

COMMENTARY

The earth shattering discoveries of the heliocentric theory, artistic perspective, the triangular sail are equally compared to the revolutionary discovery of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther in January 1518 about the spiritual meaning of the word “Repent” as spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew!

Scholasticism was the new way of thinking and teaching that is the basis of the liberal arts curriculum. The first universities of Bologna and Paris used dialectical reasoning to develop inferences and resolve contradictions. Peter Abelard, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas were the main scholastic teachers and their approach was a radical departure from the scholarship of the monasteries. The Order of St. Dominic, founded in 1215, defended the Christian beliefs of the Roman Catholic faith emphasized the use of reason and the writings of Aristotle in the debate for the truth. Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*) was a master of the Dominican model in the development of Catholic teachings that synthesized religion with reasoning.

Martin Luther, an Augustinian educated monk, makes a departure from scholastic model of thinking with his interpretation of the verse in Matthew 4:17. Luther’s way of thinking will lead to a new school known as Lutheran Scholasticism, which is a protest against the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas and the Dominicans. Luther’s conclusion that reason could not lead people to God because they could only learn about God through the knowledge revealed to them by the Holy Spirit is a huge leap in the medieval understanding of man and humanism! This is the substance of the arguments in the Leipzig Debate of July 1519.

Luther’s discovery was the result of the enormous contribution of Erasmus in 1516 and an example of the rapid explosion of knowledge at this time. Erasmus translated the Latin (*Vulgate*) Bible into Greek. The word he used for “Repent” (“*metanoiēn*”) in Matthew 4:17 is the same as the word “Repent” in Matthew 3:2 – “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**” This one word, Repent, became fascinating to Luther and was the evidence he sought to challenge the Roman Catholic teachings about sin, penance, indulgences, and good works.

Latin: “exinde coepit Iesus praedicare et dicere *paenitentiam agite* adpropinquavit enim regnum caelorum”

Greek: “ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς κηρύσσειν καὶ λέγειν *Μετανοεῖτε*, ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.”
Matthew 4:17

In one context, the word “Repent” supports the Roman Catholic view of an expiation for the wrongs committed. Thus, a person needs to “do penance” to become right with God. However, as Luther understood the new Greek translation of *paenitentiam agite* by Erasmus, the contextual meaning is one of having a complete change of mind and a rooting out of all that is evil. In short, it involves a conversion, which is initiated by God and accepted by people when they repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

Luther’s understanding is supported by Theodore Beza’s (a French Protestant scholar and follower of John Calvin) reference to the word “Repent” as a verb, ‘resipiscere’. The context for this meaning is that one repents of their former life and the change from the old life to the new life is irrevocable or permanent. Theodore Beza was born on June 24, 1519, when Luther was debating his arguments in Leipzig with Cardinal John Eck!

The development of this new understanding of God’s grace and the unchallenged authority of the revealed Word of God in the *Holy Bible*, expanded with the writing of Philipp Melanchthon and the publication of *Loci Communes* in 1521. Martin Chemnitz, and the Reformed (followers of Calvin) thinkers of Francisco Suarez and Luis de Molina continued to develop this new way of thinking about the personal relationship between God and man. .

What a remarkable discovery of a new context for the way humans would view God as a loving and caring personal God instead of an angry and punishing impersonal God. God's intervention in the lives of the Renaissance personalities of Erasmus, More, Melancthon, and Calvin, along with the historic events in the vacancy in the Holy Roman Empire upon the death of Maximilian in 1518 and the invention of the printing press, contributed to a climate for Martin Luther's character to propel the Reformation of theology, philosophy, and social change!

“Justification by faith meant that the earnest seeker after salvation heard all the promises of Christ directed to him personally and trusted God as the loving father who would bring the believer safely home. It went beyond the teaching of general predestination to the confidence that the believer was among those predestined for salvation, and its power lay in the assurance it offered to scrupulous souls like Luther haunted by their own unworthiness, desperately afraid of divine judgment, needing some word of affirmation to dissolve all the negation they felt in their own hearts.” (Richard Marius, *Thomas More*, p. 266-67)

January 1518 – What a remarkable discovery!

Footstep #12 June 2, 2013 – Shocking Discovery – January 1518

*“Luther had made the discovery that the biblical text from the Latin Vulgate, used to support the sacrament of penance, was a mistranslation. The Latin for Matthew 4:17 read *penitentiam agite*, ‘do penance,’ but from the Greek New Testament of Erasmus, Luther had learned that the original meant simply ‘be penitent.’ The literal sense was “change your mind.”*

Matthew 4:17 – *“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”*

As a professor, Luther's sermons had been topical and during the years of 1517-1519, he was not convinced that his parishioners were taking the messages of his sermons as seriously as he would have liked. During these years, the members of the Wittenberg congregation were lukewarm to his message. (Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*, p. xviii)

According Dr. Robert Kolb, *“Furthermore, although he may have presumed that his hearers were not all taking his message as seriously as they should, he did have confidence that God's presence in the proclamation of his Word was conveying his power and promise. He was convinced that God works through human speech as he created it, in its natural forms of communication, to people in a variety of situations....Narrative serves as an effective tool for focus on the concrete failures of sinners, daily life, and God's concrete plans for their actions in daily life.”* (Kolb, p. xviii)



Pulpit of the Castle Church (All Saints Church) in Wittenberg. The tomb of Martin Luther is next to the pulpit.