

The History of the Reformation
Covenant Life College-February 14, 2007
Church History-Martin Luther

Introduction

1. More has been written about Luther than anyone else in history, except Jesus Christ.
 2. A truly pivotal figure in Western Civilization.
 3. An incredibly powerful personality.
 4. From 1521 till death, he lived every day with a price on his head. A heretic and an outlaw from the state.
 5. Whatever else is said about his intellect- and it was considerable, one could not ignore his powerful presence.
 6. He did not plan the Reformation. The Reformation was in a sense a spontaneous combustion. Luther was a spark, but an unplanned spark. Like a surfer riding a great wave.
- Events converge:
 1. Luther lived in Saxony- his prince was Frederick the Wise. One question that continues is ‘Why did Frederick go to such great lengths to protect Luther?’
 2. Because of the printing press, this was not just an academic movement, but also a popular movement.

I. Early Life and Background

1. Martin Luther was born over 500 years ago (in 1483) in Eisleben, Germany of peasant stock. He died in the same town in 1546. This year marks the 461st anniversary of his death.
2. His father, Hans, was first a miner and then became a mine-owner and eventually a man of some standing in the town.¹ Luther thought of himself as a peasant, (though his mother Margaret may have been from the lower nobility). He was a common man, not an elitist. So the common man could identify with him.

¹ John Legg, The Footsteps of God, The Evangelical Press, Welwyn, Hertfordshire, England, 1986, p. 78.

3. He was coarse in some personal manners. The 2nd of 8 children, typical strict German home. Speaks favorably of parents. “My mother spanked me and I bled.” [reading from Oberman p. 92]

II. Childhood and Education

1. Luther was cheerful and uncommonly intelligent. He worked hard, played the lute and had little trouble passing his examinations, earning BA and Masters degrees by the time he was 22. He was well on his way to becoming a lawyer. But “Martin Luther was not always cheerful company. He was often troubled over the state of his soul and unsure of his standing with God.”²
2. Ordinarily, a peasant family is not able to send a son to a university. But Luther was sent to the University of Erfurt in 1502, where he received a BA, MA in 1505 and doctorate in 1512.
3. Luther’s was a first-rate intellect. Had an enormous capacity for work, very diligent and bright. Hans was happy to send him to university for him to be a lawyer—and support him in his old age.

III. Thunderstorm and Vow

1. While he was in the midst of his masters examinations, a good friend of his suddenly died. Then another occurrence soon after shattered the security of his life- his famous encounter with the thunderstorm.
2. It was as he was returning to the university on a sultry day in July 1505 that the sky turned dark and foreboding. As the storm struck a bolt of lightning crashed so close that it knocked him to the ground. In terror, he cried out, “Saint Anne, help me! I will become a monk!”³
3. So Luther vowed on the spot to devote himself to the religious life, which meant becoming a monk.
4. Hans Luther was not at all pleased by his son’s determination to enter a monastery. After all, he had invested much in Martin’s

² J.I. Packer, The Bondage of the Will, introduction, Revell, Westwood, NJ, 1957, p. 19.

³ Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, Abingdon, Nashville, 1950, p. 21.

education. Luther had been training for the legal profession and his parents fully expected him to prosper and take care of them in their old age.

5. Although Martin loved his father, his concern for his own soul was even greater. And the best way to make sure of one's salvation was by totally dedicating oneself to the religious life as a monk. So within two weeks of his brush with death, Martin Luther made good his vow and entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. It was July 1505 and he entered as a novice.

IV. Augustinian hermits

1. Why the Augustinians? The Dominicans and Franciscans were far more prominent. Probably because the Augustinians were far more demanding and rigorous.
2. Luther was into self-abnegation. Would sleep in freezing cold weather, would fast for days.
3. *Anfechtungen* --spiritual anxiety; gloom; Luther was troubled in spirit.
4. It is a struggle that emerges at different times in his life. A question would re-occur. Was he is wrong about justification, had he led people astray? He would ask himself, "Are you alone wise?"

V. May 1507- First Mass

1. Luther was absolutely conscientious in his new life. But, "Here, in spite of fasting, scourging, the minutest self-examination and every form of self-discipline known to the strict order he had joined, he failed to find peace."⁴
2. In 1506, Luther had taken the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and the following year, he was ordained a priest. It was as he attempted to perform his first mass, that a second significant event occurred.
3. The first mass for a new priest is a major event. Friends, family, distant relatives all come from miles around. His

⁴ Packer, p. 20.

father had come with a company of twenty horsemen and made a large contribution to the monastery.

