
The Life of Martin Luther

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Presented May-June 2006

Part 1

Introduction

At the turn of the last Millennium, A&E aired a series entitled *Biography of the Millennium*. It counted down who they considered to be the 100 most influential people in the last 1,000 years. And do you know who was number one?....Johann Gutenberg. Who do you think was number two?....Isaac Newton. Any guesses on who was number three?...Martin Luther. Well, I have no quarrel with their selection for the number one position, but I disagree with the choice for number two. I probably would have switched second and third place. It is interesting to note that the top three selections were all Christians. Charles Darwin comes in at number four. Unfortunately, John Calvin doesn't even make the cut. In a just world, he would have made the list and people like Steven Spielberg (at #91), Princess Diana (at # 73) and Margaret Sanger (at #50) would have been cut instead. Historians have a tendency to be chronological snobs, favoring their own generation or generations just past.

Of course, I think the reasons A&E would value Martin Luther is different than the reasons we would value Martin Luther. A&E views Martin Luther as the first modern man, who challenged authority no matter what it cost him, he was a rebel who defied all convention and broke the medieval tyranny of the Catholic Church, freeing mankind for discovery and invention, and paving the way for others to challenge the system and think outside the box.

Aside from that being a completely distorted picture of Martin Luther and one that he would not even recognize, it misses what Martin Luther was interested in and misses his greatest contribution. In one sentence, what makes Martin Luther most worth remembering is his amazing, single generation recovery and spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Luther's Early Life

Many who talk about Luther's life begin with that fateful ride home one evening when he was knocked from his horse in a lightning storm and cried, "Help me St. Anne, I will become a monk." While I want to get there, that is not where I want to begin. Instead, I want to begin with Luther's parents (no this doesn't make me Freudian).

Luther's parents Hans and Margareta Luder were peasants, his father was a copper miner and worked very

hard to provide for his family. He wanted his children to achieve more economic prosperity than he had, and, after managing some small success with the copper industry, sent his sons to the best schools he could afford. They weren't the best available but they were quite good. Luther's parents loved him but were very hard on him. Luther speaks of a time that his mother caned him for stealing a nut. She caned him so hard that she drew blood. Similarly, Luther's father once caned him so hard that Luther would hardly speak to him until Hans Luder showed remorse. Luther was frequently caned at school. In Latin class, the students were compelled to learn the language by the rod. At the end of the day, the poorest performing student would be made to wear a donkey mask and nicknamed the *asinus*, while the other students were encouraged to chase him and flog him with sticks. While Luther was not the worst student in the class, he was not a model student either and was often caned for not knowing his Latin.

Out of his ambition that his children be successful, he pushed Luther to become a lawyer. Luther had no choice in the matter at all. Luther already had a cousin who had made a reputation for himself in law and politics and lived in his cousins shadow to achieve the same success.

When Luther was 22 years old and already well into his legal education, he was traveling home in the middle of a thunderstorm and was knocked off of his horse. For fear of his life, he made a vow to God. He cried, "Help me, St. Anne! I will become a monk!" Luther hated to disappoint his father, but he had given his word to God and Luther already knew that the wrath of God was immeasurably greater than the wrath of his father. Luther did not like his law studies anyway, and so he told his father that was leaving the university for the monastery. This decision enraged his father. He did not forgive Luther for quite some time. In fact, after not seeing Luther for a year, he attended Luther's first mass as an ordained priest and told him that the Devil had a hand in bringing him to the monastery. After Luther had conducted the mass he attended a meal with his father and asked him, "Dear father, why were you so contrary to my becoming a monk? And perhaps you are not quite satisfied even now. The life is so quiet and godly." This only made matters worse. Luther's father erupted, "You learned scholar, have you never read in the Bible that you should honor your father and mother? And here you have left me and your dear mother to look after ourselves in our old age." Luther hated displeasing his father, but this fact could not overcome his fear of displeasing God. He was seeking to find a merciful God and to appease his wrath even if this required forsaking father and mother as Christ had commanded.

But something else happened at Luther's first mass that gives us a glimpse into Luther's state that would lead to his discovery of the gospel. Luther so feared God that he was terrified as he approached the altar with the words, "We offer to you, the living, the true, the eternal God..." He was so sure that he would be consumed for coming before God with his sin that he began to shake and had to grab hold of the altar to keep from falling. After that event Luther wrote about this experience:

At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, "With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say, 'I want this, I ask for that'? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.

Even though his devotion to monastic life was a way to deal with his sin, this realization of the wrath of God against him stayed with him throughout his entire time in the monastery. He could not escape the sense of his own sin. Everything he did as a monk was to satisfy the anger of God he knew was against him for his sin. Luther was a monk to the uttermost. He often went on a complete fast, many times in three-day cycles. He prayed hours beyond what was required by the monastery and many nights willfully slept on a cold, stone floor with no blankets, often becoming ill from it. He would often flog himself with sticks in order to punish

his sinful flesh. He would do anything to be found righteous before a God he knew was angry at him for his sin.

