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The DeLamar Jensen Lecture:

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Professor Craig Harline, at Brigham Young University, October 29, 2015

Craig Harline

Born and raised in California, Craig Harline earned a BA in European Studies from BYU, and a PhD in European History from Rutgers University. A faculty member at BYU since 1992, he has also been a research fellow and visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven, and the University of Antwerp, both in Belgium. His teaching and research have focused on the religious life of the Reformation, and taken him to archives and libraries around western Europe, thanks to grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and other agencies. His books, aimed especially at general readers and students, have been featured on The Today Show, CBS Sunday Morning, National Public Radio, and assorted radio and television programs in the US and Europe. A recent book, Conversions: Two Family Stories From the Reformation and Modern America, was named a Top Ten Book in Religion for 2011 by Publishers Weekly, and was one of two finalists for the Mark Lynton History Prize, awarded to a work of history that “best combines intellectual or scholarly distinction with felicity of expression.” And his latest book, Way Below the Angels, on the world of a Mormon missionary, was named Best Memoir by the Mormon History Association, and won the INDIEFAB Book of the Year award in the category of Religion.
When I was 12 or 13, my family drove from California to Salt Lake for my sister's wedding. It was my first time on temple square, and the visitors' center made a huge impression on me, especially the exhibit on Christian history, set out in giant paintings. The first painting, on the left, was a bright scene of Jesus and his mostly Scandinavian disciples. To their right was a scene of a bent-over hooded figure shrouded in mist and walking past a crumbling building shrouded in even more mist; even I knew the hooded guy must be a monk, but the accompanying words also let me know that here were the dreaded Dark Ages, that no one ever wanted to go through. The next scene got bright again, with a series of guys called Reformers, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley, who were obviously fixing some of the damage from the Dark Ages and getting things ready for the next and final scene, which was a painting of Joseph Smith.

I don't know why it all stayed with me so much, especially the part about the Reformers, as I was not an especially attentive student at the time. In fact when I started high school I shut off my brain even more, and forgot about them. But when I went on a mission to Belgium, I remembered the Reformers again, because just about everyone in my new country belonged to the religion of the guy in the mist: Catholicism. As an American, I couldn't understand how people could all belong to just one religion, and as a Mormon I couldn't understand how if they did then they would choose Catholicism! When I got home and headed to BYU, I wanted to learn more about all this, but when? It was time to get down to serious business, and take classes...
that would lead to a surely major and no doubt international career in business or law, with maybe just one fun class in social dance or something, which at the time was even more required than American Heritage.

But none of the classes I was taking thrilled me, so in my junior year I started sneaking looks at the History courses and there in the catalogue I saw a class on the Reformation, which was taught, like about half the courses at BYU, by a guy named Jensen. I suddenly couldn’t think of another class I would rather take. And what I had most in mind when I thought of it was Martin Luther, the Reformer I’d seen on temple square, rebelling against the Catholicism that so deserved to be rebelled against. Even though I signed up for the class, I still worried that I was getting distracted from my real studies. I was also a little embarrassed, because none of my friends were interested in something like the Reformation. This was the late 70s, after all, Recession Time, when no normal guy was studying the Humanities seriously, at least in public.

Sure enough, on the first day of Reformation class, there were only 8 other students, far fewer than Professor Jensen’s classes in the 60s and 80s. They all looked as sheepish as I felt, and most were female, which made me feel even more sheepish. Oh sure on Sunday I secretly wanted to be in their cultural refinement classes, but on weekdays normal guys should be in high-powered business classes, I was sure. Finally a middle-aged professor with a dashing pencil moustache and endless waves of hair strode into the room (and this is his Mission President picture, showing you he just couldn’t shave it off until the last minute). He started talking unabashedly about feudalism and kings and popes, while pronouncing all the many foreign words just the right way, and knocked all the sheepishness out of the room.

