

The Heroic
Boldness of

Steven J. Lawson

MARTIN LUTHER

A LONG LINE of GODLY MEN



“In *The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther*, I found a Luther of whom little is told: a Luther who loved an inerrant Scripture, a Luther who preached a glorious gospel, a Luther who was passionate for God’s glory and God’s people, a Luther who was willing to suffer for the cause. I am convinced that Steve Lawson has come closer to capturing the heart of Luther’s passions and desires as a gospel minister than anyone else. Here I found encouragement for my heart as I carry out my weekly ministry: read this and find encouragement for yours.”

—DR. SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS
Senior minister, Independent Presbyterian Church
Memphis, Tenn.

“With the quinqucentenary of the Reformation just around the corner, the publication of Steven Lawson’s *The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther* could not be more timely. Indeed, with the modern church very much in need of the very kind of preaching Dr. Lawson portrays here, this book’s message is perhaps more vital than at almost any time since the days of Luther. Highly recommended.”

—DR. GEORGE GRANT
Pastor, Parish Presbyterian Church
Franklin, Tenn.

“Here is a profile of Luther the preacher in all his red-blooded roughness and desperate, dogged faithfulness. Steven Lawson has captured the spirit of this volcanic Reformer superbly, and the result is deeply stirring. This is a most welcome book for today, when the church is in such desperate need of reformation. May it help to rouse a generation of Luthers.”

—DR. MICHAEL REEVES
President and professor of theology, Union School of Theology
Bridgend, Wales

The Heroic Boldness of
Martin Luther

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Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

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The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther

STEVEN J. LAWSON



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This book is dedicated
to a lifelong, faithful friend,

Ty Miller

whose firm commitment to Jesus Christ
and extraordinary leadership skills
have helped launch OnePassion Ministries,
a work devoted to the advancement of the truth
of the Word of God around the world.

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Foreword

Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men, those whom He has mightily used at critical junctures of church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures, trophies of God’s grace, have had much in common.

Certainly each man possessed stalwart faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ, but more can be said. Each of them held deep convictions as to the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in championing the doctrines that magnify the sovereign grace of God in His saving purposes in the world. To a man, they upheld the essential truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

How did these truths affect their lives? Far from paralyzing them, the doctrines of grace enflamed their hearts with reverential awe

for God and humbled their souls before His throne. Moreover, the truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to further the cause of Christ on the earth. This fact should not surprise us, as history reveals that those who embrace these truths are granted extraordinary confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision of Him, they step forward and accomplish the work of many men, leaving a godly influence on generations to come. They arise with wings like eagles and soar over their times in history. Experientially, the doctrines of grace renew their spirits and empower them to serve God in their divinely appointed hours.

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles aim to highlight key figures from this procession of sovereign-grace men. It is the purpose of this series to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were stalwart followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

The famed German Reformer Martin Luther is the focus of this volume. In a day when the church greatly needed to hear the truth, Luther's voice thundered with holy boldness throughout Europe. Amid the doctrinal declines of that hour, Luther spoke courageously, asserting an unwavering allegiance to Scripture alone. This Reformer was filled with audacious bravery as he confronted the church in Rome with its departure from the true saving gospel. His singular commitment to biblical truth became the driving force behind the Reformation. As the Lord empowered Luther, his pulpit became one of the most clarion sounding boards for His Word this world has ever witnessed. For these reasons, Luther remains eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

FOLLOWERS WORTHY TO BE FOLLOWED

May the Lord use this book to greatly embolden you so that, like Luther, you will leave an indelible mark on this world for God. Through this profile, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be full of Scripture, and thereby emboldened in your ministry for Him.

Soli Deo gloria!

—Steven J. Lawson
Series editor

Preface

The Call for a New Reformation

October 31, 1517, is a pivotal date in church history, one on which the course of human events in Western civilization dramatically turned. On that date, Martin Luther, a relatively obscure professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, Germany, nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the front door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This one-time Augustinian monk was registering his protest against the abuses of the sale of indulgences by the papacy. No one that day foresaw the firestorm Luther was about to unleash. This one bold act proved to be “the shot heard around the world” that launched the Protestant Reformation.

Noted church historian Philip Schaff has said that next to the beginning of Christianity, the Protestant Reformation was “the greatest event in history.”¹ It was an unprecedented movement, a far-reaching, history-altering season when the invisible hand of God impacted not only individuals and churches, but entire nations and cultures. The Reformation was a series of strategic events involving

1 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 7: The German Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1.

many people in many places. At its core, it was an attempt to bring the church back to the singular authority of Scripture and the purity of the gospel.

