




# “Brothers of Different Periods”: Martin Luther and John Wesley’s Influence on the Twenty-First Century Church

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## Abstract

Martin Luther and John Wesley stand as towering reformers and transformers whose influence still defines ecclesiastical theology in the twenty-first century. Luther and Wesley survived 200 years apart in two different countries, and circumstances, and yet their responses to the challenges of their milieus present the lived legacies of Lutheranism and Methodism respectively. Factors contributing to the shaping of their backgrounds and theology force one to argue that: “without Luther’s theology, the development of Methodism was a chance”. The purpose of this paper was to reread the convergencies in the backgrounds and theology of Luther and Wesley and analyse how their life settings and writings influenced the twenty-first-century church. The paper reminds the twenty-first-century church that much as Luther and Wesley’s biographies were influenced by the role of their parents, their conversion through nature, the impact of university life, unplanned marriages, and the fight against orthodoxy. Unfortunately, similar converging life experiences have not been taken seriously to “saltify” the rotting world as individualism and self-gain characterise the modern church. The paper also argues that Apostle Paul’s theology of justification by faith, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, and *sola gratia* is central to both Luther and Wesley, and they are the anchors of the twenty-first-century church. This paper does not aim to bring superiority and inferiority intricacies between Luther and Wesley but to use Luther as the role model of Wesley with the two being the beacons of the twenty-first-century ecclesia and ecclesiology.

**Keywords:** Brothers, Luther, Wesley, Twenty-First Century, Church.

## Introduction

One of the towering Protestant Reformers after the sixteenth-century Reformation was John Wesley (1703-1791 CE) who featured in the eighteenth century. Wesley and Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) a German priest and theologian had an impact in different periods. A reading of Luther and Wesley’s background and theology demonstrates some convergences that might persuade one to argue that the roots of “Methodism shoot from the garden of Lutheranism”. Although there are also divergences in the two reformers that include, the period they survived, and the nature of their ecclesiastical politics, their convergences present them with some lessons for the twenty-first-century church. This paper is a rereading of the convergences in the background and theology, of Luther and Wesley. Since the Middle Ages, the two men stood out as great leaders in the world’s church life, with Luther making history in the Reformation of the sixteenth century while Wesley featured prominently in the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. Leog Cox (1964) argues that Methodists have admired the work of Luther and looked upon the Reformation as a stepping stone to the Wesleyan Revival, however, there has been too much ignorance of Luther among Wesleyans, and only very recently has the need been felt and steps taken toward an exploration of his



works by Methodists. The signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in October 1999 between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, and its subsequent endorsement by the World Methodist Council (WMC) in 2006 (World Methodist Council 2016), is a testimony that Methodists lately felt the need to embrace the long-distanced foundation of their theology grounded in Luther.

This paper was motivated by the noticeable impact of Luther and Wesley as evidenced by the number of their followers worldwide (See Patte 2010 and World Methodist Council, n.d.) and how the two movements share the theological traditions bequeathed by the two reformers. The research will explore the common features in the early lives of Luther and Wesley, their turning point in response to nature, their conversion, the impact of university life on their ministry and theology, unplanned marriage, and how Luther and Wesley unwillingly founded their movements. Moreover, the paper will also pay attention to the theology of Luther and Wesley and how the two were influenced by St Paul's writings. The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, is a way of saying we are not justified by our works and it is the opposite of justification by our works of obedience to the law. St Paul says: "We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28). and their interpretation of, *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia* will also be explored and lessons drawn for the twenty-first-century church. The paper further argues that the celebrations of 500 years of Reformation in 2017 were not only a Lutheran ecclesial commemoration business but an ecumenical celebration. While the Catholics were repenting from their zealous orthodoxy of excommunicating Luther, the Protestants were reflecting on the Wittenberg Castle Church as a rock in which the new theology was hewn. It was of course in this church on October 31, 1517, that Martin Luther approached the door of the Castle Church (*Schlosskirche*) in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed the 95 revolutionary theses stated on paper, that would herald the Protestant Reformation.

