

CHURCH HISTORY III

WEEK 1: MARTIN LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION

INTRODUCTION¹

- In the first church history class we covered the full history of the church at 30,000 feet.
- In the second church history class we covered up to the Reformation, looking at the men, women and events which set the stage for the Reformation.
 - We saw Popes and Emperors seize control of the church and attempt to force change from the top down through threats and killings.
 - Monks attempted to live a life of solitude, shunning the world for their perception of holiness, thus attempting to reform the church from the bottom up.
 - Neither the Popes nor the monks understood that works could not fix the moral problem that had come into the church. It was in the people and thus infected the church.
 - We cannot just be better people and hope the problems go away. We need the sanctifying grace of Christ to truly change. As we will see, that's what Martin Luther realized too.
- Now, in church history three we are going to look at the events, men and women who not only participated in the Reformation but help expand the church around the world.
- The Reformation in Germany was a spark that lit a fire which still burns today. We are a product of what Luther did some 500 years ago.
- Our hope should be that we too are as faithful to the Word as those who came before us.

DURING MARTIN LUTHER'S DAY

- Popes began to buy and sell church offices and tax church members, the very things which the Popes of the early middle ages had waged war on.
- Common people and clergy alike were encouraged to venerate (worship) ambiguous “relics” of saints, including purported splinters and nails from the Cross, and even pieces of bone and hair from the apostles. Noah's beard, table on which the Last Supper was eaten, the thorn in Paul's flesh, etc.

¹ <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/class-6-martin-luther-the-protestant-reformation/>

- Church leaders taught – and the people believed – that owning or even viewing these relics, along with purchasing indulgences, could provide relief from the penalties of sin and release you from years in Purgatory.

Indulgences

- What is an indulgence?
- It begins with Origen and Clement of Alexandria in the 3rd century AD. They asked the question “how can we be perfect in heaven if we’re so sinful here?”
 - He speculated (and it’s important that they merely speculated here) that maybe there was an in-between place where we are purged of our sins so that we are ready to stand in God’s perfect presence.
- People were distraught by this, and wanted to know how they could get out of it.
 - After some discussion, the church declared that you could remove your sin in this life by hard work and good deeds.
- The church declared that some people (the saints) are much holier than others, and had a surplus of good deeds and merit in their lives that could be transferred to you, to save you some work.
 - For a nominal fee you could pay to buy an indulgence, which would transfer merit from this treasury to yourself or a family member and get you out of the purification process.
 - The most powerful indulgences (Crusaders) were actually believed to purchase complete salvation.
- The church quickly found that this was an easy and quick way to make money, and when money was tight, as it was at the beginning of the 1500s, the church sent out its most eloquent and capable speakers to sell their goods around Europe.
- A man named Johan Tetzel, perhaps the most successful and notorious peddler of indulgences in Luther’s day, summed up the principle in a pithy jingle: “*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.*”
- Not surprisingly, the sale of indulgences brought fabulous wealth to the church.
 - The positive side of things was that the influx of money meant that new church buildings (especially St. Peter’s in Rome) began springing up all over Europe, great works of art were commissioned, and scholarship boomed as the church sponsored the work of some of the greatest minds of the time, including the artist Michelangelo and the scholar Erasmus.
 - The down-side was that at best the shepherds were fleecing the flock, and at worst they were preaching a false Gospel.

- By this time, almost everyone realized the need for reform in the church, but how to do it? Time and again new popes would take office promising improvements, but to no avail. They either would be frustrated by the entrenched corruption, or fall prey to it themselves.

