
CHURCH HISTORY

“Now these things took place as examples for us...”

Martin Luther



1483-1586

Luther and the Reformation

Lesson 14

Most date the beginning of the Reformation with Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the Wittenburg church door in 1521. Although efforts at church reform had preceded Luther's protest, none have the effect of his. Because of the printing press, his 95 Theses were reprinted and widely distributed. They fomented a spiritual uprising against the church across Europe.

The centers of the Reformation Movement can be divided into three parts: Germany and northern Europe, Switzerland, and England, with surrounding countries influenced by these centers. There is little effect in the areas south of the Alps. Italy, Spain, and other areas are strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance and their common Latin heritage. These will remain the strongholds of the Catholic church. Also, there is little effect in the east under the Greek Orthodox church.

The movement's greatest years are from 1517 to 1545. Certainly its effects are felt to this very day, but these years are the time of revolutionary dissent and the separation from the Catholic church. It is instructive to observe the differing views of the period by historians. Protestant historians see it as an effort to restore the purity of the church and New Testament Christianity. Catholics view it as a heretical rebellion against the church. Secular historians see it as an outgrowth of the social-economic upheaval taking place at the same time. It is simply a political event that helped overthrow the Catholic church's economic power in Europe. Perspective is everything. But we will examine this era for its effect on the spiritual landscape and future of Christendom.

No one is more important to this movement than Martin Luther. He is truly the father of the Reformation.

Martin Luther

Luther was born in 1483 of parents of some means. Recent evidence shows his father was somewhat successful in the copper smelting business and looked forward to this exceptionally bright son joining him in the family business. But Luther's heart turns to

Luther's 95 Theses



The town's church door was much like a community bulletin board. Things of interest to the community were posted for all to read as they came for mass or confession. Luther had no expectation of his paper being widely circulated. He likely hoped for another priest in the area to desire to debate the points with him. But they struck a chord with a restless and dissatisfied laity and it began a revolution.

spiritual matters and he chooses the priesthood, over his father's protests. He is eventually assigned to a church in the small town of Wittenburg. It will remain his home for the rest of his life.

Luther's Trip to Rome

In 1510 Luther is asked to be part of a delegation to go to Rome to help settle a dispute within his religious order (Augustinian). What he sees in Rome shakes him to the core. He viewed his trip as an opportunity to see all the holy sites and view all the holy relics. These each carried blessings/indulgences for the viewer. He hoped to gain them for himself and for his family. His dedication to this was admirable but will also lead him to question indulgences.

While he spent most of his time in the city in dedicated spiritual pursuits, he heard and observed the rampant corruption and immorality of the hierarchy; Priests who flippantly say masses as fast as possible, being paid by patrons per mass performed; Cardinals keeping mistresses and seeking offices for their illegitimate offspring; the pope and archbishops selling offices to the highest bidder; officials using their power to accumulate wealth; learning of popes known for their openly promiscuous lifestyles. His revulsion was extreme and he returns home, shaken by what he had seen and heard about these men. But he still believed in the church. It just needed to be purified from such corruption and moral degradation.

Luther's Transformation

Upon his return Luther begins intense study of the original languages of scripture. His resulting study of the text led him to a belief of the sole authority of the scriptures. His study also led him to believe in the inefficacy of the sacraments. He eventually came to reject the idea that works played a role in salvation at all. This discovery led to his overcoming of a lifelong struggle with his sins. He had believed he could never do enough to be forgiven by a God whose main role was to judge. So great was the burden he felt for his sinfulness, and the need to confess each one, he spent as long as six hours a day in confession to the priest. When he realized that Jesus was a God of mercy who truly died for *all* his sins, he came to understand all his sins were covered in the sacrifice of Christ. This led to his erroneous belief that no works would play a role in salvation. Jesus had accomplished all that was necessary. This belief will lead him to a reaffirmation of many of the teachings of Augustine on the complete sovereignty of God - no free will, predestination, limited atonement, grace before faith, eternal security. These would become foundation stones of the Reformation. Luther's rejection of works is essentially a rebellion against the Catholic church's control over the individual by having the sole power to dispense the sacraments - works required to be saved.

Johann Tetzel



Tetzel's magnificent procession into a town

Tetzel's sale of indulgences in Europe helped touch off the Reformation for it was his actions that were the tipping for Martin Luther. Though Tetzel never entered Wittenburg, citizens of the town who had gone to Tetzel returned with accounts of the things for which people were able to buy indulgences. Luther was incensed and soon wrote his 95 Theses.

Luther and Indulgences

In 1517 Johann Tetzel was authorized to raise money for Archbishop Albert. Albert needed money to repay a loan he used to pay the pope for his office. Pope Leo X authorized Albert to sell indulgences to repay the loan if Albert gave half to him to finish building St Peter's in Rome. Indulgences had become a major moneymaker. An indulgence assuring salvation had been given to those who went to fight in the Crusades. But they had developed into almost a license to sin. Their main use was to provide a way to benefit from the abundance of extra meritorious works of Mary, Christ, the apostles and the saints. This treasury of merits could be dispensed to others by the pope. Receiving an indulgence meant forgiveness of venial sins and a shortened time in purgatory. Tetzel went overboard in his efforts. He promised immediate release from purgatory for family members. He promised forgiveness to the buyer even without repentance. Even future sins could be forgiven through an indulgence.

Tetzel's actions incensed Luther and led to his 95 Theses - statements against the many things he saw wrong with the church. He never envisioned it being distributed widely. But printers would print anything that would sell and this sold big time. This will quickly lead to response from church officials. If you wanted to raise the ire of the church, attack its sources of revenue. Indulgences had become a major monetary source. Luther is eventually called before church officials to recant. He defended his views and gained supporters. The church saw him as a growing threat. He writings condemned the hierarchy, sacraments and theology of the Roman church, appealing directly to scripture. In June 1520 pope Leo X issued a papal bull that eventually led to Luther's excommunication.

Luther's close friend and scholar, Melancthon, became the theologian of the Reformation, organizing the beliefs they shared. They become the basis of the Augsburg confession, the official creed of Lutheran churches.

Luther's Translates the Scriptures

After defending his beliefs at the Diet of Worms, Luther went into hiding from 1521 to 1522. During his isolation he completed a German translation of the New Testament from the Greek in one year. The Old Testament was completed in 1534. His translation essentially set the form for the German language, much like the King James Bible did for English.

Luther later returned to Wittenburg at risk to his life but was able to live out his years there. During this time he married and repudiated the teaching of celibacy for priests. He had seven children.

Luther's Legacy

Lutheranism would spread to Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. Lutheran ideas would influence most other protestant denominations from this era.

Luther's main reforms centered in moral and spiritual renewal and biblical authority. This leads to a break with papal authority and eventually the Roman church. Protestant churches retained much of the form and liturgy of Rome. Heads of state actually became overseers of their state's church. (Luther saw this as necessary to aid in organization and discipline in the church.) There is no concept of congregational authority.

The importance of Luther cannot be over emphasized. His courage of conviction and unwavering faith inspired an entire movement. He begins a protest against Catholicism that had not been thought possible. Neither did Luther. He had no idea what his opposition to Tetzal would produce. His legacy to us may not be doctrine. But he opens the door for others to study the scripture and learn biblical doctrine. He also stops the idea of authority vested in men but authority based on the Lordship of Christ alone. He gives followers of the Bible the right to study on their own and seek simple New Testament Christianity. For that we are deeply indebted to him.