

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 55

Martin Luther – Part Four

When we last left Luther, he had made his defense before the Diet at Worms. The Emperor pronounced Luther a heretic and ordered him arrested. The arrest did not come immediately, however, because either the Emperor had promised Luther safe passage to and from the Diet or out of fear of open rebellion by Luther's supporters (depending on the version you believe!). So, Luther was released to return to Wittenberg. It was a safe bet, however, that Luther would not last long before being apprehended.

Luther set out quickly for Wittenberg accompanied by a friend. They were using a horse drawn wagon for the trip. While in a deserted part of Germany, a number of knights on horses came from the forest and "kidnapped" Luther, leaving his friend to return and tell the story. Luther was taken by these knights to the nearby castle of Wartburg which was somewhat deserted.

Arriving at the castle around 11 p.m., Luther was downcast. He found out that the kidnapping was not for his demise but rather for his safety. Frederick the Wise arranged the kidnapping in order to keep Luther alive. Luther was stripped of his monastic garb and put on the clothes of a knight instead. Luther began to grow out his hair as well as his beard. Luther started living in isolation from the world.

When word got back about the kidnapping, Luther's friends and foes alike had strong suspicions that Luther was likely dead. There was great concern over exactly what had happened. The "movement" that Luther started continued, even though he was no longer there to lead it. In Wittenberg, Luther's friends at the University (Melancthon and others) continued to teach along the lines of Luther's tracts and sermons. Some of the teaching went beyond what Luther had promoted as responsible reaction to the Church's positions and practices.

Ultimately, word got back to Luther about these events, and Luther started sending letters and messages forth from his confinement. These writings were sent under the names of "From the Wilderness" or "From the Isle of Patmos,"¹ and it was obvious to all that Luther was writing from some hidden local. Soon his friends and followers began writing back, asking advice and giving news updates.

Meanwhile, solitude did not serve Luther well. He had great bouts of second-guessing where he wondered if he was right. He questioned how so many could

¹ This is a reference to the New Testament book of Revelation, which John wrote from his enforced isolation on the island of Patmos off the coast of modern Turkey.

be so wrong for centuries, only for him to find some answers that were so radically different from those of normative Christianity. He asked himself how he could think that he had some truly great wisdom that no one else had considered.

As his idleness fed his perpetually self-doubting and worrying, Luther found something that could consume his mind and his time. Luther began translating the Bible into common German.² Within a year, Luther finished the New Testament. Luther would eventually finish the Old Testament as well, but not while in isolation. We do Luther a disservice if we do not stop and note that there were a number of German dialects in use at the time. Luther worked to put the Bible into the dialect used in the courts of Saxony, with a generous sprinkling of various words and dialects Luther had learned in his travels. Luther's Bible translation was to become so widely used, that the dialect itself took over Germany and became the German tongue that is spoken today.

While Luther was isolated in Wartburg, his colleagues in Wittenberg began major changes in the mass (church services). These changes took the older guard by surprise and became in themselves quite contentious. With Luther absent, the leadership fell to Melancthon (Luther's protégé, friend, and the University's Professor of Greek) as well as Carlstadt (another University professor who was the archdeacon of the Wittenberg Church).

These friends of Luther made changes that Luther had not even, in all likelihood, contemplated. The work of Luther to that point had not directly affected everyday people beyond reproaching the practices surrounding relics and indulgences. Luther wrote his address to the nobility of the German people³ about how there is no distinction between clergy and laity. He also wrote about his biblical concern that there were only two sacraments rather than five. But, these writings had not really changed the daily practice of religion or "church" to the common man. Luther's friends at Wittenberg were out to make the changes that naturally followed from Luther's teachings.

In 1521 and 1522, while Luther was at Wartburg, his monastery in Wittenberg, his Church in Wittenberg, and his University launched a most radical agenda of changes. The priests, monks, and nuns, believing Luther's teachings on the spirituality of "mundane things" as well as Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers, determined that marriage was a holy and appropriate institution.