Many years later, Luther looked back on his time at the monastery and said, "In the monastery I did not think about women, money, or possessions; instead my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow His grace on me" (Oberman 128)

Luther's entire struggle was against the accusation of Satan and the agreement of God with Satan's accusation. How could he be righteous? It tormented him. He would often examine his behavior at the end of the day and conclude, "I have done nothing wrong today." But doubts would plague him in response, and he found himself saying, "Have you fasted enough? Are you poor enough?"

Luther struggled through the years with gastro-intestinal issues and would later attribute his digestion problems to the damage wrought by constant fasting in the days of his vows. He looked back on those days and said, "I was a good monk, and kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work (Bainton 34)."

Luther's Trip to Rome

Luther was sent with one other monk to go to Rome and represent Erfurt. This was an enormous honor for a monk. Luther was excited to the extent that, upon seeing the city in the distance, he cried "Hail, holy Rome." His personal goal during his month in Rome was to seek grace and forgiveness both for himself and his loved ones. He visited shrines and relics, venerated bones, and walked through the catacombs. He even climbed every step of Pilate's court on his hands and knees, saying a prayer and kissing every step. He was desperate to release his grandfather, Heine, from purgatory. Finally, when he reached the top of the steps he did not feel at peace. Instead he wondered, "Who knows whether this is true?"

Luther was appalled at the debauchery throughout the "holy" city. He had come not to be surprised at the abuses of his religion in other parts of the world, but was sure that if there was any place that was the bastion of piety and orthodoxy it was Rome. Instead, what he found was open prostitution in the city streets with many priests and monks taking part, drunkenness and violence. With regard to the practice of Catholicism, he found the mass treated flippantly and frequently heard priests say of the eucharist, "Bread thou art, and bread thou shalt remain." But more horrifying than all other sights that Luther encountered was the sale of indulgences. When he entered the city he cried, "Hail, holy Rome!" but leaving the city he said, "If there is a hell below, Rome is surely built on it."

But God in his providence used this trip to Rome for good in Luther's life. Had he never visited Rome, Luther would likely have maintained his reverence of the church there no matter how far gone things were elsewhere, and possibly would have never opposed the catholic church the way he did.

Beginning at Wittenberg

It was not long after Luther's return from Rome that he was transferred from Erfurt to Wittenberg. This move was absolutely monumental in Luther's life. It was here that he met the man who would have more influence on him than any other in his life—the abbot of the monastery, John Staupitz.

During this time, Luther's feelings of guilt and accusation by Satan became more intense. He read about and practiced everything that the church prescribed for one who felt alienated from God. His own good works were of no comfort and the merit of the saints only left him doubting their sufficiency. Luther managed to find a little solace in confession. Luther was in the confessional almost daily and sometimes his confession would last six hours. Luther confessed anything and everything he could think of and often felt shame for not being able to remember anything else, because he was sure that he had more sin to confess. Staupitz, his confessor, became bothered by Luther's constant confessing and on one occasion said to him, "Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come with something to forgive—parricide, blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes."

But Luther knew that one could sin without awareness and that even if he were aware, there is the question of whether one remembered everything. Luther's sin haunted him. In Luther's view, "there is something much more drastically wrong with man than any particular list of offenses which can be enumerated, confessed, and forgiven. The very nature of man is corrupt. The penitential system fails because it is directed to particular lapses. Luther had come to perceive that the entire man is in need of forgiveness." Therefore, Luther found very little solace in the means of grace and forgiveness offered by the Catholic church.

Staupitz continued to counsel Luther. He told him that he was making religion too difficult. "All God asks is that we love him. Do this and you shall have your peace with God, Martin." But this was no comfort at all. This counsel only shined a light on Luther's feeling. How could anyone love a terrible, wrathful God who consumes us as a fire if we approach him? "What is lovely about God when I feel his damnation against me?"

Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he delighted in sins and in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages. And who would not be? I was myself more than once to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him (Bainton 44)!

Luther began to wonder what was wrong with him? Was he the only one who felt this heavy hand of God? Was God only against him and no others? Luther asked Staupitz if he ever had trials such as these. Staupitz replied, "No, but I think they are your meat and drink."

Staupitz counsel was useless. Both he and Luther knew it. Arguments and theology were of no use, so Staupitz sought to employ another strategy. He recognized that Luther was one with unusual gifts and a sensitive heart. Luther was 29 years old and had nearly completed his doctoral studies and Staupitz asked him if he would replace him as the chair of Bible at the University. Luther would not hear of it, he quickly gave fifteen reasons why he would fail at the job. But Staupitz was persistent and after a short time persuaded a reluctant Luther into his new job. But why would Staupitz give such an honor to such an unstable soul? Staupitz knew Luther's voracious habit of study and knew that he would be as good for the work as the work would be for him. There was certainly a risk, but he hoped that the intensity of the task would give Luther relief. In time, his decision proved to be the proper one, but not because the work distracted Luther from the presence of God's anger and judgment, but because it was through his study of the Scriptures that Luther found peace.

