

6. Martin Luther and the break with Rome

Introduction

Some acknowledgements as we begin: as ever let me mention my dependence on Capitol Hill Baptist Church and on Garry Williams' lectures in producing this material. I've also drawn on Ros Clarke's *The church under construction*, and Jim Cromarty's biography of Martin Luther entitled *A mighty fortress is our God*.

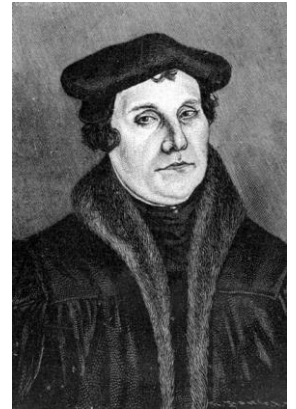
As begin let's PRAY and then listen to God's Word:

Romans 1:16-17, For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

1. Luther's problem with salvation (cf. Luke 10:25)

Luke 10:25, Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? That is the question that gripped the soul of Martin Luther.

Luther was born on the 10th November, 1483 in Eisleben (in modern Germany), to working parents who were ambitious for their children. His father was a miner.



He went to grammar school and then university, where students woke at 4am for "a day of rote learning and often wearying spiritual exercises." His father's plan was that Martin would become a lawyer.

Luther's brush with death

In 1505, Luther was riding back to university after a trip home during a storm. A lightning bolt struck very near to him. He was terrified by the notion that he could have died and would immediately have faced divine judgment. He cried out "Help, St Anna! I will become a monk," in the hope that by devoting his life to God in that way, he would find salvation. He survived. And against his family's wishes, he did just that.

However, he did not find the comfort he sought in the monastery. He was zealous and obedient, studying hard and committing himself fervently to the monastic life – fasting, praying, undertaking pilgrimage and doing penance. He was fastidious in the confessional, irritating one priest (Staupitz) so much that he said: "Look here brother Martin, if you're going to confess so much, why don't you do something worth confessing? Kill your mother or father! Commit adultery! Quit coming here with such flummery and fake sins."

But sincere devotion to religion did not help him. Speaking of this time of his life, he said, "I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul."

Nevertheless, he was ordained to the priesthood, gained a doctorate in theology, and became a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg.

He continued to experience a deep personal crisis over his own conversion. His mentor Von Staupitz encouraged him into mysticism. But it didn't help. The problem was that Luther, whilst deeply religious, had not been converted and had not – yet – discovered the Gospel of God's grace. He was stuck in the midst of Medieval Catholic dogma – he was stuck in the never-ending cycle of sin and penance.

Sin, penance and the Via Moderna

We've previously looked at the grim cycle of Catholic "salvation": you're born in original sin... by baptism you are moved to a state of grace in which God enables you to perform good works which result in righteousness... and yet we sin... fall from state of grace... require the church to grant absolution... and move back to that state of grace. The cycle continues until death, which is followed by purgatory or hell.

Later he would write of these years: "If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I would certainly have done so." But Luther never knew whether he had "done enough." Luther was schooled in what was known as the *Via Moderna* – the modern way. This school of theology was associated most with Gabriel Biel (d.1495). It had a very simple doctrine of salvation – which had to do with Luther's great problem: when have we "done enough." Biel taught that:

- Man cannot give God His due.
- God makes a pact or agreement whereby He considers what man *can* do to be *good enough*. "God will not deny grace to those who do what is in them," Biel taught. God demands 100%, but if we do our best – out of our own "natural goodness" – and only hit 50% then that will be good enough.
- Biel took human depravity seriously. But his schema was horribly un-Biblical and opposed to the doctrine of grace. It was semi-pelagian. Unsurprisingly, it did nothing to get Luther out of that cycle of works, sin and despair.

2. Luther's breakthrough to salvation

Some years later (some time in the 1510s), Luther was converted. It was studies in the Psalms and in Romans that brought him to Christ and to life.

He poured over Psalm 22:1 – "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" – until he realised until he realised that this was the cry of Jesus on the Cross. But how could it be, that the perfect Christ could be forsaken?