² Luther would not finish his translation while in confinement. He worked incredibly hard to make sure that he accurately conveyed the original words into his dialect. For example, to make sure that he had the terminology on the Old Testament sacrifices proper, Luther would visit the butcher and learn the common terms for the various internal organs of animals.

³ This was the *Address to the German Nobility* that we addressed in Lesson 54.

Celibacy was dismissed as a greater or more holy calling and these priests, monks, and nuns began to marry. They grew their hair, wore common clothes, and the priests even began offering communal wine to the laity.

The changes came at a rapid pace, as if a dam finally broke and torrents of water long kept back, flowed through at great force, rewriting the landscape daily. The priests celebrated the masses wearing everyday clothes rather than vestments of the church. The masses were spoken, at least in part, in common German tongue rather than Latin. The church ceased offering masses for the dead (A common practice at the time was to say masses for those who had already passed away in an effort to alleviate purgatory time. This violated the theology taught by Luther denying the doctrine of purgatory.).

While these changes were transpiring, Luther kept up with them through letters. Luther supported some of the changes, but was a bit taken back at others. On marriage, for example, Luther thought it appropriate for the priests to marry. He had written before of the “unchaste chastity” problem where priests would employ housekeepers and not really keep their chaste vows! To Luther, the command of God to marry exceeded the command of the church that Priests remain single. But, even Luther was shocked over the idea that monks and nuns might marry. At first, this appeared to Luther a different subject because the monk took celibate vows on himself, rather than have them insisted upon him by the church. Still, over time, Luther came to a position that personal vows of celibacy were out of line with the biblical teaching that man was not to take such vows before God. Luther wrote a tract entitled, *On Monastic Vows*, where he noted, “Marriage is good, virginity is better, but liberty is best.” It was this liberty that Luther believed transcended the vows taken earlier by monks and nuns.

The effects of these changes on ordinary citizens were profound, especially those of the mass. To have the wine offered, to be able to actually handle the elements with their own hands, to have communion without first having confession, to hear the words of the service in their native tongue, and to have a chance to sing in a congregational sense, were all brand new and quite unthinkable. Yet, these were the changes taking place while Luther was in isolation.

Not everyone readily accepted these changes. The Augustinian monastery where Luther had served was not in full agreement on the issues with the mass, and they ceased to celebrate mass there. There was a distinction in the popular reception of these innovations that seemed to be somewhat age based. The old guard was not for the rapid changes while the younger leaders could not bring change fast enough. Very soon, the issues reached a boiling point and violence broke out.

The violence upset Frederick, Luther, and many others who quickly heard of it. There were riots, invasion of the church with destruction of mass books, as well as violence against those priests that were not ready for the new way of doing things. Luther wrote out against the violence explaining that violence feeds the kingdom of Satan, preaching and praying feeds the kingdom of God.

One of the principle movers behind these changes in Wittenberg was Professor Carlstadt. He had been one of Luther's professors early on, but quickly came under Luther's teaching on the doctrine of justification by faith as well as Luther's other concerns on the church. With Luther gone, Carlstadt continue to push reform over even the orders of Frederick the Wise. On Christmas day, 1521, almost the entire own of Wittenberg (2,000 of the town's 2,500) turned out to hear mass. For the first time, they heard, "This is the cup of my blood of the new and eternal testament, spirit and secret of the faith, shed for you to the remission of sins" spoken in their common German tongue.

The town council would vote shortly thereafter that all masses in the town were to be celebrated in that very way. And the council's decree went further! The council passed its law mandating that monks were no longer allowed to beg in town, and that the images and icons from the church were to be removed. This was premised on the Old Testament command not to make any graven image for worship.

These changes seemed out of control even to Melanchthon. Writing to Frederick, Melanchthon had no idea how to get control of things absent Martin Luther himself returning from exile.

Luther also believed he should return, though Frederick thought such a move too dangerous and premature. Frederick wrote his own instructions to the council trying to restrain the rapid changes a bit, but his letter was not fully effective. The town council decided it needed the wisdom of Martin Luther! So the council issued an invitation to Luther requesting his return home from exile.