Popes? Could you study that in college? In this class you could; in fact I soon realized that a class in the Reformation was going to be as much about popes and Catholics as it was about Martin Luther, and that the Catholic stuff was, to my surprise, grabbing me most of all. Professor Jensen seemed to know everything about it too, and in a small class like that I soon saw him as my personal google search engine, before there was such a thing, interrupting at every wrong moment to ask things I was dying to know, like when he mentioned “Pope Gregory XIII” I asked, “is Gregorian chant named after him?” No, they wouldn’t have waited until #13 to name an entire musical tradition, he patiently said. Pretty soon I’d memorized all the popes of the Reformation, and if Prof. Jensen said “the pope” did this or that I might raise my hand and ask “would that have been Paul IV?” and he would say, “Good!” with a bemused look on his face, like I was being exactly the slightly odd fellow I didn’t want to be. But I had to know the code, and all the stuff he seemed to know, and that I had never known any Mormon guy to know, except maybe slightly-odd Brother Jones back home with the trembly voice.
In fact maybe Professor Jensen was slightly odd too, I had to think, because I was just a student of the Reformation who was going on to a surely major and no doubt international career in business or law and he was a full-on professor of the Reformation! How did any normal guy, not to mention normal Mormon guy, end up doing that?

In fact how the Mormon farm boy DeLamar Jensen from the vicinity of Buhl, Idaho got interested in the Reformation and Martin Luther was indeed something of a mystery. Born in 1925, he was given the French-leaning name DeLamar, apparently after an early French-Belgian settler of Idaho who founded a mining town in that name and struck it rich, then left it a ghost town. But everyone just called the new boy Dee. He soon attended the proverbial one-room two-outhouse rural school, with five rows of desks and eight grades, and also soon realized that school had a lot going for it that milking cows, feeding pigs, pulling up potatoes, and hoeing weeds, didn’t.

During those early years at school, he got interested in adventure and war, and therefore history too. No sign of the Reformation yet, but surely there was a sign of interest in the diplomacy and spying and intrigue that he would come to like so much, thanks to the very non-diplomatic way he was treated by a teacher. One day young Dee was caught passing a love note to the girl across the aisle; the teacher ordered him to come to the front of the class and read it aloud. Like a good spy, Dee tried to destroy the note on the way up, but he managed, like a bad spy, to tear off only a corner, with just one word. After a look at the two words left, the teacher guessed what was missing, and while Dee stood there silent she kept prompting him with it, repeating, “I…” “I…” “I…” until finally Dee blurted out “I love you!” and raced back to his seat humiliated. The girl was humiliated too, and didn’t go to school the next day, which the teacher made her apologize for as well, before the whole class. Oh, the good old days of education.

The Jensen family moved into Buhl itself on September 1, 1939, the day Hitler invaded Poland, and Dee started high school. Surprisingly, the teachers weren’t as exciting as they had been at his rural school, and Dee moved away from history and reading for fun to focus instead on science and math: he didn’t exactly love the subjects, but he wanted to be a pilot! So he got through his classes, played a lot of sports, joined the model airplane club, then just after graduation in 1943, with the US at war now, joined the Air Force. His parents weren’t happy; they wanted him to wait to get drafted, like other boys, but Dee figured it was inevitable so why wait? He learned to fly all sorts of planes, but the war ended before he’d finished all of his training. He stayed in the Air Force another six months, logging flying time, so his service lasted almost three years.

He started attending BYU in the fall of 1946, majoring in aeronautical engineering, because he still wanted to fly, now as a commercial pilot. But he disliked all four of the math classes he
signed up for, and liked instead, of all things, Freshman English. He liked boxing too, and he liked his religion classes, as he’d stopped practicing his faith during his three years in the service (making you wonder how he would have gotten into BYU today), and after a year of study started thinking about going on a mission. He went home and taught science at Buhl High School for a year, to save some money, but the job also helped him see that he really liked teaching—just not high school, and just not science. Although he hoped to go to Europe, he was called to Mexico, which he ended up liking very much. He also met his future wife Mary there, who was also a missionary, and he got more interested than ever in history—especially European history, even studying French and German to go with his Spanish.

When he got back to BYU, Dee gave up math for good and studied all the History he could: ancient and medieval history from Russell Swensen, Latin American history from Christen Jensen, and more, especially political and diplomatic history. He liked history so much that when he and Mary got engaged he gave her not a ring but something far more precious: his pin from Phi Alpha Theta, the History Honorary Society. I’m still not clear what Mary thought of that. He graduated in spring 1952, at 27 years old.

