Sunday, May 1, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 31 Martin Luther and the Protestant Revolution, Part 2

Note: The original research for much of 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.

German Princes and Peasants Support the Revolution

- Ideas are only revolutionary if they are embraced by the majority of society. Luther's use of the vernacular language was critical in fostering a revolutionary spirit amongst the common people within Germany. Before 1520 the average press run of a printed book had been about one thousand copies. In contrast, printers produced four thousand copies of Luther's *To the Christian Nobility*, and were completely sold out in only a couple of days with thousands more soon to follow. Meanwhile as Luther's pamphlets were selling so rapidly, his personal drama riveted all onlookers. (Reyrand, 137)

- Late in 1520, Pope Leo X issued a decree threatening Luther with excommunication unless he recanted the views expressed in his series of five tracts. (Beck, 490) On 10 December 1520, Luther responded by casting the bull (Papal order) calling for his recantation and all of the Church's laws onto a roaring bonfire in front of a huge crowd. (Schaff, 248)

- By this time it was clear to Roman authorities that Luther was more than a fly by night agitator; Papal supporter, Jerome Aleander, recorded the popular attitude in Germany prior to the Diet of Worms he wrote:

    - "All Germany is up in arms against Rome. All the world is clamoring for a council that shall meet on German soil. Papal bulls of excommunication are laughed at. Numbers of people have ceased to receive the sacrament of penance. . . Martin is pictured with a halo above his head. The people kiss these pictures." (Durant, 359)

- The excitement was fanned by a whirlwind of anti-Papal pamphlets; a wagon, Aleander mourned, would not hold all these scurrilous tracts. Luther had clearly captured the hearts and minds of the German populace. (Durant, 359)

- On 11 December 1520, the day after the burning of the Papal bull, Luther took his final revolutionary step and proclaimed that no man could be saved unless he renounced the role of the Papacy. The monk had excommunicated the Pope. (Durant, 359) Upon receiving word of these events, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther and released him to his lay overlord, the Elector Fredrick the Wise, for proper punishment. Instead of burning Luther at the stake, which would have been the customary punishment for heresy, Fredrick claimed that Luther had not yet received a fair hearing and brought, him in January 1521, to be examined by a Diet of princes of the Holy Roman Empire convening in the city of Worms. (Ralph, 687)

- The German problem now fell into the hands of the young newly elected emperor, Charles V, who was under oath to defend the church and remove heresy from the Holy Roman Empire. (Shelley, 242) As the grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain,

Charles not only shared his grandmother's desire for a moral reform of the Church but also her adherence to the doctrines of which the Pope was the guardian. (Latourette, 716)

- Viewing Catholicism as the glue that held his far-flung empire together, Charles had no sympathy for Luther. On 18 April 1521, the second day of questioning after a rough first day, Luther uttered his now famous response in German:

    - Since your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without distinctions . . . Unless I am convicted by testimony of Sacred Scriptures or by evident 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 my conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen. (Durant, 361)

- Now possessing no other choice but to officially brand Luther a heretic, Charles V was faced with the prospect of martyring the most popular figure in all of Germany. Fearing public opinion and knowing that the support of the German princes might lead to revolution, Charles V, with the sanction of the Pope, secured for Luther a safe passage back to Wittenberg. (Durant, 362)

- Despite these promises, Luther's supporters feared that he would face the same fate as John Hus who was murdered while making a similar journey despite the promises of an earlier Emperor. (Latourette, 717) "In a piece of superb melodrama, he was kidnapped by a group of bandits and held in captivity in Wartburg Castle from May 1521 to February 1522." Elector Fredrick the Wise had pressured the reluctant monk to consent to the "kidnapping" so that Luther could be protected without Fredrick laying himself open to the charge of harboring a heretic. (McGrath, 55)

- While in Wartburg, Luther began making his landmark translation of the New Testament into German, thus implementing his own demand that God's Word be made available to all people.

- Meanwhile, on 26 May 1521, the Diet of Worms issued its' official edict. The council ruled that beginning on 15 April 1521, Luther was to have twenty one days after which time; no one was to harbor or aid him in anyway. Moreover, his followers were condemned and his books were ordered to be burned anywhere they were found. (Durant, 363)

- At this point, Luther's hopes of reforming the Catholic Church had been dashed. But there was an alternative, a dangerous, radical, and groundbreaking possibility that was open to Luther. Thanks to his being backed by German princes; he could create a new church and start all over again. Luther's ideas were now being backed by secular principalities and powers thus providing a formula that would soon lead to violence.