### **The Background of Martin Luther and John Wesley: A Seedbed for Reformation**

The early life of Luther (1483-1546 CE) and Wesley (1703 –1791 CE) are characterised by a number of similarities. Although the two reformers lived almost two centuries between each other, their resemblances are worth reconstructing. On the one hand, Martin Luther was born to Hans and Margareta Luther in Eisleben, Germany. His father prospered in the local copper-refining business and at one time he became a town councillor of Mansfield in 1492 CE (Hillerbrand, 2023). On the other hand, John was the son of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. His father was an Anglican Priest in Epworth, England. The commonality of the parents of Luther and Wesley was their life of discipline. Luther wrote that at one time he was beaten by his mother for stealing nuts until he bled. He stated that "such strict discipline drove me to the monastery although she meant it well" (Bainton, 1978:27) Luther also shared how his father once whipped him and how he ran away. He wrote: "I felt ugly towards him until he was at pains to win me back. I was beaten in the morning fifteen times for nothing at all" (Bainton, 1978: 27)". From the two narratives of Luther, (Rupp & Drewery 1970) could be right to forward that, his generation was a "beating generation" and such beatings are viewed as child abuse in the twenty-first century.

In the same manner, Wesley had his mother as a stickler (Wallace, 1998:367). To produce her brand of children, Susanna Wesley introduced the Sixteen Golden Rules of her family. The rules were meant to produce a wholesome child, socially and spiritually. The rules include such strict measures like; taking medicine without complaining, not punishing a child for one fault not first confessed and repented, and never to punish a child twice for a single offense (Wallace 1998: 367). In coming up with the rules, Susanna believed that for a child to grow into a self-disciplined adult, that child must first be a parent-disciplined child. John's father's reaction toward his children is not clear. However, Kenneth Newport stresses that Samuel was never there for his family (Newport 2001).



## Engaging Luther and Wesley's Early Life Influencing Factors

Luther grew up in German while Wesley was raised in England. The two reformers were influenced by both internal and external factors of their time. Chief among the internal factors was religious formalism which they wrestled with thereby making them both reformers and transformers. Luther was influenced by the Renaissance, humanism, and medieval nominalism (Wright, 2017). Apart from these factors, many other social and cultural trends such as printing and literacy, urbanization, the growth of the middle class, and nationalism had an impact on reformation (Latourette, 2005). On the other hand, Wesley's Methodist movement arose in the context of industrialization, urbanization, and the Enlightenment emphasising experience as the most secure path to knowledge. In addition to his roots in Anglicanism, the most direct influence on John Wesley was pietism, specifically; the German pietists known as Moravians whose lives were inspired by the writings and teachings of Martin Luther.

## The Turning Points of Luther and Wesley

Apart from the similitudes in the historical background, Luther and Wesley shared almost the same conversion experiences influenced by nature. The spiritual journey of Luther began with a memorable lightning of July 1505 when he was traveling on the outskirts of the Saxon village of Stollernheim coming from the university on horseback (Rupp & Drewery, 1970). As Luther was approaching the village, "the sky became overcast. Suddenly there were some showers, then a crushing storm. A bolt of lightning struck and knocked him to the ground. Struggling to rise, he cried in terror, "St Anne help me! I will become a monk (Bainton, 1978). In response to his vow, Luther left the university and entered an Augustinian cloister in Erfurt. It is not clear whether Luther vowed to be a monk in fear of death and then, later on, gave himself to the Augustinian monastery to fulfil his hallucinations or that he received the actual call. If one goes by the assertion that, "Luther as a monk went through deep spiritual and theological anguish, attests his life" (Rupp & Drewery, 1970:17), it, therefore, makes sense to conclude that Luther went to the seminary being driven by his call more than the natural storm.