At the birth of this epic movement, Luther became its leading figure and driving force. With the aim of restoring the Word of God to the life of the church, Luther used every legitimate means to make known the truths of Scripture. His strategies included writing books, tracts, pamphlets, and letters, as well as classroom lectures, public debates, and heated disputations in churches and universities. But his chief means of producing reform was the pulpit. Luther was, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asserts, “pre-eminently a great preacher.”²

That Luther’s preaching played such a significant role in establishing the Reformation should come as no surprise: “A revival of true preaching has always heralded these great movements in the history of the Church,” writes Lloyd-Jones. “And, of course, when the Reformation and the Revival come they have always led to great and notable periods of the greatest preaching that the Church has ever known.”³ This was undeniably true of the sixteenth-century pulpit during the Protestant movement.

Writing in *A History of Preaching*, E. C. Dargan notes that the Reformation was propelled chiefly by the preaching of the Word of God. A virtual army of preachers was unleashed upon a slumbering Europe. The Reformers awakened the Continent and the British Isles by restoring the primacy of the preaching of the Word. Dargan writes:

2 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (1987; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 374.

3 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 24–25.

The great events and achievements of that mighty revolution were largely the work of preachers and preaching; for it was by the Word of God, through the ministry of earnest men who believed, loved and taught it, that the best and most enduring work of the Reformation was done. And, conversely, the events and principles of the movement powerfully reacted on preaching itself, giving it new spirit, new power, new forms, so that the relation between the Reformation and preaching may be succinctly described as one of mutual dependence, aid and guidance.⁴

John Broadus, a noted nineteenth-century professor, identifies four distinguishing marks of the Reformation. Each of these is critical to our understanding of Luther and the Protestant movement.

First, the Reformation was *a revival of preaching*. Broadus notes that during the Middle Ages, preachers were exceptions to the rule.⁵ The Roman Catholic Church had subjugated the pulpit to a subordinate, peripheral role. In its place were the Mass, rituals, and ceremonies. But the Reformation, Broadus writes, was marked by “a great outburst of preaching, such as had not been seen since the early Christian centuries.”⁶ All of the Reformers were preachers, not merely authors and lecturers. These valiant figures restored the pulpit as the primary means of grace in the church.

As Dargan explains: “Among the reformers, preaching resumes its proper place in worship. . . . The exposition of Scripture becomes

4 E. C. Dargan, *A History of Preaching, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 366–367.

5 John Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (Birmingham, Ala.: Solid Ground, 2004), 113.

6 *Ibid.*, 114.

the main thing. . . . Preaching becomes more prominent in worship than it had been perhaps since the fourth century.”⁷ The Reformation historian Harold Grimm affirms this view, writing: “The Protestant Reformation would not have been possible without the sermon. . . . The role of the sermon in making the Reformation a mass movement can scarcely be overestimated.”⁸ Roland Bainton, a Luther scholar, also agrees: “The Reformation gave centrality to the sermon. The pulpit was higher than the altar.”⁹ As Lloyd-Jones observed, in every great movement of God, preaching is central. The Protestant Reformation was no exception.

Second, it was *a revival of biblical preaching*. Broadus notes that the Protestant movement did not merely bring back preaching per se, but a certain kind of preaching—*biblical* preaching, that is, *expository* preaching. He writes: “Instead of long and often fabulous stories about saints and martyrs, and accounts of miracles, instead of passages from Aristotle and Seneca, and fine-spun subtleties of the Schoolman, these men preached the Bible. The question was not what the Pope said; and even the Fathers, however highly esteemed, were not decisive authority—it was the Bible.”¹⁰ Once again, the pulpit reigned in the church by the preaching of God’s Word.

In the sixteenth century, Broadus explains, “The preacher’s one great task was to set forth the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Word of God.”¹¹ Everything else the preacher did was secondary.

7 Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, Vol. 1, 372.

8 Harold J. Grimm, “The Human Element in Luther’s Sermons,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 49 (1958), 50.

9 Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1950), 359.

10 Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching*, 114.

11 *Ibid.*

With this new emphasis came a deeper study of the Bible: “Preachers, studying the original Greek and Hebrew,” he writes, “were carefully explaining to the people the connected teachings of passage after passage and book after book . . . , [giving them] a much more strict and reasonable exegesis than had ever been common since the days of Chrysostom.”¹² Dargan adds: “The glory of Reformation preaching was its use of Scripture. In the hands of the reformers, the Word of God, again . . . rules the pulpit . . . as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice.”¹³

Third, it was a *revival of controversial preaching*. Broadus explains that as the Reformers preached the Bible, controversy inevitably followed. They maintained not only *sola Scriptura*—“Scripture alone”—but *tota Scriptura*—“all Scripture.” The Reformers believed that every truth was to be preached from their pulpits. Every hard saying was to be expounded. Every sin was to be exposed. After centuries of apostasy, the full counsel of God was suddenly preached, which brought unavoidable conflict in a slumbering church. Broadus rightly states, “Religious controversy is inevitable where living faith in definite truth is dwelling side by side with ruinous error and practical evils.”¹⁴ The preaching of the Reformers disrupted the status quo of the day. Critical issues were confronted. Sacred cows were butchered.

