

Sunday, April 17, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 30 Martin Luther and the Protestant Revolution

Note: The original research for this lesson was done for the writing of *The Protestant Revolution and the Thirty Years War*. Copies of this work can be purchased from Grace Life Bible Church for \$4.00 per copy.

Reformation or Revolution?

- The event commonly known as the Protestant Reformation is more accurately termed a “revolution” according to noted historian Jacques Barzun. Barzun states:
 - “The Modern Era begins, characteristically, with a revolution. It is commonly called the Protestant Reformation, but the train of events starting early in the 16C and ending—if indeed it has ended—more than a century later has all the features of a revolution. I take these to be: the violent transfer of power and property in the name of an idea.” (Barzun, 3)
- In modern times, Western society uses the term revolutionary too loosely. Whenever a new technology, gadget, or practice hits the market that changes our domestic habits or makes life a little easier, the culture screams revolutionary! Unfortunately, this liberal use of the word has detracted from its true meaning. When something is truly revolutionary it changes more than our personal habits or a widespread practice. True revolutions give culture a new face. (Barzun, 3)
- According to Barzun, it is incorrect to view the Protestant Revolution as merely religious in nature,
 - “To call the first of the four revolutions religious is also inadequate. It did indeed cause millions to change the forms of their worships and the conception of their destiny. But it did much besides. It posed the issue of diversity of opinion as well as faith. It fostered new feelings of nationhood. It raised the status of the vernacular languages. It changed attitudes toward work, art, and human failing. It deprived the West of its ancestral sense of unity and common descent. Lastly but less immediately, by emigration to the new world overseas, it brought an extraordinary enlargement of the means of West and the power of its civilization.” (Barzun, 4)
- Protestant theology provided the philosophical justification for the formation of new political structures that would break with Roman Catholicism and assert their own autonomy. The new religious ideas that were being articulated by Martin Luther and others gave the German princes an ideological justification for breaking with the Roman Catholics and increasing their own power. The net effect of these changes was that, as advertised by Barzun, the cultural and political landscape of Europe was permanently altered.
- At the dawn of the sixteenth century the church in the West had successfully weathered many of the storms that besieged it during the Middle Ages. While Islam continued to spread in Africa and Asia, Western Christendom remained loyal to Papal authority despite a series of challenges during the Renaissance. (Price and Collins, 130) On the eve

of the Protestant Revolution two phenomena were already at work within European society.

- First, in order to replenish their coffers, the Church began to sell indulgences, as a means of divine favor for the afterlife in order to shorten one's stay in purgatory. Many, including the Dutch humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus, viewed the sale of indulgences as well as many of the Church's other practices as immoral. As the foremost theological scholar of his day, Erasmus penned many books that became popular, in which he skillfully utilized satire to attack the poor state of the Church. Consequently, it has commonly been stated with regard to the emergence of the Protestant movement, that "Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it." (Price and Collins, 130)
- Second, combined with the popular spiritual unrest that was burgeoning throughout Europe in the early sixteenth century, political tensions were also emerging. Many of the European monarchs sought to control their own national churches and resented not having dominion over church lands. As a result, these rulers presented a growing challenge to the authorities in Rome. Europe was now spiritually and politically primed for revolution. All that was missing was the spark that would ignite the flames. (Price and Collins, 130)

Luther Sparks a Revolution

- When Martin Luther posted his Ninety Five Theses on the door of All Saints' Church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, that last thing he wanted to do was to break up the Catholic Church and divide the world into warring camps. Rather, Luther sought to elicit the truth about the sacrament of penance which was a timely question given the current sale of indulgences that was occurring within the Church. (Barzun, 4-5)
- Despite receiving virtually no attention, debate, or discussion within the academic community of the University of Wittenburg, Luther's ideas would strike a popular cord. Using the newly invented moveable type printing press invented by Gutenberg, Luther's Ninety Five Propositions were soon printed and widely circulated throughout Germany in the vernacular tongue in a matter of weeks, the results were astounding. (Schaff, 156)
- The wide distribution of Luther's theses set Europe ablaze, as men realized that a voice had at last been raised to utter what most felt, that the whole system of indulgences was a fraud and had no place in the Gospel. (Broadbent, 161)
- Bearing the title "Disputation to explain the Virtue of Indulgences," Luther's theses are surprisingly Catholic in tone and doctrine. Noted church historian Philip Schaff makes the following observations with regard to Luther's propositions:
 - They are no protest against the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church, or any of her doctrines, not even against indulgences, but only against their abuse. They expressly condemn those who speak against indulgences, and assume that the Pope himself would rather see St. Peter's Church in ashes than have it built with the flesh and blood of his sheep. They imply belief in purgatory. They nowhere mention Tetzl. They are silent about faith and justification, which already formed the marrow of Luther's theology and piety. He wished to be moderate,

and had not the most distant idea of a separation from the mother church.(Schaff, 157)