- While in exile at Wartburg Castle, disguised as a minor nobleman and living under the assumed name Junker George, the revolt against Rome spread without Luther's direct leadership. (Price and Collins, 134) "In town after town, priests and town councils removed statues from the churches and abandoned the Mass. New reformers, many of them far more radical than Luther, appeared on the scene." By far, the most critical development during Martin's stay at Wartburg was that German princes, dukes, and

electors were defying the condemnation of Luther by giving support to the new movement. (Shelley, 242-243)

- No matter how influential Luther had become within the German populace. His cause surely would have failed had it not been for the decisive intervention and support of constituted political authorities. (Ralph 688) The authors of *World Civilizations: Their History and Culture* offer the following insight into this matter:

    - "There had been heretics aplenty in Europe before, but most of them had died at the stake, as Luther would have done without the intervention of Frederick the Wise. And even had Luther lived, spontaneous popular expressions of support alone would not have succeeded in instituting Lutheranism because such could easily have been put down by the power of the state. In fact, although in the early years of revolt he was more or less equally popular throughout Germany, only in those territories where rulers formally established Lutheranism (mostly in the German north) did the new religion prevail, whereas in the other Luther's sympathizers were forced to flee, face death, or conform to Catholicism. In short, the word of the prince in religious matters was simply law." (Ralph, 688)

- The German princes that chose to support Lutheranism did so for a variety of reasons. Some truly believed and embraced the movement's doctrinal teachings; others did so for their own economic and political gain.

- German princes had assembled at the Diet of Augsburg in 1500 to demand a refund of some of their ecclesiastical dues they had sent to Rome on the grounds that their coffers were being drained. As one might expect, these requests fell on deaf ears within in the Vatican. With the emergence of Lutheranism, many German princes were quick to perceive that if they embraced this new religious movement, ecclesiastical dues would not be sent to support foreigners and that much of the savings would directly or indirectly wind up in their own bank accounts. (Ralph, 688)

- In addition to the economic matter of taxation, the larger political issue of the early 16th century was the search for absolute governmental sovereignty. "Throughout Europe the major political trend in the years around 1500 was toward making the state dominant in all walks of life, religious as well as secular." (Ralph, 688-689) As a result, many rulers fought for the right to appoint their own church officials within their own realms thus limiting the independent jurisdiction of Church courts. Consequently, many Germany princes seized the revolutionary religious ideas of Luther as their chance to assert their political independence from the Catholic Church.

- While individual religious beliefs no doubt played a part in this power grab, the most common aim was the gaining of sovereignty by naming pastors, cutting off fees to Rome, and curtailing the jurisdiction of Church.(Ralph, 689) In the end, what the German princes were not able to secure through negotiation they were prepared to wrest by force.

<u>The Revolution Turns Violent</u>

- Using Barzun's notion of a revolution, Protestantism's primary ideas at this point had been articulated by Luther, embraced popularly, and supported by a plethora of German princes. According to Barzun's revolutionary definition, the situation was about to erupt

into violence as power and property where now up for grabs. Commenting on the religious and politically charged situation within Germany, Barzun writes:

- "An idea newly grasped stirs the blood to aggressiveness. From safe corners such as universities and monasteries, force was called for, and many laymen were not afraid to use it. They quoted Luther: "One must fight for the truth." When possessions were at stake, whether simply threatened or taken over the Protestants, armed conflict was inevitable. Pulpits, churches, and other religious houses, town offices, and privileges that went with all these changed hands—and more than once. Local sentiment, coupled with power, decided ownership." (Barzun, 15)

- Widespread violence swept over Germany with the Peasants' Revolt of 1524 through 1526. The German peasants were the beast of burden for society, and in no better condition than slaves. They were ground down by taxation, legal and illegal, a condition that would only worsen after the discovery of America and the rapid increase of wealth and luxury that followed. Long before the Protestant Revolution, revolutionary outbreaks took place in various parts of Germany, only to end as disastrous failures as they were put down by brute force. (Schaff, 441)

