

Martin Luther, His Life and Work (by Alfred Faulstick)

1. The Formation of the Church

Christ commanded His disciples to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. They were to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit had been poured out on them. This wonderful act occurred on the Day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people became Christians. From that day and place onward the preaching of the Gospel has reached every country of the globe. Congregations must necessarily be established in order to spread the Good News of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. The apostles established many congregations. The greatest missionary was the apostle Paul. The book of Acts record his missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean. The congregations were, called "churches," and all Christians, that is, all believers in Christ, were called "the church" (invisible church). The church visible was the local congregation, believers who called pastors (1 Timothy 12, 2 Timothy 2:24), and maintained their living (Galatians 6:6). The mission of the church was and is to "make disciples of all nations." The institution of the church has scriptural foundation. Of course, we must always bear in mind that the church does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of its message. First the message, then the church; that is the order of importance.

2. The Deformation of the Church

Originally the church was a martyr institution, bitterly persecuted by the world on account of its message, the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). In time, however, the world began to "patronize" or support the church; the church then became more concerned about its own interests and organization. The result was that the "message" was moved further into the background.

Under Constantine the Great (Roman emperor, died 337), the church was united with the empire and became established as a world power. Ambition seized some among the clergy. The bishops in the larger cities, as in Rome, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Antioch, began to exercise more influence and power than the others. The bishop of Rome and the bishop of Constantinople became the most powerful bishops. When both wanted to be supreme, a split occurred in the church, and Christendom was divided into the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. The bishop of Rome declared himself head of the church, that is, "the Pope."

Soon after the establishment of the papal authority, the church began to show signs of deterioration and decay. Worldly life and corrupt morals found their way into all classes of society; more and more confidence was placed in the intercession of saints, outward church services, and good works. False teachings became common. The Bible lost its authority. It was no longer the absolute norm of faith and life. Human traditions were placed on a level with or even above the authority of the Bible. The sweet, glowing Gospel of Christ, the Saviour who yielded His life in love for His people and the world, was shrouded in mist. Christ was depicted as a stern judge. Sinners would have to address - Him through His mother. False doctrines and practices crept into the life of the church and God's people. The church was de-formed; it was in need of a re-formation.

3. The Reformation of the Church

Some years before Luther, a number of attempts at reform were made. John Wycliffe (1326-84) testified in England, Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98) in Italy, John Hus (1372-1415) in Bohemia. For their efforts, Savonarola and Hus were burned at the stake. Wycliffe, the "Morning Star of the Reformation," was forced to retire from his teaching position at Oxford University. He died of a stroke before the full weight of Rome could be brought against him. In 1415, after it had ordered that Hus be burned at the stake, the Council of Constance also ordered that Wycliffe's bones be disinterred, burned, and their ashes scattered to the four winds. Such was the church's response to reform.

The efforts of Wycliffe, Savonarola, and Hus paved the way for a later reformer, who by the grace of God, called the church back to the Gospel. That man was Martin Luther, known in history as the "Father of the Reformation."

4. Birth - Schooling - Ordination - Journey to Rome

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, on November 10, 1483. He was baptized the next day, and, since that was St. Martin's Day, he received the name of Martin. His parents were Hans and Margarethe Luther. They were pious, but quite strict, parents.

At the age of six he went to the little hillside school at Mansfeld. Rigid discipline was maintained at school with little, if any, display of kindness. He did not learn to know Jesus as a loving Saviour, but as a stern judge whom one must fear and respect. He was taught to pray to the saints and the Virgin Mary to turn away the anger of Jesus.

At the age of 14 he went to the high school at Magdeburg. He had to sing from house to house to get something to eat. He later continued his studies at Eisenach.

In 1501 he entered the University at Erfurt. He earned the degree of bachelor of arts in 1502, and the master of arts in 1505.