When Luther received his invitation from the town and his old congregation, he considered it a call from God himself. Luther notified Frederick that he would be returning and that if Luther should be captured or killed, it was certainly not the fault of Frederick's.

Luther left the confines of his Wartburg castle and ventured back into Wittenberg. Luther wanted to see order returned so his very first act upon re-entering the town was to go back into his old pulpit and preach! Luther climbed up the pulpit stairs, and spoke clearly and decisively of the need for patience, love, and consideration for the weaker brother. Luther viewed the violence and degradation suffered by

the priests at the hands of the reformers as a greater indignity than Luther had ever suffered by the church and the papists.

With this return, Luther became the de facto leader of Wittenberg. The people and council alike listened to him. Here, Luther turned a corner. He was no longer the writing/teaching/preaching thorn in the side of the pope and church. Instead, he was, in a real sense, the head of a local government.

Luther never set out to be a politician. In fact, he probably never considered himself one. Luther's aims and goals were to bring the church into a greater light than it had. Luther wanted the church to reflect the holiness taught in Scripture rather than the holiness brought about by historical tradition.

Over the next few years, Luther would bring to the church in his own timing, those transforming positions that brought a distinct identity to Protestantism. As Luther sought to bring the community into line with his teaching on divine calling, he abolished monasticism. To Luther, no calling was greater than any other. Whatever vocation man took, he took because God placed him there. That made all vocations equally worthy. Luther would teach that God himself is a tailor; because God made the fur coat a deer wears. Similarly, God is a shoemaker, for he made the boots that last a deer a lifetime. Luther taught God was a butler who set out the food for the sparrows. Luther taught that even the shepherds that God called to give glory to the baby Jesus went back to their fields to work afterwards.

In the economic sphere, Luther taught that begging was a sin, not a showing of devotion. Man was expected to work for his food, just as Adam toiled in the garden.⁴ Luther was also opposed to the idea of capitalism. He did not see Christians as properly making money off other Christians by loans that he considered usury.⁵

While Luther was in Wittenberg overseeing these changes, he was still a wanted man. Both the Emperor and the church banned Luther and had the equivalent of a

⁴ We should note here that the begging Luther was countering was not the practice as set out by St. Francis centuries before. Francis and other founders of the mendicant (begging) orders also believed in working, but the fruits of those labors were to be given to the poor. The monk was to have a vow of poverty and take the place of the beggar while giving what he had to the poor. In Luther's time, begging seemed to Luther to be more of an excuse not to work at all, rather than working to give to the poor.

⁵ On this point, Luther did allow that people could loan money for economic ventures, but the most that the person loaning money could recover as "interest" was 5%. Even then, the recovery was not allowed unless the loaner took the risk of failure as well as the one receiving the loan. In other words, one might loan money for a venture and hopeful profit, but there would be no repayment if the venture failed. Folks today might call this a "no recourse" loan!

21st century arrest warrant out on him. Luther's changes were written up and made their way out of Wittenberg into communities that were already full of those who were sympathetic to Luther and his ideas. We do well to remember that Luther had propagated these ideas at the University where they taught. It is not surprising that the University students would take these ideas back with them after their training time. So, we see that others quickly modeled Luther's ideas throughout Germany and beyond.

Luther and the Lutheran movement were the subjects of debate at the big Diet at Nurnberg in the early 1520's. The issues with Luther were not limited to Germany. Henry the VIII of England (more on him in the future lesson on the Church of England break with the Catholic Church) had his own issues with Luther. It seems in correspondence Luther was called the "Minister of Wittenberg by the grace of God" while King Henry VIII was termed, Henry, King of England by the *disgrace* of God." That did not go over real well.

