

The Life of Martin Luther – Part 2

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An overview of the life of Martin Luther and his effect upon the medieval church
2. aim – To cause us to understand how the Protestant Reformation began in the 16th C.

b. outline

1. The Biography of Luther
2. The Development of Luther
3. The Immediate Effect by Luther
4. The Long-Term Effect by Luther

c. overview

1. the “reformation” period begins as we enter the 16th C.
 - a. the end of the 15th C. is the W church at her most desperate *morally*
 - b. the end of the 15th C. is the W church at her most desperate *theologically*
2. it is into this period of great moral and theological “chaos” that Martin Luther appears
 - a. born in 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony Germany, moving to Eisenach at the age of one
 1. had a strict early upbringing, and was highly intelligent and (thus) well-educated
 2. his father struggled financially, inculcating in Luther a deep sense of frugality
 3. he struggled with depression and anxiety, probably heightened by his home-life
 - b. in July 1505 (at the age of 21), Luther joined the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt
 1. this was caused by his *spiritual struggles*: overwhelmed by the holiness of God vs. his own sin
 - a. **e.g.** and several events that reminded him of his *mortality*
 2. the belief was (at this time) that spiritual justification before a holy God was *infused* through a life of discipline, aided by grace, but (ultimately) accomplished through personal action
 3. **i.e.** Luther struggled with his own *lack of holiness*, and threw himself into the sacraments
 - a. **e.g.** his own ordination only added to his sense of desperation
 - c. in 1511, he returned to Wittenberg to teach theology, where he remained permanently
 1. it was here that he encountered **Romans 1:17** and the “*righteousness of God*”
 - a. it was during his teaching tenure at the university, and his attempt to teach this book
 - b. it was not *good news* (gospel), but the frightening reality of God’s holiness expressed as judgment over sin – the *inherent* nature of God himself that comes as judgment over sin
 - c. but ... Luther came to realize that this righteous “*of*” God is something *granted to the sinner* through the completed work of Christ – an *imputation* of righteousness *by faith alone*
 2. thus, Luther came to realize that justification *cannot be a process*
 - a. so, all the aspects of medieval teaching re: justification (**i.e.** the process) were now obsolete
 - b. and it is this new realization that will come into *direct conflict* with some of the *ecclesiastical* and *political* realities swirling around him in Germany ...

III. The Immediate Effect by Luther

Content

a. the immediate effect

1. Luther (**later**) would become a fire-brand; his personality shows signs of great heat in later years
2. but ... the *immediate* effect of Luther’s understanding of justification (**on him**) was *not* of this type
 - a. specifically, Luther does not set out to “overthrow” the church of his day, nor to start an *opposing* (or Protestant) church in contradistinction to the Catholic church
 - b. he simply continues in his teaching and pastoral duties – he does not begin to *oppose* the church
 - c. he *does* begin to teach his new understanding, and many of his colleagues at Wittenberg were won over to his way of thinking
 - d. **IOW**: it *seems* that Luther did not, *at first*, fully appreciate the “contradiction” between his new view of justification and the edifice of Christian soteriology in his day
3. however, over time, he did become convinced that he must challenge the traditional position
 - a. he started by composing 97 theses (in Latin) attacking the tenets of scholastic teaching
 1. remember: Latin is the language *only* of academia – it was a “dead” language to the commoner

- b. he intended for this early set to be debated *in the academy*, which would allow him to divulge his great discovery re: justification (**i.e.** debate of other matters would ultimately lead to this)
- c. unfortunately, these initial calls for debate were ignored beyond Wittenberg
- 4. so, Luther wrote *another* set of theses – officially entitled: *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (**i.e.** the 95 Theses)
 - a. (**again**) they were written in Latin, to be used only in academic circles (his intention)
 - 1. **note:** he “nailed” them to the chapel door as a response to something else, later (**see below**)
 - b. but, they were translated by someone into German and *circulated* in an inexpensive volume
 - 1. **note:** the introduction of the printing press by Wycliffe had opened the door to this type of thing
 - c. thus, Luther’s position on indulgences became widely known, and it stirred much controversy *especially given the immediate ecclesiastical and political issues ...* (**see below for details**)