Dee had already decided he wanted to get a Ph.D. in European history, and set his sights on Columbia University, where a professor named Carlton J. H. Hays was a famous expert in the political and cultural history of modern Europe; he had even been the US ambassador to Spain during World War II, and his deep knowledge of that country helped to keep
Spain from joining forces with Germany. That sort of real-world application of academic knowledge impressed Dee, and so he was thrilled when he was accepted to Columbia. It would be expensive, but the GI Bill gave him full tuition plus $100 a month. If he worked part-time, he figured, they could survive, especially since the university provided cheap “housing” in an old army barracks called Shanks Village.

Unfortunately for Dee, news to the west apparently still went by pony express, because when he arrived bright and eager at Columbia he learned that the distinguished Carlton J. H. Hays had just retired. But he still wanted to study modern European history. Others were soon telling him, though, to take at least one class from another increasingly-famous professor, named Garrett Mattingly, whose field was Early Modern Europe, especially the Renaissance and Reformation. In fact Dee signed up for two classes from him, and found them “eye-opening and mind-boggling,” especially Mattingly’s insistence that the historian’s job was to create works of literary art from raw and often tedious documents. But Mattingly went on sabbatical the next year, and Dee now thought of studying modern Europe again, this time intellectual history with the also famous Jacques Barzun. Unlike the personable Mattingly, Barzun was very formal and refused to talk to students outside of office hours, shooing them all away after class. One day Dee went to see Barzun, during office hours, and said he was torn between studying with him, or with Mattingly when Mattingly returned. Stay with Mattingly, said the always warm Barzun.

Luckily Dee did just that, because now he found the period he would study the rest of his life: the sixteenth century, especially its diplomatic history. He chose a thesis topic on an important Spanish diplomat of the time named Bernardino de Mendoza. Mendoza hadn’t yet been studied, because his letters were in an extremely difficult Spanish cipher, or code, and so Dee traveled to Spain to try
to break it. Bad as Dee had been with his love letter back in fourth grade, he was great with this code, and finally and painstakingly broke it, then wrote an important dissertation on Mendoza and the French Catholic League during the dramatic years of the Spanish Armada. When that book was published in 1964, by Harvard University Press, it gave him an international reputation. He studied other subjects as well, of course, including Martin Luther, because as he long said, if you study the sixteenth century you’re going to have to confront Luther.

And of course there was more to life in New York than just study. Dee worked part-time at a post office and delivered mail one summer, then for OC Tanner as their representative in New York too. Mary baked bread and sold it to the neighbors, and one of her delivery boys was Kit Lund, now in the Spanish and Portuguese department, who remembers getting one cent a loaf, and dropping only a few on the ground. Dee and Mary also went to museums, and musicals, and Mary signed Renaissance-man Dee up for the popular TV show Tic-tac-dough, and he actually got on the air and put up a furious two-day fight against the current long-reigning champion, until on the third day Dee missed the question, “Who is the basketball coach at the University of Kentucky?” Dee liked sports, but he spaced out, and lost, prompting an old friend to say, consolingly, “Hell what good is a Ph.D. if you don’t know who the University of Kentucky basketball coach is.”

When Dee left Columbia and took a position at BYU in 1957, he taught all sorts of classes but especially the Renaissance and Reformation. There were always far more students in his Renaissance class than in his Reformation class, he noticed, which he decided was because Mormon kids figured they already knew what they needed to know about religion; what could Luther or historical Christianity possibly teach them? He kept researching in Europe as well, often taking along his growing family in memorable but sometimes hair-raising
adventures you really don't want to know about. And he was a co-founder of what is now the biggest international society in the world for the study of the Sixteenth Century (and yes it has many more than 8 members). And of course he published, not only his Mendoza book but a book on the Renaissance thinker Machiavelli, two still-in-print textbooks on the Renaissance and Reformation that I myself still use in classes, and then perhaps unexpectedly a book on Martin Luther too. He made such an impact on the profession and university that he of course had this lecture named after him as well.

This is all just a long way of answering the question: how did a Mormon guy come to be a professor of the Reformation, especially this Mormon guy with the dashing pencil moustache? But I didn't know this answer at the time: I just knew I was glad that he was teaching it. His extensive knowledge of the subject, and love for it, the way he took it seriously, and the vision he had that went way beyond BYU and Mormonism, all made it okay for me to like the subject of the Reformation too. It legitimized my own interest.