Humanism

- Before we talk about Luther's reforms, I want to spend just a couple of minutes talking about the thing that made Luther's reforms possible—"Humanism."
 - We have discussed this in previous classes, but it is so important to understand this in light of what is happening in our current culture.
- The most important year for Humanists was 1453. In 1453, the city of Constantinople was conquered by the Muslim armies of the Turks. This is a critical event in Western history for a number of reasons, the main one for our purposes being that the universities and schools in Constantinople closed as a result of this conquest, and the professors there packed up their books and moved West.
 - This is called the "flight of the scholars", and the result is all of a sudden in Western Europe Greek and Latin texts that had been forgotten or lost were suddenly available for research and study. Combined with the development of the printing press in 1440, these manuscripts and documents were quickly copied and spread all over Europe.
- And the first people to truly take advantage of this Renaissance in the West were the Humanists.
 - The big name for our purposes is *Erasmus of Rotterdam*.
- Erasmus was easily the most brilliant scholar of his age, and certainly one of the most brilliant of any age. He wrote a number of books and commentaries.
- How do we fix the church...Erasmus says we must go, the great cry of Humanism, "to the sources."
 - **We have to go back to Scripture.** We have to get back to the original texts, which we can now do because of the flight of the scholars.
- Erasmus begins collecting texts and copies of the Bible, and in 1516 publishes the first edition of a GNT.
- That is Erasmus' contribution and Humanism's contribution to the Reformation.
 - Erasmus himself was a bit of a coward and never joined the Reformation, instead toyed with some of the Reformation's ideas.
 - When he was threatened with excommunication by the Catholic Church, he quickly affirmed his faithfulness to the Church and spent the rest of his life half-heartedly fighting against Luther, and trying to hide behind a wall of humor.
 - Luther said that Erasmus was like Moses, he could lead God's people to the border of the promised land, but he could not go in himself.

MARTIN LUTHER (1483 – 1546)

- Born in Germany on Nov. 10, 1483, His father planned for him to attend the university to become a lawyer.
- From his youth, Luther was deeply religious. He grew up under church teaching, and spent most of his early years in mortal fear of divine judgment and the devil in hell.
- When he was 22, he found himself caught in a thunderstorm and was thrown to the ground by a bolt of lightning. In a fit of terror, Luther cried out, “St. Anne help me! I will become a monk!”
- When he did not die in the thunderstorm, he kept his word and abandoned law school to enter an Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, Germany and began the long road toward mortification of his sin and fitness for the kingdom of heaven.

Luther the Monk

- Once in the monastery, Luther became a “monk’s monk,” devoting himself constantly to the most rigorous forms of prayer, fasting, and work. Through all his efforts to earn God’s favor, however, Luther never escaped the paralyzing fear that had plagued him his entire life.
- Luther tried all of the remedies that were recommended by the Church and his superiors at the monastery. He attended mass, venerated saints and relics, and even made a pilgrimage to Rome, where he climbed the steps of Pilate’s judgment seat, kissing every step for good measure as he went. He did everything he could to atone for his sin, to no avail.
- None of these prescriptions seemed to work. Luther also tried to perform penance for his sins, but was convinced that no amount of penance could make amends.
 - Besides, even if he could perform penance and contrition for all the sins in his mind, there were countless sins that he did not know, indeed that he could not know. Luther was convinced that God was an awful judge waiting to damn him. His superior counseled him to find solace in Christ, but even Christ seemed too terrible to contemplate.
- Luther had discovered that sin cannot be defeated by becoming a monk and living according to the rules set down by the church. Around this time he wished that he “had never been created as a human being.” Thus the depths of despair over his sin.
- As a monk with a particularly active conscience, Luther caused all kinds of problems. He harassed both his superiors and his fellow monks with his incessant confessions of sin.

Luther the Professor

- Luther’s supervising priest wisely encouraged him to become a professor of the Bible at the university, a job which Luther took up with vigor. His first project was to teach the Psalms.
- He did this systematically, working through them in numerical order. When he reached Psalm 22, he was dumbstruck by the statement, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Luther understood this to be the cry of Jesus on the cross, but did not understand how this could be? How can Christ be forsaken? The perfect, righteous judge? This is a cry that only a sinner should let slip! Why would it come from the perfect Son of God?
- After much vigorous study of the books of Romans and Galatians and the writings of Augustine, Luther was struck with the conclusion that it must be that God made him who was without sin to be sin for us, to take our sin and be treated as if it were his own!
- This realization of God sending Christ to be our substitute, to bear the penalty of death that we deserved, shook Luther to the core.
 - The anguished, guilt-ridden young monk now had a profound sense of God’s forgiveness – not of working to merit salvation, but of free, unmerited grace.
- This understanding that salvation came not by works of penance but by faith alone in the crucified savior was further confirmed the more Luther studied the New Testament and the church fathers.