- In 1524, German peasants, excited by reformers' talk of freedom, and mistaking spiritual liberty for carnal freedom, demanded an end to serfdom.(Schaff, 442) Bands of angry peasants went throughout the countryside raiding monasteries, pillaging, and burning them to the ground. In addition, the peasants also demanded the right to choose their own clergy, be paid by their rulers for extra services performed, and claimed rights of land ownership.(Price and Collins, 134)

- Initially, Luther supported the peasants; however, he turned against them when Thomas Muntzer massacred the inhabitants of Weinsberg and burned castles and churches. (Price and Collins, 134) In a venomous tract, Luther urged the German princes to use whatever means necessary to put down the revolt. In response, both Protestant and Roman Catholic princes united their forces against a common enemy and successfully put down the rebellion, slaughtering over one hundred thousand peasants in the process.(Schaff, 447)

- Luther responded to the carnage by calling the nobility devils for their brutality, but the damage had been done. The ultimate result was that Luther lost the trust of those he had initially sought to help with his reforms. Despite losing much of his popular support, many northern German princes continued to support Lutheranism. (Price and Collins, 134)

- The temporary truce between the Protestants and Catholics did not continue after the end of the Peasants' Rebellion. It would not be long before religious antagonism would erupt into full scale warfare. Germany would witness twenty three years of war with periodic breathing spells as two unstable leagues of princes, Protestant and Catholic, sought to establish the dominance of their own faith and governmental power.(Barzun, 15) Even though the Edict issued at Worms in 1521 was binding; Charles V was too preoccupied with wars in France and Italy to enforce its ruling.(Latourette, 726)

- In the years following Worms and preceding the outbreak of open hostilities, the German princes had begun arranging themselves on one side or the other, with Northern Germany primarily supporting Lutheranism while the Southern states remained loyal to Rome. In 1524, Papal legates succeeded in organizing a league of Roman Catholic princes in Southern Germany. (Latourette, 726)

- In 1526, the First Diet of Speirer convened to consider the demands of the Catholics that the Edict of Worms should be enforced, and the counterproposals of the Protestants, that religion be left free until a general council, under German auspices, should adjudicate the disputes. To the surprise of many, the Protestants prevailed at Speirer. The council ruled that, pending the findings of future Diets', each German state in religion, "should so live, rule and bear itself as it thought it could answer to God and the Emperor." (Durant 442)

- Furthermore, it was decided that no one should be punished for past offences against the Edict of Worms, and that the Word of God should be preached by all parties, none interfering with the others. (Durant, 442) The revolutionaries interpreted this "Recess of Speirer" as sanctioning the establishment of Lutheran churches, the religious autonomy of each territorial prince, and the prohibition of the Mass in Lutheran areas. (Schaff, 683-687) While the Catholics rejected these assumptions, Charles V was too preoccupied with other matters to do much about the situation.

- In February of 1529, having settled the majority of his foreign distractions, Charles V ordered that the Diet of Speirer be reconvened. Possessing a Catholic majority, The Second Diet of Speirer repealed the "Recess" of 1526 and passed a decree permitting Lutheran services but requiring the toleration of Catholic services in Lutheran states, while completely forbidding Lutheran preaching in Catholic states, thus enforcing the Edict of Worms. (Schaff 690-691) On 25 April 1529, the Lutheran minority published a protest declaring that conscience forbade them from accepting the decree and appealed to the Emepor for a general council while pleading to hold unswervingly to the original "Recess of Speier," no matter the cost. (Durant, 442) Herein lies the origin of the term protestant; it was first used by the Roman Catholics to describe the German princes who protested the ruling of the Second Diet of Speirer. (Latourette, 727)

- By 1530, the religious and political situation within Germany was an absolute mess. Philip Schaff offers the following assessment of the situation:

    - "The Diet of Speier had forbidden the further progress of the Reformation: the Edict of Worms was in full legal force; the Emperor had made peace with the Pope, and received from him the imperial crown at Bologna; the Protestants were divided amongst themselves, and the Conference at Marburg had failed to united them against the common foe. At the same time the whole empire was menaced by a foreign power. The Turks under Suleiman . . . had reached the summit of their military power, and approached the gates of Vienna in September 1529." (Schaff, 696)