Wesley's turning point was also influenced by nature. He took thirteen years as a clergy believing in works more than faith. His spiritual spree stretched from 1725 CE and was completed in 1738 when his spiritual vacuum was fulfilled (Mujinga, 2017). The transformation of his spiritual journey is pinned on his journey to Georgia in 1735 CE. There was a severe storm in the Atlantic Sea that caused some tornadoes of uncertainty in his spiritual journey. Wesley records in his Journal:

[I]n the evening another storm began. In the morning it increased ... I could not but say to myself, 'How is it that thou hast no faith?' being still unwilling to die. I was vaulted over with water in a moment, and so stunned that I scarcely expected to lift my head again till the sea should give up her dead. But thanks be to God, I received no hurt at all. About midnight the storm ceased (Wesley, 1753).

In spite of being the priest who was expected to give hope to the people on board, this moment of life was difficult for Wesley. Contrary to Wesley's state of fear the Moravians were calmly singing. The vehement storm necessitated Wesley to self-introspect his spiritual life. This was the first time that he realized that he had more fear than faith. The storm passed as all of God's storms, but Wesley's turbulent soul could not be quieted easily. He started to engage in his soul searching.

Analysing the storm experiences, one notes that the spiritual journey of Wesley was challenged by the Moravians whose faith was moulded by the theology of Luther. For Luther, theological and religious problems ran alongside and inside one another and centred him on



the thought of righteousness or justice of God. The Moravians introduced Wesley to Luther's theology of Justification by Faith. While Luther gave his vow to St Anne, Wesley appealed to the Moravians for his spiritual journey. The lighting and the Atlantic Ocean storm brought moments of soul-searching that eventually led Luther and Wesley to realize their spiritual vacuum. In this faith-seeking life, Luther and Wesley found assurance of grace in Paul's theology in the book of Romans thereby making Methodism a religion grounded in Luther's experience. Such experience shaped both Lutheran and Methodist theologies.

### **Unplanned marriages- “the weak point of an effective ministry”**

Luther and Wesley had decided to remain unmarried for the sake of the Gospel. When Luther and Wesley eventually decided to marry, the marriages were marred with controversies. Luther's decision to marry came after he had developed bad blood with the Catholic Church and had been excommunicated. He married Katherine von Bora in 1525 CE. He writes: “I intend to get married before I die even if it is only a betrothal like Joseph... this was no love match” (Bainton, 1978:224). Luther got married for three reasons, first, to please his father who always wanted him to marry, second, to radicle the pope and the devil and third to seal his witness before martyrdom (Bainton, 1978:224). The process of his marriage was conducted speedily and later on he made enemies because of this decision. When his friend Spalatin asked him about long relationships, he replied,

(D)on't put it off till tomorrow! By delay, Hannibal lost Rome, by delay, Esau forfeited his birthright. Christ said, 'You shall seek me and you shall not find me.' Thus, Scripture experience and all creation testify that the gift of God must be taken on the wing (Bainton, 1978:226).

The above statement was said on the 10 June and on the 13 June, Luther was married. The public ceremony which followed was on 27 June. In his invitations, Luther made the whole process very controversial, for example, he wrote to Spalatin, saying, “You must come to my wedding, I have made the angels laugh and the devil weep (Bainton, 1978:226). The couple had six children.

Wesley had also difficulties in marriage, however, Molly Vazeille, was the woman who finally got into Wesley's marriage life between 1751 CE and 1771 CE. One of the reasons why Wesley did not want to marry was the vow that they had made with Charles Delamotte, Charles Wesley, and Benjamin Ingham before leaving for Georgia that they would remain eunuchs for the sake of the gospel (Leger, 1910). Libido and faith contested heavily in the life of Wesley. He taught that “marriage is honourable in all, and the bed is undefiled...nor it can be doubted persons may be as holy in marriage as in single state ... if then they cannot contain, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn. Wesley first attempted to marry Sophy Hopkey during his days in Savanna in 1737 and this affair turned disastrous (Heitzenrater, 2013). His second attempt was in 1749 to marry Grace Murray who was a widow and also engaged to a local preacher John Bennett.

