It is a truism to say that we are not always aware of the full implications of our actions, and we cannot predict all the consequences that will flow from our choices. When Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door he intended to provoke academic debate, but he could have had no idea of the dramatic series of events that would flow from his actions, including schism and fragmentation in the church. He was calling for reform, not for revolution. But the impact of his action has flowed through the centuries, sometimes overt and as a matter of theological debate, but also indirectly in the lives and practices of Christians of many denominations.

It is not the intention or purpose of this paper to follow through the history and development of Christian life and experience, tracing its journey from Luther to The Salvation Army, but rather to explore some ways in which our life and ministry may resonate with his. It will highlight practices and freedoms we take for granted, and aims to challenge us to live well and faithfully in our own context. Luther’s world and world view was very different from our own, but despite this, it is possible to discern connections and lessons to be learned. Stephen J Nichols writes ‘his thought inspired a whole generation in his own day. But also it has the power to impact the church today and to ignite our own generation to a passionate quest for God and his truth.’

Foundations
Luther’s actions and writings are a reflection of the interplay between aspects of his life. His personal history and his identity in Christ interacted with academic and experiential understanding of faith and pastoral practice to enable new knowledge and depth of insight. A respected academic and committed Christian for whom justification by faith was not a theological shift but a profound and life-changing discovery, Luther was ‘a pastoral and practical theologian who more often than not responded to a pastoral need or doctrinal question on an ‘as needed’ basis.’ Thus his rich theology was shaped by a personal experience of God, commitment to pastoral ministry, and informed by a deep and detailed study and teaching of the Bible. But it also moved beyond them to ask questions, challenge the status quo and defend those who were defenceless in unjust systems.

As with Luther, influences from our lives will be traced in our ministry. Luther’s story of release from crippling fear in the light of a clearer understanding of the gospel can serve to remind us that our faith is part of our whole life story, not isolated from the realities that make us who we are, but in the midst of them, offering life and illumination at every stage in our life.
We see in Luther a willingness to move beyond what he had accepted as timeless truth to a new position with a different perspective, but also determination to defend what could not be compromised. This brought challenges and personal cost but was driven by a firm conviction that it was of God. We too will face challenges to our deeply held convictions and at such times we will need to seek wisdom to know what can be changed, and what must remain.

Luther also allowed his experience, and that of other people, to interact with his theological understanding and ultimately to question the accepted practice of the church. A deep pastoral concern for the congregation led to questions about indulgences and to the 95 Theses, which although intended as a stimulus to academic debate, became the catalyst for the reformation of the church. Our ministry is always connected with the needs of others, and the injustices that affect them cannot be set aside, but must be addressed in appropriate ways.

The connections between personal conviction, pastoral concern and theology serve as a reminder that ministry is always relational, between us and God, between us and other people, and in our connections with the world. Our theology is a record of how those relationships are shaped by the word of God. We neglect any of these factors at our peril, and at the risk of a theology that is inadequate and unable to sustain.

**Authority of the Bible**

For Luther the Bible was the only ultimate source of revelation and final authority in all matters relating to revelation. He insisted that theology must be disciplined by a repeated turning to the Biblical text to test all areas of doctrine and practice. Thus his principle for reform has been described as the ‘preservation of all which the Scriptures did not require him to give up.’

“The preaching of God’s word, as law and gospel, stands at the heart of the community into which God incorporates individual believers, and therefore this proclamation of His Word is constantly forming and strengthening the core of every believer’s life.” Salvation Army doctrine affirms that central place of the bible in Christian life ‘We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God and that they only constitute the Divine rule of Christian faith and practice.’

Luther and most of the other reformers believed that the message of the Bible was both ‘clear’ and ‘plain,’ and that truth was revealed under the direction of the Holy Spirit, so that although a passage may have different interpretations, they would not be contradictory. Subsequent history has taught that this was a vain hope and that sincere and scholarly Christians can come to irreconcilable conclusions. Nevertheless, in every generation, the challenge to ensure sound biblical interpretation remains. ‘The Holy Spirit inspires and teaches readers of every generation, so that the words of the text become the words of God for their life and situation.’ N.T. Wright describes this as an act of ‘faithful improvisation’ as the church lives in our own place and time, in ways that are faithful to what has gone before, being obedient to the authority of scripture. But this is not an excuse for the inertia or entrenchment that refuses to accept change in the name of tradition; if there is no openness to change, faithfulness may be no more than a synonym for slavish re-enactment of the past.