Luther's Discovery of the Gospel

Luther quickly began lecturing on the Psalms and later on Romans and Galatians. It was not through some

ecstatic experience that Luther encountered Jesus. It was not through hearing a voice from heaven, but in the quiet, careful study of the Bible that Luther found the merciful God. In Psalm 22 he read, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” How often he had felt this way: utterly abandoned and alone without God, but he knew that Christ had prayed this on the cross. Christ went to the cross to suffer rejection, shame and the wrath of God. Why should Christ endure this? The only answer Luther could find was that Christ took on himself Luther’s sin and bore God’s wrath for us all. Christ came to share in the alienation that he felt.

God’s wrath and his mercy met at the cross. The wrath was for Christ, the mercy for us. God treated Christ as though he were Luther so that he could treat Luther as though he were Christ.

The beginning of Luther’s understanding of the Gospel came from his study of the Old Testament. Throughout his life and his preaching, Luther would teach more from the Old Testament than he did from the New Testament. Though his study of the Psalms is where the seed of the gospel began in Luther’s heart, it would blossom in his study of Romans.

Luther still continued to wonder about the justice of God. If justice turns into easiness can God really be said to be just? Doesn’t justice require that God give the sinner what he deserves? Can the cross explain it all away? The answers to these questions may seem so easy and obvious to us, but this is because we are already standing on the very discovery that Luther is in the process of making.

Though he had read Romans 1 many times in his life, with his new understanding of the Psalms he came to understand it. God’s justice does not make man just. It puts him in a place where he cannot possibly be just in himself. Light broke in when he read Rom 1:17 “The just shall live by faith.” It was in reading this verse that Luther sees a conversion experience.

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. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather murmured against him. Yet I clung to dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by 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 to be reborn and to have gone through the gates of 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...If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and flowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face.

Allow me to give a quick word for why the study of the Scripture in the original languages is important. Luther would later say that his understanding of justification was built on his understanding of the Greek language. Not only did the Greek change his understanding of justification, it changed his understanding of repentance as well. In Matthew 4:17, the Latin Vulgate, the official catholic translation, reads “do penance” where the Greek reads, “Repent!” Luther pointed to the fact that “do penance” refers to an act or a work, while the Greek word for repent means “a change of mind.” Luther wrote, “I venture to say they are wrong who make more of the act in Latin than of the change of heart in Greek” (Bainton 69). Imagine, were it not for his knowledge of Greek, there would have been no Reformation.

Luther's Ninety-Five Theses

All of Luther's theology was not immediately corrected and in line with the Scriptures, but his understanding of the Scriptures began to quickly fall in place. It was only about a year later that Luther would nail his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg. In his teaching on Romans and the doctrine of justification whereby we receive the righteousness of Christ, Luther continued to come up against the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were nothing new. They had been used by the church for centuries. The idea behind an indulgence was that they only were effective for those who were truly penitent and confessed their sin to the church. As proof of their penitence they must do some work of penance, and paying for an indulgence constituted such proof. The official church doctrine did not teach that you could buy yours or someone else's way out of purgatory. Rather, it taught that a grateful heart should want to bestow physical blessing in response to the spiritual blessing just received. In defense, the church cited Paul's words from 1 Cor 9, "If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more?"

But the church began to abuse its own doctrine. John Tetzel a Dominican monk, who was commissioned by the Archbishop Albert of Mainz to push indulgences as a way of raising money for the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica. To encourage an increase in sales, Tetzel offered discounted, rock-bottom prices on an indulgence with an extended warranty! "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Luther had already been outspoken against them for nearly three years. In fact, Luther was not the only one. There were many theologians and priests who were critical of the abuse of the church's doctrine of indulgences. Luther did not stand out from the many voices who criticized the abuse of indulgences.

But after Luther's discovery and understanding of the gospel, he was no longer simply against the abuse of indulgences, he was against the very idea of indulgences altogether. On October 31, All Saints' Eve, 1517, Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. It would become a hammer heard round the world. Luther did not focus on the clear and obvious cases of abuse of indulgences. He knew that many had already criticized these examples, and that by focusing on cases of abuse his arguments would be waived by his opponents as simply dwelling on the abuses. In anticipation of that, Luther focused instead on the idea of repentance in general. He criticized the whole system of penance and not just indulgences. For Luther, indulgences was not the problem itself, it was only indicative of the larger problem of the church's teaching on merit and penance in general. This is clear from the very first thesis: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent' (Matt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (Oberman 190).

Luther went even further stating in thesis 37, "Every true Christian participates in the treasure of the Church, even without letters of indulgence; (thesis 62) this treasure is the Gospel of the glory and grace of God" (Oberman 191).