This was no simple task, Dargan affirms: “The stern conflict which the reformers had to wage with error demanded abilities and training of no mean order. The task of Protestantism was not easy.”¹⁵ However, the theological errors they had to oppose “served to

12 Ibid., 115.

13 Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, Vol. 1, 376.

14 Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching*, 117.

15 Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, Vol. 1, 375.

quicken and render more earnest the preaching of the reformers.”¹⁶ Therefore, their preaching was “largely polemical and doctrinal.”¹⁷ They wielded the Word of God like a sharp, two-edged sword that tore down and struck dead. However, the Word they preached also built up and made alive.

Fourth, it was *a revival of preaching on the doctrines of grace*. Broadus finally notes that biblical preaching in the Reformation elevated the truths of the sovereignty of God in salvation: “The doctrine of divine sovereignty in human salvation was freely proclaimed by all the Reformers.”¹⁸ In-depth biblical preaching always sets forth the doctrines of grace because they are so repeatedly taught throughout Scripture. A return to biblical preaching necessitates a return to preaching divine sovereignty in man’s salvation. The two are inseparably linked. Broadus adds, “Protestantism was born of the doctrines of grace, and in the proclamation of these the Reformation preaching found its truest and highest power.”¹⁹ In the Protestant movement, biblical preaching reclaimed the high ground of sovereign grace.

The lofty teaching of God’s supreme authority in saving grace shook Europe and beyond, serving as a launching pad for the Protestant cause. In teaching these God-exalting doctrines, the Reformers resurrected the core teaching of Scripture that salvation is entirely of the Lord. In fact, these bold preachers asserted that the true church is comprised of the total number of God’s elect—no more and no less.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching*, 117.

19 Ibid.

Standing at the headwaters of the Reformation was Martin Luther. This bold German Reformer became one of the greatest preachers in this remarkable time. His pulpit proved to be the first strong pulse in the heartbeat of the Protestant movement, pumping life into the body of Christ. Luther unleashed God's Word on the European continent with the force of an electrical storm. The thunder and lightning of his biblical exposition were powerful in shaping this movement.

The focus of this book is Luther's bold biblical preaching. A mighty force for God, he was one of the most fearless individuals who ever served the church. Luther was unflinchingly courageous as he stood in the pulpit. The reason he was so brave is that he was thoroughly biblical. His heroic valor arose from his deep convictions, which sprang from sound doctrine. As a mighty expositor of the Scriptures, Luther left a rich legacy of pulpit excellence. Therefore, in these pages, our purpose is to examine his life and pulpit ministry. Specifically, why was he so bold in his preaching, and how did that boldness evidence itself?

Before we proceed, I must thank the publishing team at Ligonier Ministries for their commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series from church history. I remain grateful for Greg Bailey, director of publications, who has done a masterful job editing this manuscript. Chris Larson continues to be instrumental in overseeing this series. And I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my association with my former professor, Dr. R. C. Sproul.

I am indebted to Christ Fellowship Baptist Church of Mobile, Alabama, which I serve as senior pastor. No pastor has as much freedom to serve Christ on such a broad scale as I have. I am extremely grateful for the support of my fellow elders and the congregation, who encourage me in my extended ministry.

THE HEROIC BOLDNESS OF MARTIN LUTHER

I want to express my gratitude for my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document, and Keith Phillips, a fellow pastor at Christ Fellowship, who helped edit this manuscript. I also want to thank Mackay Smith for his help in preparing this book.

Finally, I thank God for my family's support in my life and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, remain pillars of strength for me.

Whether you are a layperson or a preacher, may the Lord use Luther's example to embolden your commitment to the cause of Christ and to the furtherance of His gospel. In these days, when there is a crying need for boldness both in the pulpit and the pew, may we see the restoration of Christ's church to her pristine purity through a new reformation.

—*Steven J. Lawson*
Mobile, Alabama
July 2012

Luther's Life and Legacy

In order to understand the genius and history of the German Reformation, we must trace its origin in the personal experience of the monk who shook the world from his lonely study in Wittenberg, and made pope and emperor tremble at the power of his word. . . . Of all the Reformers Luther is the first. He is so closely identified with the German Reformation that the one would have no meaning without the other. His own history is the formative history of the church which is justly called by his name and which is the incarnation and perpetuation of his genius.¹

—PHILIP SCHAFF

Whenever God moves powerfully in His church, He first raises up a pivotal leader, a chosen instrument through whom He brings needed reformation and revival. Such a heroic figure stands as an evangelical Atlas, uniquely empowered by God to

1 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 7, 105.

uphold a new work in a new day by giving it spiritual direction and dynamic impetus. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, there emerged such a man.

