



Interview with Jeff Mallinson

Associate Editor, *The Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017)

Interview by Jonathan J. Armstrong

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Jonathan J. Armstrong: *The Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation* spans 2 volumes, some 1,000 pages, and 475 articles written by 180 scholars from 25 countries! This is a remarkable undertaking! What was the most challenging aspect of this project for you as editor?

Jeff Mallinson: Fortunately, there were few challenges with the project despite of the number of authors to herd and the breadth of entries to organize. The exceptionally-skilled editorial advisory board members, who are world-class scholars at various academic institutions primarily in the United States and Europe, guided the process of what themes, names, events, locations, and contributors should be included and excluded. Their roundedness and sagacity very much coached the most relevant and pressing areas of inquiry to be part of the contents for the sake of our readers. The project is indebted not only to their knowledge but also their grace in taking on assignments and contributing the best of the scholarly pursuits for this project.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Martin Luther is a man who has been both venerated and vilified by scholars from various Christian traditions. How did you choose which scholars to invite to contribute to the project?

Jeff Mallinson: We did not select scholars based primarily upon their personal appreciation of Luther's life and theology, but rather scholars who were qualified as historians and theologians. Despite this, Reformation scholars tend to have personal confessional affiliations that make in-depth study of Luther's thought particularly relevant to their ecclesial roots and contemporary theological concerns. This brings a richness and depth to the nuances of the Reformation and its trajectories.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Luther has been portrayed traditionally as having a poor relationship with his father and mother. Is this still the basic impression that we gather concerning Luther's early family life?

Jeff Mallinson: The idea that Luther had a particularly bad relationship with his parents is turning out to be a bit overplayed today. To be sure, our modern understanding of family and discipline is such that the practices of the late medieval world seem barbaric. It is true that he experienced physical punishment from his folks, but records seem to indicate that his experience was similar to the majority of his contemporaries. The move from training in law to the monastery seems indeed to have initially disappointed Luther's father; nonetheless, there is reason to believe Luther's notoriety and success was eventually appreciated.

The larger story is an intellectual and spiritual one: Luther seems to have taken Jesus' statements that disciples must be willing to hate even parents (Luke 14:26) seriously, which allowed him, through Scripture and conscience, to chart his own course, despite what his biological father and the big "father" of the church, the Pope (etymologically derived from the Latin for father) have wanted.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: How do Luther's "Table Talks" inform our knowledge of Luther and the Reformation?

Jeff Mallinson: While the accuracy of these informal notes, written down by a variety of associates, is not terribly reliable, they are very helpful for understanding the general ethos of his movement. Luther was not always consistent, and did not focus on systematizing his beliefs. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Table Talk material is the way in which Luther's concept of grace allowed him to cultivate an environment that was free to be playful, sometimes even vulgar, and often humorous. This seems to be something that flowed from his concept of Christian Freedom. These fragments of conversation, if nothing else, help paint a more complete picture of the historical Luther.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: The invention of the printing press advanced the Reformation in incalculable ways. What are the primary ways that the Encyclopedia accounts for the influence of the printing press in Luther's work?

Jeff Mallinson: Indeed, the printing press advanced the Reformation significantly. It is also notable that Luther's close oversight over most of the printing process deeply affected the success of the printing industry both in terms of sales and aesthetics. This is brought out by the excellent recent research of Andrew Pettigree, who served on our editorial board and is the author of *Brand Luther: How and Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe—and Started the Protestant Reformation* (Penguin 2016)

Jonathan J. Armstrong: How may Luther's anti-Semitism need reappraisal?

Jeff Mallinson: This uncomfortable subject of course comes up frequently since the catastrophe of the Nazified church. The short answer is that what Luther eventually said was horrible and even many of his contemporaries cringed at some of what he said. Scholars have justifiably noted that the concept of race has changed significantly over the centuries. Luther fit in with

the baser prejudices and suspicions of his day. To understand this precisely: Luther seems to have focused primarily on Judaism as a religion. Thus, Judaism represented in his opinion a system that was even more starved of the Gospel of Christ than the Papist system. Given Luther's harsh words against the pope, it is not surprising that he had similar, intemperate statements ready for Judaism.