Charles Wesley successfully outwitted and outrode John and hence prevented his marriage to Grace Murray. Charles decided that John's plan to marry was unwise and would bring shame both on John's personality, and the whole of the Methodist movement. Charles was set against the proposed marriage and engineered Grace's marriage to John Bennet. John was not pleased with this course of events. Charles burst upon him and pronounced, “I renounce all intercourse with you, but what I would have with a heathen man or a publican” (Heitzenrater, 2013: 127). Wesley later married Molly, a widow of Anthony Vazeille. First on February 2, 1751CE,

Wesley wrote in his *Journal*:



Having received the full answer from Mr P ..., I was convinced that I ought to marry. For many years I remained single because I believed I could be more useful in a single, than in a married state. And I praise God, who enabled me so to do. I now as fully believed, that in my present circumstances, I might be more useful in a married state; into which, upon this clear conviction, and by the advice of my friends, I entered a few days after (Wesley, 1751)

Wesley thought that he should marry because he would be more useful to the Methodist movement, though it is not at all clear in what sense. Wesley unconsciously felt it would be useful to the Methodist for him to marry because it would resolve the conflict that plagued him and made him sick unto death. On February 4, 1751CE, he preached to the unmarried Methodist field preachers encouraging them that, "it is a gift to remain single for the Kingdom of heaven's sake" (Wesley, 1751) Contrastingly, on February 10, 1751CE, he slips on London Bridge coming home from a meeting of the Holy Club in Oxford. He was first taken to his home at the Foundry but was later transported to Molly's house on Threadneedle Street where he quickly ended into a marriage proposal. On February 18, just after a week of love proposal, he married Molly Vazeille. Unfortunately, the marriage did not work. Wesley lived in hell in his own home (Mujinga, 2017). Wesley's marriage to Molly has been especially vexing to biographers. Many have found it difficult to comprehend how the methodical, cool-headed Wesley could have, made such a costly choice for a mate. From the marriages of Luther and Wesley, one can conclude that their love lives were marriages of convenience entered through compromise but did not affect their visions.

### **Lutheran and Methodist: Denominations founded out of traditional ecclesiastical internal conflict**

Although Lutherans and Methodists stand as some of the most prominent reformed denominations, their formation was not intentional, and the founders only planted the seed that was irrigated and maintained by their followers. In early sixteenth-century Europe, there was a single religion, Catholicism, whose acknowledged head was the pope in Rome. The Catholic Church was a universal, infallible guide to human existence from cradle to grave and the life to come. The vast system of confession, pardons, absolution, indulgences, sacred relics, and ceremonies gave the male clerical hierarchy immense power over its largely illiterate flock (Rupp & Drewery, 1970). Several of these key doctrines and practices were challenged by Luther through his force of will and new ideas. On 31 October 1517CE, he posted the Ninety-Five Theses at the Wittenberg Castle Church. When eventually Pope Leo X received the copies, he deployed a series of papal theologians and envoys against Luther but he (Luther) was not deterred from speaking his mind. In 1520CE Luther was threatened with being excommunicated unless he recanted forty-one sentences drawing from his writings. His continuous refusal led him to be anathematized by the Catholic Church.

According to Patte (2010:744), "although Luther was expelled from the Catholic Church, he had no intention to leave or to start a reformation. As an earnest monk and teacher of Scripture, he began to have questions that featured the medieval religion which led to his conflict with the papacy and the subsequent excommunication in January 1521CE. It is not clear whether Luther formed structures for Lutheranism, although he founded the movement. He tried passionately to reform the Catholic Church. He desired to return Christianity to its roots, putting more focus on the reading of Scripture and less focus on Catholic dominance.

After Luther, the world witnessed another form of reformation from the Church of England. Wesley never wanted to form a movement called Methodists (Miller, 2003) and several reasons justified his decision. First, Wesley was raised from a dissent-ism tradition of the eighteenth century, but he reprimanded any Methodists who wished to break away from Anglicanism arguing that Anglican was the Church that gave him ordination. Second, he made



it a point that his services would not clash with those of the Anglican Church. Third, one of the major borne of contention with Charles was an attempt to move out of the Church of England. Although both John and Charles were founders of Methodism, they both died Anglican priests.

After his expulsion from the Church of England, John Wesley claimed the world to be his parish. Although the movements were formed from the reluctance of Luther and Wesley, the founders were not influenced by the privatisation of religion that has rocked the twenty-first-century church.