A main Catholic voice for moderation during this time came from Luther's intellectual equal (and maybe intellectual superior) Desiderius Erasmus.⁶ Erasmus had earlier tried through writings and reasoning to keep Luther in some relationship with the church. Once Luther had written on the sacraments in the summer of 1520, Erasmus correctly noted the "breach" was irreconcilable. During the mid-1520's, Erasmus and Luther went back and forth on the issues that seemed of utmost importance to the two of them. The issues were not about marriage or the mass. The core issue was sin and the will of man. Erasmus wrote *On the Freedom of the Will* where he took issue with Luther on morality and man. Erasmus believed that man had ability to chose good and do it. Luther would allow for no such thing. For Luther, the best human deeds are tainted with at least a bit of self-love or arrogance and as such are reprehensible to God. This did push Luther to a position that God made man in such a way that man could never choose to please God on his own. Erasmus considered such a God immoral or unjust in his own right. Luther responded that while one may find God revolting, it is reality, whether it offends one or not.

During this time, a number of Luther's friends and acquaintances took the newfound liberation from the Church and its theology in a different direction from Luther. Carlstadt, the former professor of and with Luther launched a Puritan movement taking matters to a much greater extreme than Luther (It was this same

⁶ We are likely doing Church History a disservice by not dedicating a class wholly to Erasmus. Born an illegitimate child to a priest, Erasmus became a leading intellect of the early 1500's. Erasmus brought about great change in the church through his pen, but was always a moderating force compared to Luther's more radical approach. Erasmus corresponded a good bit with Luther and many others, including Henry VIII. One of Erasmus's greatest contributions came in his editions of Scripture.

Carlstadt that had effected so many changes in Wittenberg while Luther was in hiding at Wartburg). Carlstadt removed any further accoutrements of the ministerial role in stressing a lay ministry, including vestments and titles as well as his surrendering of any payment by his congregation. Carlstadt started emphasizing the need for a Sabbath day of rest, he rejected infant baptism in favor of a necessary adult experience of conviction, and he again rejected any images in Churches. Carlstadt also changed his church's perceptions and beliefs on the Lord's Supper, teaching that Christ was in no way present in the elements. For Carlstadt, God was spirit and could not in any way be present in the physical elements of communion. At most, the elements were reminders of the sacrifice of Christ.

Luther himself did not fully agree with Carlstadt in these later years. Luther believed that Carlstadt was setting up a religion of works and legalism that emphasized external acts rather than inward faith.

Was Luther the "start" of the "Protestant movement?" Yes and no. Luther set Germany on a course away from the Catholic Church and toward Protestantism. The term "Protestant" itself comes from Luther and other affiliated groups that were seen as "protesting" the economic and political ties associated with the Catholic Church. There were also other reformers and movements contemporary with Luther, many of which he came into contact with. Even though they are considered "distinct movements," many of these other reformers and their groups borrowed a great deal from Luther and his writings and reforms. Some of these groups we will consider in later classes, such as the Anabaptists. We will also spend a class section dealing with the Catholic Church's "Counter Reformation" as the church sought to clean up many of the abuses that led to Luther's departure. We have already considered the Swiss reformers and Ulrich Zwingli. Ultimately, many of the likeminded reformers would meet in an effort to unite their movements, but to no avail. Their individual sticking points of theology proved to great a wall to a common fellowship. Other more estranged movements (for example, the Anabaptists) were actually persecuted themselves even by the reform minded groups, for their "heresies."

While Luther was never the extremist Carlstadt and others were, Luther was the man, more than any other, which left his prints on Protestant churches. Luther put the liturgy into the common tongue, and then rewrote the liturgy! Luther instituted congregational singing, instituted classes to teach singing, and then wrote the hymns to be sung! In doing so, Luther shied away from the chanting of church music and used more street melodies for his hymns. In fact, one of Luther's most prominent hymns was *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. In that hymn, we have Luther putting his words to a barroom melody of his era. Luther placed the sermon at the center of the church service, speaking from a pulpit that was

elevated higher than the altar. Luther's services were much more instructional with a greater emphasis on Scripture than was found in the German Catholic services. For the Lutherans, church services were not only times of prayer and praise, but also times of learning. Luther wrote the catechism to be used in teaching the congregants. As already noted, Luther translated the Bible into German for use as well.⁷

SOME FINAL PERSONAL NOTES

Before finishing our time on Luther, we should note some final personal events in his life. In 1523, Luther went about setting up marriages for nuns that were leaving their cloisters. Before he finished this task, he surprisingly took one himself as a wife! Her name was Katherine Von Bora. They had a wonderful marriage full of much give and take. Luther's correspondence makes it clear that he not only adored his wife, but also leaned on her heavily in his continued ministry.

