

Church History: “The Reformation” 1500-1900 (Part 2)

“In 1500 papal supremacy over Christendom appeared secure. . .but the foundations were not secure. Before long they were to be shaken by the earthquake of the Protestant Reformation. A number of factors paved the way for the Reformation. The late medieval papacy amply illustrated the maxim that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and there was considerable anti-papal feeling. The church was in the vulnerable position owning fabulous wealth while manifestly lacking the moral qualifications needed to justify her privileges. A distinctively Christian Humanism, led by Erasmus back to the Hebrew and Greek Bible and early Christian Fathers, was biting critical of much contemporary church life – the lives of the popes and clergy, the state of the monasteries.

“Church Thought” Tony Lane p.120

Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in 1483 at Eisleben (in East Germany). He was on his way to becoming a lawyer when a close brush with death frightened him into becoming a monk (much to his parent’s dismay). Two weeks later, obsessed with guilt, he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfut and proved to be a dedicated monk. He was driven by a profound sense of his own sinfulness and of God’s unutterable majesty. No amount of penance, no soothing advice from his superiors could still Luther’s conviction that he was a miserable, doomed sinner.

In due course he rose to become professor of theology at the new university of Wittenberg. But Luther had problems. He was taught that in order to please God and earn his grace he must ‘do his very best’ which included loving God above all else. But this God was portrayed to Luther as a judge weighing up his merits. Luther was trapped – he could not love the God who was condemning him. But until he loved him he would not be accepted. One verse in particular caused Luther difficulty – Romans 1:17 – ‘In it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed’. Luther hated God for righteously condemning man not only by the law but also by the gospel. Then one day his eyes were opened and he saw the meaning of ‘the righteousness of God’. It is not the righteousness by which He *condemns* us but the righteousness by which He *justifies* us by faith. The gospel reveals

not God’s condemnation and wrath but his salvation and justification. Once Luther saw this he felt as if he had been born again and entered paradise.

“Christian Thought” Tony Lane p.127

Luther saw it clearly now. Man is saved only by his faith in the merit of Christ’s sacrifice. The cross alone can remove man’s sin and save him from the grasp of the devil. He saw how sharply it clashed with the Roman church’s doctrine of justification by faith and good works: the demonstration of faith through virtuous acts, acceptance of church dogma, and participation in church ritual: the sale of indulgences.

Luther had no idea where his spiritual discovery was leading him. It took a flagrant abuse of church finances to propel him into the center of religious rebellion in Germany, and into another revolutionary position regarding papal authority.

He drew up 95 propositions for theological debate and on October 31, 1517, following university custom, he posted them on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg. Among other things, they argued that indulgences cannot remove guilt, do not apply to purgatory, and are harmful because they induce a false sense of security in the donor. That was the spark that ignited the Reformation.

“ChurchHistory” Bruce L Shelley p.250

Luther’s greatest contribution:

He took the four basic Catholic concerns and offered invigorating new answers. To the question, how is a person saved? Luther replied, “**not by works but by faith alone.**” To the question, where does religious authority lie: he answered, “**not in the visible institution called the Roman church but in the Word of God found in the Bible.**” To the question, what is the church? He responded, “**the whole community of Christian believers, since all are priests before God.**” And to the question, what is the essence of Christian living? He replied, “**servicing God in any useful calling, whether ordained or lay.**” To this day any classical description of Protestantism must echo those central truths.

“Church history” Bruce L Shelley p.257