

Reformation Church History

Session 4—Luther and Lutheranism

After the Diet of Worms, Luther was spirited away to Wartburg Castle for his own protection. While in seclusion he worked on the German translation of the NT and wrote a tract on monastic vows in which he urged nuns and priests to leave the monastic life and marry.

I. Marriage

- A. Luther effected a sociological as well as a theological revolution, including a reformation in family life. He was a major force in changing the thinking about marriage. Before Luther, marriage was the second-best thing you could do, after the monastic life.
- B. In 1525 he married a former nun, Katharina von Bora. It was not initially a romantic attraction, but it grew into a deeply affectionate relationship. “The twenty-year marriage of convenience became a happy one: ‘I would not give my Katie for France and Venice together.’ ...’Katie, you have married an honest man who loves you; you are an empress.’”¹

II. Reformation Continues

- A. In 1521, Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s associate, wrote *Loci Communes* (Commonplaces), the first Protestant systematic theology. This was the idea of bringing different portions of Scripture together to formulate doctrine. Early on Melanchthon agreed with Luther’s theological positions, however later he would diverge significantly.
- B. Various challenges faced the work in Wittenburg. In late 1521, while Luther was at Wartburg, excesses occurred under Andreas von Karlstadt, who pushed for reform too rapidly. Iconoclasm ran

¹ Heiko Oberman *Luther*, , Image Books, New York, 1992, p. 280.
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rampant. For example, the “Zwickau Prophets,” claiming divine authority through dreams and visions caused disturbances in Wittenberg. Luther returned at great risk to himself and successfully contended with them by preaching a series of sermons. He argued that true reform comes through the conversion of hearts rather than external means. Proponents of more radical methods of reform then became suspicious of Luther.

- C. **Humanism also parted company with Luther.** In England, Henry VIII burned Luther’s books and earned papal approval and the honorary title *Fidei Defensor*. Henry himself might not be characterized as a humanist, but John Colet, John Fisher and Thomas More (the man for all seasons) were patronized by his court. When Luther responded sharply to Henry, Erasmus retaliated in a pamphlet “The Freedom of the Will.” Luther responded with, “The Bondage of the Will.”
- D. Luther’s reformation was primarily doctrinal. “... Luther’s first concern, as theologian and reformer, was with doctrine. ‘I am not concerned with the life, but with doctrines,’ he declared. This, he held, was what distinguished him from reforming spirits of earlier days. ‘Others, who have lived before me have attacked the Pope’s evil and scandalous life, but I have attacked his doctrine.’”²
- E. **In “The Bondage of the Will,” Luther’s most important theological work, he laid out the foundations of the biblical doctrine of grace.** Here he stands squarely with Augustine and in opposition to Pelagius, insisting that man’s will is bound due to original sin and so no possibility of earning merit exists. “Man cannot put God in his debt.”³
- F. “The doctrine of free justification by faith only, which became the storm-centre of so much controversy during the Reformation period, is often regarded as the heart of the Reformer’s theology, but this is hardly accurate.... the doctrine of justification by faith was

² Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, introduction by J.I. Packer, Revell, 1957, p. 44.

³ *Ibid.* p. 51.

important to them because it safeguarded the principle of sovereign grace; but it actually expressed for them only one aspect of this principle, and that not its deepest aspect. The sovereignty of grace found expression in their thinking at a profounder level still, in the doctrine of monergistic regeneration—the doctrine, that is, that the faith which receives Christ for justification is itself the free gift of a sovereign God, bestowed by spiritual regeneration in the act of effectual calling. To the Reformers, the crucial question was not simply, whether God justifies believers without works of law. It was a broader question, whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, and whether God is to be thought of as saving them by free, unconditional, invincible grace, not only justifying them for Christ's sake when they come to faith, but also raising them from the death of sin by His quickening Spirit in order to bring them to faith.”⁴

- G. **The Peasant's War** of 1524-25, was the largest popular revolt in Europe prior to the French Revolution (1789).⁵ At first Luther was sympathetic to the plight of the peasants and rebuked the landed classes. But after peasant atrocities when he urged the princes to put down the rebellion they did so, brutally. He has been strongly criticized for his position on this. The basis of the problem was economic. But also at this time a fanatic religious and revolutionary element spurred on by Thomas Müntzer was spreading.
- H. During the next five years, from 1525 to 1530 (Peasant's War to the Diet of Augsburg), Western Christendom divided into Protestant and Catholic camps. At the Diet of Speyer (1526) it was agreed that the prince of the political state would determine the religion of his state.
- I. United Catholic parties under emperor and pope, revived repressive policies at the second Diet of Speyer in 1529. They declared Roman Catholicism to be the only valid religion. The Lutheran princes issued a formal *Protestation*. It is from this time the term *protestant* came into being.

⁴ Ibid. Pages 58-9.

⁵ Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, B&H Academic, Nashville, 2009, p. 83.

- J. At the **Diet of Augsburg in 1530**, the **Augsburg Confession** was presented which became the official creed of the Lutheran church. Philip Melanchthon was its principal author. “The confession was remarkable for its careful wording and conciliatory tone. Melanchthon skillfully avoided controversial doctrines such as purgatory or papal authority. Luther said, ‘I have read Master Philip’s *Apologia* [Augsburg Confession] and it pleases me very much. I know of nothing to improve or change in it.’ It was a clear attempt at reconciliation without giving up the essentials of the Lutheran faith—all in all an effort to maintain peace in the empire.”⁶
- K. **The Marburg Colloquy, 1529** was an attempt to link all evangelical groups in Germany and Switzerland by political compact. The Elector of Saxony made it clear he would not join without consent from Luther and Luther would not consent without doctrinal agreement. A conference was arranged at the Marburg castle of Philip of Hesse. Luther and Ulrich Zwingli (of Zurich) discussed fifteen doctrinal points. On fourteen they agreed, but could not agree about the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli held a memorialist view while Luther believed the elements did more than merely *signify* the body and blood of the Lord, holding to a literal interpretation of the words, “this is my body.” The conference ended with Luther telling Zwingli, “You are of a different spirit.”