Luther was devoutly religious. He was deeply conscious of his sin. He was afraid of death. He cried to the Virgin Mary when one day he cut a deep gash in his leg with a short sword. Later on, namely, in the summer, he was almost struck by lightning. He fell on his knees in terror, crying, "Help, dear Saint Anne." He vowed that should he be spared he would become a monk. He entered the monastery of St. Augustine and became a monk July 17, 1505. He tried hard to find peace by doing all sorts of menial tasks, by fasting and spending nights in prayer. But all his "good works" did not quiet the unrest of his soul.

In the monastery Luther found a complete edition of the Bible. He read it eagerly. The blessed Gospel greatly quieted him. Dr. Staupitz the prior of the monastery, also pointed him to Jesus, the loving Saviour, whose blood cleanses from sin.

In 1507 Luther was ordained to the priesthood. In 1508 he was appointed to lecture on philosophy at the University of Wittenberg. It was not long before he began to preach in the chapel of the monastery. His preaching attracted great attention.



In 1509 he was transferred to the University of Erfurt. While there he was commissioned to make a journey to Rome. He was glad of the chance to visit the "holy city"; but he was disappointed in what he saw and learned there.

Upon his return from Rome he was transferred back to the University of Wittenberg. This time he was asked to teach theology. How happy he was that he could devote all his strength and time to the study of the Sacred Scriptures. He distinguished himself as a theologian. The University awarded him the degree of doctor of divinity (1512).

5. The Sale of Indulgences - 95 Theses - Burning the Papal Bull

The Diet at Worms

Leo X was Pope. He needed much money for St. Peter's Church in Rome. John Tetzel was one of the men commissioned to sell indulgences. Tetzel made quite a stir in Germany. Some of Luther's parishioners went to buy indulgences, and because they thought they had bought remission of sins, they refused to confess their sins before going to Communion. Luther knew that this was wrong; he knew from the Bible that the life of a Christian should be one of daily and continual repentance. He wished to have this matter discussed publicly. Every Friday afternoon public debates were held in the Castle Church, and it was the custom to post the topics of debate on the door of the church. And so Luther prepared 95 points of discussion, called the 95 Theses, and, on October 31, 1517, he posted these on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. These theses flew like the wind through all of Germany and beyond. The Pope heard about them, too, but he passed the matter up as "a monkish squabble." Before long, however, he thought it necessary to take action. He ordered Luther to appear before Cardinal Cajetan, his representative, at a diet (a public assembly) which was soon to be held at Augsburg. He went in October 1518.

At Augsburg Luther was ordered to revoke everything he had written touching the matter of indulgences. This he could not do, because he was certain that his writings were in agreement with Scripture. Thus gradually Luther came to see the errors of the Roman Church, and he began to publish other documents and books in which he again set forth the truth of the Bible. The Pope then issued a bull (formal letter) in which he commanded Luther to repent within 60 days of all he had written against the Roman Church, or else he would be condemned as a heretic. However, Luther felt bound by his conscience to continue his teaching as before and to publish what he knew to be God's Word.

To show that he regarded God's Word more than man's word, Luther burned the papal bull outside the city walls, in the presence of a group of students. (To this day the spot is shown in Wittenberg where this daring act was done. A tablet is erected there which reads: "Dr. Martin Luther burned at this place, on December 10, 1520, the papal bull.") By this act Luther completed his break with the Roman church. He was subsequently summoned to the diet at Worms, in April 1521, to appear before Pope Leo X and Emperor Charles V. Luther's friends feared for his life, claiming that he would not return alive, but Luther was sure that it was his duty to go there in the name of Christ and to confess the truth. He was so certain of the truth and so confident of God's protection that he replied to the pleadings of his friends: "And if they will build a wall of fire between Wittenberg and Worms that will reach up to heaven, I will still go in God's name and tread between the teeth in the mouth of Behemoth and confess Christ!"