A related question involves the extent to which Luther influenced Nazi ideology centuries later. One of our contributors, Uwe Siemon-Netto, author of *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths* (2nd edn., Concordia Publishing House, 2007) contends that Luther's civil courage and doctrine of vocation were in fact helpful for faithful Christians in Germany who wished to oppose the Nazis.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: The Encyclopedia features a large number of articles devoted to aspects of Luther's theology, ranging from such topics as "The Cross" to "Sabbatarianism." In what ways does the Encyclopedia perhaps offer a new portrait of Luther's theology?

Jeff Mallinson: History, personal piety, devotion, theology, society, and education all affected and were affected by Luther and the Reformation movements. Our project indeed sought to incorporate the most up to date research available. Perhaps more important is the breadth of the discussion. There have been times when scholars, for ideological reasons, reduced the Reformation to only one aspect. For instance, Marxist scholars read the whole era through the sense of economic forces and class. Confessional historians saw everything as a theological debate, sometimes underemphasizing the sociological and political forces at play. This encyclopedia helps bring all facets together in one resource.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: How is the growth of Christianity in the Global South today changing the face of Lutheranism worldwide?

Jeff Mallinson: The growth of Christianity in the Global South is changing the face of all confessional traditions these days. Lutheranism is no exception. Lutheran missions, particularly in the pietist traditions, have been quite active in Africa, especially Tanzania and Ethiopia. Their presence is felt, but more muted in Latin America. In the United States, it seems that Lutherans have historically been tied more closely to their ethnic roots—say, Scandinavian or German—than other Protestant traditions, and thus with some notable exceptions, it is only recently that many Lutheran congregations have broadened the form of their cultural expressions, practices, and congregational diversity.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: Why did reunification proposals (for example, the Diet of Regensburg in 1541) between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics ultimately fail?

Jeff Mallinson: First, there is Luther himself as a personality and template. When he refused as early as 1529 to compromise in his Marburg Colloquy with Reformed leader Ulrich Zwingli, he set an example for his heirs that blurring theological lines was unacceptable. Second, when political compromises were attempted, particularly under the direction of Luther's right hand

man Philipp Melanchthon, many who had suffered persecution under Roman Catholic censure came to believe this was a betrayal of the cause. Soon a loose but bold group of orthodox Lutherans “the Gnesio-Lutherans” came to define themselves as the true heirs to Luther and tended to oppose not only unionism with Rome but also what they called “crypto-Calvinism”.

Jonathan J. Armstrong: What lessons does the sixteenth century teach us today about Christian unity? How can we pursue today the unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17?

Jeff Mallinson: First off, the sixteenth century shows us that Christian unity can be incredibly difficult if it is defined confessionally and propositionally. When Luther broke with Rome, everyday Christians wondered how they could find a true Church. Luther originally focused on the idea that the Word of Christ was enough to make a Church. Soon, however, so many radical interpretations of the Bible arose, some that led to popular uprisings and violence, that conservative leaders in society needed a bit more definition. Eventually, the standard line was thus that the church could be identified as being where the Word was preached and the sacraments administered. That sounded simple enough. But the question then became whether this or that group was administering the sacraments rightly. Should babies be baptized? Who can partake in communion? Then some Radicals and Reformed groups insisted that a church needed the word, sacraments and church discipline. The fact is, the Roman fear that the Reformation would splinter Christianity was in fact realized. Today there are countless splinter groups within Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, and Anabaptist traditions.

Nonetheless, there is another side to this story. Late medieval Catholicism was incredibly diverse, intellectually. There were mystics, and scholastic Dominicans, and romantic humanists, and devoted Franciscans with various understandings of theological questions. What united them was an institutional understanding of what made Christianity unified: tactile apostolic succession. That is, the church for Roman Catholicism came to be understood as the visible organization on earth that could trace its ordained bishops all the way back to Peter, the first pope. The idea was that a literal apostolic hand was passed from Peter to all future bishops. Unity, for the Protestants, involved succession of apostolic teaching. And the centerpiece of this was the gospel of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. It was a spiritual rather than temporal unity that they sought.

If there is a spiritual takeaway too this, then, it is that evangelicals came to understand that the Gospel cannot be trademarked by any human group. Evangelicals are free to abandon ecclesiastical logos and affiliations if necessary, in order to follow the true voice of the good shepherd. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:27-28). This means that Christians are free to be united to the one love, faith, and baptism in the global fellowship of believers, even when they are unable to establish formal ecumenical arrangements. Put another way, from a Reformational perspective, Christ makes it the case that the church is a unity; human agents cannot guarantee that.