III. Blots on Luther’s Character

- A. **Diatribes regarding the Jews**—In 1523, Luther wrote a tract, *Jesus was Born a Jew*, in which he said that God had honored Jews above all people, therefore all ought to honor the Jews, as well. His goal was to evangelize the Jews.
- B. But in later life he had undergone a change and around 1542 wrote another tract, *On the Jews and Their Lies* in which he advocates that harsh measures be taken against them.

⁶ Frank James, *Church History, Vol. Two*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2013, p. 137.
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- C. Perhaps the only thing that can be said to moderate the jarring impression produced by this repulsive material is that Luther's anti-Semitism was theological, not racial. He was unfortunately, in many ways, a man of his age.
- D. **Scandal and hypocrisy**—Landgrave Philip of Hesse was a Lutheran prince crucial to Luther, politically. Hesse was a powerful duchy and Philip was one of Luther's earliest and staunchest supporters. He had married a woman, whom he did not love, in a political marriage. In such situations it was accepted, if not admitted publicly, that a mistress could be kept. Philip's conscience bothered him, somewhat. He felt bad about adultery, but not bad enough to stop. He wanted a young woman, Margaret Van der Saal, but her mother refused to allow it. Philip saw that the OT seemed to allow more than one wife. Luther/Melanchthon/Bucer agreed that Philip could take a second wife. Luther said he preferred bigamy to divorce.
- E. Luther didn't want to jeopardize Philip's position, so he told him to keep it quiet. But word got out. When he asked Luther what to do, Luther told him to lie. Luther is otherwise a man of principle—money and women were not issues for him, personally. But his role changed from visionary and movement founder to that of maintainer and caretaker. He compromised in order to maintain his organization.
- F. **The Death of Luther**— “Early in 1546 the counts of Mansfeld, two brothers, called Luther to Eisleben to settle a dispute. The journey was made in bitterly cold weather, and he contracted a cold which made him a victim of apoplexy. He spent three weeks in Eisleben, the place of his birth, and finished the arbitration, to the mutual satisfaction of the parties concerned, on February 17. The following night he became alarmingly ill. A friend asked him: “Reverend Father, will you stand by Christ and the doctrine you have preached?” To this Luther answered, “Yes.” It was his last word. He died early in the morning of February 18, 1546. His body was laid to

rest in a grave made to the right of the pulpit of the church in Wittenburg, upon whose door he had nailed the 95 theses.”⁷

IV. After Luther’s Death—Lutheranism

A. After Luther died, leadership fell to Melanchthon who turned in different theological direction. Two camps developed:

1. Gnesio-Lutherans (‘genuine’ Lutherans)

2. Philippists, who were more moderate in understanding of:

- a. Predestination. Luther had been a strong advocate of double predestination.
- b. Doctrine of salvation. A more synergistic understanding.
- c. The sacrament (Eucharist). Says there is no real presence. Was closer to Calvin’s understanding of dynamic (spiritual) presence.

B. **The Adiaphera Controversy**—This stemmed from Melanchthon’s attitude toward Roman Catholicism. He accepted the restoration of some traditions for the sake of compromise under the pretext that they were neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God and were therefore non-essentials (or *adiaphora*).

C. **The Schmalkald League**—This was a defensive alliance of Lutheran princes. Charles V defeated the Lutheran princes in the Schmalkald War (1546-47). Still, things were undecided and an uneasy stalemate between the two sides continued until, in 1554, when Lutheran and Catholic Princes met in 1555 and produced the Peace of Augsburg. For the first time, HRE accepts Lutheranism as a viable alternative within his realm. *Cuius regio eius religio*—the ruler of the region determines the religion of the

⁷ Lars Qualben, *History of the Christian Church*, Thomas Nelson, New York, 1942, p. 279.
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region. This eventually unraveled resulting in widespread wars of religion.

D. In 1577, the **Formula of Concord** brought some degree of reconciliation between the different Lutheran factions.

V. **Consequences of the Reformation.** While beginning as a purely religious movement disputing over the issue of indulgences, it resulted in much more, bringing change to practically every area of life.⁸

A. Lutheran church historian, Lars Qualben cites three cardinal principles which emerged from the Reformation.

1. The recognition of the Bible as the absolute authority in matters of life and doctrine. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli each rejected the Roman Catholic understanding of Bible and Tradition as joint rules of faith and conduct. Since the Bible was of such importance to the people, it had to be made available in the vernacular, and it was essential that people learn to read. The corollary of individual judgment and individual responsibility along with the importance of reading provided the impetus for universal education.
2. The proclamation of justification by faith alone as over against a Roman Catholic understanding of faith and good works necessary for salvation.
3. The priesthood of all believers meant that God, as revealed in Jesus Christ was available and accessible to every believer without the mediation of a priest. This overturned the idea of pope excommunicating and consigning to hell as well as the force of the interdict over a city or kingdom.

B. In addition, we can note some other results:

⁸ Qualben, p. 285.

1. Protestantism re-established the biblical place of the family and marriage as the norm, overturning the medieval monastic ideal of piety.
2. The collectivism of the Middle Ages was followed by a Protestant tendency toward individualism.
3. Protestantism eventually divided into three general confessions, Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican, and these three again produced a number of smaller divisions.⁹

⁹ Qualben, p. 287.