

MARTIN LUTHER - "A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD."

Martin Luther, the great German Reformer, lived from 1483-1546. He translated the Bible into German and pointed the Church back to Jesus Christ and the Early Church. He stood before Pope and Emperor and courageously defended the Truth. By His Word, God brought about a Reformation of the Church, and through regenerated thinking established great freedoms in every area of life. Luther's influence reached far beyond Germany and paved the way for Calvin's Reformation. The Holy Scriptures and Luther's writings formed the character of Germany. His Catechism became the basis of education, and his great hymns including "A Mighty Fortress is our God," are sung all over the world.

MARTIN LUTHER'S CONTEMPORARIES

Among Luther's contemporaries were the great German painters Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach. In Italy the genius Michelangelo was at work. Columbus was sailing to the New World, and Kopernikus discovered that the planets move around the sun. Paracelsus pioneered a new medical science, and Machiavelli laid down his political philosophies. Earlier Johannes Gutenberg had perfected the printing press, and this enabled Luther's writings to be multiplied in all of Europe.

EDUCATED TO BE A LAWYER

Martin Luther was born in Mansfeld as one of 7 children. His pious father was a miner, an able and thrifty man who wanted to give his gifted son the best education possible. He sent him to study law and philosophy at the University of Erfurt. But on July 2, 1505, while on his way to tell his father that he was not keen on pursuing Law, Luther was caught in a thunderstorm and struck to the ground. Grippled by the horror of death and the fear of eternal damnation, he entered, against his father's wishes, the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt and began his theological studies. He was ordained a priest in 1507, and in 1508 became a lecturer at the recently founded University of Wittenberg. At the age of 28 he was appointed professor of theology, a post which he held until his death. A year earlier, in 1510, he had been to Rome on business for his order. There he climbed the sacred steps (said to have been those climbed by Christ in Jerusalem when being led to Pilate). But he returned to Germany disgusted with the behaviour of the Roman clerics and anguished about indulgences and the hierarchy of saints.

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

In Luther's day the sacrament of penance held a central place in Catholic religious practice. (Even today Roman Catholicism holds to 7 sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Absolution, Extreme Unction, Ordination, and Matrimony). At the heart of the sacrament of penance was the priestly act of absolution. This meant that the penitent sinner had to show contrition, make confession, and do works of satisfaction (such as prescribed prayers, fasting, enduring pain, giving alms, going on a pilgrimage, or taking part in a crusade). Eventually it became the custom that the penitent could simply pay a sum of money (a fine) to the Church. He would then receive an official statement, an indulgence, which certified that he been released from all other penalties.

The idea behind this was the doctrine of 'works of supererogation', works which were done beyond the demands of God's law. The Church claimed that Christ had earned such a rich treasury of merits that much of it was now laid up in heaven. Over the centuries the saints had added to this fund, and the Pope, as the vicar of Christ, was entitled to distribute this fund to sinners who were short of merits. This system was generally accepted, initially even by Martin Luther himself, and it benefited the Pope who, because he was busy building the magnificent cathedral of St Peter's, needed a great deal of money.

INDULGENCES

Because of the Pope's needs, the indulgence business grew out of all proportions. By now one could buy indulgences not only for oneself, but for any other person living or dead. Johannes Tetzel, an eloquent Dominican Friar and high-pressure salesman, peddled indulgences in a particularly scandalous manner in the neighbourhood of Wittenberg. In his sales talk he said: "The moment you hear your money drop in the box, the soul of your mother (or any other person) will jump out of purgatory." This was pure financial exploitation of the German people by Rome.

"HOW DO I FIND A GRACIOUS GOD?"

Luther himself had long struggled with the issue of sin and forgiveness. In a letter to the Pope after his conversion, he wrote: "I often endured an agony so hellish in violence, that if those spells had lasted a minute longer I must have died then and there." He knew that all his works, penance, and pain, had not and could not reconcile him to God. "In those days," he said, "an inconceivable passion had gripped me to understand the words of the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans 1:17... *'For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.'* I hated this word, 'the righteousness of God'... I hated the 'righteous' God who punishes sinners... I said: Is it not enough that poor sinners by virtue of original sin alone, are damned for ever, and that they are miserably burdened with the Ten Commandments, and yet God adds even more pain by reproaching us through the Gospels with His righteousness and wrath?" At last, he said, "God had mercy on me and showed me the meaning of the words *'For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'* I began to realise that the 'righteousness of God' is the gift of God through which the righteous man lives by faith... - Then I felt entirely born again and was led through open gates into Paradise itself. Suddenly the whole of Scripture had a different appearance for me. I recounted the passages, which I had memorised and realised that other passages, too, showed that the 'work' of God is what God works in us... Thus St Paul's words that *'the just shall live by faith'*, did indeed become to me the gateway to Paradise."