- Too heavily immersed in Italian and European politics, Pope Leo X took little more than a casual notice of Luther's propositions that had been forward to him, considering them a relatively unimportant debate among monks. However, by the summer of 1518, Luther had been summoned to Rome by the Pope to answer the charges of heresy and contumacy. Through the good offices of the Elector of Frederick, the hearing was transferred to Germany in connection with a meeting of the imperial Diet at Augsburg. (Latourette, 709)
- Cardinal Cajetan (Thomas de Vio of Gaeta), represented the Pope at the German Diet where Luther was interviewed three times. The Cardinal demanded that Luther retract his errors and submit to the authority of the Pope. Luther refused to acquiesce declaring that he could do nothing against his conscience and that one must obey God rather than man, arguing that the scriptures were on his side. (Schaff, 172-173)
- Cajetan, in turn, threatened Luther with excommunication, having already the papal mandate in his hand, and dismissed him with the words: "Revoke, or do not come again into my presence." Clearly at an impasse with the Church authorities and, with the aid of his friends, Luther escaped from Augsburg, but not before leaving an appeal with Cajetan to the Pope himself. On 28 November 1518, Luther formally appealed to the Pope for a general council and thus anticipated the papal sentence of excommunication. (Schaff, 173-175)
- Perhaps perceiving that the writing was already on the wall in terms of his future within the Catholic Church, Luther abandoned the bland approach of the theses and began a direct assault upon the Roman Church. "In 1520, he boldly stated his position in five tracts which are often regarded as the primary expositions of his distinctive convictions." Turning to the German populace for popular support, all five of these tracts were published in the vernacular languages and therefore enjoyed wide circulation. (Latourette, 709)
- The first tract entitled *Sermon on Good Works*, was published in May. In it, Luther articulated his position on justification being by faith alone resting in the merits of Christ. Moreover, Luther's first tract sought to debunk the Catholic belief that power to forgive sins resided in the sacraments being administered by the church. (Latourette, 710-711)
- The publication of, *To the Christian Nobility of the German nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate*, in September, "called on princes to correct the abuses within the church, to strip bishops and abbots of their wealth and worldly power, and to create, in effect, a national German Church." (Shelley, 241)
- As such, Luther's address to the German nobility contained his most scathing assessment of the Roman system thus far. He argued that the Roman Church had erected three walls in its defense which had caused Christianity to suffer. The first wall Luther sought to topple was the superiority of Popes, bishops, priests, and monks over the laity whom He identified as being princes, lords, artisans, and peasants. Rather, Luther argued that all Christians are consecrated priests by baptism, and that the only difference amongst Christians is one's office. He thus sought to sweep aside the principle which exempted

- clergy from the jurisdiction of civil authorities. The second wall that Luther attempted to scale was the Papal claim to have the exclusive right to interpret the Scriptures. Thirdly, Luther used the famous Council of Nicaea to question the Pope's authority to summon councils and confirm their acts on the grounds that it had been called by Emperor Constantine a secular authority. Furthermore, he condemned the luxury of the Popes and Cardinals and challenged their authority in domestic matters by suggesting that, when a Pope caused an offence to Christendom, temporal rulers ought to have the authority to summon him to a council. (Latourette, 710)
- In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther assaulted the church with a caustic ferocity suggesting that Rome's sacramental system held Christians captive. "He attacked the papacy for depriving the individual Christian of his freedom to approach God directly by faith, without the mediations of priests, and he set forth his own views of the sacraments." To be valid, Luther asserted that a sacrament had to be instituted by Christ and be exclusively Christian. Using these parameters Luther disposed of five of the seven Roman Catholic sacraments. Maintaining only Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Luther placed these within the community of believing Christians rather than in the hands of the priesthood. "As a result, Luther brushed aside the traditional view of the Church as a sacred hierarchy headed by the pope and returned to the early Christian view of a community of Christian believers in which all believers are priests, called to offer spiritual sacrifices to God." (Shelley, 241)
 - In November of 1520, Luther penned *The Freedom of the Christian Man*, and addressed it to the Pope. This tract's most famous line reads, "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone." (Schaff, 221) By this Luther meant that, since justification is by faith alone and cannot be earned by good works, he who has this faith is freed from the bondage to the law and from seeking to earn salvation by works. (Schaff, 222) Not to be misunderstood, he did not discourage good works but believed that the inner spiritual freedom that comes from the certainty found in faith should lead all true Christians to perform good works. (Shelley, 242) Plainly stated, Luther wrote, "Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works." (Latourette, 715) Thus on the eve of his excommunication, now virtually insured as the result of his 1520 writing campaign, Luther removed the necessity of monasticism by stressing that the essence of Christian living lies in serving God in one's calling whether secular or ecclesiastical. (Shelley, 242)
 - Alister McGrath, the renowned University of Oxford professor of Historical Theology and author of *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution*, has summarized four principles of Luther's religious reforms that gave birth to the religious and political revolution that was to follow.
 - The first principal according to McGrath, is the belief that the Bible is the ultimate foundation of all Christians' faith and practice. Often referred to as the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, this doctrine contends that "the Bible was central to the life and thought of the church, as it was to the personal devotion of the individual Christian."
 - Second, desiring to break from the clerical and academic monopoly of the priesthood over the Scriptures, Luther maintained that the text of the Bible and

all preaching based upon it should be in the vernacular everyday language of the people.

- Next, Luther asserted that salvation is a free gift of God received by faith; totally separate from the requirements and sacraments of the Roman Church.
- Fourth, he argued that there is no fundamental distinction between clergy and laity, a doctrine commonly known as the Priesthood of all Believers, had tremendous implications. Congregations of believers were free to select their own pastors and teachers in addition to clergy being allowed to marry. (McGrath, 56-57)
- In summary, Luther's reforms were not a piecemeal demand for change; his fundamental conviction was that the church of his day had lost sight of some fundamental themes of the Christian gospel.
- Using Barzun's definition of a revolution, one can clearly see how the ideas articulated by Luther were revolutionary in nature; and how they threatened the religious and political status quo of Western Europe. Herein lies what McGrath refers to as Christianity's Dangerous Idea, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers which allowed believers to bypass the ideas of a centralized authority and interpret the Bible for themselves. As time went on, "not even the personal authority of Luther could redirect this religious revolution, which anxious governments sought to tame and domesticate." The result of this idea was a radical reshaping of Christian society and the violent transfer of power and property in the name of an idea. There can be little doubt that a momentous revolution was now under way in Europe. (McGrath, 3-4)

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