- Under these circumstances the Diet of Augsburg convened, on 8 April 1530. Its objective was to settle the religious question, and to prepare for war against the Turks. (Schaff, 696) Knowing the hour and the score, Charles asked the Protestants to put forth their beliefs in writing and demonstrate where they differed from the Roman Catholic Church. The resulting document became known as the Augsburg Confession, which was

henceforth regarded as the official presentation of the Lutheran position. (Latourette, 727)

- The document was drafted by Melanchthon, a student of Luther's, who being under imperial ban was not present at the meeting. Despite being absent from the Diet, Melanchton consulted his teacher and composed a two-part treatise outlining the articles of the faith which Lutherans and Catholics shared in common as well as those that were unique. The Swiss portion of the Empire, being the followers of Zwingli, refused to sign the Augsburg Confession and submitted their own document. Charles V attempts to reconcile the views of the revolutionaries with Catholic rebuttals failed. As a result, the Roman Catholic majority claimed that the Protestants had been refuted resulting in Charles decree that they had until April 1531 to submit to Papal authority. (Latourette, 727)

- Unwilling to capitulate, the Lutheran princes met at Schmalkalden and formed a defensive league which bore the name of the town in which it was formed. (Latourette, 727) Over the next twenty-three years, Germany existed in a state of almost constant warfare as leagues of Catholics and Protestants sought to establish their own political and religious dominance. (Barzun, 15) In 1532, a temporary truce was struck between Charles V and the Schmalkaldic League in order to defend the region against Turkish invasion. However, during the intermittent time Protestantism continued to spread throughout the Empire. (Latourette, 727-728) When conferences between Protestants and Catholics, held in 1540 and 1541 at Charles V's request, failed to bring peace, the Emperor sought to eradicate Protestantism from within the boarders of the empire and restore Imperial obedience within Germany. (Durant, 453)

- In order to accomplish his goal, Charles declared under the ban Philip of Hesse and Elector John Fredrick of Saxony, the nephew and successor of Elector Fredrick the Wise who had aided Martin Luther. (Durant, 454) In the ensuing war, both Protestant princes were defeated and imprisoned. Protestantism appeared to have been destroyed. (Latourette, 728)

- In actuality, the revolutionaries were far from being snuffed out, as large portions of the populace still embraced Luther's teachings. When war broke out again, this time the Protestant princes were aided by the King of France who was awarded the border cities of Metz, Toul, and Verdun for his support of the revolutionary cause. With French strength behind them, the Protestants defeated Charles V's forces and nearly captured him 1552. (Latourette, 729) "Arms and circumstances so favored the Protestants that they demanded everything: they were to be free in the practice of their faith in all German territory; Catholic worship was to be forbidden in Lutheran territory; present and further confiscation of Church property were to be held valid and irrevocable." (Durant, 456)

- The resulting Peace of Augsburg was established on 25 September 1555, and rested on the notion of *cuius region, eius religio* ("as the ruler, so the religion"), which meant that in those principalities where Lutheran princes ruled, Lutheranism would be the sole state religion and the same for those with Catholic princes. Thus, in order to permit peace among and within the states, each prince was to choose between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism. In addition, all ones' subjects were expected to embrace the religion of their realm or emigrate. (Ralph, 715)

- As such, the Peace of Augsburg was a historical milestone inasmuch as Catholic rulers for the first time acknowledged the legality of Protestantism; however, it boded ill for the future in assuming that no sovereign state larger than a free city could tolerate religious diversity. Moreover, in excluding Calvinism, it insured that Calvinists would become aggressive opponents of the status quo, a reality that would always make the Peace of Augsburg tenuous at best. (Ralph, 715-716)

- The real winner was not freedom of worship, but the freedom of the princes. Each became like Henry VII of England, the supreme head of the Church in his territory, with the exclusive right to appoint the clergy and the men who should define the obligatory faith. It was the princes not the theologians who had led Protestantism to its triumph; they naturally assumed the fruits of victory, their territorial supremacy over the emperor, and the ecclesiastical supremacy over the church. There can be little doubt that Protestantism fits Barzun's definition of a revolution. Luther and the theologians had articulated the ideas while the political authorities transferred power and property in the name of the theologian's ideas. (Durant, 456)

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