At four o'clock in the afternoon of the first day after his arrival in Worms, Luther was conducted into the hall where the diet was in session. The streets were so crowded that he had to make his way through the backyards and alleys. Just before he entered the hall, an elderly gentleman, Captain George Frundsberg, tapped him on the shoulder and said: "Little monk! Little monk! You are now on your way to take a stand such as I and many another general have not taken in the most desperate battles, but if you are sincere and sure of your cause, go in God's name and be of good cheer, God will not forsake you."

Upon his appearance before the diet, Luther was asked two questions: first, whether the books lying on the table before him were his, and, second, whether or not he would retract what he had written in them. To the first question Luther answered, "Yes." To the second question he did not give an immediate answer, but asked for time to consider the question. An allowance of 24 hours' time was given him, and Luther spent all night in prayer over the matter.

On the following day, at four o'clock in the afternoon, he was again summoned to the diet. When he was asked whether he would retract, Luther replied with a long address which he delivered in Latin and repeated in German. He was then requested to give a shorter answer. This he did, saying in part: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Holy Scripture ... I cannot and will not recant, since it is neither safe nor advisable to do anything against conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise! God help me! Amen."

At the Wartburg - The Translation of the Bible

Luther was now excommunicated-excluded from the church as a heretic. Emperor Charles, furthermore, signed the Edict of Worms, a decree, drawn up by Luther's foes, forbidding everyone to aid or shelter him and ordering his books to be burned. This probably would have meant the death of Luther had it not been for his good friend, the elector Frederick of Saxony, who planned his rescue.

In the Black Forest of Saxony was an isolated fortress called the Wartburg. As Luther's wagon



entered the forest on its way home from Worms, it was suddenly surrounded by a group of horsemen who brought the wagon to a stop, seized Luther, and took him away to the Wartburg. Here he was commanded to wear the clothes of a hunter and let his beard grow so that no one could recognize him. This was the Elector's successful plan of sparing Luther.

Luther remained 10 months at the Wartburg. While there, he translated the New

Testament into the language of the people. Later on he also translated the Old Testament, and in 1534 he published the entire Bible in German.

6. The Fanatics

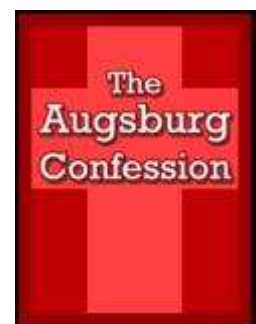
Meanwhile, Wittenberg was the scene of religious fanaticism. Under the leadership of Dr. Carlstadt, people stormed into the churches and threw out pictures and crucifixes, abolished organ and choir music, thinking they could reform the church in this way. Moved by the extreme teaching of the Roman Church regarding the words of Christ in the Lord's Supper, "This is My body," namely, that the bread changed into the body of Christ (transubstantiation), Dr. Carlstadt went to the other extreme and taught that the bread represents the body of Christ. There was also another group of fanatics who came from the town of Zwickau in West Saxony, Germany, and who were called the "Zwickau prophets." Besides trying to reform the church in the manner in which Carlstadt attempted it, they also taught false doctrines regarding the Sacrament of Baptism, namely, that Baptism is merely an act of initiation into the church, but does not work forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. Because they demanded that everyone baptized as a child must be baptized again in adult life, they were called "Anabaptists."

Luther at first tried to correct the matter through writing, but with no results. Finally, he returned from the Wartburg, and through his influence, preaching every day for eight days, this fanatical spirit was checked in Wittenberg and the Word of God and common sense prevailed. Of course, this fanaticism continued in other places, and its leaders brought about a rebellion among the peasants of Germany, who welcomed this fanaticism because they long had been oppressed. Luther, on the other hand, put forth every effort to stem this rebellion, but unfortunately Luther's advice was not accepted, and the result was the Peasants' War. At this time also two men appeared in Switzerland: Ulrich Zwingli in German Switzerland and John Calvin in French Switzerland. Both men preached against the errors of the Roman Church, but they also tried to bring about a reformation in the similarly rash and fanatical manner of Carlstadt and the Zwickau "prophets." Both men taught essentially the same errors regarding the Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism as Carlstadt and the Zwickau prophets had done.

