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Reformation
& Revival

A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 1, No. 1 • Winter 1992

More has been written about Martin Luther than any other man in human history, with the exception of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why? What made this man so unique, so important in his era, and, in the estimation of many, still very important today?

Luther was God's choice instrument. He was colorful, and he was singular. His life helped end the old passing era, and it signaled and promoted a new epoch as well.

Martin Luther was essentially a theologian, a preacher, and a faithful pastor. Because he was involved in a titanic struggle to emancipate his people from papal tyranny, he could not escape involvement in the major political issues of his time. In many of these matters, thrust upon him as they were, he fell short of the highest Christian expectations. This was especially the case in his dealings with the peasants, who had serious grievances with the nobility of his age, and with both Anabaptists, whom Luther plainly misunderstood, and Jews, whom he spoke none too kindly of in his writings. Even though we can make some allowances for Luther's being a child of his own age we cannot, indeed must not, praise him in these things. Yet in his wielding of the Scripture as the very Word of God he has no peer in German history. As we survey the history of other nations it is difficult to find anyone who can match the formative influence of the converted monk!

Luther translated the Bible into the language of his people. He preached, plainly and powerfully, the message of justification by grace through faith alone. He provided moving and impressive music for the church, equipped congregations with a still useful catechism, and gave to the people of his time a model of good home life. In addition, he provided significant Biblical exposition, which forms the larger part of the content of fifty-seven volumes of his complete works. From the age of forty, when he began to write, until his death at age sixty-three, he produced, on

average, a modest sized book every fortnight. The number of pamphlets issued in German during the four years from 1521-1524 exceeds the quantity for any other four years in German history until the present day. These were tracts illustrated with cartoon drawings. Though not all were totally Luther's work, his influence is felt in most of them. As for his books, large numbers were sold—sometimes as many as 300,000. Today, 10,000 copies of an evangelical book is a virtual "best-seller." His writings reflect the indefatigable zeal and prodigious output of his work. It is safe to say that he did the work of ten normal men. From 1512 until his death in 1546 he lectured in the University of Wittenberg, in addition to pastoral work and the writings already mentioned, expounding thirteen books of Scripture during that period.

Special reference should be made to his home life and marriage. The ordering of his home was a model for other believers to follow. At forty-two he married a former nun, Katherine van Bora, aged twenty-six. She bore six children. Luther derived immense comfort and joy from his family. Rich fellowship took place around the Luthers' meal table, Martin being a congenial conversationalist. Katie took in students to ameliorate their income so that, together with hospitality extended to many visitors from other parts, they were never short of company in their home.

The Corruption of the Papacy

Naturally, when we think of Martin Luther we think first of his battle with the Papacy. It was here that the unknown German became a public man without seeking the burden.

Since nothing in the Scripture supports the idea of a human spiritual sovereign over the entire Christian church (and territorial ruler of the whole world), it took several centuries for the idea to crystallize. The demise of the Roman Empire had left a vacuum. Many looked to the

Church to fill this. We should note well that at the time of the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) there were six centers of church rule, not just one (i.e. in Rome). Gradually, one power emerged which began to claim complete spiritual and civil control over all men.

During the 10th century the Papacy sank to the lowest depths of degradation, unequalled even in earlier eras. Just prior to the time of Luther there reigned Pope Alexander VI who gave support to his son Caesar Borgia's ambition to be heir to the papal throne. It is believed that Borgia later murdered over 100 people, including his own brother, his brother-in-law (whom he had strangled in his own presence), and eventually knifed Alexander's favorite, Peroto, in the Pope's own arms, blood spurting over the papal robes.

When Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517, Leo X was the Pope. Leo was given to self-gratification, laziness, and pleasure seeking. He delighted in rich banquet fare, and he was preoccupied with gaining massive revenues in order to sustain his power and pleasures, as well as build a new St. Peter's in Rome. To assist this drive for income Leo encouraged the sale of indulgences. These written documents consisted of assurances of release for those presently suffering the agonies of purgatory. Depending on your rank or station in life, you could buy your relatives or friends out of the purging fires. A Dominican monk named Tetzel became the well-known salesman of indulgences and used his personal eloquence to extricate large sums of money for the coffers of Rome.

"Listen," Tetzel would say to crowds of people, "Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends, beseeching you and saying, 'Pity us, pity us.. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance.' Do you not wish to? Open your ears. Hear the father saying to his son, the mother to her daughter, 'We bore you, nourished you,

brought you up, left you our fortunes, and you are so cruel and hard that now you are not willing for so little to set us free. Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory?' Remember that you are able to release them, for: As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs! Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul into the fatherland of paradise?"