And it should be stressed that Luther and the other reformers did not see themselves as innovators, developing a new type of theology. They only sought to call the Church back to its roots, to the theology of early church fathers like Augustine, and most especially to the Bible.

Luther the Reformer

- Luther would only later comprehend just how radical was this declaration of the Gospel relative to the accepted teaching of the day.
- He immediately was challenged to try and reconcile his understanding of salvation as a free gift of God’s grace and the church’s practice of selling indulgences. The problem of indulgences had only grown worse.
- Pope Leo X, as corrupt and decadent as many of his predecessors, wanted to build an opulent new church named after St. Peter, and commissioned a new round of indulgences to pay for the construction.
 - On Oct. 31, 1517, Luther nailed a series of 95 propositions to the door of the castle-church in Wittenburg.

- These “95 Theses,” as they quickly came to be known, made two major points.
 - First, if the pope truly has such control over purgatory and can reduce the length of time there through indulgences, then why doesn’t he just release everyone from the wretched place?
 - Second and more importantly, Luther held that remorse for sins is not a bad thing, and one should not seek to escape it by gathering indulgences, whether through paying money or visiting shrines. In fact, it is precisely this contrition that leads one to repent and trust in Christ.
- The 95 Theses provoked an immediate and dramatic response.
 - All of Germany was swept away in the controversy.
 - Luther found his cause being taken up by other scholars (the Humanists especially enjoyed the discussion that was started), who shared both his concerns about the corruptions of the church and his affinity for original source texts, in this case the Bible.
- With the help of the printing press (1440-1450), Luther’s 95 Theses were circulated throughout Germany, and a copy even made its way to the chamber of Pope Leo X.
- In 1518, Luther was summoned to appear before a Diet in the city of Augsburg to answer charges of heresy. ***Luther refused to recant and declared that the pope and church councils could err.***
- In 1520 Luther published a series of books and tracts attacking the pope and elaborating on his positions. The most inflammatory and consequential of these was titled The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.
 - In it Luther argued that the papacy was the kingdom of Babylon that had dragged the church into captivity, just as the children of Israel had been exiled in Babylon centuries earlier.
- He also affirmed only baptism and communion as true sacraments instituted by Christ in the New Testament, and denied that the other five sacraments administered by the Roman Catholic Church (confirmation, confession, marriage, ordination, and last rites).
- Here was the most severe challenge medieval Catholicism had ever faced.
 - It had fought wars with Islam over territory and had conflicts with European emperors over the relationship between civil and church authority, but now the Church’s authority had been denied.
 - ***If the church could not control the application of God’s grace through its various sacraments, how would people trust it or even continue to support it?***
- Not surprisingly, The Babylonian Captivity caught the attention of a distressed Pope Leo X, who issued a bull (or written mandate).
- The declaration began with a quotation from the Psalms, “Arise O Lord, and judge Thy cause! A wild boar has invaded Thy vineyard!” The bull gave Luther sixty days to submit to the Pope.
- On the final day, Luther celebrated the expiration of the deadline by burning the bull and a set of writings that supported papal claims.

