

MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF SALVATION AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper studies Martin Luther's theology of salvation and its continuing relevance for African Christian worship and practice. Drawing from Luther's core soteriological convictions on justification by faith alone, salvation by grace alone, the authority of Scripture, and the centrality of Christ's atoning work, the paper maintains that worship is the Church's personified response to God's saving action rather than a means of earning divine favor. The paper also demonstrates how Luther's theology provides a corrective framework for reorienting worship toward gratitude, assurance, and Christ-centered proclamation through dialogue with contemporary African Christian contexts that are marked by prosperity theology and syncretistic tendencies. The paper further explores how the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers affirms participatory African worship and also grounds it in theological accountability. The paper concludes that Luther's theology of salvation remains a vital resource for renewing African Christian worship, enabling it to resist transactional religiosity and to function as a formative, grace-centered expression of redeemed life.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Theology of Salvation, African Christian Worship, Justification by Faith, Sola Gratia.

I. INTRODUCTION

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, led by Martin Luther, represents a seismic shift in the history of Christian thought and practice. At the core of the Reformation was Luther's rediscovery of the biblical truth that salvation is not earned by human effort or merit, but is received as the free gift of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. His theology of salvation is summarised in the Reformation maxims: *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*. He maintained that justification by faith alone is "the article by which the Church stands or falls."¹ As per the different theories of Salvation discussed by Millard J. Erickson, Luther's theology falls within the category of the Evangelical/Orthodox theology of salvation, particularly on justification. As such, this paper will discuss Luther's theology of salvation within the designated purview.

¹Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 9.

In the African context, the Church is growing rapidly, and based on Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo's permutative forecast, more than 40% of the world's Christians will live on the African continent by 2060.² If this be forecastedly true, it is expedient to note that African Christianity also faces theological and practical challenges. It is evidentially true that prosperity gospel teachings, ritualistic syncretism, and other forms of legalism often distort the biblical message of salvation which in turn impacts the worship practices of the Church. In such a setting, Luther's theology of salvation will serve as a corrective lens for the aforesaid practices. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to present a critical overview of Martin Luther's theology of salvation within its biblical and historical contexts; and second, to demonstrate its relevance for African Christian worship and practice today. It will argue that Luther's theology on salvation provides practical resources for renewing worship in Africa. This paper will adopt a descriptive and analytic methods to achieve the said objective.

II. LUTHER'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, and was reported by Ethan Hollman to have started studying Latin at the age of 5, combined with building capacity via the learning of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord' Prayer and many other prayers.³ He had his Masters in Law in the year 1505, and in the same year, a near death experience changed the course of his life. He had a terrifying experience where a lightening bolt struck right before him, and in fear he chanted, "Help, Saint Anne, and I will become a monk."⁴ Luther would spend long hours in confession and fast rigorously because he wanted to please God and find peace for his guilty conscience. He wanted to atone for his deep sense of his sinfulness. The turning point came in 1512 at Wittenberg while he was critically studying the book of Psalms and the Epistles of Apostle Paul. He came across Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith," which redefined his theology about salvation, and he said "I felt like I was born again."⁵ At the heart of Martin Luther's theological vision is his doctrine of salvation, which was formed during his confrontation with medieval Catholic teaching and his personal struggle for assurance of forgiveness.

Luther's rediscovery of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone was integral in reshaping Christian theology, and also reorienting Christian worship and practice. His theology of salvation can be understood through four interrelated themes that shaped the Reformation movement: justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), salvation by grace alone (*sola gratia*), the authority of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), and the centrality of Christ's atoning work.⁶

III. LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF SALVATION

Justification by Faith Alone

Based on Luther's theology, the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the "article by which the Church stands or falls."⁷ By this, Luther means that the doctrine is at the heart of the Church's

²Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 34.

³Ethan Hollman, "Martin Luther and Salvation by Faith Alone," YouTube video, 8:35, April 18, 2025, from *Our Reasonable Faith* channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzPnAg3V4zM>

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Albert Amos Banda, "Musico-Theological Response to Dotterer's Finitistic Theism and Its Potential for Shaping the Future of African Christianity," *BTSK Insight* 20, no. 1 (May 2025): 188–203.