### **Theological Commonalities in the Works of Luther and Wesley**

Luther and Wesley were prominent reformers and their writings benefitted both the scholarly world and their denominational theology. Luther was a Biblicist while Wesley was an ethicist. Luther spent most of his career in Biblical studies while Wesley drew his ethical topics on his beliefs in God and his system of ethics rests securely on his theology (Sigsworth, 1982:73).

In this section, we start with the influence of Paul's works in the ministry and the works of the two reformers. The spiritual pilgrimage of Luther and Wesley was characterised by the continuous feeling of the innermost vacuum. Luther struggled through a time of deep anxiety concerning his own salvation while he was a professor at Wittenberg. Eventually, when he fully yielded to the Pauline teaching of justification by faith, he felt that the gate of heaven had been opened for him (Richardson & Bowen, 1983: 382). This emptiness led Luther to continuously search for righteousness. His lectures from the book of Romans from (1515CE to 1516CE) brought to him the expression of the elements of the doctrine of Justification by Faith. Luther's works include the prefaces to the Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews among others. He states that,

Although I was good in these epistles, I had been captivated by the extraordinary ardour for understanding Paul in the Epistle of the Romans. But up till then, I was not a cold blood but a single word in Chapter 1, the righteousness of God is revealed that stood in my way... though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with an extreme disturbance of conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction...I was angry with God and said, 'as if indeed, it is not enough that miserable sinners eventually lost through original sin are crushed by every kind of calamity... thus I raged with the fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at the place most ardently desiring what St Paul wanted (Watson, 1960:131).

Luther's spiritual examination began to lead him into religious despair. This glimpse of truth about the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity changed Luther forever. Luther looked for antidotes in his sinfulness. Although he was already a monk, and spent his days in prayer and service, still, as he looked at his life closely, he found sins in thought, word, and deed (Bainton, 1978:224). In the monastery, Luther spent up to six hours a day confessing his sins to a priest. But later, he would always remember sins he had forgotten to confess (Bishop, 2016). Questions of his spirituality continued to nag his conscience. He narrated some of the things that troubled him, "If only confessed sins were forgiven, what would happen if one has forgotten? What about all the sins one might have committed in ignorance, are they forgiven? (Bishop, 2016). Luther began to realize that his sinful actions were like smallpox pustules - nasty, external manifestations of the internal, systemic disease of sin (Watson, 1960: 332). Luther fasted for days and refused blankets at night, believing that he might earn merit with God through self-imposed suffering. He writes, proudly one day "I have done nothing wrong today" (Watson, 1960:332). However, on reflecting on the events and activities of the same day, he wondered if he had indeed fasted enough, prayed enough, suffered enough, and served enough. He expressed the level of his spiritual vacuum and how he tried to work for his salvation.



During a visit to Rome, Luther climbed a staircase on his knees, saying a prayer on each step. In taking that anthropological means of grace, he remembered that the Catholic Church promised that this was a means of grace. When he got to the top, he wondered aloud, “Who knows whether it is so?” (Watson, 1960: 338) Luther later described this moment by saying, “I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created” (Watson, 1960:338). Luther later read Paul’s Epistle to the (Romans 1:17), which says, “for in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith (NIV). Luther wrote: “At last, by the grace of God I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by the gift of God namely faith. And this is the meaning of righteousness of God... God justifies us by faith as it is written, ‘he who through faith is righteous shall live’” (Watson, 1960:338). Luther further stated that, after reading this text, “I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” (Watson, 1960:338). He later read St Augustine’s works on, *The Spirit and the Letter*, (*De spiritu et littera*) where righteousness is contrary to hope. He said, “I found out that he too interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way as righteousness with God clothes us when he justifies us.” (Watson, 1960:338). Paul’s theology ended Luther’s spiritual pilgrimage.

