

The Life of Martin Luther – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An overview of the life of Martin Luther and his effect upon the medieval church
2. aim – To cause us to understand how the Protestant Reformation began in the 16th C.

b. outline

1. The Biography of Luther
2. The Development of Luther
3. The Immediate Effect by Luther
4. The Long-Term Effect by Luther

c. overview

1. the “medieval” period ends as we enter the 16th C.
 - a. the end of the 15th C. is the W church at her most desperate *morally*:
 1. the rise of *humanism* infecting the church with a man-centered approach to life
 2. the revival of *antiquity* changing the focus of art and literature away from the spiritual
 3. the hierarchy at the *zenith* of its corruption, dragging the church into apostasy
 - b. the end of the 15th C. is the W church at her most desperate *theologically*:
 1. the fall of Constantinople flooded W Europe and Italy with scholars who brought “Eastern” views
 - a. *i.e.* Greek became more common, and a return to the “sources” was recognized
 2. the ideas of the earliest reformers (Wycliffe, Huss) in reforming doctrine began to appear
2. it is into this period of great moral and theological “chaos” that Martin Luther appears ...

I. The Biography of Luther

Content

a. his early life

1. born in 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony Germany, the second son of Hans and Margaret (nee Lindemann)
2. at the age of one, the family moved to Eisenach, and his father became a copper mine part-owner
 - a. Hans remained in debt most of his life, and his children learned frugality from it
3. Luther had a very strict upbringing, complaining years later of what he experienced
 - a. and he suffered from periods of depression and anxiety, some related to these early years
 - b. yet, his father recognized his academic gifts and provided the means for an excellent education
4. he began his studies around 6-7 in Mansfield until he was fourteen
 - a. in 1497 he was sent to Magdeburg to continue, and then went to Eisenach, his mother’s hometown
 - b. two teachers there recognized his giftedness and recommended he attend the University of Erfurt
 - c. being young (17), he did not initially do well, but improved considerably and earned a Master’s
 - d. his father hoped that he would then become a lawyer, and he began to study law in 1505, but ...

b. his young adult life

1. in July 1505 (at the age of 21), Luther joined the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt
 - a. Luther had already had some doubts about a legal career, and certain events “elevated” it
 1. *e.g.* an outbreak of the plague took two of his examiners, and Luther had once cut an artery in his thigh – these created intense spiritual turmoil in him about his eternal condition
 - b. the decision was precipitated by a promise he made to St. Anne during a thunderstorm
 1. a lightning bolt striking nearby while he sheltered under a tree caused a great fear of death and hell in him, and he promised her he would become a monk
 2. *note*: the popular religion of the day stressed the suffering of the damned in hell, and this great sense of dread came over Luther, not wishing to “waste” his life pursuing material things
 1. *i.e.* in a time where people believed profoundly in heaven and hell, and that earthly life was only a brief pilgrimage, Luther’s brush with death made him aware of the transience of life
 3. *i.e.* Luther saw law as a waste of time, and dedicated his life to eternal pursuits
 - c. so, against his father’s wishes, he entered the order of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt
2. at first, Luther’s experience in the monastery was peaceful and happy, in worship, prayer, meditation
 - a. his superiors recognized his unusual abilities, and ordained him as a priest in less than 2 years

- b. but, in celebrating his first mass, Luther suddenly became overwhelmed with the nature of God present in that ritual, particularly coming into the presence of a holy God as a sinner
 - c. this continued in him – he believed that he was not doing “enough” to be saved – God appeared to him a severe judge (like his father), and he began to question whether he was saved
 - 1. **i.e.** he was overwhelmed by the holiness of God contrasted by his own sinfulness, and he saw Jesus as more of a *judge* than a Savior
 - 2. **note:** medieval theology taught (at this time) that justification was a *process* dependent on the grace of God in which human effort played a significant role
 - 3. for many, it offered a safe way to salvation; for others (like Luther) it was a fearful dogma, where human merit was “helped” by God’s grace in the process, but the “goal” was always elusive
 - a. the Church insisted (and still insists!) that salvation is *not* solely by human effort, but the *emphasis* on a human contribution was so strong that many believed it to be “the” means
 - b. **i.e.** justification was an *infusion* of righteousness over time through the sacraments
 - 3. so, Luther “threw himself” into the full means of grace offered by the church in the hope of accomplishing what he needed to complete the work of justification
 - a. he spent hours cataloging and confessing his sins, but still felt that he hadn’t done “enough”
 - b. **e.g.** his confessor, Johann von Staupitz, once suggested that he go commit an “actual” sin so that he would have something to confess, rather than his “hobby horse” sins
 - c. this spiritual struggle would plague him for years to come ...
- c. his teaching career**
- 1. in 1508, Luther was sent to the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg to lecture on Aristotle
 - 2. the next year, he was transferred to Erfurt where he lectured on theology for two years
 - 3. in 1510, Luther was sent to Rome on a mission by his monastic order
 - a. he hoped that the trip would benefit his soul (**i.e.** seeing the burial sites of saints, venerating the relics, and even climbing the 28 steps of the Lateran on his hands and knees to free his grandfather from purgatory)
 - b. but, he was bitterly disappointed with *doubt* in what he experienced – the corruption of the priests distressed him in their *irreverence* of the mass, along with the wholly secular nature of the city
 - 4. in 1511, he returned to Wittenberg to teach theology for Staupitz, where he remained permanently
 - a. in 1512, he received his doctorate, and in 1513 began his lectures in biblical theology at university