Luther wrote his theses in Latin as was customary for a scholar, and his theses at first were not at all controversial, but Luther demanded a hearing and a debate on the matter. This got the issue further into the public, but publication and news of Luther's theses exploded when someone, against Luther's wishes, translated them into German and began to distribute them. Within a few weeks all of Germany was embroiled in controversy. Was Luther right? Some said yes. Many said no. The issue even went beyond Germany when Luther sent his Ninety-Five Theses to Archbishop Albert of Mainz. Albert did not respond to Luther but forward the document on to Rome to be read by Pope Leo X himself.

The Life of Martin Luther

Part 2

Introduction

Well I feel like where we left of last time is a little like the end of an episode of the old Adam West Batman show. At the end of each show they left the audience hanging. The narrator would come on and say “What will happen to our Caped Crusader, will he escape, or will he be crushed? Tune in next week to find out, same Battime, same Batchannel.” Well, we sort of left Luther in a suspenseful place. What will happen to our Great Reformer, will he escape or will be crushed? When we last saw Luther, he had nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. As I pointed out last time, Luther’s theses only became controversial after it was translated into the language of the people. Luther’s theses gained very little attention at first. But someone—we don’t know who—felt that Luther’s words needed to be read by all the German people in their own language.

Pope Leo sent a papal court theologian to respond to Luther—Sylvester Prierias. Prierias thought it easy to respond to Luther. The pope is the highest authority and the foundation of the universal church. “He is infallible when he makes a decision in his capacity as pope.” Prierias stated,

"As I intend to sift your doctrine thoroughly, my Martin, it is necessary for me to establish a basis of norms and foundations. . . . He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic" (193).

Prierias recognized that Luther’s theses raised an even bigger issue beyond that of what was necessary for true repentance. Luther’s rejection and criticism of Catholic teaching went right to the heart of the issue of authority. What is the source of authority for the Christian? The church or the Scriptures? The Pope or Christ? Luther was not looking for a Reformation. He was not looking to leave the church. At first he was only looking to correct a false doctrine of repentance. But soon realized the doctrine on which Rome was built: it was asserting its authority over God’s. At first, Luther could recognize the authority of the church so long as it recognized the authority of God’s word, but at the point that the church said that it spoke for Christ and that Scripture derived its authority from the church, Luther could not be silent. The issue that Prierias

raised was not even over the interpretation of Scripture, it was bigger than that: the church is the one who gives Scripture its authority, whether in the matters of interpretation or even when the interpretation is not the issue.

Luther's response to Prierias was:

I am sorry now that I despised Tetzel. Ridiculous as he was, he was more acute than you. You cite no Scripture. You give no reasons. Like an insidious devil you pervert the Scriptures.... You call me a leper because I mingle truth with error. I am glad you admit there is some truth. You make the pope into an emperor in power and violence.

Luther quoted Galatians 1:8 to show that there is no one on earth that can hold authority over the gospel. "Even if an angel from heaven [let alone a pope] should

descend and preach a gospel contrary to what you have received, let him be accursed."

Furthermore Luther quoted Augustine and canon law to prove that the Church had always and clearly recognized the Bible as the only standard of faith and morals.

The Leipzig Debate

Luther felt thrown into this controversy. His Ninety-Five theses had a much more profound effect than he ever intended. He quickly found many theologians challenging his teaching. He was invited to debate the issue with many, but none would be a more skilled and vehement opponent than John Eck. Luther debated Eck several times.

The most bitter debate was at Leipzig. Luther showed up with 200 students armed with battle-axes, and John Eck had 76 bodyguards.

Luther argued against the historicity of the Roman pope and against the office's divine origin. He argued that the Greek orthodox church never recognized the authority of Rome and that in the early centuries bishops beyond Rome were not ordained by, nor subject to the bishop of Rome.

John Eck replied by accusing Luther of making the same claims as John Wyclif and John Hus of Bohemia.

'I see,' said Eck, 'that you are following the damned and pestiferous errors of John Wyclif, who said, "It is not necessary for salvation to believe that the Roman church is above all others." And you are espousing the pestilent errors of John Hus, who claimed that Peter neither was nor is the head of the Holy Catholic Church.' 'I repulse the charge of Bohemianism,' roared Luther. 'I have never approved of their schism...' (Bainton 89).

John Wyclif and John Hus had already been condemned as heretics by Rome, and if Eck could get Luther to admit his agreement with them then the debate was over. Eck did not need to try to persuade Luther but only to get him to admit his agreement with other heretics.

The assembly broke for lunch, and Luther rushed to the library to study on John Hus. He read the Council of Constance which had condemned Hus as a heretic to be burned at the stake. Luther was completely amazed at what he read from John Hus, “The one holy universal church is the company of the predestined....The universal Holy Church is one, as the number of the elect is one.” Luther recognized this line as almost identical to Augustine.