Wesley’s spiritual journey was also through a gradual process of search for wholeness over a period of thirteen years as an Anglican priest. The journey started when he was still at Oxford and it climaxed upon his interaction with the Moravians particularly with Peter Böhler in 1738 CE. The first incident happened at Oxford. One evening, Wesley met a college porter, a deeply pious man with whom the dawn began to spark. The poorly clad porter was urged to go home for a coat because the evening was cold. In return, the porter said, “I thank God for the one coat as well as for the water the only drink I have during the day.” (Miller, 2003:23). When Wesley asked the porter what else he thanked God for, he said, “I thank Him, I have the dry stones to lie upon; I also thank Him for He has given me my life and being able to love Him and a desire to serve him” (Miller, 2003:23). Returning to his room, that evening, Wesley began to feel that there was an emotional depth to salvation he had not plumbed and he needed to work on it.

The second incident that heightened his desire to connect with God happened on his way to Georgia in 1735 as discussed earlier. Wesley’s efforts were serious and his discipline as a clergyman was demanding on himself and others. Troubles with local leaders arose and he voluntarily left Georgia but with the charges of a libel suit over his head. His apparent failure nearly brought him to despair and prepared him to seek spiritual help. In reflecting on his mission in his *Journal* of February 1, 1738 CE, he wrote: “I went to America to convert the Indians, who is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, ‘To die is gain!’” (Miller, 2003:23).

Wesley’s spiritual search is similar to that of Luther. Although Wesley’s encounter with Luther’s works is not clear, Mark Olson presented three theories as possibilities. First Wesley was introduced to Luther at Oxford University through pietism. Second, it was through Peter Böhler who transformed his spiritual life, and third, Wesley read Luther’s works personally (Miller, 2003). It is not clear from Wesley’s writings whether he knew Luther before 1738 CE. However, Cox claims that some of the writings of Luther had come into England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is possible that some of Luther’s works had indirectly influenced the theology of the Church of England and it may be that Wesley had read some of them directly before 1738 CE (Cox, 1964).

Despite this puzzle, what is certain is before 1738 CE, the greatest influence upon Wesley’s religious life was writers widely separated from each other in time and very diverse in genius and atmosphere. Wesley read the works of Thomas á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, and he wrote that:



The providence of God directed me to Kempis Christian patterns; I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions... I set apart two hours a day for religious retirement... I watched every sin whether in deed or action. ... I began to aim that and pray for inward holiness so that now, doing so much and living so good a life... I doubted not but I was a good Christian... I resolved to dedicate myself to God (Miller, 2003:30).

In addition, Wesley read William Law's *Christian Perfection* from which later were the germs of his doctrine of sanctification. Wesley also read the works of Jeremy Taylor, Richard Baxter, and Juan de Castaniza and he later published abridged versions of some of these spiritual classics. It was from these scholars that Wesley received the inspiration to live and act like a Christian. These writers were in the Anglo-Catholic tradition rather than in the Reformation tradition. It can safely be said that until 1738 CE, Wesley was not very interested in Luther and made no reference to any of his writings. His engagement with the Moravians opened for him a window of hope.

Wesley admitted he understood and accepted Peter Böhler's doctrine of faith, but he was puzzled by the fact that it was an instantaneous work. Wesley felt that Böhler's contention that salvation was by faith alone was hard for one who sought to grasp it through works and disciplined life (Sigsworth, 1982). Miller comments that in the process of the arguments of Wesley and Böhler, to move him from salvation by works, Böhler introduced Wesley to three Englishmen who professed to have 'saving faith' and promised to bring eight more, if numbers were what was needed to dispel the disbelief (Miller, 2003). Through this continuous engagement, Wesley was convinced of the absence of faith in his life. Wesley's other problem was that even though the doctrine of faith could have been true in the early church; it did not work in the eighteenth century. Böhler succeeded and produced for Wesley convincing witnesses. Now Wesley was completely convinced of Luther's justification by faith alone and began to declare it. His life was transformed. He writes in his *Journal of Wesley* on May 24, 1738 CE, that,

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street. A layman was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation: and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

After the Aldersgate experience, Wesley felt that he was now a Christian and the Spirit bore with his spirit that he was the child of God. Justification by faith, as Wesley conceived it, and preached it, with all its implications, was to him "a new doctrine." (Holway, 2007:48). Wesley's 1738 CE conversion made him a follower of Luther's Reformation doctrine of 'Justification by Faith'. Significantly, Luther's preface to Romans, being read by an unknown layman, at the prayer session where he went unwillingly, transformed his life. His sermons were anchored more on Justification by Faith starting with the sermon that he preached at St Mary's –Oxford on 11 June 1738CE two weeks after his conversion titled *Saved through trust in God* taken from the book of Romans 5:18.