II. The Development of Luther

Content

a. the development of his view of justification

- 1. the study of Scripture had *not* been an important part of his theological education at Erfurt
 - a. the study of the *scholastics* was much more important
 - b. and, the standard *method* of exegetical study was the *Quadrige* = the fourfold meaning in a text: the *literal*, the *allegorical* (its doctrinal teaching), the *tropological* (its morality), and the *anagogical* (its future fulfillment of God’s promises)
 - 1. **i.e.** theologians used the Bible more for “proof-texting” doctrinal propositions
 - c. but, Luther *had* become a prolific reader of Scripture, and this was the *basis* of his teaching
- 2. Luther lectured through the Psalms from 1513-1515, and during them his theology was changing
 - a. **e.g.** he came to see references to “first person” statements in Psalms as those of Christ himself, a view of Christ taking upon *himself* the iniquity of the sinner
 - b. **IOW:** Luther began to move from a view of justification emphasizing what *man does* towards a view of what *God does* – his years of study of Scripture led him to a *crisis* moment ...
- 3. the **Tower Experience** – in the tower of the monastery
 - a. **note:** there is some *question* as to the date of this event, either 1515 or 1518 (his dating) – most Protestant scholars believe that it occurred in 1515 (faulty memory), *prior* to the 95 Theses
 - 1. if later, the change of view re: justification was a reaction to dealing with opposition
 - b. in lecturing on Romans, Luther came to struggle deeply with the meaning of **Romans 1:17** and the phrase “*the righteousness of God*” revealed in the gospel
 - 1. since “*righteousness*” was perceived (at this time) to be *God’s inherent nature as righteous*, the assumption was that this “righteousness” was the *justice of God over sin*
 - a. God’s formal or active righteousness, in which he is righteous and punishes the unrighteous
 - 2. but, since the phrase says that this righteousness is revealed “*in it [the gospel]*”, Luther struggled with how this justice of God against sin could be “good news”

- a. his many-year struggle with God's justice had led him to hate that justice *over him* – it was not “good news” that God punished sinners, for he saw *himself* to be the chief one
- 3. so, through great struggle and study, Luther came to realize that the righteousness of the verse was not something *in God*, but something revealed *in us through faith in Christ*
 - a. that, in Christ, God gives us his righteousness through faith, and the man of faith is justified before God *entirely* on the basis of what Christ procures and gives to him
 - b. in 1519, in his sermon *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, Luther states his new understanding:
“Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours ... this is the righteousness given in place of the original righteousness lost in Adam”
- 4. thus, justification could no longer be viewed as a *process*, the process of human beings “cooperating” with God's grace through the sacraments to “infuse” righteousness into them
 - a. **IOW:** Luther came to see himself as *already saved*, and not merely “plodding along” the road to salvation – the Christian life *with its required good works* was not the *condition* of salvation, but its *consequence*
 - b. **IOW:** justification was now *declared* over the sinner rather than something to be achieved, even though the declaration would be over a *continuing sinner*
 - 1. the “second” form of righteousness (see above sermon) would be “the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence”
- 4. the change in Luther's way of thinking would make the break with the medieval church inevitable
 - a. all the aspects of medieval teaching re: justification (**i.e.** the process) were now obsolete
 - 1. **i.e.** meritorious works, purgatory, the sacraments as infusion of righteousness, the priesthood acting as mediators, indulgences, and popular religious pieties all designed to “earn favor”
 - b. and all of this was based on *faith*: a trust that Christ's *completed* work had procured this righteousness from the Father and was willing to *impute* it to the sinner entirely by trust in *him*
 - 1. **i.e.** the **material principle** of the Reformation: *sola fide*, salvation by faith alone