⁷Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 9.

salfivic discourses, and away from the doctrine of works. Historically, and during the time for which this doctrine was discovered, the Medieval Catholicism taught that salvation required both faith and works, which were, at that time, mediated through the sacraments of the Church. Indulgences, penance, and pilgrimages were prescribed as means of securing forgiveness and lessening the temporal punishments of sin.⁸ It is against this system that Luther argued from Romans and Galatians that human beings are declared righteous before God not on the basis of their deeds but solely through trusting in the finished work of Christ.⁹

Luther's 1535 *Lectures on Galatians* articulate his undelying conviction on this. He said: "Faith alone, and nothing else, is the means by which righteousness is imputed to us, and through which we receive salvation."¹⁰ In principle, justification is a declarative act of God, whereby sinners are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. It has nothing to do with a process of moral improvement but a once-for-all pronouncement rooted in Christ's merit. It is just as Ethan Hollman gathered when he reported Luther's word. He said:

"Why was it necessary for Christ to die if we can obtain a good conscience by our own works and afflictions? Accordingly, you will find peace only in him when you depair of yourself and your own works. Besides, you will learn from him that just as he has received you, so he has made your sins his own and has made his righteousness yours."¹¹

This particular doctrine brought personal liberation to Martin Luther, and also emancipated him from the despair he felt under the weight of God's law. This also provided the foundation for Protestant theology, particularly on the subject of soteriology.

Salvation by Grace

Building on salvation by faith alone, Luther maintained also that salvation originates entirely in God's gracious initiative, not in human will or effort. In his article, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), which he wrote against Erasmus, Luther emphasised the utter inability of human beings to contribute to their salvation. He categorically affirmed that divine grace alone makes faith possible.¹² His argument is that the human will is bound in sin (human depravity), and thus only the sovereign grace of God can bring about salvation. This emphasis on grace was not a denial of good works but a reordering of their place to emphasise that good works is a fruit of salvation. Luther once said that "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works."¹³ As such, salvation is by grace alone, and man's faith in the salfivic work of Christ on the cross is what makes man good for good works.

⁸Raphael Eckert, "Punishment, Penance, and Salvation in Medieval Canon Law and Theology (12th Century-Beginning of the 13th Century)," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 228, no. 4 (2011): 483-508.

⁹Preserved Smith, "Luther's Development of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Only," *Harvard Theological Review* 104, no. 4 (2011): 523-545.

¹⁰Smith, "Luther's Development of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Only," 12.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1957), 25.

¹³Martin Luther, *On Christian Liberty* (1520), in *The Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 51.

Scripture Alone

An ever present approach in Luther's theology of salvation was his unapologetic dependence on Scripture as the sole authority in matters of faith and practice. He rejected the authority of papal decrees and church tradition when they contradicted Scripture, and contended at the Diet of Worms in 1521 when called upon to recant his position. He said: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand and I can do no other, so help me God."¹⁴ For Luther, it was Scripture that revealed the gospel of justification by faith and grace, and therefore Scripture must be the supreme standard of Christian teaching. This very principle gave the laypeople access to the gospel as Luther translated the Bible into German and ensured that ordinary Christians could read the Word for themselves. Scripture also took central place in the Church's worship of God as the principle of Scripture alone reshaped the form and content of worship.¹⁵

The Centrality of the Atoning Work of Christ

Finally, Luther's theology of salvation was comprehensively Christocentric. He viewed Christ's death on the cross as the decisive act of substitution, in which Christ bore the penalty of sin and bestowed his righteousness on believers. C. Brunt explains that the theological meaning of the whole Scripture is centered in Jesus the Messiah, the definitive revelation of the character of God; and the meaning of each part of Scripture is understood in relation to this center. It is the incarnate God who is the focus and the ultimate criterion of Christian theology.¹⁶ If the meaning of Scripture, the norm of theological thinking, is centered on Christ the Messiah, it follows that theology, too, is centered in Him. This truth is central to Luther's soteriology, that the sinner's guilt is imputed to Christ, while Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer.¹⁷

