

THE LIFE AND THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER  
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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the life and theology of Martin Luther (1483-1546). Luther, more than anyone else, is credited with beginning the Protestant Reformation. The German reformer was prolific as an author, preacher and hymn writer. Luther's discovery of the doctrine of justification by faith not only transformed his own life, but the entire subsequent history of Western civilization. In the words of biographer Stephen J. Nichols: "One thing on which scholars agree is that the world 'Martin Luder' was born into on November 10, 1483 was quite different from the one he left on February 19, 1546."<sup>1</sup> The world has never been the same. For these reasons and many more the study of the life and theology of Martin Luther is essential to understanding both the Protestant Reformation and the Modern age of history which it began.

**Luther's Life**

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in a small Saxon town named Eisleben.<sup>2</sup> He was born the son of Hans and Margarethe Luder (later changed to Luther).<sup>3</sup> His father was a miner who, although not rich, became owner of six foundries through his hard

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen J. Nicols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2002), 24.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

work.<sup>4</sup> However, his parents desired a better life for Martin. They wanted him to become a lawyer and escape life as a peasant. Luther enrolled at the University of Erfurt, earning a Bachelor's degree in 1502 and a Master's in 1505.<sup>5</sup> He was preparing to study law further when a decisive turning point came into his life “on a sultry day in July of the year 1505.”<sup>6</sup>

On the fateful day of July 2, 1505, a young Luther was traveling from his home in Mansfield back to the University at Erfurt. During this journey, he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm. Fearing death from a stroke of lightning, Luther cried out in terror to the patron saint of miners these words, “Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk.”<sup>7</sup> As Luther's most famous biographer, Roland Bainton, so eloquently stated it:

The man who thus called upon a saint was later to repudiate the cult of the saints. He who vowed to become a monk was later to renounce monasticism. A loyal son of the Catholic Church, he was later to shatter the structure of medieval Catholicism. A devoted servant of the pope, he was later to identify the popes with Antichrist. For this young man was Martin Luther.<sup>8</sup>

In one sense, this event is the real beginning to the story of Martin Luther. Luther became “a loyal son of the church” and the rest is history.

Exactly two weeks after the thunderstorm experience (July 16, 1505), Luther threw a party for his classmates in which he announced that he would join a monastery the next day. At the party, Luther gave away his law books and master's cap. The next day Luther presented

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<sup>4</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 26.

<sup>5</sup>Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 26.

<sup>6</sup>Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 21.

<sup>7</sup>Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 28.

<sup>8</sup>Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 21.

himself at the Augustinian monasteries' gates without the blessing of his father.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after entering the monastery on July 17, 1505, Luther took his monastic vows and begins his monastic duties. Luther later boasted that if ever a monk could have gotten to heaven through monkery, it would have been him. He prayed, fasted, kept vigils, and almost froze to death in unheated chambers.<sup>10</sup> His fear of God drove him to punish himself. Historian Bruce Shelly notes that, "He sometimes fasted for three days and slept without a blanket in freezing winter. He was driven by a profound sense of his own sinfulness and of God's unutterable majesty."<sup>11</sup> However, despite all his efforts to the contrary, Luther could never find peace with God through "monkery."

Luther was ordained a priest on April 4, 1507 and less than a month later on May 2, Martin celebrated his first mass.<sup>12</sup> This normally joyous occasion was actually a dreadful event for Luther. He was so terrified by his awareness of both his sinfulness and the holiness of Christ that he was nearly petrified and could barely complete the mass. Martin's father, Hans, had attended the mass and afterward mocked and rebuked his son.<sup>13</sup> This event drove Luther deeper into a sense of despair and forsakenness.

When Luther could find no relief for his tormented soul in the monastery at Erfurt, he was ordered by his superior, Johan Von Staupitz, to the monastery at Wittenberg in 1508.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 28.

<sup>10</sup>Marty, *Martin Luther*, 9.

<sup>11</sup>Bruce L. Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 238.

<sup>12</sup>Marty, *Martin Luther*, 10.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>14</sup>Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 29.

There he was allowed to study the Bible at the University of Wittenberg at which he received a second B.A. in Bible in 1509. Eventually, in 1512, Luther would receive his doctorate in theology. He then became a faculty member in theology at the University of Wittenberg.<sup>15</sup>

It was while teaching the Bible at Wittenberg that Luther became exposed to the gospel resulting in the famous “tower experience.” In August 1, 1513, Luther began lecturing on the book of Psalms. In the fall of 1515, he began lecturing on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. The Epistle to the Galatians was taught during 1516-1517.<sup>16</sup> It was sometime during this period (August 1, 1513 and 1517), while studying Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, that Luther experienced the peace of justification. His description of this experience is glorious:

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice of God,” because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. . . . Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself reborn and to have gone through the open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.<sup>17</sup>