This revelation that salvation was not by works, but by grace through faith - this *'sola fide'* - became the cornerstone of Lutheran Christianity. The agonised struggle of Martin Luther illustrates more than anything else how far removed the Church was from the true Biblical Gospel, and what a precious Truth God restored to the world through him.

THE 95 THESES NAILED TO THE CASTLE CHURCH IN WITTENBERG

When Martin Luther, on October 31, 1517, nailed his 95 theses onto the door of the Castle Church, his main thrust was not against indulgences as such. He rather focussed on the will of God, which is that **all men must repent**. On All Saints' Day the ruler of Saxony, the elector Frederick the Wise, was exhibiting his collection of more than 5000 relics in the Schlosskirche, which had been specially built for the purpose of housing this massive collection. From far and wide the people came in order to benefit from the graces, which they believed were attached to them. As they filed into the church, they read the 95 theses. These theses caused such a stir that within two weeks they had been printed and read throughout Germany. Four weeks after their publication they were read all over Western Europe. Their effect was so great that they nearly stopped the sale of indulgences. They begin with the words: "Since our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says: *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'* (Matthew 4:17), he wants the whole life of a believer to be a life of repentance." The second thesis says: "... repentance as it is administered by the priests cannot be understood as a sacrament. (Christ's) words apply to an inner repentance... which would be no repentance at all, if it did not bring with it an outward change... a transformation and renewal of a man's whole being..." Martin Luther emphasised that it is God alone who forgives sins, and that indulgences are a fraud. He also appealed to national feeling against Roman exploitation and declared that

the Pope had no power over the souls in purgatory. He called him to return to true Christian ministry.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

Even today, even in Protestant churches, believers tend to prefer a religion of works to the religion of grace. People are still trying to earn merits. The free unmerited redemption through Jesus Christ is, for many, a difficult thing to accept. But it is God who gives everything. And so Luther said:

"I have done nothing, the Word of God has done everything."

"If your Word, Lord God, did not comfort me, I would perish," he exclaimed. "No other book, doctrine, or anything else is able to comfort in need and misery, in death and dying, even among devils and in hell. Only this Bible is able to do what God teaches and let God speak to us like a man to His friends." (Kohls, pp 183-184)

Of a truly Christian person he would say: "The Word has him, and he has the Word."

DISPUTES WITH THE POPE'S EMISSARIES

As the controversy surrounding the 95 theses spread, a series of theological disputes took place which had been arranged by the Pope with the aim of keeping Martin Luther quiet. The first was held in the Augustinian chapter in Heidelberg (where Luther won over Martin Bucer who greatly influenced Jean Calvin), another with Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg. In 1520 Pope Leo X published a refutation of Luther's ideas. Luther had meanwhile written several pamphlets, among them a little booklet "On Good Works" which had a far-reaching effect. In it he stated that "man is saved by faith alone" and that "the noblest of all good works is to believe in Jesus Christ." He urged Christians to serve God in the midst of the world by faithfully performing their daily work, and assured them that if they did this to the glory of God they would be more pleasing to Him than monks and nuns. In fact, he affirmed the priesthood of all believers, but by doing so he challenged the power structures of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther said: "All believers are priests."

After reading a book by the brilliant Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla, he also became convinced that the "donation of Constantine" was a forgery and that the papal power was built on a fraud.

EXCOMMUNICATION

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X ratified and signed a bull excommunicating Martin Luther from the Church. He condemned his teachings as "heretical, scandalous, false and offensive." He called for the burning of Luther's books, forbade him to preach and demanded that he recant publicly within 60 days. He ordered the government to seize and imprison Luther and his followers. Any town or district that sheltered them would also be placed under the interdict.

At this Luther published the "Three Great Reformation Treatises": - "To the Christian Nobility of Germany", the "Babylonian Captivity of the Church", and "The Liberty of a Christian Man." In these books he demanded that the abuses fostered by Rome be stopped. He denied that men could be saved only through a priest or sacrament, (he limited the sacraments to two: Baptism and Communion) and he outlined what a true Christian life should be like. On 10 December 1520, surrounded by a large crowd of students and professors he burned the Pope's Bull.