It can be further argued that the endorsement of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation by the World Methodist Council (WMC) in 2006 is a clear testimony of the Methodists' appreciation of the impact of Luther's theology to Wesley. More to this, the planting of the tree by the WMC in Luther's Garden is a lifelong testimony by the Methodists to embrace Luther in their theology. These actions confirm Heather Hahn's claim that without Luther, it was not quite possible that the Wesleyan movement would have risen two centuries later (Hahn, 2015). The





Aldersgate experience of 1738 CE was that of a seeker who became a finder and a person who had the form of godliness now receiving its power. Before this day Wesley was a zealous servant of God, but on this day, Wesley became a son of God. Wesley's Aldersgate experience is nursed in the theology of Salvation by Faith and Luther's epistle to the Romans. For Cox from 1738 CE, Wesley held Luther in high esteem (Cox, 1964:83). Writing concerning Luther's life, Wesley said; "God raised a poor monk, without wealth, without power, and at that time, without friends, to declare war, as it were, against the entire world; against the bishop of Rome and all his adherents (Wesley, 1749). From these quotations and experiences of Wesley, it is clear that Wesley discovered Luther, and greatly admired him.

### **Convergences of the Theology of Faith and Grace**

The two reformers also agree on their understanding of faith, as something they found after a long time of search and grace as a God-given gift. Luther uses the term *sola fide*; by (faith alone) to describe how he was wrestling with his deeply personal question of how one could become righteous (Richardson & Bowen, 1983:545). *Sola fide* denotes a nerve centre of the Protestant Reformation. Luther cites (Romans 1:17) "the just shall live by faith". *Sola fide* rebuts the theology that humanity is justified by keeping the law. On the one hand, Luther attacked salvation by works, penance, mortification, and the buying of indulgences. Both Luther and Wesley agree that faith by which a person is justified is not merely intellectual or creedal acquiescence, but living confidence in God's grace, being so sure and certain that humanity would stake in life on it a thousand times (Richardson & Bowen, 1983:546). Wesley taught that salvation through faith is already bringing us as a way of escape from sin and the consequences of sin. For Wesley, there is faith and saving faith. Saving faith is not the faith of non-Christians, not the faith of the fallen angels, or the faith of the apostles, but it is the trust in Jesus and trust in God through Jesus (Romans 10:9). For Luther and Wesley faith is the evidence of justification and the only way to salvation and there is no justification without faith.

On grace, Luther uses the Latin term *sola gratia* (by grace alone). Luther uses *sola gratia* to express the absolute initiative and sufficiency of God's salvation. Luther teaches that, in grace, God reaches humanity in the very depth, of humanity's sinfulness, offering forgiveness of sins as the beginning and not the end of God's relationship with humanity. For Wesley, grace and faith are interchangeable. During his sermon at St Mary's Oxford, he used grace, faith, and justification to assume that the three are inseparable. He preached that grace is the blessing we are given by God freely. The same free grace continues to sustain us day by day for nothing we do can enable us to claim anything from God as a right. Wesley was convinced that human beings are sinners and need to be saved by the grace of God. Unlike others who believe that only a few people can be saved, Wesley believed that whosoever wills, can be saved; there is sufficient grace for all human beings to be saved, and even the worst sinner is a candidate for grace, unlimited grace.