These are the words of a man set free from the futility of works righteousness. His days of terror are over, but much controversy is still to come.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the castle church door at Wittenberg. This event is still celebrated today by Protestants as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther was responding to the selling of Papal indulgences in a nearby

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>16</sup>Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 60.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 65.

town by a monk named Tetzel. Tetzel represented Albert of Mainz, who had received authority for the indulgences from Pope Leo X. Albert of Mainz was seeking a second bishopric and the title of Archbishop. Leo X wanted to build Sistine Chapel of St. Paul's Basilica. Both of these goals required money and the selling of indulgences became the means to the ends.<sup>18</sup> When Luther heard that Tetzel was selling indulgences nearby, he challenged him to a debate by posting his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door. When they heard about the *Theses*, Tetzel, Albert and Leo X were all outraged. After seeing the *Theses*, Pope Leo famously and pejoratively said of Luther, "Luther is a drunken German. He will feel different when he is sober."<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, Luther had no intention of spreading his concerns among the people. His *Theses* were written in Latin, the language of scholars, and was simply an invitation to debate. Some, however, translated the document into German and other languages and began printing them on the recently invented Guttenberg press. As Bainton states the surprising attention which Luther received about the *Ninety-Five Thesis*, "Luther ... was like a man climbing in the darkness of a winding staircase in the steeple of an ancient cathedral. In the blackness he reached out to steady himself, and his hand laid hold of a rope. He was startled to hear the clanging of a bell."<sup>20</sup>

The next two years (1518-1519) were filled with debates with Roman Catholic theologians. In the most famous of these debates: Ausburg with Cardinal Cajetan and Leipzig with Johann Eck, Luther was persuaded to admit that he denied the authority of church councils

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<sup>18</sup>Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 34-35.

<sup>19</sup>Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 85.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

and of the Pope.<sup>21</sup>

During 1520, Luther took his case to the German people by the publication of three pamphlets: *To the German Nobility*, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On Christian Liberty*.<sup>22</sup> With these publications and Luther's comments in his disputes with Cajetan and Eck, the stage was set for the Diet of Worms. On June 15, 1520 a papal bull was issued known as *Exsurge Domine* for its first two Latin words. It begins, "Arise, O Lord, and judge thy cause. A wild boar has invaded thy vineyard."<sup>23</sup> The bull stated that Martin Luther's books "are to be examined and burned."<sup>24</sup> Luther himself was given "sixty days in which to submit."<sup>25</sup> Upon reception, Luther burned the papal bull publicly on December 10, 1520.<sup>26</sup> The die is cast, next stop Worms.

Early in 1521, the new emperor, Charles V, summoned Luther to appear before the imperial diet of Worms in the spring of 1521. Luther attended, being assured of protection by his elector, Frederick the Wise.<sup>27</sup> It was on April 18, 1521 that Luther was asked at Worms to recant his books which were contrary to the teaching of the church to which Luther gave this heroic response:

Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, not embellished: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by

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<sup>21</sup>Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 284.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 147.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 284.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

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 contradict themselves, I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand. May God help me, Amen.<sup>28</sup>

As Martin Luther left the stunned Imperial Diet it was clear there could be no turning back.

Although Luther had been guaranteed safe conduct by his Saxon elector, Frederick the Wise, this pledge would expire soon. Since Luther had been condemned by the Edict of Worms, citizens would be required to bring this heretic to justice.<sup>29</sup> A dramatic plan now unfolded to protect Luther. On May 4, 1521, Luther was whisked away by a band of horsemen armed with crossbows.<sup>30</sup> The intent was to make others believe that Luther had been kidnaped or killed. In reality, Luther was taken to an almost abandoned Wartburg Castle for his own protection.<sup>31</sup> Although, as biographer Stephen Nichols has noted, that by 1521 “Luther had accomplished more than most do in many a lifetime,” God spared his life for yet more accomplishments during his next twenty-five years.<sup>32</sup>

Among the accomplishments of Luther’s later years includes: publishing the first hymnal in 1524, marrying Katherina Von Bora on June 13, 1525, writing the great theological work *The Bondage of the Will* in 1525, writing the first mass delivered in the German language in 1526, composing the great hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” in 1527, writing the *Small Catechism* in 1529, and producing the first translation of the Bible into the German language in

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<sup>28</sup>Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 41-42.

<sup>29</sup>Martin Marty, *Martin Luther*, 69-70.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 44.

1534.<sup>33</sup> Any single one of these accomplishments (with the possible exception of marrying Katherina Von Bora), would have made Martin Luther a historically significant individual. Combined together and adding the events leading up to and including the Diet of Worms make Martin Luther one of the most significant individuals who has ever lived. As Luther's own Katherina mourned her husband's death on February 17, 1546 in a letter to a relative: "For who would not be sad and afflicted at the loss of such a precious man as my dear lord was. He did great things not just for a city or a single land, but for the whole world."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Luther's impact extended beyond any single city or land for now over five hundred years later his life is still effecting the world.