When the debate reconvened, Luther opened by saying,

Among the articles of John Hus, I find many which are plainly Christian and evangelical, which the universal Church cannot condemn....As for the article of Hus that “it is not necessary for salvation to believe the Roman Church superior to all others” I do not care whether this comes from Wyclif or from Hus. I know that innumerable Greeks have been saved though they never heard this article. It is not in the power of the Roman pontiff or of the Inquisition to construct new articles of faith. No believing Christian can be coerced beyond Holy Scriptures....A simple layman armed with the Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it....For the sake of the Scriptures we must reject pope and councils (Bainton 90).

The debate lasted a total of 18 days with no clear winner but Eck had done all he needed. Luther acknowledged his agreement with heresy and rejected the authority of the ecumenical councils and the pope—this was enough to satisfy Eck.

Diet of Augsburg

Rome felt that the time for debate was over. It had heard enough from Luther. He refused to recant. Luther was excommunicated by Leo X with agreement by Emperor Maximilian at the Diet of Augsburg. Luther went to Augsburg sure that he would be killed for his faith. He wrote a public will expecting to die. In it he said, “May Christ live, may Martinus die—like every sinner.”

Diet of Worms

At the Diet of Augsburg the church had already condemned Luther and cast him out of the church, but Luther was not too concerned because he increasingly viewed it as a false church. But the greater penalty would be excommunication by the state. It was for this purpose that he was summoned to Worms for a hearing before the Emperor. Luther wrote in a letter to a friend that “We shall enter Worms, even if the gates of Hell and all the powers of Heaven try to prevent it...There the task is to chase away the devil” (Oberman 197). Emperor Maximilian died shortly after Luther had been condemned by the church at Augsburg. A new Emperor had been elected—Charles V. He had no tolerance for theological division in his empire. It was before the Emperor that Luther had to stand trial.

Sometimes we have this view of Luther as one who charges full steam ahead, throws caution into the wind and goes into a fight no holds barred, but that is an inaccurate understanding. Luther was very cautious and somewhat uncertain of what to do at the Diet Worms. The Diet asked him to recant his works, but Luther said he couldn’t do that since so much of what he wrote does not conflict with the doctrine of Rome, so he charged them to declare which part he should recant. Finally, they put forward some of Luther’s statements

that were clearly contrary to established Catholic doctrine. They asked him again if he would recant his statements. Luther unsure what he should do, asked for a day to consider his answer. They granted him until the next day.

That night Luther read voraciously and expeditiously. He prayed with a heavy heart that night and looked to the Psalms for comfort. The next day they asked him again if he would recant. The time for deliberation was over. He must give his answer now. But Luther knew his answer. This is an excerpt of what he said:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—I consider myself convicted by the testimony of the Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one’s conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me. Amen (Oberman 39).

Charles V was not dissuaded though. Luther’s refusal to recant only emboldened him. Shortly after Worms he said, “I have decided to mobilize everything against Luther: my kingdoms and dominions, my friends, my body, my blood and my soul” (Oberman 29). But God in his providence kept Charles V preoccupied and distracted with a variety of issues going on in his empire. While he never forgot about Luther, he could never gain the right momentum. Luther had become an iconic figure in Germany. The people loved him and his governors and rulers were intent on protecting him. While there was a variety of factors that kept Luther from the stake, Luther’s long life should be attributed primarily to the protection and intervention of one man—Frederick the Wise, the elector of Germany. Frederick was no confident Luther supporter, on the contrary he was a devout and sincere Catholic. He believed in indulgences, was an avid collector of relics and attended every mass. But neither was a supporter of Charles V’s Holy Roman Empire. Politically, he was enraged at the way the Pope and the Emperor treated Germany, and he was intent on defending Luther as a son of Germany.

Final Summary of Luther’s life

Well, here’s where I must make a long story short if I we are to see what Luther can teach us today.

To sum up the rest of Luther’s life, he went on to involvement in politics, pastoral teaching, translating the entire Bible, helping to draft a catechism for adults and writing a catechism for children, writing music and church liturgy. Luther died at the age of 63 in 1546.

Lessons we can learn from Luther

Luther’s Marriage

First, I think Luther can teach us some lessons about marriage today, both to those who are single and to those who are married.

I'm sure many of you have seen the Luther movie that came out two years ago. Though there's much to enjoy and appreciate about the film, there are several things that I didn't like about it. One problem I had with the film is that it portrayed Luther's courtship and marriage as a passionate love affair from beginning to end, when, in reality, it was anything but. Initially it seemed more like a concession on Luther's part than real love that motivated him.

Luther did not want to get married for at least three reasons:

First, Luther was sure that he would be martyred any day for his defense of the gospel. He didn't think he needed to inflict the burden on a wife of having to deal with the death of a husband and the burden of the emotional and financial hardship to follow.

