

**Response to Lecture by Dr. Douglas Shantz:  
“What Evangelicals Should Know about Martin Luther: How Evangelicalism Departed  
from its Reformation Roots”**

by Paul Knudtson, Rocky Mountain College, October 29, 2007

Thank you Dr. Shantz for your excellent lecture on a most-fascinating topic. As the resident Lutheran professor at an Evangelical institution for the past 7 ½ years, I have often pondered the sorts of issues raised by your lecture. I too have considered both the similarities and differences between Luther and Evangelicalism. What I found especially helpful about your lecture was how you addressed not only some of the ways in which they differ, but also provided a historical explanation for these differences. And I concur with the lament of the paper that something valuable has been lost in Evangelicalism’s amnesia regarding Luther.

I would now like to offer some reflection on the argument of your paper, and then to raise some questions that arise from this reflection.

As I understand it, the thesis of your paper is that contemporary Evangelicalism is a direct descendant of German Pietism and Wesleyan revivalism and that whereas Wesley and the Pietists worked out their faith in the context of Luther and the Reformation (even though critically), modern North American Evangelicals have largely lost this connection to Luther and are the poorer for it. To put it another way, while both Wesley and the Pietists distanced themselves to some degree from Luther, their modern descendants, the Evangelicals, have ended up neglecting Luther altogether, thereby cutting themselves off from the healthy corrective provided by the Protestant tradition.

Now some questions for clarification

In your paper you assert that because of its history, Evangelicalism has lost touch with Luther and that this loss is worth remedying. While your historical approach has revealed the probable causes of this loss, I would like to hear more regarding why you think this loss is worth addressing. While you have described some (and only some) of the prominent differences between Luther and Evangelicalism on such matters as sacraments and place of tradition, I am not yet clear as to why Evangelicals should care about Luther. Would not many Evangelicals view Luther and the Lutheran Reformation as a “half-way house” to the more profound and more desirable reformation represented by the Pietists and Revivalists? Why should Evangelicals reconsider Luther’s view of the sacraments or of justification or of any of the other elements in his thinking that you have identified? What exactly has Evangelicalism lost? In what ways is it impoverished as a result? How exactly would it benefit from a re-acquaintance with Luther? So this is my first question: 1. Why is this loss worth remedying?

A second question is somewhat related.

2. Would you say that the Pietists and Wesleyans possessed a healthier spirituality because they were more connected to the Protestant Reformation than contemporary Evangelicals, or does the problem lie with some fundamental shift in religious perspective that took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries? In other words, do modern Evangelicals simply need to re-appropriate their own pietist and revivalistic heritage (which maintained a proper assessment and appreciation of people like Luther), or do Evangelicals need their own heritage to be critiqued in fundamental

ways by the qualitatively different faith perspective of the Reformers? Was Luther an Evangelical as the term is used in North America today? Or, does Luther stand completely outside the Evangelical camp, even as represented by Francke and Wesley and others? In that case, are we to imagine that the Reformation paradigm and the Renewal paradigm are compatible at all, or are they at complete odds with one another? Can *bona fide*, dyed-in-the-wool Lutherans be Evangelicals? Should Evangelicals ever consider becoming Lutherans?

So, my two questions are:

1. Why is Evangelicalism's loss of Luther worth remedying?
2. Did the Pietists and Wesleyans depart from their Reformation roots, or did the significant departure only take place with later Evangelicals?

I would also like to offer brief comment on a few other matters raised in the paper. I was struck by the difference between Francke's experience of conversion and Luther's evangelical experience. Francke's conversion was "a kind of mystical experience" with a predominant emotional component. While Luther also described his experience in emotional terms, he defined it not mystically, but in terms of insight into the words of scripture. His close, exegetical study of scripture became the occasion for Luther to feel himself "reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise," not kneeling in prayer before God (Bainton, 49). This contrast between Luther and Francke suggests an inherent weakness within Evangelicalism toward subjectivism indicated. I also wonder if Francke's conversion could be described as a turning from worldliness to piety, while for Luther conversion involved an exodus from monastic piety toward the grace of God for sinners. Luther knew well, it seems to me, that pride attaches itself just as readily to the practice of piety as it does to worldly accomplishments. And I wonder if one of the greatest gifts that Luther could offer to Evangelicalism would be his refreshingly honest assessment of the human condition, along with his strong emphasis upon the liberating word of the gospel.

In conclusion, I applaud and support a principal argument of this paper, that Evangelicals can benefit from a re-acquaintance with Martin Luther. As we once again approach the anniversary of the posting of the 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg (October 31, 1517), I hope this paper will stimulate our interest in the life and thought of Luther. I also hope that this renewed interest will lead us to consider the elements of Luther's thought that have been highlighted in Dr. Shantz's paper, as well as such other elements such as original sin, the bondage of the will, the theology of the cross, the need for catechesis in the church, and especially a preoccupation with the gospel, or evangel. Only those who define their faith in terms of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it seems to me, have the right to the name Evangelical.

Thank you, Dr. Shantz, for a stimulating paper.