At least inside the classroom. Outside of it, I was still embarrassed. Sure, I now switched my major to one I finally stuck with: European Studies. But whenever people and especially girls asked the inevitable what are you going to do with THAT, I coolly explained that it was of course just a warm-up for the surely major and no doubt international career in business or law that I still planned on. In fact I did try law school, for three whole weeks, but all that did was convince me that I really should study what I wanted to study instead of what other people thought I should study. And so I decided I wanted to go to graduate school in History, just like Dee, and go back east, just like Dee, and even go to Columbia, just like Dee. Sure, I mostly wanted to be like Mike but I also wanted to be like Dee.

Of course I wasn't just like him. On his advice, I ended up at Rutgers, not Columbia, studying with one of his former classmates from Columbia, Herbert Rowen. Plus Dee grew up on a farm, and I in the suburbs. He had a pencil moustache, I more of a Magic Marker moustache. We both deciphered coded documents, but his really complicated set took several months while my pretty simple one required just a couple of days, and it would have been faster if I had noticed that the key to the code was right on the front cover. He was a mission president, I merely a mission resident. And our interests weren't entirely the same: I've studied mostly everyday religion during the Reformation, especially Catholicism, and he studied politics and diplomacy.

But of course we also have some things in common. We both spent long periods of time in Europe doing research. We both claim intellectual descent from Mattingly. We both taught 22 credits one semester—oh wait, I didn't. We both stumbled on national
TV. We both like sports, and Belgian stoofvlees. And finally we both ended up writing books about Martin Luther.

Just as Dee always said, if you study the sixteenth century you’re going to confront Luther. Still, I never expected to confront him as closely as I have this year. I’ve always studied Catholics! I wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was the music and art. Maybe it was because, as I gradually realized, Catholicism was more like Mormonism than Protestantism was, to my utter surprise, given the old Mormon narrative of Christian history. Whatever the case, Catholicism was what I taught and wrote about, in books on things like nuns and bishops, and miracles. I never ever expected to write a book about Martin Luther. Then last October Oxford University Press asked me to do just that, in time for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

I didn’t exactly want to write it, mostly because I wasn’t a Luther specialist. But I agreed, remembering that non-Luther-specialist DeLamar had also written a book about Luther as well. What makes Luther so hard to avoid, or even so attractive? It’s partly his celebrity of course; he’s one of the few names that non-historians know from the Reformation. But a name doesn’t last that long unless it keeps on having something to say. In fact Luther still has plenty to say to the modern world, including the Mormon world.

I don’t really go in much for high theology, since to me it often seems like an exercise in words about words, instead of words about life. But Luther’s theology was bloated with life, because it grew out of his own emotions and experience. And the idea of his that’s moved me most is his central idea, the foundation, the main pillar, the calling card of the Reformation—on the question of how we are saved. Oh, he wrote on all sorts of subjects, in hundreds of tracts (some of them completely offensive now), but his ideas on salvation were the heart of everything else. What Protestants now call Reformation Day, or October 31, commemorates Luther’s 95 theses against indulgences. But to Luther indulgences were a sideshow: the real question was about how we are saved. And again, this idea, like most of his others, came right out of his personal struggles.

Luther grew up in Saxony, in east-central Germany, where his father was a smelter and his mother insisted young Martin go to school. He was bright enough in grammar school to go onto Latin School, which prepared him
to be among the less than one percent of the population who went onto university, where all classes were taught in Latin. Luther's father pushed his son to study law, so he could work for the family's business interests or become a prominent official. And so Martin earned a degree in the Arts in 1505, from the University of Erfurt, and soon after that he began his graduate study of Law, just as his father hoped. But then just weeks into his program, Luther quit the Law and entered a monastery, infuriating his father. Luther had become a hooded figure shrouded in mist.

It wasn't unusual for someone suffering from a spiritual crisis to become a monk or nun—doubt makes a monk, went the famous saying. Not doubt in God necessarily, but doubt that you could be saved. Many people considered the monastery to be the surest way to salvation, and that monks would get preferential treatment in heaven, and so it made sense that those who worried most about salvation would be most likely to enter. And Luther was suddenly an elite worrier. It's not clear what set him off: the death of a friend from the Plague that year? A lightning storm that terrified him and made him vow to become a monk? Or did Luther even kill someone in a duel and enter the monastery to soothe his soul and escape the law, as some argue? Whatever it was, “great terrors (about salvation) so suddenly overcame him that he almost died,” wrote a friend.