Second, Luther was sure that many would accuse his decision to leave the church and break his vow of chastity to be motivated by his sexual desire and passions instead of his pursuit of truth and his love for the gospel.

Third, he didn't think he was suited for marriage. He was older than the normal marriageable age and was accustomed to single life.

As a consequence of Luther's teaching many nuns began to leave the cloisters. Some had written to Luther for guidance and Luther feeling a certain responsibility to help them carry out their evangelical convictions, would from time to time arrange to smuggle some of them out of the convent. On one occasion Luther arranged for one of the men making a delivery of fish to a convent to disguise twelve nuns as a collection of empty barrels. Three returned home to their parents but the remaining nine were brought to Wittenberg to see Luther. Luther felt he had a duty to find husbands for them. It seemed only fair since it was his teaching that brought about their situation. Some of Luther's friends suggested that he make his job easier by marrying one of them. Luther, of course, objected. Luther had some success finding husbands for them but when he had trouble match-making for three of them his friend Spalatin raised the issue again and suggested he marry one of them. This is what Luther wrote in response:

As for what you write about my marrying, do not be surprised that I do not wed, even if I am so famous a lover. You should be more surprised when I write so much about marriage and in this way have so much to do with women that I do not turn into a woman, let alone marry one (Bainton 224).

Eventually, all of them found husbands except one named Katherine von Bora. It had been two years since she had left the cloister. Desperate to find someone for her, Luther suggested a man that Katherine refused to have anything to do with.

Once during a visit to his parents, Luther casually mentioned the idea of marrying Katherine to his father who, to Luther's surprise, took the idea quite seriously and pressed Luther to marry her. Luther's father was motivated by seeing the Luther name passed on.

Luther actually wanted to marry another woman named Ave von Schönfeld. He said he thought Katherine was haughty. But after much persuasion the forty-three year-old Luther decided to marry twenty-seven year-old Katherine.

He cited three reasons for his decision.

1. To please his father.
2. To spite the pope and the Devil
3. To be a witness to what the Bible taught before he was martyred (Bainton 225).

Here's a few samples of wedding invitations he sent out:

You must come to my wedding. I have made the angels laugh and the devils weep" (Bainton 226).

Undoubtedly the rumor of my marriage has reached you. I can hardly believe it myself, but the witnesses are too strong" (Bainton 226).

I am to be married on Thursday. My lord Katie and I invite you to send a barrel of the best Torgau beer, and if it is not good you will have to drink it all yourself (Bainton 226).

Though Luther and Katie's marriage seemed to be more of a partnership at first it eventually blossomed into love and mutual affection. Luther quickly realized the benefits of marriage. He wrote, "Before I was married the bed was not made for a whole year and became foul with sweat. But I worked so hard and was weary I tumbled in without noticing it" (Bainton 226).

Another benefit: "One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtails on the pillow which were not there before" (Bainton 226).

Luther grew very fond of Katie. He went so far as to even give her pet names. Instead of calling her Katie he would modify it slightly and call her Kette which is German for "chain." He also called her "my rib" (227), "Mrs. Dr. Katherine Luther...Mistress of the pig market, lady of Zulsdorf, and whatever other titles may befit your grace" (Bainton 228). He loved Katie so much that he nicknamed Paul's letter to the Galatians "my Katherine von Bora" (Bainton 228). Luther once had to repent of being so devoted to Katie, "I give more credit to Katherine than Christ, who has done so much more for me" (Bainton 228).

The same Luther who said at the beginning of his marriage said, "I do not love my wife, but I appreciate her," would later say "I would not exchange Katie for France or for Venice, because God has given her to me and other women have worse faults" (Bainton 225).

I want to make it clear how absolutely out of the norm and counter-cultural it was for one to write about one's wife the way Luther did. For example compare what we know about Luther's wife Katie to what we know about Calvin's wife or many of the wives of the Puritans. There is an exponential difference in how much Luther said about his wife compared to the others. Luther wrote about sex and marriage and love and commitment. In this sense he was a man beyond his time. But it was not because he was seeking to be progressive, liberal or the "modern man" but because he was seeking to be biblical. He knew that the Scriptures addressed love, sex and marriage, and that it shared stories about the marriages of those in Scripture. Like everything else good in life, Luther viewed marriage and sex inside of marriage as a gift of God's grace. Sex was not a necessary evil or even just for procreation. He went so far as to say that sexual drives were a divine force or even God's vital presence. "For Luther God is so vitally present in the power of attraction between man and woman that he inspires the conjugal union Himself and constitutes the sexual bond of marriage" (Oberman 274). For Luther the marriage bed is a very sacred thing.

He once wrote in a personal letter to his friend Spalatin to tell him he would not be able to attend his wedding but told him “When you sleep with Catherine and embrace her, you should think: ‘This child of man, this wonderful creature of God has been given to me by my Christ. May He be praised and glorified.’ On the evening of the day on which, according to my calculations, you will receive this, I shall make love to my Catherine while you make love to yours, and thus we will be united in love” (Oberman 276).