The idea of lessening penances by payment of money goes back to the 7th century, but it was in 1300, when a Jubilee year was celebrated in Rome, that the system really got underway. Large amounts of money were raked in as they were deposited on the supposed tomb of St. Peter. This led to more frequent special occasions on which to gather cash for indulgences.

It was error and corruption of this kind which provoked Luther's indignation. The indulgences were part and parcel of a whole system of merit which was supposed to be treasured up in the storehouses of Rome and dispensed to the people. Salvation was conceived of as something you worked for piece by piece. Merit was accrued and preserved through the ministry of the Church, especially by means of seven sacraments which Luther reduced to three (baptism, the supper and penance). Later, he and the other reformers, upon careful study of the Scripture, reduced the number to the two plainly revealed in the New Testament.

One means of gaining merit or relief from purgatory was the viewing of relics. These were objects supposedly associated with martyrs and saints. Frederick the Wise, governor of Luther's part of Germany, had amassed a museum full of such relics. By 1520 there were 19,013 holy bones in his collection. Prized among the relics was a strand from the beard of Jesus, a piece of the stone from which the Saviour ascended, a twig from Moses' bush, one tooth from the jaw

of St. Jerome and three parts of the cloak of the virgin Mary. If viewed on a certain day, and if accompanied by a generous monetary gift, extended relief could be obtained for loved ones in purgatory.

Clear biblical teaching had been overgrown by a mixture of human reason and philosophy. A man by the name of Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274) had produced a body of literature almost as large as Luther's. Aquinas's theological system (called "Thomism") owed much to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. He blended faith and reason and followed the idea that you can prove God by studying cause and effect. Mysticism, which placed great emphasis on feelings, was very popular as well. It was in the midst of this confusion of thought, and of ethical breakdown both in and outside the church, that God raised up Luther to be a rescuer of the people of God.

A New Age of Art, Learning, and Science

An amazing new age was dawning, without which the Reformation would not have been possible. A movement of learning called the Renaissance provided the scholarly tools essential for the Reformation. We must admire the wonderful providence of God, that at the very time of Luther's spiritual awakening, a distinguished German scholar, John Reuchlin, made available the necessary Hebrew grammar for the careful study of the Old Testament text. At the same time, the text of the Greek New Testament was published through the effective work of Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1516. The discovery of the printing press was another vital aid to the developing Reformation movement.

Great excitement was caused through the genius of gifted artists, sculptors, architects, and engineers. The names of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci are well known. Others, lesser known to be sure, such as Brunelleschi, Masaccio, Giotto and Alberti, had made an

important contribution too. Of Alberti it was said by contemporaries that he was "the first universal genius." Alberti was a musician, artist, architect, man of letters, and inventor. He is said to have invented a printing press on his own in 1457, similar to the one Gutenberg would later make.

Luther's Conversion - a Prototype

In the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul describes Abraham's salvation as a prototype. Justification by faith is God's way of salvation. Justification by faith became for Luther his experience of deliverance from darkness. His experience has encouraged many from that day to the present. For instance, a few days before writing this, I learned of a university student who recently came to salvation through studying the life of Martin Luther.

Melanchthon said that Luther's eyes were like those of a lion or falcon. One of his students said they sparkled and burned like stars so that one could hardly bear looking at them. Behind those eyes lay not only an intellect of exceptional power but a personality which was warm and magnetic. Added to this, he possessed a brilliant memory and a will of extraordinary determination. These unusual gifts were brought to their best by the fires of deep and prolonged spiritual experience. Luther's resolute willpower nearly killed him as he tried to gain salvation by means of the Roman system of merit. It was not the reformer's genius which penetrated the maze of medieval theology to discover that it is imputed righteousness alone which justifies. To the Holy Spirit Himself must be attributed the illumination of Luther's understanding.

Staupitz, the vicar of the Augustinian monastery, was baffled by the young monk, so disturbed and so enormously exercised about salvation. Staupitz's counsel helped but did not solve the persistent deep-rooted problem. A way had to be found. One day under a pear tree in the cloister

garden Staupitz informed Luther that he was to take the chair of Bible teaching in the university. This involved a huge volume of work. Staupitz was rightly convinced that it would benefit brother Martin and serve to direct his mind to the best source of help, namely, the Holy Writings.

It must surely be unique, even in the Roman Catholic Church, for an arch God-hater to be rewarded with such a privileged position of foremost Bible teacher in a leading German university. Can we really say that Luther was an arch God-hater? Well, let us discover the answer by seeing what happened.