If entering a monastery helped your chances at salvation, then entering a strict monastery helped them even more, and so Luther chose the strict Augustinian monastery right in Erfurt. And if entering a strict monastery boosted your chances at salvation, then being the most strictly obedient monk in that monastery would have to make you a shoo-in. That's what Luther thought anyway. He tried to please God and become righteous by strictly obeying every rule about prayer, the sacraments (what Mormons call ordinances), fasting, and more, sometimes going three days without food, and in winter sleeping without a blanket to discipline his body. Doing everything perfectly was the key to being righteous, to being justified, to being saved. But no matter how hard he worked, he still didn't feel justified.
He either didn’t do something just right, or his heart wasn’t right when he did—he was proud, or angry, or resentful. He confessed all his visible and invisible sins at heroic length, once for six hours, and did penance to make up for them. Still it didn’t work: he spent whole nights weeping and feeling hopeless that he could ever do enough to be saved.

Luther sought comfort by talking to other confessors, and by study: though in the monastery now, he was still a graduate student at the University of Erfurt, but in Theology now instead of law. The answer he kept getting was one he already knew, as it dominated the church by now: namely, we are all ultimately saved, or justified, by God’s grace, not by our own efforts; what you have to do is put yourself, through your conduct, in a state to receive that grace. Or in the famous phrase, just do what lies within you. Facere quod in se est, or more technically, do every dang thing you possibly can. Do your best.

This didn’t soothe Luther at all. How could he know whether he was doing everything he could? He could always think of more he could do. And if he really was doing his best, wouldn’t he be keeping all the rules perfectly? The constitution of the order said he should, and could, so it could certainly be done! But Luther could always think of a way he’d fallen short. “I was the most wretched man on earth,” he later wrote. He had tried to be the most obedient monk in one of the strictest orders of all, and he had failed. Either something was wrong with him, or with the system of salvation he was following.

Around 1510, he began for the first time to question the system, by talking to still other confessors, and by reading less in church-approved commentaries and more in the Bible, especially Paul, plus also St. Augustine, and the famous monk St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In these sources he found talk of God’s grace that wasn’t much heard anymore, but that was still Catholic: it was a minority tradition. His superior, Johan von Staupitz, knew this tradition though, and taught Luther to focus on the Christ who suffered because he loved us, rather than Christ the judge who extracted payment for every sin; Staupitz also taught him to let this loving Christ be God and save him, rather than think that he Luther had to be God and save himself. All you needed to receive this grace, the tradition said, was sufficient humility to recognize you needed it.

This was an improvement for Luther, and it made him wonder how this tradition had been muffled. The trouble began around 400, when a Christian named Pelagius said that God had given all the grace he needed to give when he gave the commandments, and then Christ as an example of how to follow them. After that it was up to humans to become righteous by living the law, or remain unrighteous and be damned, according to their merits. Pelagius was heavily influenced by Aristotle in all this, especially in concluding that humans could make themselves righteous by moral conduct,
and that the rational system of reward and punishment applied to salvation too.

Augustine, a contemporary of Pelagius, was incensed by this. Salvation was not about rational pagan methods. The whole point of Paul, the first and foremost interpreter of Christianity, was that reward and punishment for following or breaking commandments was not how salvation worked: the good news, or gospel, was that Christ had suffered and died for imperfect humans if they would only believe he could save them. Augustine’s view triumphed, Pelagius was declared a heretic, and Augustine became the foremost voice in the church on just about everything.

But then a funny thing happened: after 1100, as universities and professors emerged, more and more theologians started to quibble with Augustine’s view of salvation. Much as they admired him on everything else, they also admired rational thought, especially Aristotle’s, and tried to reconcile as much of it with Christianity as they could, thus getting the name scholastic theologians. They therefore adopted into Christianity as well the idea that humans could at least help themselves become righteous. They didn’t want to be accused of Pelagianism, and so didn’t go so far as to say that humans could save themselves. Instead they found a sort of compromise that said salvation came through the cooperation of your will with the grace of God. Your conduct created a natural disposition “which prepares your will for grace,” bringing you to a sort of “demarcation line where sin and grace meet.” This was how doing all that lies within you came to be the dominant strain of salvation by around 1500, when Luther entered the monastery.