Luther viewed all of marriage as a gift of grace. When was the last time you viewed your spouse as a gift of grace from God? Do you take advantage of your husband or wife or do you praise him or her? Do you see them as being a source of grace and teaching for your growth and instruction or do you view your spouse as holding you back and as a source of the problems in your life. And in case your thinking Luther is just thinking about good spouses as a means of grace, think again. Regardless of who your spouse is, you should thank God for them because they are given to you to make you like Christ. But in case you feel like a failure in this area we can learn from Luther here, too. As you’ll see from what I say in a moment, Luther did not always view his wife as a means of grace. He felt his own frustrations with her and this should teach us that we all fail in this area. Even the great Luthers in life do not have a flawless marriage.

Luther’s Family Life

Second, I think Luther can teach us about family life.

While Luther was a very busy man with teaching and writing, Katie was doubtless busier than he. Let me give a peak into a day in the life of Katie Luther. Katie traveled several times a week beyond the village to an orchard where they grew apples, grapes, pears, nuts and peaches. She regularly fished from a pond by casting a heavy net catching trout, carp, pike and perch. She worked on the family farm raising hens, ducks, pigs and cows and did all the slaughtering herself. It was her job to take the animals to market and sell them. After they bought a farm in the town of Zulsdorf, she had to spent several weeks by herself developing the new farm.

Luther suffered all kinds of ailments such as gout, insomnia, hemorrhoids, constipation, kidney stones, dizziness, ringing in the ears. She had to learn to mix herbs and dress wounds and massage his muscles.

The Luthers had six children in all. Even with all the commitment and energy required to rear six children, Luther and Katie took in four orphaned children in addition. And if that is not enough there were times at which the house would number twenty-five after all of the guests they took in. They constantly had students staying with them. The students considered every meal and an opportunity to advance their education and would take notes at the dinner table as Luther spoke. Katie joked at times that they should charge tuition.

Here’s a sample of how broad and sprawling the conversation was at the dinner table. Luther said:

- “The monks are the fleas on God Almighty’s fur coat.”
- In criticism of the rules of the pope he said, “The only portion of the human anatomy which the pope has had to leave uncontrolled is the hind end.”
- “Printing is God’s latest and best work to spread the true religion throughout the world.”
- “Birds lack faith. They fly away when I enter the orchard, though I mean them no ill. Even so do we

lack faith in God.”

- “What lies there are about relics! One claims to have a feather from the wing of Gabriel, and the Bishop of Mainz has a flame from Moses’ burning bush. And how does it happen that eighteen apostles are buried in Germany when Christ had only twelve?”
- About astrology Luther said, “I am the son of a peasant and the grandson and the great-grandson. My father wanted to make me into a burgermeister. He went to Mansfeld and became a miner. I became a baccalaureate and a master. Then I became a monk and put off the brown beret. My father didn’t like it, and then I got into the pope’s hair and married an apostate nun. Who could have read that in the stars” (Bainton 231).

Life in the Luther household was not conflict free.

- Once, Katie felt that Luther was talking to his students too much at the table and interrupted him and said, “Doctor, why don’t you stop talking and eat?”
- Luther in a frustrated tone replied, “ I wish that women would repeat the Lord’s prayer before opening their mouth.” He tried to regain his composure but he was upset the rest of the meal and could not focus on what he was saying.
- Luther wrote, “All my life is patience. I have to be patient with the pope, the heretics, my family and Katie” (Bainton 235).
- About his children Luther once said, “Christ said we must become as children to enter the kingdom of heaven. Dear God, this is too much. Must we really become such idiots?”
- Once, Luther’s pants needed mending, when he couldn’t find any spare cloth he cut up his son Hans’ only pair of pants in order to mend his own.

I do not tell you these stories to make you think that Luther did not love his family. He did, and he told them so quite often and sacrificed for them in a thousand ways. But we must remember that Luther is not some perfected saint. Luther is real. He is accessible. He is a son of Adam and the fall reaches even him. He is faulty and yet the Lord used him mightily. Sometimes I think we can build up men of God to such an extent that we think they don’t share the same struggles, temptations and failures that we do. Luther’s faults are here to remind us that God can use anyone.

And ladies you shouldn’t think that your home has to be perfect to entertain. The Luther home is there to remind us that the greatest things about our homes is the love of Christ we show in our hospitality. What made people want to be in the Luther home was the instruction from the Word of God and the abiding love of Christ shown to them by the Luther family. Make your home a rich, wacky, interactive place to be and friends will come.

And ladies don’t think that Katie was superwoman, I must tell you that she had maidservants and manservants working in the house as the Luthers grew older and more financially viable.