4. But in the middle of the mass Luther became overwhelmed by the majestic holiness of God and was unable to finish. Someone else had to complete the ceremony.
5. His father was embarrassed and outraged. “So this is what it has come to. My brilliant son can’t even perform the most common priestly duty.”
6. The day was a disaster for Luther, but it only pointed up what was to be a recurring problem in his life for many years. Luther used the word *anfechtungen* to describe this problem. There is no one, good English word to translate this. It refers to a feeling of dread, despair, anxiety, a sense of foreboding doom.
7. Luther was so aware of his own sin that he was tormented by the question of whether he had fasted enough and prayed enough and done enough religious works to be accepted by God. Was he sufficiently contrite?
8. He had totally dedicated himself to the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church. But it provided him no relief, no peace.

- He wrote in later years,

“I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.”⁵

“The whole sacramental system of the Church was designed to mediate to man God’s help and favor. Particularly, the sacrament of penance afforded solace, not to saints but to sinners. This only was required of them, that they should confess all their wrongdoing and seek absolution. Luther endeavored unremittingly to avail himself of this signal mercy. Without confession, he testified, the Devil would have devoured him long ago. He confessed frequently, often daily,

⁵ Bainton, p. 45.

and for as long as six hours on a single occasion. Every sin in order to be absolved was to be confessed. Therefore the soul must be searched and the memory ransacked and the motives probed. As an aid the penitent ran through the seven deadly sins and the Ten Commandments. Luther would repeat a confession and, to be sure of including everything, would review his entire life until his confessor grew weary and exclaimed, 'Man, God is not angry with you. You are angry with God. Don't you know God commands you to hope?'

"This assiduous confessing certainly succeeded in clearing up any major transgressions. The leftovers with which Luther kept trotting in appeared to Staupitz to be only the scruples of a sick soul. 'Look here,' said he, 'if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive- parricide (murder), blasphemy, adultery- instead of all these peccadilloes.'"⁶

- But something was accomplished through all this. Luther became aware that there was something much deeper that was the matter. Something more than "... any particular list of offenses which could be enumerated, confessed and forgiven. The very nature of man is corrupt.... The entire man is in need of forgiveness."⁷
- The whole nature of the man needs to be changed.
- Luther continued in a state of turmoil for quite some time.

VI. Luther's Mentor—Johannes von Staupitz

1. Luther's mentor and superior at the monastery, Johann Von Staupitz, stunned him one day by suggesting that he should prepare himself for the ministry of preaching. An invitation to become a lecturer of Scripture- September 1511. He protested, saying that he felt himself so unfit that such an endeavor would kill him. Staupitz answered, "Quite all right. God has plenty of work for clever men to do in heaven."⁸
2. In fact, the move proved to be of the greatest significance, for it meant Luther would have to study the Scriptures. Up

⁶ Bainton, p. 54.

⁷ Bainton, p. 55.

⁸ Bainton, p. 59.

to that point he hardly knew anything about the Bible, not even having seen one until he was twenty years old. But he studied with great diligence until he received the degree of Doctor of Theology. Then beginning in 1513 he lectured in the Psalms, followed by Romans in 1515, and by 1517 he was teaching from Galatians. The result of all this activity brought Luther face to face with the God whose judgment he dreaded.

VI. Realization of the Justifying Grace of God

“I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in **punishing** the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

“Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy **God justifies us** through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scriptures took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...”⁹

“What is it that Luther discovered? What is the essence of Protestantism? Of Christianity? What is it that makes Christianity different from every other religion on the face of the Earth? What is it that Luther discovered and of course, that Christ and the apostles brought to light through the gospel?

⁹ Bainton, p. 65.

That righteousness is not man's gift to God, it is God's gift to man."¹⁰

1. The development of this doctrine that meant so much to Luther personally- justification by grace alone through faith- would become the very foundation of the Protestant Reformation.
2. When did this evangelical breakthrough occur? Some say as early as 1514, others as late as 1519. Perhaps somewhere in between?
3. In his preface to his commentary on Romans, in 1545, just before his death, he relates his conversion as a sort of instantaneous thing, but it probably happened over a period of time.¹¹
4. He had been reading a lot of Augustine prior to the "breakthrough."
5. In 1514-16 he had been considering the phrase, 'the righteousness of God.'
6. He had thought of it as an 'active' righteousness- the picture of God as judge and judge only. He had had an Ockhamist semi-pelagianist perspective.
7. God as righteous Judge only, and the phrase – *facere quod in se est*—"A person needs to do the best he can."
8. The person needs to take the first step toward God, before God will give grace. And he thought, man *does* have the ability to take that first step.
9. *Then* God responds, pours out some grace, man does meritorious works and goes to heaven.
10. **But from Augustine, he began to wonder if he could even take that first step.** The believer can do **nothing** for himself.
11. It is the picture of God in His mercy.

¹⁰ D. James Kennedy, "By Faith Alone," taped message, n.d.

¹¹ Heiko Oberman, *Luther, Man Between God and the Devil*, Image Books, New York, 1982, pages 157-8.