Together they had six children over an eight-year span, three daughters and three sons. This changed domestic situation brings an interesting comparison in some of the words and writings we have of Luther. Prior to the marriage (and even subsequently), we have some incredible works of theology and faith such as those we considered in the last two lessons. After his marriage and birth of his children, we have some more humorous and poignant passages recorded from the lips and pen of Luther. Some of Luther's more noteworthy statements come from his personal interaction with his immediate family. Once, when one of his infant children was crying incessantly, Luther asked, "Child, what have you done that I should love you so? You have disturbed the whole household with your bawling!" At another instance of seemingly non-stop crying, Luther proclaimed, "This is the sort of things that has caused the church fathers to vilify marriage."

Once at his dinner table, Luther was going on and on in response to student questions when his wife interjected, "Doctor [her favorite title for Luther], why don't you stop talking and eat?" Luther's response was, "I wish that women would repeat the Lord's Prayer before opening their mouths." While Luther was devoted to his wife, he did add on one particularly trying day, "All my life is patience. I have to have patience with the pope, the heretics and Katie [his nickname for his wife]."

⁷ Luther would continue refining his translation of the Bible into common German until his death. Luther was so concerned that the language be right he once said, "I endeavored to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew."

Medical tragedy was never far from families in that age. When Luther's daughter Magdalena was 14 years old, she got quite sick and lay dying. Luther was bedside and prayed for God's will. He then asked his daughter, "My little Magdalena, you would like to stay with your father here and you would be glad to go to your Father in heaven?" His little girl answered, "Yes, dear father, as God wills." Luther held his daughter in his arms as she passed away. His grief was profound. As he laid her away he said, "*Du liebes Lenchen*, you will rise and shine like the stars and the sun. How strange it is to know that she is at peace and all is well, and yet to be so sorrowful!"

Luther himself lived until 1546. The last 15 years of his life were marked by a number of things that make biographers tend to shy away from that period. Luther wrote some very anti-Semitic materials out of his frustration with Jewish rejections of Christianity. He also was quite short tempered and down right cantankerous with many different people and elements. His health was always quite poor and it got progressively so as he aged. Luther was always required to have some measure of care where and how he traveled, for his life was always for forfeit in certain parts of Europe.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. History is not haphazard. Neither is your life! It wasn't in Luther's day; and it isn't today. It has an author -- God. God is at work in this world and in his people, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. We see it in the life of Luther, and it is no less true in our lives. This means that when life's pressures weigh us down, even to the point of death, we can choose to live in humble obedience and faith to our Lord, trusting that as we "continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling" our God is at "work within [us] both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12-13, New American Standard).
2. Scripture isn't a big book that sits on your shelf or coffee table. It is not made to be some foreign, incomprehensible language that sits on a high church altar for us to stare at occasionally. It is God's word that ministers his message of life. We are to treasure it in our hearts by reading it, meditating on it, and understanding it. As the Psalmist recognized and said to God, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).

3. Godly change is a good thing. Luther brought about many groundbreaking changes in the church and in worship services. While God and his Word never change, the expressions of God's Word do find freshness and newness as time goes forward. Many times, this can mean visible changes in the way we worship and function together. Holy change is never to be feared or shunned. It is to be embraced with wonder and awe. Now, change for change's sake is not necessarily holy, but God finds ways of expressing himself in new wine that bursts old wineskins (Matthew 9:16-18) and we should see God and embrace him in whatever direction we find him leading.