### **Luther's Theology**

As thrilling as the story of Luther's life is, the study of Luther's theology is even more enriching. Hundreds of thousands of pages have been written examining his own voluminous writings. This paper will only examine a few of the most prominent themes in Luther's theology: justification by faith alone, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the sovereignty of God.

### **Justification by Faith Alone**

There is no controversy in stating that the doctrine of justification by faith alone was prominent in the theology of Martin Luther. Luther's own personal discovery (or recovery) of the doctrine of justification changed his life forever. Luther himself stated the importance of this doctrine by writing "if the article of justification is lost, then all true Christian doctrine is lost."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 46.

<sup>34</sup>Martin Marty, *Martin Luther*, 188.

<sup>35</sup>Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1988), 21.



He elsewhere called the doctrine of justification “the summary of all Christian doctrine” and “the article by which the church stands or falls.”<sup>36</sup> Obviously, for Luther, this doctrine was no peripheral matter, justification is the heart of the gospel.

Luther defined justification by faith in numerous places in his writings. In his commentary on Galatians he writes:

We also who are justified by faith, as were the patriarchs, prophets, and all the saints, are not of the works of the law as concerning justification; but in that we are in the flesh, and have the remnants of sin in us, we are under the law, and yet not under the curse, because the remnants of sin are not imputed unto us for Christ’s sake, in whom we believe.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, even though we are sinners we are not under the curse of sin because of faith in Jesus Christ. In Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, the apostle states a great summary statement of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the following words: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28). Luther comments:

The words ‘we conclude’ must not be taken in the sense ‘we think,’ as though there were attached to the righteousness of faith any doubt, for such doubt would be wicked. The expression rather means: We believe most assuredly and firmly; indeed, we know; or, we are persuaded (*by the divine Word*) to believe that sinners are justified by faith.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, Luther understood the doctrine of justification by faith to be central to his own theology.

### **The Sufficiency of Scripture**

Another important aspect of Luther’s theology is his understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture. As Luther’s reply at the Diet of Worms in 1521 indicates, Scripture alone is the binding authority in the life of the Christian. Popes err, church councils err, only the Word of

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<sup>36</sup>Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1988), 62.

<sup>37</sup>Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 178.

<sup>38</sup>Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, 80.

God does not err. Therefore Luther's conscience was only bound to Scripture. In his *Tabletalk*, Luther rejoiced in the privilege of having the Word of God:

Oh! how great and glorious a thing it is to have before one the Word of God! With that we may at all times feel joyous and secure; we need never be in want of consolation, for we see before us, in all its brightness, the pure and right way. He who loses sight of the Word of God, falls into despair; the voice of heaven no longer sustains him; he follows only the disorderly tendency of his heart, and of world vanity, which lead him on to his destruction.<sup>39</sup>

Given Luther's high view of Scripture it is no wonder that he devoted himself to translating the Bible into the language of the people.

Luther's belief in the sufficiency of Scripture is seen in the fact that he attributed all his success in the reformation of the church to the power of the Word of God. In a sermon preached in 1522, Luther declared:

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 my 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.<sup>40</sup>

Luther gave all the credit for God's work through him in the reformation of the church to the all sufficient Word of God. His belief in the sufficiency of Scripture resulted in a ministry which focused on preaching and writing God's Word. The Word did it all!

### **The Sovereignty of God**

At the heart of Luther's theology was a deep appreciation of the sovereignty of God. When Erasmus attacked Luther in his work *On Free Will*, Luther responded in *The Bondage of the Will* with these words of thanks to Erasmus:

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<sup>39</sup>Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 15.

<sup>40</sup>Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 53.

Moreover, I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account – that you alone, in contrast with all the others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like – trifles, rather than issues ... you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot. For that I heartily thank you.<sup>41</sup>

Luther clearly understood that the issue of God’s sovereignty (even over the free choices of his creatures) was the central issue at stake in his dispute with the Roman Catholic church. For Luther, this was no secondary matter of little importance it was the “hinge” upon which everything else turned. Elsewhere Luther admitted that God gave to mankind a free-will. But that will is only “subverted, perverse, fickle and wavering.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on to say, “God ... works in us, and we must suffer and be subject to his pleasure. Even as a potter out of his clay makes a pot or vessel, as he wills, so it is for our free-will, to suffer and not to work.”<sup>43</sup> For Luther the will of God always ruled over the will of man. In other words, God is sovereign.

### **Conclusion**

Upon studying the life of Martin Luther it would be easy to say, “What a great man!” But upon studying the theology of Martin Luther, one is forced to say, “What great truths this man believed!” Luther’s greatest legacy to the church is his teaching of these great truths which have been preserved to this day. As another German theologian, Karl Barth, who lived four centuries after Luther stated, “What else was Luther than a teacher of the Christian church whom one can hardly celebrate in any other way but to listen to him?”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 319.

<sup>42</sup>Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 159.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>44</sup>Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 106.

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