

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

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PART 16: BIBLICAL TRUTH AND HUMAN COMPROMISE

STANCE ON ISLAM

The scourge of Islam had threatened Europe since the eighth century, and in Luther's day that threat was embodied most powerfully by the Ottoman Empire, which lasted from 1299 to 1922. The empire rose in Asia Minor, the region that would later become known as Turkey. This same land had once been a mission field of the apostle Paul, where the gospel was preached and churches were established, including the seven churches addressed in the Book of Revelation.

"The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches."

(Revelation 1:20)

Martin Luther had a negative view of Islam which he usually discussed under the term "the Turk" because the Ottoman Empire was threatening Europe. Luther believed Islam was inherently wrong because it denied the heart of the Christian gospel in the following areas:

- ❖ Denying the deity of Jesus; not acknowledging Him as the Son of God.
- ❖ Rejecting the Godhead; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ Not accepting Christ's death as atonement for sin; considered just a prophet.
- ❖ Promoting works-based righteousness rather than salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

Luther saw Islam as a rival to the gospel of Christ and often interpreted the rise of the Turks as a divine chastisement upon corrupt Christendom. He thought God was using the Turks to punish the sins of Europe, the pope, false religion, and worldly Christians. He believed Christians needed repentance, prayer, preaching, and reform. The Turkish danger exposed the spiritual weakness of Christendom.

Islam appeared to Europe as an aggressive force advancing under the sword. The Ottoman ruler in 1530 was Suleiman the Magnificent, who reigned from 1520 to 1566. Under his leadership, Ottoman power surged westward through southeastern Europe. Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia had all felt the weight of Islamic conquest, and Hungary suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Mohács in 1526. With the eastern defenses weakened, Suleiman turned toward the Habsburg lands.¹ In 1529, he marched into Austria and laid siege to Vienna, placing central Europe under direct threat and forcing Luther and the German princes to confront the danger of the Turk.

¹ The Habsburg lands became known as the Austrian Empire in 1804.



In 1518, Luther argued against resisting the Turks in his explanation of the Ninety-Five Theses. Luther rejected the call for a holy war, arguing that such a crusade was contrary to the teaching and doctrine of Jesus Christ. This position brought criticism upon him, as some accused him of being willing to accept the Muslim advance into Europe.

At that time, Luther believed the Turks were an instrument of divine judgment, sent by God to punish corrupt Christendom. In particular, he saw Roman Catholic Europe as being under the rule of the Antichrist, whom he identified with the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church.

Luther made a clear distinction between a religious war and a secular war. In 1526, he addressed the question of military service in *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, arguing that national defense could be a legitimate reason for a just war. Later, in 1528, Luther wrote *On War Against the Turk*, which was published in 1529. In this work, he urged Emperor Charles V and the German people to resist the Turks, not as a religious crusade led by the church, but as a secular war of defense under lawful civil authority. Luther called Christians to repentance and prayer, asking God to deliver the empire from the Turkish threat.

In 1542, Luther read a Latin translation of the Koran, which deepened his opposition to Islam and led him to write critically about its teachings. Luther regarded Islam as a religion inspired by the Devil, yet he did not call for a missionary campaign among Muslims. Instead, he argued that Muslims should be allowed to live under civil order, even while Christians rejected their doctrine. Luther expressed this view when he wrote:

“Let the Turk believe and live as he will, just as one lets the papacy and other false Christians live.”²

When the question arose as to whether the Koran should be banned in Germany, Luther rejected the idea of suppressing it. He believed the Koran should be made available so that its teachings could be examined, exposed, and refuted in the light of Christian truth.

When examining Luther’s mindset, it becomes evident that he was not primarily a missionary leader in the modern sense. His focus was not on taking the gospel to unreached nations, but on reforming Christendom and calling Roman Catholics back to what he believed was the biblical gospel. Although Luther affirmed the truth of Christ and the authority of Scripture, he did not place strong emphasis on foreign missions or the Great Commission as later evangelical movements would. This weakness carried over into much of early Lutheranism, which often concentrated more on doctrine, church order, and territorial reform than on organized missionary work.

“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”

² From *On War Against the Turk*, 1529, quoted in Roland E. Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2006

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

It is striking that Germany has a large Turkish population in 2026, but relatively few of these immigrants have converted to the Christian faith. Germany’s population stands at approximately 83.7 million and people of Turkish background form one of the country’s most significant immigrant communities. This raises a serious question about the missionary weakness of the German Lutheran churches. Rather than aggressively evangelizing Turkish Muslims, many churches seemed to embrace a “live and let live” attitude similar to Luther’s time.