A meeting was arranged at Marburg between Luther and Zwingli, known as the Colloquy of Marburg. Zwingli maintained that the Lord could not be bodily present at the same time at so many different places at which the Lord's Supper is celebrated in one day; that the body of Christ is not present in the Sacrament, but is received only in a spiritual way, and that the bread represented the presence of the body. Over against this teaching Luther maintained that when Christ said, "This is My body," He knew and meant what He said, and that we dare not deny His word. Nothing came of this meeting, for Zwingli continued in his error. Those who continued this spirit and these teachings, chiefly under the influence of Zwingli and Calvin, founded the Reformed Church, which continues to this day under various denominational names.

7. The Augsburg Confession

In the course of time, those who believed as Luther did (mockingly called "Lutherans") found it necessary to outline their faith in writing. And when they were summoned to state their belief before the Emperor and officials of the Roman Church, they presented the document they had prepared. It was read on June 25, 1530, in the city of Augsburg, and therefore it is called the Augsburg Confession. Previously Luther had also published his Small Catechism, in 1529, in order to help the people, and especially the children, in learning God's Word, for they knew so little about it. Luther also believed that the people should take part in the services at church; therefore he introduced singing by the



congregation, and he himself also composed several hymns, the most famous of them being "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

8. Luther's Marriage and Family Life

When Luther became a monk, he vowed to remain unmarried. However, he had come to see that it is contrary to God's Word for the Pope to forbid priests, monks, and nuns to marry. In order to testify against this error by his own example, he entered holy matrimony on June 13, 1525, with Katharina von Bora, a nun who had been converted by reading his writings. She became his devoted wife. They had six children, Hans, Elizabeth, Magdalene, Martin, Paul, and Margaret. Magdalene died at an early age. Luther was a kind and devoted father and spent much time with his children.

9. Luther's Death

The time was coming when Luther's life on earth was drawing to a close. For several years he had not been well. In January 1546, Luther was asked to attend a meeting in Eisleben, the place of his birth, in order to settle a dispute. While there, he complained about pains in his chest. He went to his room and lay down on a couch, but the pains continued. After about an hour's sleep he awoke and went into his bedroom, praying: Into Your hands I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O Lord God of truth." After midnight he had another attack. Death was approaching, and he knew it.

He arose, walked into the next room, lay down on the couch again, and prayed this beautiful prayer: "O my heavenly Father, one God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, God of all comfort, I thank You that You have given for me Your dear Son Jesus Christ, in whom I believe, whom I have preached and confessed, loved and praised ... I pray You, dear Lord Jesus Christ, let me commend my soul to You. I am certain that I shall be with You forever and that no one can ever, ever tear me out of Your hands. ... Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit. You have redeemed me, faithful God."

Luther repeated to himself other passages of Scripture. When his friends saw that he was about to pass away, Dr. Jonas approached him and said: "Venerable father, will you die steadfastly adhering to Christ and the doctrines you have preached?" Luther answered distinctly, "Yes!" He passed away between two and three o'clock on Thursday morning, February 18, 1546, and was buried near the pulpit in the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

10. Conclusion

Luther's great work of the Reformation may be summed up in these words: Luther restored the message of the Christian church in its original truth and purity. Luther did not wish to abolish the outward forms of Christian worship, nor did he want to start a new church; he wished to cleanse the church of its false doctrine. To him the critical issue was the Gospel, and it was a matter of greatest importance to him that the message be the entire truth, and nothing but the truth, of God's Word. His two great principles were Sola Scriptura-"The Bible Alone," and Sola Gratia-"By Grace Alone."

In summary, we are saved by Grace, through Faith, for Christ's sake. This truth is the heart and centre of Lutheran doctrine and life.