It was as he studied verses from Romans 1 that the Lord finally brought him into the light. Here are words from his ***Autobiographical Fragment***:

"I had certainly wanted to understand Paul in his letter to the Romans. But what prevented me from doing so was... that one phrase in the first chapter: "the righteousness of God is revealed in it" (1:17). For I hated that phrase, "the righteousness of God", which I had been taught to understand as the righteousness by which God is righteous, and punishes unrighteous sinners. Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually hated him..."

"I was in desperation to know what Paul meant in this passage. At last, as I meditated day and night on these words... I began to understand that 'righteousness of God' as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God; [that] by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'the righteous person lives by faith'. This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again... From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light... This passage in Paul became to me the very gate of paradise."

Luther realised that God's righteousness is not merely his own inner rightness. It is also something that he GIVES to sinners, something in which he clothes us and thus saves us from our sins.

According to Luther there are **6 characteristics of saving righteousness**. It is:

Alien: That is, it does not belong naturally to us. It is not *our* righteousness. God treats us on the basis of someone else's righteousness.

Imputed: It is counted to me, or reckoned to me.

Undeserved: You can do nothing to earn your salvation. You receive – you simply believe – and you are justified. Luther taught what we would call the doctrines of grace. In this respect Luther was a Calvinist! Later Lutherans would sadly move away from this.

Personal: That is, I must believe that this is *for me*.

Side by side with sin. In this life I am *simul justus et peccator, semper justus et peccator* – at the same time righteous and a sinner, always righteous and a sinner.

In hope, not daily reality. Justification and sanctification are different. Yes, I'm growing in godliness by the Spirit's power. But I continue to sin. Heaven is my hope.

Was this, though, a convenient legal fiction? Was Luther saying that God merely pretends that I am Jesus? Some have argued so, claiming that Luther's doctrine of justification was too legal, too forensic, too impersonal. This is a false objection. Why? Because our justification is rooted (and rendered just) because it takes place in the context of our union with Christ. Here's how Luther put it in his 1520 treatise on Christian Liberty:

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31--32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage -- indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage -- it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?

What are the consequences of the Bible's doctrine of justification by faith?

- Firstly, perfect peace. "This passage in Paul became for me the very gate of paradise."
- Secondly, humility. Luther's last written words were these: "We are all beggars now." He knew that as we confront a blazingly holy God there is "Nothing in my hand I bring."

In God's providence what was an intensely personal discovery did not stay confined to the experience of one man. It had far-reaching consequences.

3. Luther and the break with Rome

The presenting issue that led Luther to split with the Roman Catholic Church was the sale of Indulgences. You'll remember that these were certificates granting time-off punishment in Purgatory. It was the most horribly abusive and corrupt practice.

On All Hallows Eve (i.e. 31 October, 'Halloween') 1517 Luther nailed his 95 Theses Against Indulgences to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. They were translated and copies circulated quickly throughout Germany and the rest of Europe. Here are a few of his theses:

27. There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of the purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest.

36. Any Christian whatsoever, who is truly repentant, enjoys plenary remission from penalty and guilt, and this is given him without letters of indulgence.

37. Any true Christian whatsoever, living or dead, participates in all the benefits of Christ and the Church; and this participation is granted to him by God without letters of indulgence.

48. Christians should be taught that, in granting indulgences, the pope has more need, and more desire, for devout prayer on his own behalf than for ready money.

50. Christians should be taught that, if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence-preachers, he would rather the church of St. Peter were reduced to ashes than be built with the skin, flesh, and bones of the sheep.

There then began years of conflict and opposition. First, the Dominican Order of monks was immediately marshalled against Luther's own order, the Augustinians.

Then, in 1518 Luther was summoned to Rome, though instead was permitted to be examined by Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg. Cajetan argued that the Pope *did* hold the keys of purgatory. Luther argued against papal authority – and denounced the pope as Anti-Christ. He urged the necessity of faith for the sacraments to be effective, and declared Scripture as the final authority.

Rome demanded that Luther immediately be handed over. In God's providence Luther came under the protection of his local prince, the Elector Frederick of Saxony. He refused to hand Luther over. Further debates ensued. And in 1520 a papal bull – *Exsurge Domine* – gave him 60 days to recant or submit.