As an unconverted priest Luther was in the darkness of medieval superstition. Unlike today, the people did not doubt the reality of the supernatural world. It was, however, a confused belief, for it saw turmoil between God and Satan, saints and demons. The problem in this system was how to gain favor with God, how to achieve enough merit and thus earn salvation. Of the monastery Luther said, "I plagued myself with prayers, fastings, wakings and freezings that I almost died of cold. Sometimes I would lock myself up for two or three entire days at a time without food or drink." He fasted, prayed, chastised, and tormented his body, "that I might remain obedient and live chastely." But it was not a battle over women. "In the convent I thought neither of money, nor of the wealth of this world, nor of women." A celibate life is an utter curse to those not so gifted. This often led to appalling and unspeakable immoralities. St. Benedict rolled his body in thorns to quell lust and St. Cuthbert stood all night up to his neck in the ghastly cold North Sea off the coast of Northumberland to subjugate the flesh. But Luther cheerfully remarked once, "Women never bothered me. I was always concerned with the really knotty problems."

Many have attempted to pinpoint a crisis in Luther's conversion, but that is really not possible. He moved for-

ward through storm after storm. Each overlapping phase ended in failure. The young monk tried salvation by confession of sin, but could never be satisfied that he had remembered everything. Staupitz became impatient with the scruples of his sick soul. "Look here," he exclaimed to Luther. "If you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive—patricide, blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes!"

Staupitz was himself a mystic. He believed in the whole penitential system of the time plus mysticism. Catholicism was then, and still is, very elastic. The mystical idea is to cease striving and sink down into the ocean of God's love. Of course you have a lifejacket, but the idea is to float luxuriously. But this approach did not work for Luther. He saw God as angry, judging and damning him, justly, for his sins. He did not find refuge in a floating paradise, but fled to Mary and the twenty-one saints whom he had selected to be his personal patrons, three for each day of the week!

Now monk Martin was wrestling not only with an angry God justly offended; he was also struggling with a sovereign Jehovah who predestinates some to salvation while passing by others. This is how he expressed it later: "Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he delighted in sins and in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages. And who could not be? I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!"

Staupitz was baffled. A way must be found. It was then that the vicar informed brother Martin that he should study for his doctor's degree, undertake preaching, and take the chair of Bible at the university.

So, in August of 1513, Luther commenced his lectures on the book of Psalms. From there he moved to Romans, then Galatians and later Hebrews. For Luther this Bible study was his Damascus Road, his new birth, his evangelical enlightenment. His actual experience of salvation took place in about 1514 when he wrestled with the meaning of the word "righteousness." "Then I began to comprehend the 'righteousness of God' through which the righteous are saved by God's grace, namely, through faith; that the 'righteousness of God' which is revealed through the Gospel was to be understood in a passive sense in which God through mercy justifies man by faith, as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.' Now I felt exactly as though I had been born again, and I believed that I had entered Paradise through widely opened doors."

Soon Luther realized that the Scriptures are to be interpreted in their grammatical and historical sense and he abandoned the old method of imposing allegorical ideas upon the passages. We should admire the providence of God in directing Luther first to the Psalms, which approximated his experience; then Romans, which provided him with the foundations of justification by faith; then Galatians, which is a manifesto for reformation and liberation from intolerable additions to the Gospel; and finally Hebrews, which gave him his Christology, without which he could not be mighty in his God. The reformer was a giant in his understanding of the person and work of Christ and the all-sufficiency of that work. Even by the time you reach Hebrews 1:3 you are confronted by the One who purged us of our sins in one sacrificial action. What then are we to say about the whole purgatorial system of Rome, not to mention the perpetual additions by way of the mass to that one perfect sacrifice of Christ?

Three Decisive Reformation Events

Following this experience, conflict with the Papacy and its system was inevitable. The subsequent events can, for the sake of study, be simplified by focusing on three main events:

1. The nailing of the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in 1517.
2. The burning of all Papal laws and decretals as well as the Pope's bull of excommunication, 1520.
3. Luther's uncompromising stand before Emperor Charles V at Worms in 1521.

The fixing of the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the castle church was in itself nothing unusual, for that was the custom of the times in announcing a matter for debate. It was, however, God's hour! Martin Luther was God's man for this hour! The German nation was ready for it. News of the protest spread like wildfire. The main thrust of the theses was against the exploitation of the people by means of indulgences to fill Rome's coffers. Luther stressed fervently the spiritual harm done by these indulgences. Written in Latin, the theses were designed to invite dispute among theologians. The press of that day translated them into German and distributed them far and wide. Luther had pulled the rope which rang the bell which awoke the world from a thousand years of sleep.