### **The Centrality of Scripture in the Theology of Luther and Wesley**

Luther and Wesley had scripture as the central departure of their teaching. Luther describes the centrality of scripture using the Latin term, *sola scriptura*. By *sola scriptura*, Luther meant that scripture is the only source of authority for the Christians and the Church. *Sola scriptura* is thus Christocentric in intent and scripture is the Word of God because it is the Word of Christ (Richardson & Bowen, 1983). The Bible is therefore to be read to find Christ using reason and prayer. Greidanus (2001) attests that Luther's *sola scriptura* remains the fundamental criterion for preaching and the rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation because for centuries the Roman Catholic Church had made its traditions superior in authority to the Bible. Luther publicly rebuked the Catholic Church for its unbiblical teachings saying:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning, unless I am persuaded using the passages I have quoted, and



unless they thus render my conscience bound by the Word of God, I cannot and will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me! Amen! (Bainton, 1978:234).

For Wesley, Methodists were people of one book, the Bible. He once said “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven; how to land safely on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this end, He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. Give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God!” (Heitzenrater, 2013). The position of Luther and Wesley is clear that scripture is the starting point of knowing God.

### **Lessons for the Twenty-First Century Church**

From the background and theology of Luther and Wesley presented above, there are several lessons that the twenty-first-century church can learn. From their background, it is clear that the two reformers were raised in very unfriendly family backgrounds with discipline defining their childhood and yet they triumphed against all the challenges and they stood for what they believed. The twenty-first-century church is challenged not to concentrate on the harsh socioeconomic and brutal political environment in that it finds itself and focus on the future to provide hope to the hopeless communities. Second, Luther and Wesley’s backgrounds also present the two with a troubled spiritual life which they took seriously to deal with until their vacuum was fulfilled through prolonged conversions. Such commitment to conversion is lacking in the twenty-first-century church that is surviving in a world of inter and intra-religious conflict, modernity, and globalisation that are taking most of the people’s meditation time. If the church has to be relevant, much attention should be given to prayer, fasting, and meditation, more than the commercialisation of the gospel. Third, Luther and Wesley recognized the corruption troubling the church of their time and did everything to revive it from within.

The twenty-first century is almost defined by people of the same calibre as Luther and Wesley’s time and yet very few are challenging the ills of the church people using the weaknesses of the church to establish their self-styled denominations where their authority is not challenged. Such behaviour presents the church as a society of the powerful and not a place of sinners who needs grace. Fourth, the spiritual journeys of Luther and Wesley were not an event, but a gradual search for an encounter with the creator. The ability to identify personal faults and being prepared to be assisted by some individuals resemble a strong personal character that the twenty-first century is thriving to get because of the uncertainty and ambiguous world defining the everyday life of the church.

Fifth, the theology of Luther and Wesley, especially justification by faith redirects the church from the theology of working for salvation which is misleading theology daunting to the twenty-first-century church. In addition, Luther and Wesleyan theology of *sola gratia* vindicates people from some self-styled prophets who teach their members that they are the way to God. Lastly, Luther and Wesley’s theology of *sola scriptura* and *sola fidei* reorient the twenty-first-century church to the teachings of Jesus Christ where personal faith characterize Christians to be citizens of heaven.

### **Conclusion**

Although Luther and Wesley are divided by two centuries between them, their background and theology are still relevant in the twenty-first century. The convergences in their background lives, conversion, impact of the Book of Romans, forced ejection from the orthodoxy, unplanned marriages and theology of justification by faith are common reconstructions that should not be considered coincidental but can best be explained by



describing Luther as the trailblazer of Methodism and an elder brother whose mission was accomplished by the young brother Wesley in England.

The strength of this study is its capacity to locate the twenty-first-century ecclesiology into the foundation of Protestantism. In addition, the study also challenges the church to revive itself as religious formalism is not new. Third, the research also assists the church to be strong in the contest of globalism much as Luther and Wesley's Renaissance, humanism, enlightenment, and religious formalism of their time. The weakness of the study is its propensity to draw the lessons of the church to many century problems and individuals which can also compromise the study. Despite the weaknesses of the study, its implication for the twenty-first century is great as it forces the church to always go back to the drawing board. Its applicability is its call to centre theology on the right path and the right terrain amidst continuous challenges being experienced in the world.

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