When Luther saw that this tradition hadn’t exactly come from the Bible, he became more and more willing to criticize it, and to come up with something new. He continued studying hard in the Bible itself, having such a prodigious memory that even though he didn’t memorize every verse in the Bible he knew what was on every page, and where. In 1512 he earned his doctorate in biblical theology, and in 1513 he became a professor at the new University of Wittenberg.

In 1515 he lectured on the book of Romans, and we see his new ideas already emerging. To Luther, Romans was the best exposition in the Bible of how the gospel worked, and how it was related to law, of any kind. Law and commandments are necessary, he read, but they don’t save you because you do them perfectly; instead, your inevitable ability NOT to do them perfectly makes you turn to Christ in desperation, for help. In other words, law
leads you to Christ by showing you your inevitably imperfect state.

And now that you are brought to this state, how do you receive Christ's grace? It isn't through having enough humility, decided Luther, because that again immediately raises the question: how much is enough? It makes humility just another sort of prerequisite good work. No, Luther concluded, from endless texts in the Bible, you just need to believe that Christ can save you, and make you righteous. That's it. You just need to assent. As Staupitz put it, "I am yours, save me." This is justification by grace, through faith (by which Luther meant belief). God justifies, or makes you righteous, at his initiative, not yours. It's not a combination of your works and God's grace, because that never solves the problem of how much is enough? This opened the heavens for Luther, and made him love the words justice, and righteousness, instead of hating them as he had, because he now believed they were given by a loving God, instead of jealously guarded by a stern God. In fact, a big part of God's justice was the mercy that he gave to his imperfect creations. This solution to his personal crisis was, he believed, also the solution to everyone's personal crisis, because we are all in the same boat. We are all beggars, he said.

In 1518, this solution of Luther's was still actually a Catholic solution; others had come up with much the same thing, and his wasn't condemned as heresy until the 1560s. But it was also another minority tradition, and was criticized by most Catholics, who said that too much belief in grace would make believers complacent: they would think they could do anything as long as they said they believed. Luther responded, whoever says that doesn't understand grace, and the desperation that precedes it, or the life-changing effect it has afterward. Grace isn't easy at all: grace is the way of the cross. Just as Christ's glory emerged from the darkness of the cross so the light of grace comes only through dark trials; you never got to those trials as long as you thought that things like buying indulgences would give you grace instead.

Critics also said that an emphasis on grace would lessen the importance of good works: Luther responded that he was thoroughly in favor of good works, but wanted people to understand that they didn't get grace by doing them; instead good works flowed out of grace, in even greater number than usual. Other critics said, if everybody ends up doing good works anyway, then why stir things up? Luther responded, because how you think about works affects which works you do and how you approach them: those who do good works to earn grace become obsessed with themselves and their purity, making for some cranky souls, as he knew firsthand. Those whose works flow out of grace are more inclined to turn and help others, out of gratitude to God, plus the worry about earning credit is gone and you are a far more pleasant person. The key is not to do more good works, or preach constantly about them, but to preach belief in Christ: the good works will take care of themselves.
Luther’s ideas on grace alone wouldn’t have gotten him into trouble, because again he wasn’t alone. Neither would his criticism of indulgences, because he wasn’t alone there either. Even his 95 theses weren’t of themselves a rebellious act; professors announced theses all the time, for debates, or disputations: they were part of the curriculum. A thesis, as anyone who has taken English 150 knows, is a debatable assertion, and so disputations were organized around them; they weren’t meant to be assertions of absolute truth, but were meant to raise discussion to help clarify things.

Two months before his 95 theses, Luther led a disputation with 97 theses; a year before that, he led one with 3 theses; six months after his famous 95 he led one with 38 theses; and one of his colleagues led a disputation with 380 theses, which surely left no one standing. Not even nailing theses to the church door was rebellious: the church in question was the university’s church, and the doors were the university’s bulletin board. Nailing up theses was like putting up signs for university events, like today’s lecture. No, what eventually got Luther in trouble was the way he took his central idea of justification and extended it to other parts of the church, especially the authority of the pope. Luther wasn’t against Catholicism before or after 1519, he was against Roman Catholicism, and that was what would lead to his excommunication in 1521, and the splitting of Christianity in the decades to come.