b. the storm breaks

- 1. in 1515, Pope Leo X authorized a *plenary* indulgence, specifically for the building of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome (and for neglect of other buildings that had occurred during the Great Schism)
 - a. plenary indulgence = a papal statement that anyone purchasing such an indulgence would be freed from all *temporal punishments* due to sin *without the need for contrition or repentance*
 - 1. including the “liberty” of souls in purgatory specifically named in the indulgence
- 2. the plenary indulgence was precipitated by the *political realities* in Germany
 - a. the house of Hohenzollern aspired to hegemony in Germany – to establish itself as the *single* ruling house over both the political and ecclesiastical affairs of the country
 - 1. Albert (Albrecht) of Brandenburg owned two of the episcopal sees (powerful bishoprics)
 - 2. he desired to acquire the most important (and largest) archbishopric in Christendom: Mainz
 - 3. this seat was one of the seven *voting members* over the monarchy – controlling it would also control who was named as emperor whenever the seat became open
 - 4. so, Albert negotiated with Leo X to purchase the seat, agreeing to pay 10,000 ducats (29,000 Rhenish gold gulden)
 - a. Albert did not have this cash on hand, so he borrowed it from the Fugger banking house
 - 5. Leo X agreed that Albert would receive ½ of the proceeds from the sale of indulgences (to repay the loan) while Leo would receive the other ½ to fund the completion of Saint Peter’s
 - b. the man put in charge of the sale was the Dominican John Tetzel
 - 1. Tetzel was unscrupulous, making *wildly absurd* claims about what these indulgences could do
 - a. the sinner became “cleaner than when coming out of baptism” or “cleaner than Adam before the Fall”; the cross of the seller of indulgences “has as much power as the cross of Christ”
 - b. a familiar ditty used for the sale of indulgences for those who had died, often sung by children, was “as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs”
 - 2. Luther never met Tetzel, but a number of his parishioners went to hear him in a nearby town
 - a. Luther became incensed over what he was hearing – he knew that Tetzel (and his preachers) were *distorting* true church teaching on the subject (**i.e.** plenary indulgences were against the teaching of the church *even at the time*)
 - b. and, many among the learned were also distressed – they realized that the prevailing ignorance and superstition were fertile ground for this kind of teaching
 - 1. many also came to realize just how *deeply* the church had become corrupt, at the highest levels, given that this was authorized *by the pope*
 - c. and, this was also deeply concerning *in Germany* – another example of a pope *in Rome* fleecing the people of Germany, using the common people to further themselves
- 3. it was *in response* to this reality that caused Luther to nail his 95 Theses to the chapel door
 - a. **October 31, 1517** – the Eve of All Saints Day (ironically, a day dedicated to honoring those who had been canonized by the church as exemplars of righteousness and holiness)
 - 1. on that day, Luther wrote to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz (**see above**) expressing his concern about the teaching of the indulgence-sellers (**i.e.** that purchasing an indulgence = salvation)
 - 2. he included a copy of the 95 Theses in the letter, to outline what his concerns were
 - 3. he *probably* nailed them to the door as a *public statement* that he had sent them to Albert
 - b. written with a deep sense of righteous indignation, and more devastating than the earlier set
 - 1. they struck at the heart of German exploitation by foreigners (**i.e.** the pope)
 - 2. they struck at the alliance being made between Leo X and the house of Hohenzollern
 - 3. they struck at the *theological exploitation* at the heart of the matter: if the pope is able to free souls from purgatory, he ought to use that power, not for building buildings, but out of love, *and freely* (thesis 82) – the pope should be *giving money to the poor* (not exploiting it from them)

- c. the 95 Theses *were not* intended to be a call to revolution – just a call to the *academic community* to come together and debate the matter (**i.e.** written originally in Latin)
- d. in the 95 Theses, Luther *questioned* the powers claimed for indulgences:
 - 1. he denied the power of indulgences to remit sin or release souls (theses 5-11)
 - 2. he maintained they had no value without true repentance (thesis 36)
 - 3. he doubted the Treasury of Merit on which indulgences were based (theses 56-66)
 - 4. he worried that indulgences produced a false sense of assurance re: salvation (theses 41-43)
 - 5. he argued that indulgences actually *lessened* the respect of the pope (thesis 81)
 - 6. he questioned why the pope didn't just “empty” purgatory out of love (theses 82-89)
 - 7. he ended with a warning against the false sense of security in them (thesis 95)
- e. when the (unexpected) response (both general and specific; **see below**) began, Luther wrote an extensive explanation of the original propositions, and *sharpened* his attack on indulgences
 - 1. much of his *theological* stance comes out in this explanation
- 4. **question:** how does Luther's new view of *justification* find its way into the 95 Theses?
 - a. **IOW:** why attack the issue of indulgences if you have now come to understand justification as an *imputation* of righteousness rather than an *infusion* of God's grace through your efforts?
 - b. **IOW:** if indulgences are simply a money-making scheme preying on the superstitions of ignorant Catholics, why not write a tome on *justification* instead, addressing the *heart* of the matter?
 - c. **answer:** since Luther (at the beginning) was *not* (in fact) attempting to start a revolution, he (undoubtedly) felt that the issue of indulgences *in the present tense* would be a way to address the issue of justification *by faith* – attacking indulgences would “open the door” to express his views on justification *through teaching about the absurdity of them*
 - 1. indulgences are based (fundamentally) on the teaching that righteousness before God is attained through personal effort
 - 2. specifically, that the *church* decides “how much” righteousness is needed and how that righteousness is attained
 - 3. purgatory is the *obvious outgrowth* of this teaching – if you have not attained the “fullness” of righteousness needed to enter heaven, you must then “complete” it, *even beyond death*
 - a. however, no Catholic teaching exists on *how* one completes purgatory *or how long it takes*
 - 4. therefore, purgatory and indulgences *stand in direct opposition* to the doctrine of justification by faith – either *you* make yourself righteous (here or in purgatory), or you *trust in the completed righteousness of another (Christ) on your behalf*