Luther burned a copy of the papal bull. And he was prolific in writing in response. In 1520 he wrote *The Three Treatises: Address to the German Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and On The Freedom of The Christian.*

In 1521 Luther was excommunicated. He would live under Rome's condemnation for the rest of his life.

At the Diet of Worms in April 1521 Luther was put on trial. He declared that "the Pope is the opponent of Christ and the apostle of the devil." It was demanded that Luther recant his teachings and his books. At this point he seems to have had a "wobble." It seems he was over-awed by the Diet (the name for the assembly). He asked for time to go away and think. The prosecutor had to press him for a clear answer. At which point he gave his famous declaration:

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and

contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."

He departed from Worms, whereupon he was kidnapped. But it turned out his kidnapper was his old friend, Prince Frederick. He was spirited away to the Wartburg Castle where he was known as "Sir George" (Junker Jorg). He was here for 10 months and was both enormously productive (e.g. he translated the New Testament from Greek into German), but also deeply troubled in his soul.

Luther returned secretly to Wittenberg in 1522. In 1525 – at the age of 42 – Luther married Catherine Von Bora. She was a hugely intelligent, strong-willed, plain-looking woman who had left a nunnery and sought refuge in Wittenberg. Marriage changed many things for Luther! He wrote to two friends:

Before I married no one made up my bed for a whole year. The straw was rotting from my sweat. I wore myself out with work during the day, so that I fell into bed oblivious of everything... [Now] One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtails on the pillow which were not there before."

Luther came to adore his Katie – and she him. She brought order to his life and home. She nursed him through physical ailments, and through the terrible of melancholy to which he was prone. God gave to Luther six children, though two died early in life. Luther became a tender and loving father, and had the terrible privilege of nursing his 14 year old daughter Lena as she lay dying. After she had passed into the presence of Christ he inscribed these words on her tomb:

*Here do I, Lena, Luther's daughter rest,
Sleep in my little bed with all the blessed.
In sin and trespass was I born;
For ever would I be forlorn,
But yet I live, and all is good –
Christ did save me with his blood.*

Luther himself died on 18 February 1546. He was buried in a tomb at the foot of the pulpit in the Castle Church at Wittenberg where all those years earlier he had nailed the 95 Theses.

4. Luther's doctrines and character: strengths and weaknesses

We've noted already his great re-discovery of **justification by faith**. Allied to that was his conviction about the sinfulness of sin. In this he stood shoulder to shoulder with Paul and Augustine. Most famously he wrote of this in ***The Bondage of the Will***.

Luther had a great commitment to ***Sola Scriptura*** – God's Word alone is Authoritative and God's Word alone brings the power of God to save men's souls.¹

¹ Luther famously wrote thus on the power of God's Word: "Take me, for example. I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and Amsdorf the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all. Had I wanted to start trouble.... I could have started such a little game at Worms that even the emperor wouldn't have been safe. But what would it have been? A mug's game. I did nothing: I left it to the Word."

Luther came to hold a particular understanding of **Law and Gospel**. It would prove quite different to that of Calvin and the Reformed churches. It was partly because of these convictions that Luther rejected the letter of James – as an epistle made of “straw” – with its clear statement that good works are necessary for salvation (as evidences of justification by faith).

He had a deep commitment to **education**, writing a catechism and pushing for the schooling not only of boys but of girls too.

His understanding of **work and vocation** was revolutionary. Previously the monks and nuns were the true servants of Christ. But now Luther understood and taught that the Christian can serve Christ in the fields, farm, army and family.

Family life was itself revolutionized under Reformation influence. It was no longer the case that celibacy was the superior state.²

Luther didn't get everything right, of course, either in his doctrine or his life.

His distinctive view of the **Lord's Supper** – what he termed “**consubstantiation**” – and the Christology that is connected with it – is unhelpful and would be rejected by Reformed and Calvinistic churches both in continental Europe and in England.

But more than that, **Luther's fiery and disputatious character** sometimes led him to fall out with people who should have been his allies. This was the case when in 1529 he met with some of the Swiss Reformers at the Colloquoy of Marburg. They discussed many matters, but fell out horrendously over their differing understandings of the Lord's Supper. Luther refused to shake hands with Zwingli, the great Zurich reformer, and even refused to call him brother-in-Christ.