What is there for Mormons in all this, especially in Luther’s struggle over justification? Plenty of us struggle with the same questions, but do we believe we can learn something from him, and others? President Hinckley famously said, “we appreciate the truth in all churches…and we say…bring with you all the good that you have, and then let us see if we can add to it.” But is it not possible that others can add to us too, with their truths or emphases? Again, they have certainly added to me, and I try to teach my students that we have stronger ties to traditional Christianity than we might think, and many of the same issues, and can therefore learn from them.

If you ask most Mormons today how they think they are saved, as I do at school or in gospel doctrine class, they tend to answer with a vague combination of works and grace, along the lines of the dominant Catholic version in Luther’s day: yes, justification by grace, but only after you’ve done every dang thing you possibly can. But there is a more Luther-like grace tradition too. The most common of these sort of finesses the question by distinguishing between salvation and exaltation, saying that yes we are indeed saved by grace alone, in the sense that we all resurrect, but exaltation still requires the combination of grace and every dang thing you can possibly do, presumably at an even higher level. Luther would find this to be playing with words a little, I think: what he had in mind with justification is in the spirit of what Mormons mean by exaltation. And for someone wired the way he was, it still doesn’t necessarily solve the conundrum of whether you yourself have done enough.
Yet there is also in Mormonism a minority grace tradition which has some resemblance to Luther's justification by grace, through faith. Nephi's famous “for we know it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do,” often used to support the usual grace and works combination, has lately been read more and more as, “go ahead and try doing all you can, but you'll see that you're still saved by grace.” And Nephi's statement soon after, “the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith,” sounds an awful lot like Luther. King Benjamin's “we are all beggars” is exactly Luther, and his we are all “unprofitable servants” sounds familiar too. More recently Stephen Robinson's Believing Christ argued that trying to save ourselves through making ourselves perfect shows that we really don't believe Christ when he says he'll save us, which is vintage Luther. Elder Uchtdorf’s April 2015 landmark comment that “salvation cannot be bought with the currency of obedience,” and that obeying commandments is a natural outgrowth of gratitude to God and love for others sounds Luther-esque too. So does Adam Miller's new paraphrase of Romans, which says that grace is not God's backup plan but there from the start, and that sin is a rejection of his already offered grace more than a particular misdeed. Ah yes, Romans: there is of course Paul himself. Is he Mormon? Or might the article of faith as well read, We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly, which cannot possibly include the tricky bits in Paul.

Still, except maybe for Paul and Adam Miller, even these authors still seem to require something up front, besides belief. Just as Luther said, it’s hard to accept justification by grace, though faith, and the idea that we can’t make ourselves righteous. In American culture maybe it’s especially hard, since we often live in terror of somebody getting a benefit they didn't properly earn, and as we tend to prefer action and visible deeds over what we can't see inside. We want to DO something to show we want to be saved. Just how relevant Luther’s idea on justification is to us might depend on which Mormon tradition we prefer, and even our particular personality. But the dominant tradition obviously wasn’t right enough for Catholics like Luther, or maybe even for some Mormons wired like Luther. And beyond that minority, maybe even other Mormons would benefit from a little injection of grace, or as the scholastics put it, an infusion of grace.

And so in the spirit of Reformation Day, I want to advance some theses of my own on what effect an infusion of Luther-style grace might have. Like Luther, I'm a professor, and am supposed to profess something. And like Luther, I advance theses not as statements of absolute truth, or what should occur, but as a way to raise questions that might need clarifying.

1. An infusion of Luther-style grace would affirm that faith, not obedience, is the first principle of the gospel, just like the fourth Article of Faith says, which wouldn't even need altering.

2. Some Luther-style grace might require altering a couple of others, like the third, but some articles get altered in practice anyway, like the twelfth: we believe in obeying and sustaining kings and rulers and the law, except the King of England, rulers not in our political party, and any speed limit that is ridiculously too low.

3. Telling people to do their best but also to obey rules with exactness can fast create a crisis of faith in anyone who is even close to being as sensitive as Martin Luther.

4. Saying that all God asks you to do is keep His commandments isn't entirely all, since God also says that whoever has to be commanded in all things is a bafflingly lazy who.

