognized the Messiah but didn't.

The confusion persists into typical presentations of Luther's distinction between law and gospel. If there is anywhere that a retrieval of Luther would actually improve relations between church and synagogue, this is it. Because the most common version of law and gospel one hears these days is inherently, if tacitly, anti-Judaic.

It goes like this: the law is a purely negative force that accuses and kills. Then the gospel comes along and sets us free from the law and its death-dealing forever. To the contrary, Luther distinguishes law and gospel but does not oppose them. They are both words of God, both good, both life-giving if in different ways, and both death-dealing to those who close their ears. The popular but faulty division of law from gospel is bad enough as a distortion of Luther, but it gets much worse when the maligned law is identified with the religion of Israel. Allow me to illustrate this with some examples from sermons I've actually heard.

There's the one about the hemorrhaging woman. In her day, the preacher innocently begins, she was considered unclean. You know, they had all those purity laws. Nobody would touch her or go near her. As a result, she's lived 12 years cut off from

all human community. But then Jesus comes along and isn't afraid to touch her and restores her to human community, because Jesus turns no one aside—he includes us all.

Of course, we all love a good inclusion story. But what's being excluded here? Inferior, regressive Jewish law. Purity laws are assumed to be inherently exclusionary and that's the main problem to be overcome. Jesus' role as healer and the woman's faith are subsumed under the category of exclusion/inclusion, which is, if you look closely, actually a Judaism versus Christianity story.

Another example, closely parallel: the Good Samaritan. Look at that Jewish priest and that Jewish Levite, how they walk on the other side of the road, because they don't want to risk making themselves unclean or unable to offer sacrifices by touching blood or a corpse. They're unloving and bad. But then the Samaritan comes along, that non-Jewish guy, that outsider guy, and he cares lovingly for the injured man. Lesson: Jewish law bad, breaking Jewish law good. Not: these two particular Jews fail to understand their own law. Not: here is a foreshadowing of the gathering up of all the nations, including Samaria, that will take place in the book of Acts. Not: the Levitical command to love your neighbor is *extended* to all people rather than repealed.

A third such sermon deals with the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Leviticus prevented eunuchs from serving in the tabernacle, we are solemnly informed; they never had a place among the people of Israel. But now, hallelujah, eunuchs are welcome. *They* kept them out, we've let them in. The same inclusion story quietly turns observant Judaism into the scapegoat. And meanwhile it again misses a number of crucial scriptural details. Leviticus outlawed any but the physically perfect as priests but mandated permanent care of the physically imperfect; moreover, in the sacrificial system, to be perfect was to receive a death sentence while to be imperfect was to be spared to live (Lev. 21). Then there's the fact that Isaiah had already found a way to bring the eunuchs back into fellowship long before Jesus came along (Isa. 56:3–6). And the Ethiopian eunuch was in fact a Jewish proselyte—drawn to, not repulsed by, the Old Testament's law and how it shaped a life of devotion toward the God of Israel.

These sermons are *tacitly* anti-Judaic. I have never actually heard a single Christian preacher openly denounce the Jews, religiously or racially, and thank God for that. That's real progress. But the deeply rooted anti-Judaism that has plagued the church

from at least the second century still bubbles under the surface.

There could hardly be a greater irony than using Luther—at his better moments, to be sure—to correct the anti-Judaism concealed under modern, progressive Christian preaching. From this better Luther we can learn to say without hesitation that the Old Testament is not an inferior book. That Jewish law is not primitive, legalistic, or false. That the law of God in itself is not bad or oppressive but a good and divine thing. That God has always spoken to people in the language of promise, and people have always been called to respond with faith in the promise and obedience to the law, Jews as much as Christians.

And if there was anything Luther wanted to commend to the church, it was this golden ring of promise and faith. In Christ we are promised forgiveness of our sins and life everlasting in a fellowship of love. Eve, Noah, and Abraham knew about the promise long before we did and passed the word along through the generations. Today we lay hold of that promise in the only way we can: by believing in it. The gift of God and our reception of it are the golden ring forged by the flame of the Holy Spirit. Neither life nor death, powers nor principalities can wrench it away.

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