Like the church in the Middle Ages Luther failed to find a godly **relationship between church and state**. He relied on the Elector Frederick to protect him personally from the Catholic Church and her political allies. But he also came to regard the state as responsible to enforce the newfound doctrines of the Reformation. This was a faulty idea in itself – after all, how you can coerce people to believe (faith is a matter of the heart). And it led him into some terrible decisions: on one occasion he lent his approval to the bigamous marriage of a Lutheran prince, the Landgrave Philip of Hesse – and then advised him to lie about it. And increasingly he supported Lutheran princes who by means of persecution and judicial murder got rid of any enemies of the Reformation – for example those slaughtered in the Peasants War or radical protestants such as the Anabaptists. Luther's largely pragmatic attitude to the prince was quite effective: Lutheranism took root where the *prince* was Lutheran.

Another blot on Luther's name is his treatment of the Jews. **Anti-semitism** was virulent and widespread in sixteenth century Europe. Luther was initially sympathetic toward Jews, wanting them to hear the good news of Christ and be saved. In his later years he lost all tolerance for them and advised the ruler of Saxony to be ruthless in his treatment of Jewish people. Luther was by no means alone in expressing such sentiments, but he was guilty of finding apparent biblical support

² To Luther is attributed this humorous couplet on the frequency of marital sex: “Twice a week, hundred-four a year / should give neither cause to fear”! Quoted in John Piper, *This momentary marriage*, p134.

for his views, giving them greater credence. It is also a good reminder that even the greatest Christian leaders can be mistaken, since they too are fallible sinners.

5. The Spread of Lutheranism

What would you have noticed if you lived in a little German town in the 1520s and Martin Luther's teaching started to have an effect? Here is what, typically, happened.

Monks would start leaving their monasteries – and some of them would quickly marry. Alongside the preaching of the Gospel this was the most visible sign of reformation.

What happened in church quickly started to look very different. The service would be conducted in German, not Latin. Readings would be given from a German Bible. The clergy would no longer wear vestments – the garb of a sacrificing priest. The laity would be offered communion in both kinds – wine as well as bread. German hymns were quickly written, replacing Latin choir singing. (Luther loved music. He likened his congregations singing of the new Protestant hymns as akin to a square dance in heaven). Local bishops were appointed to oversee groups of congregations. There were often problems caused by radical going too far – and having to be restrained.

From 1521 churches influenced by Luther sprang up all over Germany and beyond: in Altenburg, Augsburg, Basel, Strasbourg, Zurich. It was in the cities that most growth took place. Of the 65 cities in the Empire 51 became Protestant at some stage, and around half remained so. Key names behind this growth included Zwingli, Bucer, Melancthon, Oecolampadius.

