

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

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[Note: this is a somewhat expanded version of the response I gave to Shantz’s paper when it was first delivered; at that time I spoke extemporaneously from notes, here I make the same points but elaborate on them]

I thank Dr. Shantz for a stimulating paper. Dr. Shantz outlines three assumptions as the basis for his paper: that evangelicals have lost touch with Martin Luther; that there is a historical explanation for this; and that the loss is worth remedying. The paper provides arguments to support the first two of these assumptions, but not the third assumption. While I share each of these assumptions with Dr. Shantz, I believe that each of them needs an argument. I would argue that the third assumption has the greatest importance but is the least likely to be widely shared or taken up. I look forward to a future paper by Dr. Shantz that would explore reasons why an evangelical movement of resourcement that would include a recovery of Luther is necessary or possible or beneficial, despite the very significant difficulties it must face.

Before commenting on the main thread of Dr. Shantz’s argument, I would like to make a brief comment about the section of his paper on Wesley, since I am a scholar of Wesley. Shantz argues through his discussion of Wesley that while there are significant continuities between the theology of Luther and that of Wesley there are also quite significant discontinuities as well. Citing Rack especially, Shantz points especially to a difference between Wesley and Luther on the doctrine of justification. Wesley stresses sanctification where Luther stresses justification. This point is well taken and I would agree that there is a significant difference between Wesley and Luther, both in ethos and doctrine, on sanctification. Nevertheless, I would take issue with Rack and Shantz in their suggestion that the difference is to be placed in Wesley’s doctrine of justification. Like Luther, Wesley stresses a forensic definition of justification. Justification plays no other role in his theology but to name the forgiveness of sins consequent upon true faith. Rack is quite wrong to claim that in Wesley’s theology justification is a means to holiness or sanctification. Faith is the only means to holiness in Wesley’s theology; and faith is the only means to justification; and salvation is to have that true faith which intrinsically leads to justification and holiness; but since faith is the only condition of sanctification, justification is not the condition of sanctification. The difference between Wesley and Luther in soteriology should be located perhaps in their doctrines of faith, or in their doctrines of holiness, regeneration and sanctification. This is but a quibble, however, with regard to the thesis that Shantz is supporting here, that there are very significant differences between Wesley and Luther, including differences in theology, focusing on their respective soteriologies. The wider point stands and Shantz has suggested several other ways in which this is probably true.

The bulk of Dr. Shantz’s paper traces theological divergences by evangelicals from Luther (the main witnesses are Francke and Wesley) and what I suppose could be called sociological divergences between contemporary evangelicals and Luther (citing Bebbington’s thesis on the definition of “evangelicals” and citing contemporary transformations of American evangelicalism towards political activism, including identification with the Republican party, and

towards accommodation with popular American culture). These illustrations certainly suggest the breadth and depth of difference between Luther and evangelical tradition, and therefore provide a demonstration of Shantz's first assumption, though of course within the scope of the paper a detailed account of such differences is not attempted.

It seems to me that the crucial question raised by Shantz's paper is to know how to evaluate the second of his assumptions. That there must be a historical explanation for the dissolution of Protestantism from Luther forward seems unexceptionable. But the crucial question raised by this assumption is to know what is the best historical account or explanation of the divergence between evangelicals and Luther. I would expand this question to ask why there is a wide divergence between Luther and all Protestants, using "evangelical" in a broader sense than the sense it has in this paper, where "evangelical" seems to mean "free-church evangelical." The history of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century protestant theology is largely the story of a steady, rapid, and fairly complete dissolution, across the board, which includes in many quarters post-trinitarian doctrines of God, post-incarnational doctrines of Christ and (it is harder to find the term here) post-Pauline ethics, not to say post-Luther theology and practice. I am not sure how to answer the question posed by Shantz's second assumption. But three historical explanations of this phenomenon occur to me, and I would welcome a conversation with Dr. Shantz to explore whether one of these explanations is best, or whether another explanation should be offered. I believe that once we understand a historical explanation for the dissolution of Protestantism we are better placed to offer reasons why a recovery of tradition, including a recovery of Luther is possible (or impossible) or desirable (or undesirable).

One explanation for the dissolution is through the reigning metaphor of modern historical science: secularization. Secularization implies the retreat and then perhaps the disappearance of the eternal in the world of time. To take one of Shantz's main observations as an illustration, the narrative of secularization perfectly explains the retreat in modernity from Luther's sacramentalism to free-church evangelical post-sacramentalism. I think secularization powerfully explains a great deal of the shift from Luther to contemporary evangelicalism: it is a shift that coincides with and is caused by and contributes to the onset of modernity. We no longer live in Luther's three-story universe, surrounded by the infinite spaces of eternity, but merely in the world of time. Whatever belongs to the other levels of Luther's universe either disappears or is transformed. From one angle evangelicalism looks like a hold out against modernity—hence its oddity from the perspective of fellow moderns. From another angle, from the angle of the past that Shantz holds up for us, evangelicalism might be called a symptom or a product of modernity. This explanation gives a positive evaluation of the destination of secularization, or of the growing distance between evangelicals and Luther. It might be used to give a positive evaluation of evangelicals, so far as they contribute to the narrative of secularization; or it might be used to give a negative evaluation of evangelicals, so far as they resist secularization; or it might be used to give a wistful and nostalgic evaluation of evangelicals, as people in the hinterland who continue to fight a war that has already been lost.