We must use the truths of the Bible and the wisdom of Christian history to help us to discern what it means to live authentically as Christians in the 21st century, responding to the challenges of the age in ways that are a proper development of Biblical faith. This is not without risk because there is always a danger of misunderstanding and diversion from truth. Christian history provides many examples of times when new reflection has led to heresy and untruth. But if the church is to remain vibrant and living there is no alternative to finding new expressions of the tradition in each generation. In order to do this we must ensure that our reading of the Bible is in itself accurate, consistent with the whole
message of scripture and God’s purposes for creation, and is engaged in at sufficient depth for us to truly discern the meaning and its implications for our own situation.

Just as, through the centuries, the church has learned to re-evaluate long held traditions and convictions in the light of new insight and knowledge, so we too must learn to be both open and faithful, ensuring that we neither cling to the past without justification, nor compromise the essentials of our faith in the name of progress.

**Faith and Freedom**

Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand claim that ‘in large part, the doctrine of justification, like the closely related doctrine of original sin, is a question of anthropology.’ It enables us to understand the mystery of what it means to be human and to discern the purpose of our existence. So to be righteous is to be the person God created us to be, and the gift of passive righteousness does not justify our withdrawal from the world, but motivates us to live well in the world. Luther wrote ‘... we have established that faith, without any good works, makes us just. It does not follow from that, however, that we should not do good works.’

When people know themselves to be justified by grace through faith they are motivated to serve. Good works are the fruit of goodness, but they do not make us good. In a letter to Pope Leo X, *On Christian Liberty* Luther summarises his argument ‘a Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.’ (1 Corinthians 9:19; Romans 13:8)

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of this thinking for the medieval Church. The shift from seeing good works as a possible, but not guaranteed, way of alleviating the inevitable judgement, to viewing them as the outcome of the gift of faith resulted in new freedom but also attracted criticism, with some suggesting that it would lead to an antinomianism that would undermine the order of society.

In the 21st century, we recognise how much the thinking of Luther and those who followed him have shaped our understanding of lived discipleship. As Salvationists, we endorse Luther’s contention that good works are the result of our salvation, and the outworking of holiness, not a means to it. ‘Commitment to worship and personal devotion will be accompanied by commitment to God’s mission in the world by evangelism, social service and social action. However works of piety or compassion cannot achieve or earn holiness, but are its effects.’

Thus a Salvationist statement on the doctrine of social responsibility suggests that

‘... it is through a perspective of seeing beyond ourselves that we fulfil the plan of salvation by extending unconditionally to those in need a hand of service, fellowship and inclusion...At the very heart of the gospel itself stands the manifesto of Jesus in Luke 4:18-19 in which the gospel is defined in terms of proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberating the oppressed and proclamation of the jubilee. Compassionate meeting of human need and social action are fundamental to the gospel of Jesus Christ.’

As Salvationists we affirm that ‘we love, because he (Christ) first loved us’ (1 John 4:19). We must ensure that we are never tempted to love, or to serve, believing that by so doing we make ourselves worthy of Christ’s love.
Worship with Understanding

For Luther a Biblical theology was the foundation of Christian life and practice. It should be taught, learned and lived. However, it was difficult to teach an accessible theology if the people could not understand the language of the Bible. Thus Luther’s translation of the Bible into German stands as a key component in his determination to enable people to worship and serve with understanding. Similarly he turned his attention to writing the Short and Long Catechisms, to ensure the education of the laity and the priests. ‘I again implore that all Christians, especially pastors and preachers... daily exercise themselves well in these studies...if they manifest such diligence, then I will promise them, and they shall also perceive, what fruit they will obtain, and what excellent men God will make of them, so that in due time they will acknowledge that the longer and the more they study the Catechism, the less they know of it, and the more they find yet to learn...’

The Salvation Army is committed to pay attention to the discipleship of its people. The report of the Spiritual Life Commission noted that ‘the vitality of our spiritual life as a movement will be seen and tested in our turning to the world in evangelism and service, but the springs of our spiritual life are to be found in our turning to God in worship, in the disciplines of life in the Spirit, and in the study of God’s word.’ Salvationists need a deep foundation on which to build their lives in the 21st century, therefore commitment to meaningful and sustained discipleship development must be a priority if we are to flourish as a movement. Attention to the teaching, development, and empowerment of our people is crucial to the future effectiveness of The Salvation Army. It may be done formally or informally, through word, music, or creative arts but should form an integral part of any Salvation Army corps or centre. Discipleship also leads to empowerment, as those who are discipled take their place in the body of Christ. As leaders we need to invest in our people through mentoring, guiding, training and teaching, enabling them to serve Christ according to his will and in his way.

Luther’s aim was to change the spirit and motivation of the church, but not necessarily its practice. He did not believe that just because the papacy was corrupt, everything in the church had to be overturned. In the actions of some of his followers we see some dangers of unreflective adoption of new teaching, as reform was interpreted as a licence to reject all that was known and familiar. For example he criticised the Anabaptists whom he saw as ‘subversive and lawless, not recognising the true and legal authorities in both church and state, going about their business stealthily and secretly’.