THE DIET OF WORMS

The Pope had come to the end of his tether. He was beginning to fear that the Church's spiritual power over the temporal powers was at risk. He appealed to the new Emperor, Charles V, to bring Luther either

to obedience or to the stake. So the Emperor called the Diet of Worms, a Council of German rulers. Martin Luther was summoned, and his journey was like a victory parade. Crowds lined the roads to see the man who dared to stand up for Germany against the Pope. They thought he was going to a certain death. On April 17, 1521, while facing the 21 year old Emperor, Luther was asked: "Are those your writings; and do you wish to retract them, or do you adhere to them and continue to assert them?" Luther begged to answer the next day. He first addressed the Diet, and then said: "If the emperor desires a plain answer, I will give it to him. It is impossible for me to recant unless I am proved to be wrong by the testimony of Scripture. My conscience is bound to the Word of God. It is neither safe nor honest to act against one's conscience. Here I stand. God help me. I cannot do otherwise."

Luther left the town by a small gate in the city wall for, after the meeting the Emperor had declared: "To root out heresy I shall stake my crown and my life." He issued the Edict of Worms which ordered Luther's arrest and death. Surely, Luther would have been burned at the stake had not Frederick the Wise protected him. He had been promised safe conduct home and even preached here and there on his way back, but when he was close to Wittenberg, he was captured in a forest by masked riders of Frederick the Wise and taken to the Wartburg for safekeeping.

BIBLE TRANSLATION

Luther was in hiding in the Wartburg for ten months (4 May, 1521 - 3 March 1522) and began to translate the Bible into German. It was his practice to "look the people upon their mouths" so as to use common idioms which would speak most directly to their hearts. By doing this he laid the basis for the modern High German language. He also wrote the Shorter Catechism so that children be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In addition, he authored many hymns, of which "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*" is the most well known, and stated that "music should have the next place to theology and the highest honour."

AUGSBURG CONFESSION

With the Bible now freely available, the Church was reformed. Services were no longer held in Latin, but in German. In 1530, at the Diet of Augsburg, the Lutheran faith was laid down in the "Augsburg Confession". It was the first confession or creed to be formulated since the ancient Church had formulated the Christian faith in the Apostles' Creed, and in the Creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

On June 13, 1525, Luther married a lady of the nobility, Catherine von Bora, a former nun. She was a wonderful helper to him, and bore him several children. His closest friend and most helpful co-worker was Philipp Melancthon, who had become a professor of Greek at Wittenberg University at the age of 21. He was one of the most learned men of his day. He published the first systematic presentation of Luther's theology under the title of *Loci Communes* and also drafted the *Augsburg Confession*. Another friend of Luther's and most valuable assistant was Spalatin, the private secretary of Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, who had so courageously protected him from all harm. Luther also had contact with Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, but though their teachings were very similar, they could not agree on the question of Holy Communion. Zwingli maintained that the bread and wine were administered in memory of Jesus Christ. Luther maintained that the bread and wine were Christ's body and blood.

THE FOUR SOLAS

Martin Luther profoundly affected the life and thinking of Europe, indeed the world. He laid the foundation for great freedoms in all areas of life. The Church was brought back to Jesus Christ and the pattern of the Early Church. At a time when Christians, including priests, were unbelievably ignorant of Biblical truth, he gave them the Scriptures in their own language, and God built the believers like living stones into a spiritual house, "*to be a royal priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God*"

through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5)

Luther's struggles were interwoven with great political upheavals, such as the uprising of the longsuffering peasants, but he steadfastly refused to sanction armed rebels, saying that throughout history God's Word had and would establish His will. Not all the princes of Germany accepted the Reformed faith, and Germany remains religiously divided to the present day. But Martin Luther emphasised the Four Solas, which are the foundation of Biblical Christianity. "*Solus Christus*", Christ alone is the head of the Church; "*Sola Scriptura*", Scripture alone is our authority; "*Sola gratia*", Salvation is by the grace of God alone; "*Sola fide*", Justification is received by faith alone, and. As long as the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ builds on these four fundamentals "*the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*" These great principles will remind all believers of the way to life and renewal even in the darkest times.

Dorothea Scarborough
Gospel Defence League
PO Box 832
Milnerton 7435
Cape Town
South Africa
Email: dscarborough@mweb.co.za
Website: www.christianaction.org.za

Bibliography

BH Kuiper, *The Church in History*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970
Wilhelm Horkel, *Luther zu Ehren*, Evangelische Buchhilfe e.V., Vellmar, Germany, 1996
Ernst-Wilhelm Kohls, *Luther oder Erasmus*, Friedrich Reionhardt Verlag, Basel, 1978
Purnell's *New English Encyclopedia*, Purnell, London, 1965
Duden Lexikon, Dudenverlag, 1962
The Holy Bible, New International Version, 1985.