IV. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF SALVATION

Martin Luther's Theology of Salvation was not just an intellectual philosophical system but a rediscovery of biblical truth. It was his encounter with Scripture, especially the letters of Paul to the Romans and the Galatians that gave rise to his theological standpoint and convictions. Previously his interpretation of the "righteousness of God" was akin to God's retributive justice. In his commentary on Romans, he recounts that this realisation filled him with despair until he discovered that God's righteousness is a gift and not a demand. His words were; "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."¹⁸ The epistle to the Romans provided the biblical grounding for Luther's justification by faith. That is, salvation is God's initiative and it is received by trusting in Christ's work rather than by human merit.

The epistle to the Romans was not the only epistle that shaped the theological standpoint of Luther. Jaroslav Pelikan explains that "If Romans was Luther's theological foundation, Galatians

¹⁴Hollman, "Martin Luther and Salvation by Faith Alone."

¹⁵Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 69–72.

¹⁶C. Brunt, *Decisions: How to use Biblical Guidelines when making Decisions* (Nashville: Southern, 1979), pp. 15-23.

¹⁷Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 216–18.

¹⁸Martin Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (1545), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 34, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 336–38.

was his spiritual manifesto, as Luther considered Galatians his “Katie von Bora,” comparing the epistle to his beloved wife.”¹⁹ Galatians 2:16 became a central proof text for Luther, where the Bible says; “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” Also, Luther’s theology drew upon 1 Peter 2:9, where believers are called a “royal priesthood.” This particular text supported Luther’s rejection of clerical elitism and sacramentalism²⁰ as the exclusive means of grace. He notes that every believer is justified by faith and has direct access to God through Christ who is the believer’s one mediator.

V. RELEVANCE FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND PRACTICE

African Christian worship is vibrant and participatory, and worship is mostly approached as an encounter with divine power that is capable of addressing sickness, poverty, fear, spiritual oppression, and social instability. As rightly noted in the introduction, worship in many African contexts is closely tied to the search for meaning, protection, healing, and transformation. Consequently, how salvation is understood inevitably shapes how worship is practiced. However, this existential orientation has also created theological vulnerabilities, as in many African churches is subtly framed as a means of accessing divine intervention. Salvation, in such settings, risks being reduced to immediate material or existential outcomes rather than reconciliation with God through Christ. It is precisely at this point that Martin Luther’s theology of salvation becomes nonnegotiable relevant. The following are the perceived relevance that this paper holds for African Christian Worship:

Justification by Faith and the Healing of Transactional Worship

It is expedient to note that at the heart of Luther’s theology stands the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and Luther’s protest against medieval Catholicism was not merely institutional but pastoral. He recognized that when salvation is perceived as something to be earned, worship becomes burdened with fear and performance oriented. This truth speaks directly to African worship contexts where believers sometimes approach worship with the fear of not doing enough to merit divine favor. Luther’s insistence that sinners are justified solely through faith in Christ liberates worship from this anxiety, as such, worship becomes response rather than negotiation.

In African Christian practice, this means that the acts of worship are no longer driven primarily by the fear of spiritual failure but by confidence in God’s saving grace. As Luther writes, “Faith alone makes someone righteous and fulfills the law.”²¹ This theological conviction challenges worship practices that implicitly suggest that God’s favor is proportional to human effort or ritual intensity. The African theologian Kwame Bediako also echoes this concern when he warns against forms of Christianity that replicate pre-Christian religious anxiety under Christian symbols.²² Luther’s doctrine of justification offers a corrective by grounding assurance not in ritual success but in Christ’s completed work.

Salvation by Grace and the Critique of Prosperity-Oriented Worship

¹⁹Jaroslav Pelikan, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, in *Luther’s Works*, 2

²⁰**Clerical elitism and sacramentalism** describe a system where spiritual authority and salvation are controlled by the clergy through the sacraments.

²¹Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (1522), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 73.

²²Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 93.