Luther’s view of the church in the world

I think that Luther can teach us a lesson on a balanced view of politics and political engagement. Luther was very active in politics, but he knew its place. He recognized that the most political involvement can

accomplish is to preserve the world until doomsday. But contrary to other Reformers he did not think society could be rehabilitated by Christian political involvement. Instead Luther reminds us that the church always shares the same fate of her Lord. She suffers and is persecuted. She continues to worship and serve others though she be “hanged, drowned, murdered, martyred, chased, tormented. Where you see or hear such know that this is the holy Christian church” (256). While we don’t pursue persecution and suffering we must expect it and recognize it as our calling as Christ’s people.

Luther has a word for our time and our culture of toleration and relativism. He wrote that “absolute tolerance is total persecution.” In an age of tolerance, the church must be silent. It must not proclaim a message of judgment against sin and of salvation in Christ alone. Luther wrote that the “The Devil is endangering the Church with the greatest conceivable persecutions, namely without persecution, with tolerance and security. Woe to us, who are dazzled by satiety and well-being that we fall into the Devil’s trap” (Oberman 256-7). The powerful and wealthy church received by all the world is actually a church in captivity.

According to Luther we are free to criticize our politicians and government, but we must obey them whenever they do not command against the gospel. Before the kingdoms of the world become the kingdoms of our lord and of his Christ, the church must endure severe persecution. She is always a suffering communion of Christians but her enemies will not overcome her. She is not the church militant as Calvin’s followers proclaimed. She is the church triumphant but only as she shares in the wounds and sufferings of her Lord.

Luther’s integration of theology and life

Luther extended theology to all of life. God has importance for everything. He didn’t try to compartmentalize God to certain areas of life and see him as having nothing to do with other parts. So what does God have to do with cardplaying? According to Luther, God has everything to do with cardplaying! Luther once wrote that cardplaying, music and company are all gifts from God. Today it would seem silly for many of us to think about parking lots, microphones, shampoo, contact lenses, sidewalks, and the buttons on our shirts as all being gifts from God, but Luther would think we are silly for not seeing them as gifts from God. For Luther nothing is neutral. Everything is from God or it is from the devil. All of life takes part in the cosmic yet personal battle between God on one side—and the world, the flesh and the Devil on the other.

So Luther integrates God to life and not the other way around. Edmund Clowney tells a story which he no doubt picked up from someone else about a group of monks who approached the abbot and asked him if they could smoke while praying. The abbot quickly said, “No,” with a look of disgust. As they were walking away they noticed another group of monks smoking and praying. After waiting for them to finish both activities they asked why they got to smoke while praying when they had just been turned down by the abbot. One of the monks replied, “We didn’t ask if we could smoke while praying, we asked if we could pray while smoking.” Luther is that second group of monks who instead of trying to integrate life into theology, integrates theology into life.

This very idea was the very reason Luther decided to translate the Scriptures into the language of the common people. Luther’s Bible is not the language of the scholar, or the language of the upper class, it is the language of the common people—it is a true folk Bible. It is the language of the butcher, the farmer, the miner, the housewife and the blacksmith. He said that the language of the common man was not too lowly to be the language of God.

This does not mean that Luther’s Bible lacked a scholastic development. On the contrary! Before dinner every Wednesday and Thursday for two years he assembled his colleagues at the University and worked

through the translation. He consulted Jews and foreign language experts. But scholarly review was not all that mattered. Because the Word of God relates to all aspects of living he sat in the market place and watched people. He asked them for the proper German terms for things. “Once he had several sheep cut up so a German butcher could tell him what every organ of the sheep was called” (Oberman 308). How could he say that the Bible should impact all of life it does not speak to the common man.

Luther even integrated the Scriptures with the smallest details of life. While I’m not advocating beer drinking. Nearly everyone in Luther’s day drank beer—Luther included. Luther’s favorite beer mug had three rings around it. The first he said represented the Ten Commandments, the second the Apostles’ Creed, and the third the Lord’s Prayer. “Luther prized himself that he was able drain the glass of wine through the Lord’s prayer, while his friend Agricola could not get beyond the Ten Commandments.” But Luther is never recorded to have been drunk.

Another example: Luther was once asked what he thought the Apostle Paul looked like, he replied, “I think he was a scrawny shrimp like Melanchthon.” Instead of thinking about how life related to God, he thought about how God related to life.

Conclusion

Well, as you can see Luther is a man for our time, even though he was not a man of our time. He has much to say to all of us. He can teach us lessons about the believing the gospel, about living life and struggling against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

As we have seen Luther was not perfect, he was a sinner like all of us. Yet he was also a saint. A saint like all of us. He is an example to us of a life lived under grace and under trust in Jesus Christ. If Luther were here tonight. Well, first I wouldn’t be teaching if he were—he would be. But in addition, he would not tell us to be like him, he would tell us to be like Christ. This is ultimately the message of Luther and the Reformation. Christ is glorious, know him by grace through faith and glorify him in being conformed to his image.