Luther’s teaching and writings in the sixteenth century deeply shaped Germany’s religious and political development. His distinction between religious war and secular war, along with his defense of lawful military service under civil authority, influenced later discussions about what could be called a “just war.” Over time, however, such ideas could be misused by political leaders who appealed to religion, nationalism, or moral duty to justify military action. The tragic history of Germany, culminating in Adolf Hitler’s exploitation of national and religious language, shows that religious and political doctrines can have consequences far beyond their original setting.

ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY

The word “antinomianism” comes from two Greek ideas: anti meaning “against,” and nomos meaning “law.” It refers to the belief that Christians are released from obligation to obey God’s moral law because they are under grace.

“Since I am saved by grace, it does not matter how I live.”

That is not biblical Christianity. The Bible teaches that salvation is not earned by works:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But the next verse says believers are saved unto good works:

*“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works...”
(Ephesians 2:10a)*

Antinomianism abuses grace and turns Christian liberty into permission to sin. Paul rejected this false idea in his letter to the church at Rome:

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Romans 6:1-2)

In 1537, the Lutheran pastor Johannes Agricola preached a sermon in Eisleben, the same city where Luther had been born. He argued that the Gospel, not God’s moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments, revealed God’s wrath to Christians.

When a copy of the sermon was brought to Luther, he realized that Agricola was responsible for the anonymous antinomian pamphlets that had been circulating in the region. Agricola taught that the Ten Commandments and other Old Testament laws belonged primarily to the secular realm, where civil authorities used them to maintain law and order in society.

Luther responded by writing a series of theses against Agricola's teaching. He insisted that the second use of the Mosaic Law is a tool of the Holy Spirit, used to bring conviction of sin and work repentance in the heart. Luther argued that whatever exposes sin and brings a person under conviction may properly be called Law, even when that conviction comes through Christ's suffering, His death for sin, or the goodness of God displayed in creation.

Refusing to preach the Ten Commandments to Christians does not remove the accusing function of the Mosaic Law. To claim that the Law of Moses should not be preached to believers is to imply that Christians are no longer sinners in themselves and that the church is made up only of perfectly holy people.

Luther further argued that the Ten Commandments should not be viewed only as God's condemning judgment, but also as an expression of His eternal will. In this sense, the Mosaic Law reflects the natural law and positively teaches Christians how they ought to live.

For Luther, the life of Christ, when understood as an example, served as the perfect illustration of the Ten Commandments. Christ's life shows the believer what obedience to God looks like in daily practice and Christians are called to follow Him in their lives.

During my years as a pastor, I have encountered many Christians who mistakenly believe that God the Father is the author of the Old Testament, while Jesus is the author of the New Testament. This false division leads them to conclude that the Ten Commandments and the practical instructions concerning morality, sexuality, and daily living are no longer relevant for Christians.

As a result, many use the grace of God as an excuse to sin, disregarding the commandments God gave in the Old Testament and failing to recognize the consequences such disobedience brings into their lives. They forget that Jesus did not dismiss the moral law, but upheld it and warned His followers not to treat the Mosaic commandments lightly.

"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17-19)

LIES AND POLITICS

Philip of Hesse's bigamy scandal was one of the ugliest incidents of the Reformation because it involved sexual sin, political compromise, secret theological advice, and public embarrassment for Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon.

Philip I, Landgrave of Hesse, was one of the most important Protestant princes in Germany. He introduced the Reformation into Hesse in 1526, founded the University of Marburg in 1527, and became one of the strongest political defenders of the Lutheran cause. He was responsible for the Marburg Colloquy in 1529, trying to unite Luther and Zwingli, who represented the Reformed branches of the Protestants.

Philip married Christine of Saxony in the early 1520s. The marriage was politically useful, but unhappy and Philip soon engaged in adultery. By the mid-1520s, he was already asking whether bigamy could be permitted. Melanchthon wrote to Luther as early as 1526, appealing to the polygamy of the Old Testament patriarchs, but Luther initially answered that the patriarchs' example was not enough without special divine sanction.

Philip continued in sexual immorality for years. Later, he became attached to Margarethe von der Saale, a young noblewoman and maid of honor. He did not want to divorce Christine, but he also did not want to give up Margarethe and sought a way to take Margarethe as a second wife while keeping Christine.

This was not merely a private family matter. Bigamy was legally and socially scandalous in Christian Europe. Philip's reputation could be damaged and Melanchthon supported his case with the Old Testament examples of Abraham, Jacob, David, and other patriarchs. He claimed that Scripture did not absolutely forbid having more than one wife.