Made famous overnight, the reformer was now looked to for leadership. He was summoned to answer for his actions at Rome, but Frederick secured for him a hearing at Augsburg before Cardinal Cajetan. This ordeal Luther survived quite well. Nothing decisive came out of it. During 1519, he was obliged to engage in a public disputation with Eck, Rome's Goliath, in the arena of public debate. Eck soon exposed the extent of the reformer's deviations from Rome and compelled him to come right out into the open concerning his

Sola Scriptura position. According to Luther, not only the popes but even General Councils of the Church were subject to error. Scripture alone was trustworthy. Soon Luther was associated and aligned with John Huss who had been martyred 100 years earlier for similar statements. Would he, Luther, have any more hope of survival than Huss?

Had it not been for the firm protection afforded him by the German princes and knights he would surely have perished. Before going to account for himself before Cardinal Cajetan he confessed that he fully expected to be burned at the stake.

By now the battle was white hot and Luther's pen was moving with mercurial rapidity. One treatise called upon the German people to reform the Church, exposing the false claims of Rome. Another book expounded the true nature of the sacraments as against their abuse by Rome. Yet another (and all three were written and published in 1520) expounded the doctrine of justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers. These publications sold in large numbers. Leo X was shocked into action and issued a papal decree excommunicating the Augustinian friar. Luther's reaction was both characteristic and symbolic. A pile of wood was gathered just outside the east gate of the city. It was the place where pest-infected clothing was burned. The doctors and masters and student body of the university gathered to witness the ceremonial burning. Only after the *Corpus iuris canonici*, the whole body of papal canon law, represented by several large volumes, had been consigned to the flames, did Luther draw from his gown the papal bull of excommunication. He threw it into the flames with the words, "Because thou hast destroyed the truth of God, may the Lord consume thee in these flames!"

This was an act so dramatic and radical as to be unparalleled. What is far more significant is the fact that Luther first burned all the papal canon laws and decretals which

formed the foundation of the papacy. It was a conflagration of the entire body of presumptuous and extravagant laws built up through the centuries to give power to the pope. This was the basic framework on which the papacy was built, the burning of which symbolized the end of the medieval ascendancy of the Church. We see here the end of an ever increasing volume of tradition which made void the Word of God. Divorce from Rome, the Curia, and the papacy was proclaimed by that fire. These canon laws were used like thunder and lightning to terrify and tyrannize doubters and waverers. Dreadful anathema, possible death awaited those who failed to expel Luther, irrespective of rank or class. But the news of their destruction by fire brought fresh courage to all supporters of the reformation.

The following year saw the historic appearance of the reformer before Charles V supported by his illustrious court in full session. The story is well known. At his first appearing, Luther seemed overawed and asked for time to consider the momentous questions being put to him, namely, first, "Are these books written by you?" (about twenty were arrayed on the table); and, second, "Are you prepared to retract these books and their contents?" Some misconstrued Luther's caution and restraint as weakness and anticipated his recantation.

The next day was more auspicious than the first. There was standing room only in the largest auditorium that could be found. When the time came for Luther to respond, he did so with his clear baritone voice ringing out for all to hear. He unequivocally stood behind his writings as faithful to the Scriptures, and thus he could not recant.

To the monk's eloquence Eck responded, "Martin, you have not sufficiently distinguished your works. The earlier were bad and the latter worse. Your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics. You do nothing but renew the errors of Wycliff and Hus. How will

the Jews, how will the Turks, exult to hear Christians discussing whether they have been wrong all these years! Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all? You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ the perfect lawgiver, proclaimed throughout the world by the apostles, sealed by the red blood of the martyrs, confirmed by the sacred councils, defined by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death and gave to us as an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the Pope and the emperor to discuss lest there be no end of debate. I ask you, Martin—answer candidly and without horns—do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?"

Luther replied, "Since your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

The earliest printed version added the words: "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." These words, though not recorded on the spot, may nevertheless be genuine, because the listeners at the moment may have been too moved to write.

Luther had spoken in German. He was asked to recant in Latin. He was sweating. A friend called out, "If you can't do it, Doctor, you have done enough." Luther made again his affirmation in Latin, threw up his arms in the gesture of a victorious knight, and slipped out of the darkened hall, amid the hisses of the Spaniards, and went to his lodging.

Frederick the Wise went also to his lodging and remarked, “Dr. Martin spoke wonderfully before the emperor, the princes, and the estates in Latin and in German, but he is too daring for me.”

Frederick did stand by Luther, but two of the six German electors decided that he was a heretic. This division ensured the future of the reformation movement, now moving forward with increasing speed. At the same time our freedom was preserved as well, for without such a deliverance who is to say that the papal octopus would not have grown more dominant to stifle the recovery of the gospel and biblical Christianity even until this very day? Let us thank God for what He did through this reformer who sought, simply, to be faithful to both the Word of God and his conscience.

Recommended Reading

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Estep, William R. *Renaissance and Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.

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