Closely related to justification by faith is Luther's emphasis on salvation by grace alone. In many African churches, prosperity-oriented worship has become dominant, often presenting material success as evidence of divine approval. While such worship echoes the socio-economic realities of African life, it also risks redefining salvation in materialistic terms. Luther's theology directly confronts this distortion as grace, for Luther, is unearned and unconditioned. God's saving action precedes human response, and this has far-reaching implications for African Christian worship because worship that is shaped by *sola gratia* resists the idea that blessings are rewards for correct worship techniques. Instead, it invites believers to encounter God as gracious giver rather than transactional patron. John Mbiti's observation that African religiosity is deeply concerned with life and well-being helps explain why prosperity-oriented worship thrives.²³ Yet Luther's theology does not negate this concern, instead, it re-centers it theologically by insisting that life in its fullness flows from reconciliation with God and not ritual manipulation.

Christ Alone and the place of Worship Mediation

Another pressing need in African Christian worship is clarity regarding mediation. In some contexts, Christ's mediating role is subtly supplemented by prophets, spiritual fathers, ritual specialists, or symbolic objects. Luther's insistence on Christ alone (*solus Christus*) addresses this directly. For Luther, Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity, thus, worship must constantly direct attention to Christ's saving work rather than human mediators. This emphasis is particularly important in African worship settings where spiritual authority can become personalized and absolutized. Luther's theology calls African worship back to a Christ-centered focus that affirms spiritual leadership without displacing Christ's unique salvific role.²⁴

The Priesthood of All Believers and Participatory African Worship

One of the most constructive points of contact between Luther and African worship practice is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. African worship is naturally communal and participatory, and Luther provides the theological grounding for this disposition. Luther legitimizes congregational participation while guarding against clerical domination, and he did this by affirming that all believers share equal access to God through Christ. This doctrine challenges both authoritarian leadership and passive congregationalism, as such, worship becomes the shared vocation of the redeemed community, not the exclusive domain of a spiritual elite. In this sense, Luther's theology does not suppress African worship expression but dignifies and orders it theologically.

Worship and Lived Salvation

Finally, Luther's theology insists that good works flow from salvation rather than produce it. This understanding has important implications for African Christian practice, where moral expectations are often tied directly to spiritual worth. Worship shaped by Luther's theology forms believers for ethical living without collapsing into legalism. Worship becomes the space where grace received is translated into love, service, and justice in everyday life.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Martin Luther's theology of salvation, with its emphases on grace, faith, Scripture, and the finished work of Christ, have a myriad of implications for rethinking theological education in Africa. First,

²³John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1.

²⁴Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 112.

Luther's insistence on salvation by grace through faith provides a framework for theological curricula that place the gospel at the center of all training. Consequently, seminary courses should consistently emphasise justification by faith as the foundation for all Christian ministry. Second, Luther's theology of salvation equips theological education to respond to the doctrinal distortions that are prevalent in African Christianity. Third, Luther's conviction that theology is sung as well as preached has direct implications for African theological education. Theological education should therefore include robust training in contextual liturgical leadership and theological evaluation of worship practices. Fourth, on the priesthood of all believers, theological education in Africa should equip ministers not to dominate congregations but to empower them. Finally, theological education should contextualise Luther's theology for Africa.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at Martin Luther's theology of salvation, and it highlighted Luther's recovery of justification by faith alone as the central truth of the gospel. It has also shown that Luther's theology of salvation is grounded in *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, and the sufficiency of Christ's atonement, which of course, has redirected Christian thought from human merit to divine grace. Through this rediscovery by Martin Luther, he also redefined worship as a response of gratitude to God's saving act rather than a means of earning salvation. The paper also showed that Luther's theology remains vital for the African Church in areas where there are tendencies toward moralism, legalism, and prosperity-driven religiosity. In summary, this study affirms that Luther's theology is still valid and reliable in challenge every generation to return to the gospel's core, that salvation is the free gift of God, and it is received by faith and expressed through worshipful obedience to the One who has saved us.

Article Publication Details

This article is published in the **INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PUBLIC SERVICE GOVERNANCE, INTERGOVERNMENTAL & POLICYMAKERS**, ISSN XXXX-XXXX (Online). In Volume 1 (2025), Issue 1 (October-December)

The journal is published and managed by **Erudexa Publishing**.

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Declarations

Funding

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

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