Philip asked theologians Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and Martin Bucer for advice. Luther and Melanchthon did not publicly teach bigamy as normal Christian marriage and did not want this case made public. However, under pressure from the Landgrave, and apparently treating the matter as a secret pastoral/confessional case, they gave Philip I permission in this exceptional situation.

Bigamy was sinful and dangerous because it threatened marriage, family order, church discipline, civil law, and public morality. But the three men considered it less destructive than the ongoing adultery or potential fallout from divorce. As a result, Luther, Melanchthon, and Bucer did not want Philip's bigamy publicly defended as normal Christian marriage. They treated it as an exceptional private case and urged him to keep it quiet. Philip happily married seventeen-year-old Margaret von der Saale in 1540.

Margarethe was not to appear publicly as Philip's ruling wife, nor would she take Christine's public place as landgravine. Christine reportedly gave written consent on the condition that Margarethe's children would have a lower status. They were barred from claims to the landgraviate and did not inherit Philip's ruling lands since Margarethe was of lower rank and her children would not receive normal succession rights as rulers of Hesse.

Philip had nineteen children total between the two women. Christine gave birth to ten children and Margarethe had nine children. Interestingly, Christine had seven of her ten children before Philip married Margarethe, and three more after the bigamous marriage.

The ceremony was secret, but not unknown to important insiders. Elisabeth of Hesse, Philip's sister, was deeply troubled by the bigamy and helped bring the matter into public view. Once Philip's bigamous marriage to Margarethe von der Saale became known, it caused an uproar in the Landgraviate of Hesse and damaged the reputation of the Lutheran cause.

Angered by the exposure, Philip sought to defend himself by threatening to reveal that Luther and other Protestant leaders had given him secret consent to marry Margarethe. Luther, not wanting the truth of his involvement to become public, advised Philip to deny the matter forcefully, even if that meant lying to protect the secrecy of the case and the reputation of the Reformation.

Melanchthon was present, and Martin Bucer was heavily involved in the negotiations. The secrecy itself made the scandal worse. When news leaked, Luther and Melanchthon appeared not only to have tolerated bigamy, but to have helped hide it.

The scandal damaged Luther's moral credibility. Luther had previously attacked Roman Catholic corruption, clerical immorality, and false doctrine, but now his enemies could point to the bigamy of the Reformation. Papist opponents used the scandal as proof that Luther's rebellion to Rome led to moral disorder.

Martin Luther was personally embarrassed by the scandal. He became distressed once the news spread and unsuccessfully tried to defend the matter as a private confessional case, not public doctrine. However, that defense was weak because the marriage was a public act, not merely a private thought or confession.

Luther had argued for the authority of Scripture over pope and tradition. But in this case, critics accused him of twisting Scripture to accommodate a powerful prince and it was a powerful propaganda weapon utilized by Rome.

The most charitable explanation is that Luther treated Philip's case as a pastoral emergency. Philip was a powerful Protestant ruler, sexually immoral, politically important, and threatening to act regardless. More than likely Luther thought he was choosing the lesser evil with secret bigamy over public adultery, divorce, and/or political collapse. But even if that explains Luther's reasoning, it does not excuse the damage caused by the moral failure.

Martin Luther was used by God to break the power and monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, just as Lucifer brought great reproach upon King David through his sin, he also found a way to damage Luther's reputation and weaken the testimony of the Reformation.

SUMMARY

Martin Luther's life and ministry demonstrated the power of standing upon biblical truth and the danger of departing from it. He correctly recognized Islam as a rejection of the central truths of the Christian faith, yet his limited emphasis on evangelizing Muslims

revealed a weakness when measured against Christ's command to "teach all nations." The church is not merely called to identify false religion, but to confront it with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Antinomian Controversy likewise showed that salvation by grace does not give Christians permission to disregard God's moral commandments. We are saved by grace through faith, but we are also "created in Christ Jesus unto good works." Jesus did not abolish the moral law, and grace must never be twisted into an excuse for sinful living.

Finally, the scandal involving Philip of Hesse revealed what happens when political pressure and human reasoning are permitted to override biblical standards. Luther, Melancthon, and Bucer attempted to manage a sinful situation through secrecy and compromise, but the result damaged both their credibility and the testimony of the Reformation.

Martin Luther was used by God to break the religious monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church, but he was still a fallible man capable of serious error. No reformer, pastor, church, political leader, or religious tradition stands above the Word of God. The Bible must remain the final authority for doctrine, morality, and Christian conduct.