Nevertheless, Luther’s theological emphases ultimately led to change, including freedom from the hierarchical oppressiveness of the church, a more individual approach to faith, the acceptance of married clergy, congregational singing and a redefining of the relationship between church and state.

For The Salvation Army, learning to worship and serve with understanding in this generation requires evaluating the effectiveness of long-held and well-loved practices of our denomination, and listening to the Spirit for ways in which new strengths may emerge, but it does not justify change without careful consideration. Discerning between that which is of God, and therefore must remain, and what can be changed, is a complex and emotive practice that requires patience, courage, wisdom and careful attention to the leading of God’s Spirit.

Spiritual Authority

Luther articulated clearly his belief that all Christians are of the ‘spiritual estate’ and all belong to the priesthood through baptism, but not all should exercise the office. ‘A cobbler, a smith, a farmer each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own works must benefit and serve everyone.’ However, the church, or more specifically the priesthood, should not see itself as more deserving of power, or as spiritually
superior. ‘It behoves every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to rebuke errors’.

The priesthood of all believers is a long established, although often misunderstood, tenet in The Salvation Army. It is part of our heritage and has shaped our understanding and practice. ‘Ministry is shared throughout the whole priesthood of God. This does not mean that every aspect of the priestly ministry is evidenced in every person. Rather, ministry is exercised as individuals receive and use their natural abilities and spiritual gifts for the benefit of all.’ This view acknowledges that some are called to ministry and leadership, but does not assume that this brings with it special status or privilege.

However there are those who would suggest that we have developed a priestly approach to ministry which takes us away from first purposes. Harold Hill argues that ‘the Church’s history illustrates that function always gravitates towards status and status validates its claims by asserting that it was all God’s plan. As it institutionalises, the early zeal fades, energies are expended on maintaining rather than advancing, and the functionaries get delusions of grandeur.’ Thus the servant leadership which was modelled and taught by Jesus is neglected, and sometimes negated. It also disempowers the majority and is a hindrance to effective mission.

For The Salvation Army in the 21st century the challenges are significant. In many western societies the traditional practices of the church, including The Salvation Army, are questioned. Leaders and officers are no longer respected simply because of their place in the community, and at times tensions can arise. A clear understanding of both functional and spiritual leadership is required, alongside a deeper appreciation of what it means to take one’s place in the body of Christ.

Total Conviction

Biographer Derek Wilson sums up Luther’s life in a single sentence. ‘He was that rare phenomenon, a man of total conviction who had the courage to follow his beliefs wherever they led.’ His biographers show him as a man of enthusiasm, commitment, a persuasive preacher, a dedicated teacher, and an affectionate husband and father who enjoyed life. He could also be stubborn, vulgar, impatient and hostile to and scathing about his opponents. His attitudes could be inconsistent and his prejudices offensive and damaging. He was a man of flaws as well as virtues, whose willingness to challenge the status quo and to offer a theology that re-emphasised foundational principles and establish new practices set the church on a path that led farther than Luther could have envisaged. From a starting point of rigorous devotion to God and a demand for right living he discerned a new way, which both grew from and departed from the past. He did not learn, teach or think alone, nor was he the first to call for reform, but Luther became the catalyst for change, and subsequent events in the life of the church became linked with his name and his teaching.

In following his convictions without compromise, Luther became increasingly isolated from both enemies and allies, determined to have his own way at all costs, and ultimately this led to greater division in the Church. Graham Tomlin comments ‘heroic stands are necessary when under attack, but they are not what is needed to build something new, durable and inclusive.’

As we consider the life and ministry of Luther we are reminded of the need for those Christians whose strong faith will lead them to test the status quo, discern and defend what is good and confront that which is not of God. We recognise courage that this requires and the possibility of personal pain and isolation that it brings. As we consider our own culture and the challenges of the 21st century each of us must discern our calling, and ensure that when we are called to defend truth, or to advocate change, it is a faithful improvisation of the tradition that we seek and not an agenda of our own making.
We also acknowledge that this is not a path that all are called to walk, and we recognise the importance of the consistent and faithful ministry of the majority who are not the visionaries and innovators. They are the people who will test the new, bring stability and ensure faithfulness in future days.

Conclusion

As we look at Luther’s impact for Salvationists, we remind ourselves that our context and worldview is very different from his, our theology has been shaped by subsequent events and theologians, and our practices have evolved in ways he would not have imagined. Nevertheless, it is right to remember and to reflect. Nichols writes ‘our celebration of the past reminds us of our obligation in the present and our commitment to the future.’ What can we contribute?

ENDNOTES

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