Regarded as the father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther towered over his own time and became a giant of church history. This monk and professor pioneered the extraordinary movement to restore the purity of the gospel after centuries of corruption by the Roman Catholic Church. So enormous was his giftedness that he once was described as an “ocean,”² and many consider him to be the most significant European figure of the second millennium.³ As the undisputed leader of the German Reformation, Luther ignited the flames that soon engulfed the continent of Europe and spread to the British Isles and the Colonies in America.

Luther was a fearless champion of truth in a day of monumental change. Described as “the German Hercules,”⁴ he was blessed with a towering intellect, a magnetic personality, and enormous boldness to confront the challenges of his time. He appeared on the world scene as one made for the battle. When the conflict raged the hottest, Luther stood the strongest. In the fierce fray, he held his ground as an erupting volcano, spewing forth red-hot biblical truths on the surrounding landscape.

Simply put, Luther was dauntless, seemingly impossible to subdue. When he spoke, it was to express strong beliefs anchored to the

2 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), vi.

3 Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 181.

4 Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 107.

immutable truths of God's Holy Word. He possessed an indomitable spirit that revealed itself in his fearless personality.

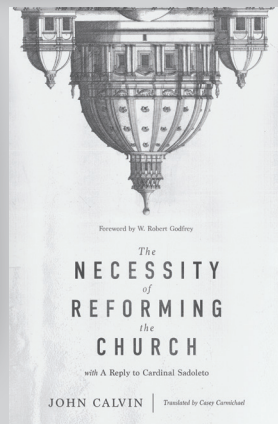
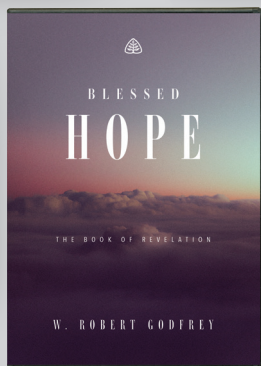
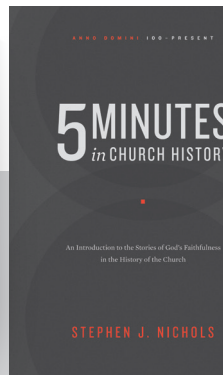
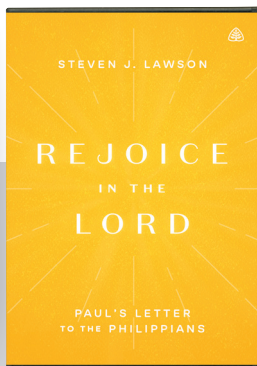
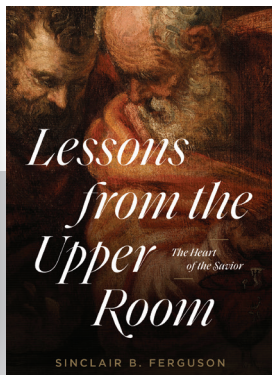
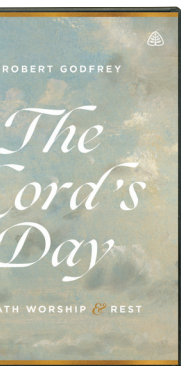
Primarily a Preacher

In the tempestuous days of the Reformation, the centerpiece of Luther's ministry was his bold biblical preaching. Fred W. Meuser writes: "Martin Luther is famous as reformer, theologian, professor, translator, prodigious author, and polemicist. He is well known as hymn-writer, musician, friend of students, mentor of pastors, and pastor to countless clergy and laity. Yet he saw himself first of all as a preacher."⁵ Luther gave himself tirelessly to this priority. E. Theodore Bachmann adds, "The church . . . is for Luther 'not a pen-house, but a mouth-house,' in which the living Word is proclaimed."⁶ Indeed, Luther wrote voluminously, yet he never put his written works on the same level with his proclamation of God's Word. He maintained, "Christ Himself wrote nothing, nor did He give command to write, but to preach orally."⁷ By this stance, Luther strongly underscored the primacy of the pulpit.

Luther's commitment to the pulpit can be clearly seen in his preaching activities. On most Sundays, he preached two or three times, and, by his own admission, "Often I preached four sermons on one day."⁸ In addition, he usually preached at least two to three

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- 5 Fred W. Meuser, "Luther as preacher of the Word of God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136.
 - 6 E. Theodore Bachmann, "Introduction to Word and Sacrament," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), xi.
 - 7 Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 1, ed. John Nicholas Lenker (1905; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, 1995), 44.
 - 8 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54: *Table Talk*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 282.

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