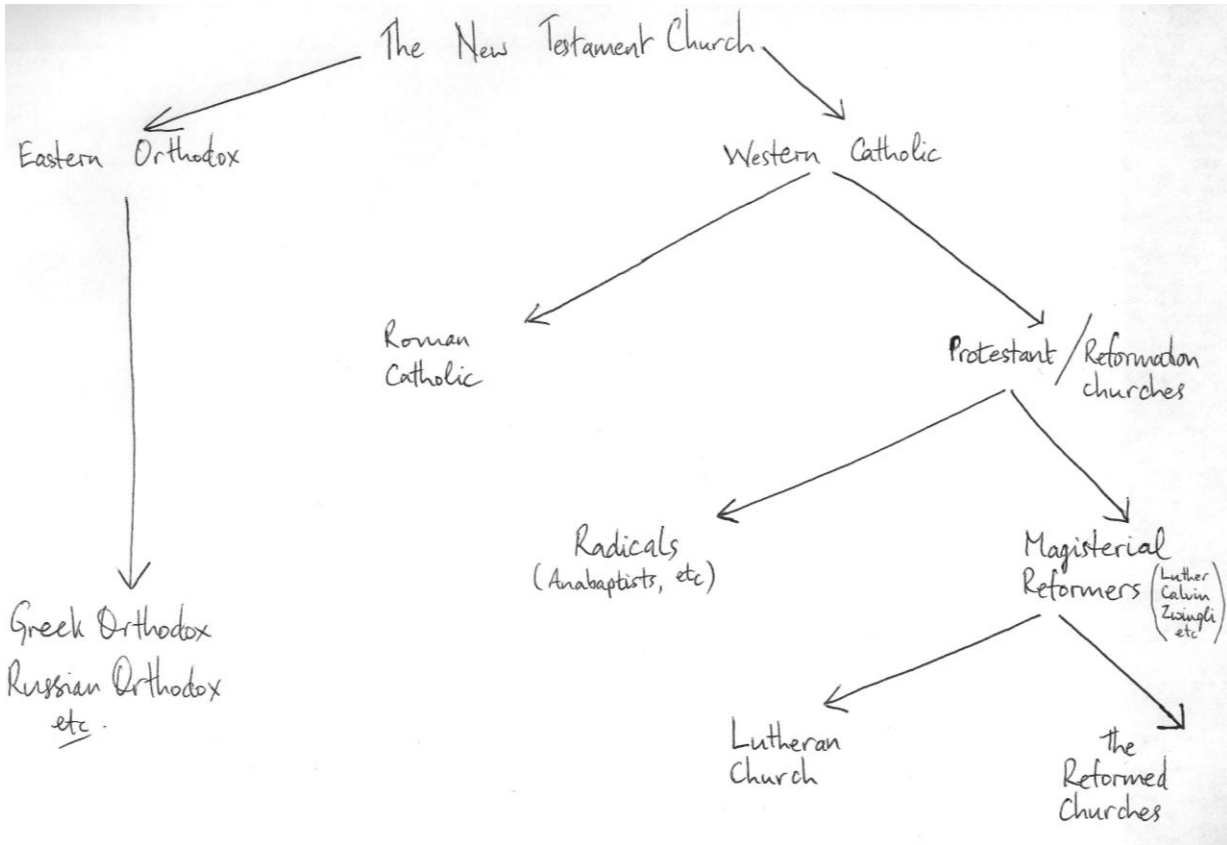
What about the spread of Luther's influence beyond Luther's lifetime?

As we look down the years since 1520 we need to distinguish between the influence of Luther's teaching which ran wide and the formal denomination of the Lutheran Church which emerged.

Take the Lutheran Church to begin with: in 1580 the Book of Concord was drawn up, which summarizes and defines Lutheranism in a way that most Lutherans have since agreed with. Lutheranism expanded elsewhere in two major movements: first, in the late 1500s into Scandinavia; second, via immigration into the United States at the start of the 18th century just before the Great Awakening. As a result, a significant proportion of Lutherans are today in America. Tragically, Lutheran churches all around the world have divided as some have remained faithful to Scripture doctrine while others have lapsed into gross liberalism.

Luther's clear articulation of justification by faith would be taken up and built on by many others who were themselves *not* Lutheran. And it was the branch of the church which is often called "Reformed" which would surge ahead – in theology, training pastors, planting churches, mission. This is the branch of Protestantism which locates itself much more in a Calvinistic stream and from which – for example – would later emerge the Puritans. It's to the Reformed churches that we'll turn in our next sessions.

Appendix: the major divisions within the churches



A Reformation Hymn

A mighty fortress is our God,
 A stronghold never failing;
 Our helper He amid the flood
 Of mortal ills prevailing.
 For still our ancient foe
 Conspires to work us woe;
 His craft and power are great,
 And armed with bitter hate,
 On earth is not his equal.

2. If we in our own strength confide,
 Our striving would be losing,
 Unless God's man is on our side,
 The man of God's own choosing.
 You ask who that may be?
 Christ Jesus, it is He;
 The Lord of Hosts, His name,
 From age to age the same,
 And He must win the battle.

3. And though this world, with devils filled,
 Should threaten to undo us,
 We will not fear, for God has willed
 His truth to triumph through us.
 The Prince of Darkness grim,
 We tremble not for him;
 His rage we can endure,
 For lo, his doom is sure;
 God's word shall overthrow him.

4. That word above all earthly powers,
 Is evermore abiding;
 The Spirit and the gifts are ours,
 Through Jesus with us siding.
 Let goods and kindred go,
 This mortal life also;
 The body they may kill;
 God's truth is with us still;
 His kingdom is forever.

Words and music by Martin Luther