5. This is one reason why obedience can’t be the currency of salvation (à la Elder Uchtdorf) or even ultimate guide to life: there just aren’t enough commandments
in the world to anticipate every situation you might possibly face.

6. Another reason is that commandments are sometimes at odds with each other and you therefore have to choose one or the other, like in the very first story of Adam and Eve, or maybe they don’t even fit the immediate situation, like in David’s followers eating the shew bread, and Nephi’s picking corn on the Sabbath, and Nephi lopping off Laban’s head.

7. An infusion of Luther-style grace might help you pay less attention to visible behaviors that usually count for religion or irreligion, and pay more attention to the invisible quality of someone’s heart, including your own, that Jesus spoke so profusely about but that is so easy to ignore in religious societies defined pretty much entirely by visible behaviors.

8. A little Luther-style grace might lead you actually to believe that the greatest commandments really are to love God and love your neighbor, even greater than not smoking, not cussing, not drinking, not cheering for the U, paying tithing, dressing modestly, etc.

9. In fact, a little Luther-style grace can help you to see that when Luther said it was more important to do works of love for your neighbor than to buy indulgences, it would be akin in Mormonism to saying that it’s more important to do works of love for your neighbor than not smoking, not cussing, not drinking, not cheering for the U, paying tithing, dressing modestly, etc., all of which in Mormonism can easily take on some indulgence-style features.

10. Some Luther-style grace might result in more and actually well-prepared sacrament-meeting talks on how people believe what Christ says about saving you, rather than on how to do even more of every dang thing you possibly can at an even higher level that you currently are.

11. Putting the focus on talks about believing Christ might, though, mean changing the line in I Am A Child of God back to “Teach me all that I must know” instead of the famous 60s revision “Teach me all that I must do,” which might in turn make you think about how profound that can be.

12. A little Luther-style grace might help you stress out less over being something less than perfect, and a little less shocked when you or others inevitably fall short, even way short, and realize that just as it’s easier to handle death by wholeheartedly and not just theoretically accepting that it’s real, and painful, and inevitable, it’s also easier to handle less-than-perfect by likewise accepting that it’s likewise real, and painful, and inevitable.

13. That sort of acceptance also goes a long way toward helping us all to see that we really all are in the same boat: we are all beggars.

14. We are all people of Walmart too.

15. And we are all people of AA as well, because we can all use the 12 steps and benefit from the point that as soon as you think you can handle things on your own, without your sponsor, then you’re in trouble, because we probably all need a sponsor to help us keep an eye on our particular afflictions, or when we start saying “I am worthy” instead of “I am unworthy.”

16. Saying you are unworthy like that doesn’t have to go with any flagellation or gloom and doom, but should actually lend some joy, because just like Luther said you become less obsessed with yourself, and turn pleasantly to help your neighbor, and be a home or visiting teacher or doing other things not for the classic reasons of getting the EQ or RS president off your back, or because “I need the [preferably tangible] blessings,” but because you realize you need help too—maybe not on this particular thing, but on something else for sure. Probably something big too. Certainly.

17. But with a little Luther-style grace you again don’t despair but have hope, and you really believe the famous sermon of the Lutheran Paul Tillich: You are accepted, even though you are unacceptable—which is no easy statement to get your mind around, mind you, but when you finally do you actually believe both parts now instead of still secretly believing that you can only be accepted when you’re acceptable.

18. Some Luther-style grace would keep you from constantly waiting for the day when you’re finally perfect, but instead help you find some joy and contentment right now.In fact some Luther-style grace would make you as relieved as the character in John Steinbeck’s East of Eden, who said, “now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.”

These are just a few theses, of course. They could go on forever. And I’m sure you could make up millions of your own. A greater emphasis on grace might not solve everything right away: Luther himself had periods of horrible doubt his whole life, about whether he could really be saved. But maybe it would help too. It’s certainly helped me.

Again, these are just a few ideas. I’m grateful beyond words that I am able even to think about things like this, which to me seems not only a luxury in a world always starving for grace, including right here in River City, but a grace itself. And much of that was due to the inspiring example of De Lamar Jensen, to whom I’m forever thankful, even if he did prevent me from a surely major and no doubt international career in business or law.