- As we've seen so many times in the past, the Holy Roman Emperor attempted to step into the fray. Charles V, who would go on to become the most powerful monarch between the Roman Emperors and Napoleon, summoned Luther to appear before the Diet at Worms on April 17, 1521.
- Luther was presented with a pile of his books and commanded to renounce them.
 - Before Luther could answer, the Emperor halted the procession and demanded that the books be checked, there were so many of them he didn't believe one man could have written them all!
- He was given a day, after which he replied to the court that he could not recant.
 - The prosecutor accused Luther of waffling and demanded a straight answer. Luther replied:
 - "Since Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will give an answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted 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."
- As one scholar has said, "*with these words, Protestantism was born.*"
 - And it was born on the foundation of the Bible as the supreme and final authority.
- He was given forty days to return home. After that, anyone could hand him over to the authorities to be burned. Unbeknownst to Luther, his prince, Frederick the Wise, had made plans to protect Luther.
 - On his way home, Luther was kidnapped by Frederick's men and taken to his castle at Wartburg, there to spend the next year in hiding.
- While at Wartburg, he wrote many significant works, including a German translation of the Bible that is celebrated still today for its precision and elegance of language.
- In Wittenburg, Luther's followers carried out reforms of the church based on Luther's teachings. On Christmas Day, 1521, one of these ministers held a mass after the new fashion – in plain clothes, with no mention of sacrifice and in the German tongue.
 - ***For the first time in their lives***, people heard in their own language the words, "This is my body!"
 - At this mass, the host was actually handed to the people instead of being placed on their tongues.
 - In Wittenburg, priests and monks began to marry, and Luther himself followed suit in 1525 when appropriately enough, this former monk married Katharine, a former nun.
- From 1517 to 1525, in the words of one scholar, Luther was "both the most revered and the most hated man in Europe."
- He engaged in numerous theological debates with the leading thinkers of the day. For example, he carried on a lengthy discussion with Erasmus over the nature of human freedom and the effects of our sin on our

inability to choose God on our own. These essays have been collected in a marvelous book, *The Bondage of the Will*, which is still in print.

- Later, he wrote some particularly harsh and unfortunate condemnations of the Jews, and called for them to be driven out of the land.
- Meanwhile, the theological principles of the Reformation spread rapidly through Europe.

Luther and His Doctrine

- So what did this man teach that got him in so much trouble? **There are four doctrines:**
- **Justification by Faith alone:** If it is shown that our best works are actually sinful, then we cannot trust in them to be the means by which we are saved. What then is the means by which the Gospel is applied to us? Luther answered this question in his study of **Romans 1**: “The Just shall live by faith.” There Luther found his answer, the means by which God takes our sin and nails it to the cross, and takes Christ’s righteousness and applies it to us is by faith, and only by faith. Luther calls this “the sweet exchange” and Luther calls JBFA “the summary of all Christian doctrine, by which the church stands or falls.”
- **Theology of Glory/Theology of the Cross:** **Galatians 2:16** ends with the statement: “by the works of the law, no one will be justified.” Have you ever really thought about what this means? Paul here is not talking about sin, he’s talking about what we would normally call virtue! When Luther read this verse and others like it, it cause him a great deal of anguish, because what Paul is saying that our very best attempts to be good will not save us. So, Luther pointed out that salvation is not a combination of Christ on the cross paying for our sin and our good works (either positive things, like giving to charity, or negative things like having just never killed anyone), salvation is not a team-up between Christ’s work and the very best within us.
 - Instead, Luther argued, your very best is still full of sin. The Bible commands us to love our God and our neighbor and then tells us that our very best attempts at such love are sinful.
 - Of course, this is horrendously offensive to us as human beings, we don’t like being told we’re sinners when we know we’re sinning, and we really don’t like being told we’re sinners when we think we’re doing something good.
 - That’s because, Luther says, we are inherently theologians of glory, people who are concerned to establish our own righteousness, however small that righteousness may be.
 - We will go to our graves to defend that inherent spark of goodness upon which we think our salvation rests.
 - Opposed to this theology of glory Luther held up the theology of the cross.

- Salvation comes when absolutely everything you are is recognized as insufficient and sinful and placed on the cross, both the actively sinful things and your best attempts at virtue must be nailed to the cross and in their place the righteousness of Christ must be received.
- **Believer's freedom**: If Christ has indeed totally and completely accomplished everything necessary for the work of salvation, if our sin is paid for and the law is totally obeyed, what do we then do?
 - Luther's answer was as long as you are not sinning, you may do what you please. In this he was quoting Augustine: "Love God, and do what you want."
 - So, for example, if we as a church ask the question: "Should we or should we not have an organ in our church?" Luther would say "Because the Bible lays down no law on that topic, we may either have or not have one as we so desire." We are free, because of the Gospel, to have joy in ourselves and in the world, not because we're wonderful individuals, but because of the cross.

CONCLUSION

- We would do well to remember the church stands on justification by faith alone.
- There is nothing else that we need to add or take away, just tell them the glory of God through the person and work of Christ.