Another explanation for the dissolution is conceptual, and has been used by Catholic apologists who have tried to explain and evaluate Protestantism. John Henry Newman explained both the great achievements and institutions of Protestantism and its post-trinitarian and post-incarnational tendency in the nineteenth century (in his estimation the tendency was always there

in Protestantism but was now becoming dominant) through the principle of the free choice of the individual in religion, which he understands as the most basic principle of Protestantism. Louis Bouyer, in his *The Spirit of Protestantism* makes much the same case. Let me restate this case in my own words. By the principle of free choice in religion, every man and woman in Protestantism is his or her own magisterium: this is what *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* and the priesthood of believers each directly imply. This has produced a great deal of activity, countless systematic theologies, countless missionaries and denominations, and countless other organizations, many of which are very impressive, including many schools of higher learning and persons of immense learning, of which one might easily be awed. But it also inevitably produces the dissolution of the original: a multiplicity of magisteria inevitably means a multiplicity in doctrine and practice; the principle of free choice in religion is inherently a centrifugal force. Shantz perhaps suggested this analysis in his spoken lecture, when he asserted that the early Luther would claim, “give them the Bible, and they will all agree,” an assumption apparently, floridly disproved by the facts even in Luther’s own time. Dissolution is not, then, an accident of protestant history but the essence of protestant history, a result of the principle of free choice intrinsic to Protestantism. It does not need to be explained by the historian; it is the explanation the historian applies to the history. According to this narrative, the story of dissolution in free-church evangelicalism is one consistent part of the larger story of Protestantism. This explanation largely coincides with the narrative of secularization, but gives a negative evaluation of the destination towards which the narrative moves and implies overall a negative evaluation of evangelicalism, except insofar as evangelicalism resists the overtures of modernity.

A third explanation of the distance between Luther and evangelicals might also be offered that implies a more positive evaluation of evangelicalism. It has, I propose, always been a tendency of free-church evangelicals to distinguish between the core and the periphery of the Christian tradition. At the core are the eternal truths of the gospel for which there is a very high degree of confidence. But the core is surprisingly small. It includes a certainty of the divinity and humanity of Christ, and of the tri-unity of God; it includes a certain focus on the cross in a recognizable family of doctrines on the atonement; it includes a quite full acceptance of the moral teaching of the New Testament in areas such as sexuality, idolatry and sobriety (if not an entire acceptance in these areas, and perhaps not in other areas). But one soon reaches the limits of what a free-church evangelical is willing to define as dogma; and many free churches are very unwilling to define the dogmas that nevertheless shape them. This is clear if we set down the complete doctrinal and moral teaching of a particular free-church denomination beside a complete catechism, a complete body of canon law and a complete encyclopedia of official teaching in the Roman church over the past two millennia. Outside of this core is a much larger set of accretions, a periphery. The core has not changed from the time of the New Testament on; the periphery has constantly changed and will constantly change and is greatly affected by the surrounding culture. The core is essential; the periphery is not. What is the same between Luther and those who belong to authentic free church evangelicalism is at the core; what is different is in the periphery. One of the traits of free church evangelicalism is its surprising adaptability. The difference between evangelicals and Luther is a result of changing circumstances and laudable adaptation in the difficult environment of modernity; the great distance between Luther and evangelicalism or between each of the thousands of evangelicals is not a fault but a strength; Protestantism that does not keep the core identified by evangelicalism betrays the heritage of

Luther; but the quite various authentic types of evangelicalism authentically preserve what is essential in Luther. This explanation incorporates a great deal of the narrative of secularization (except that here secularization has a bottom), and would probably agree to a great extent that evangelicalism is characterized by the principle of free choice in religion. But this explanation implies an overall positive evaluation of evangelicalism and admires both its adaptability within modernity and its ability to hold modernity off at certain key points. Just as a free market economy was surprisingly successful (and originated in societies dominated by evangelicals), a free market in religion is also surprisingly successful, and perhaps holds the key to the future of Christian belief and practice.

As I have said, it seems to me that the questions raised by Dr. Shantz's second assumption, that there is a historical explanation for the dissolution of Luther's legacy, are crucial. No doubt other historical explanations might be offered for the distance between Luther and evangelicals. Yet it is well worth wondering which of the possible explanations is the best explanation. The answers one finds here determine how one will evaluate Shantz's third assumption that evangelicals would do well to reclaim Luther. The question of a historical explanation seems to be crucial for evangelicals because how one evaluates the past of evangelicalism must determine one's assessment of the future of evangelicalism. The choice of historical explanation is crucial for others because it puts a finger on the wound of Christian belief in modernity; it determines whether we will celebrate or mourn the loss of what once was, but is no longer.