

HHT 3.3



The German Reformation Part 1

I. Discussion

A. Martin Luther (1483-1546)

“Without Martin Luther, the Reformation as it took place in the sixteenth century cannot be understood. The movement began with him, and as it developed it swirled around him.” –James Payton Jr

1. From Mansfeld to Erfurt

-Luther was born in 1483, the son of a copper miner in Eisleben in Saxony, Germany. Soon after birth, Luther’s family moved to the town of Mansfeld, the center of Germany’s mining industry. In the beginning Luther’s family was very poor, however things soon changed.

-By the time Luther was 17 years old, his family had become very wealthy in the copper mining business, even owning several of the local mine shafts and smelting furnaces. Such newfound wealth, prompted Luther’s father (Hans) to pursue a career for his son, which would increase both the family’s status and income. Subsequently, in 1501 Luther was sent to the University of Erfurt to study Law.

- However in June of 1505, Luther’s career path in Law was forever put on hold. He was returning to the University of Erfurt after a visit home when he encountered a violent thunderstorm and a lightning strike so close that it threw him from his horse and caused him to cry out, “Saint Anne, help me! I will become a monk!” This plea and Luther’s almost immediate joining (July 17th, 1505) of one of Erfurt’s most rigorous monasteries—The Augustinian order (or brotherhood)—reveals several things about his family life and personal beliefs at this time:

a) He was raised Roman Catholic and holding to Roman Catholic beliefs.

-Saint Anne is the RC patron saint of miners.

b) He was very superstitious.

-Bad weather as well as dark or scary places were considered to be inhabited by demons. This kind of thinking stayed with Luther his entire life—even during the time of the Reformation.

“Certain places were also felt (by Luther) to be the home of dark powers. Luther never outgrew this outlook; in his maturity he said, ‘May regions are inhabited by devils. Prussia is full of them, and Lapland is full of witches. In my native country, on the top of a high mountain called the Pubelsberg, is a lake into which, if you throw a stone, a

tempest will arise over the whole region, because the waters are the abode of captive demons.’ Luther’s struggles with Satan were given a graphic power by this demon-haunted view of the world.” –N.R. Needham

c) He was holding to a very works based salvation.

-This was known in Luther’s day as the “via moderna” (the modern way): God will not deny righteousness/justification to those who do their best. Righteousness/justification was therefore (according to the Roman Church) dependent upon one’s personal discipline, denial and devotion to the Church. This was the reason Luther joined the Augustinian monastery versus the 7 other major ones existing in Erfurt. He believed (as most in his day did also) that becoming a monk was one of the surest ways to reach heaven since there you could give undistracted devotion to the meritorious works of the Church (Roman) and escape the pollution of the world. And since the Augustinian order was the most rigorous, the potential for such things became even higher.

“The (Augustinian) priory was an austere place—yet, based on the theology of the day, it seemed to Luther to guarantee his place in heaven.” –Alister McGrath

“Like other Christians of the time (and the Roman Church), (Luther) believed that humanity has the capacity to make itself righteous, that when this happens God endorses this transformation and accepts the transformed person into a relationship with him, and that this only happens through the institution of the church, which provides the God-given structures that lead securely and inevitably to salvation.” –Alister McGrath

2. Monastic life

-Luther’s time in the monastery did not resolve or give assurance to the issue of his own salvation. As a matter of fact, it only made things worse. His sacred duties as a monk as well as his time spent in prayer and silent reflection only made Luther more aware of God’s holiness and demand for righteousness and his own hopeless state of sin and unrighteousness.

-As a result, Luther became obsessed with how to find peace with God. This led to personal practices which went well beyond any of the rigors or austerity inherent to his order: sleeping naked on nothing but the cold, hard ground of his bedroom, spending six hours a day in confession of his sins. Through these measures Luther hoped he would find God’s favor, but instead it drove him further into despair and even hatred toward God.

“No matter how vigorously he lived up to and even exceeded the rigors expected in a strict monastery like the Augustinian one in Erfurt, (Luther) could find no peace. He always discerned that in some way he never measured up to the divine standard, as urged by ecclesiastical teaching and monastic practice. He knew that deep within he was not fulfilling the expectations, whatever his father-confessors offered by way of assurances to him. Overwhelmed by his inability to live perfectly unto God, he found himself pushed in the other direction. As he acknowledged to a trusted older friend and counselor, Johann von Staupitz, rather than loving this God whose standards were so rigid and unattainable, he hated him. Bitterly, Luther asked what penance he should be assigned for that.” –James Payton Jr

-Johann von Staupitz, vicar general of the Augustinian friars of Saxony and professor of Biblical studies at Wittenberg University became Luther’s spiritual guide and mentor while at Erfurt entrusting him with

two responsibilities which proved to be key in his change of heart and thinking regarding the Roman Church and her teaching—especially her teaching on justification (i.e. the via moderna):

a) A pilgrimage to Rome.

-In 1511, as a means to remedying Luther's demons, Staupitz arranged for Luther to see Rome and her "holy relics" - a menagerie of items which were believed to be historically genuine and divinely powerful. It included things such as: pieces of wood from Jesus' crown of thorns, pieces of wood from Jesus' cross as well as the cup from which Jesus drank during the Last supper. It was taught that veneration of such relics was efficacious for removing sin and propelling one further in their work of gaining justification/righteousness. Staupitz's intentions unfortunately had the opposite effect on Luther, pushing him further into despair. However, there was some good to come from it. It also served to open Luther's eyes to the folly and futility of the Roman Church and her view of the Christian faith.

"For Luther himself, the pilgrimage to 'holy Rome' was profoundly disenchanting. He never forgot the cynical attitude to religion that he found there (due to the empty veneration of relics), or the (Roman Church's) obsession with money. He was later fond of saying, 'If there is a hell, Rome is built over it.'" --N.R. Needham

b) Theological study and lecturing.

-As additional means to remedying Luther's situation, Staupitz also arranged for Luther to pursue theological studies at the University of Erfurt. The goal was twofold: create enough distraction through heavy theological study, that Luther won't be able to spend so much time in self-examination; and through such deep study, also gain a knowledge of God which would ultimately calm the fears of holy condemnation and hell. Luther pursued the academic course suggested to him by his mentor and by 1512 gained not only his doctorate in theology but also the teaching chair of Staupitz at the University of Wittenberg. Luther became the new professor of Biblical Studies. Like before however, his academic pursuits and teaching only made the issue clearer in his mind: Man was helpless and hopelessly lost when it came to earning righteousness before the Holy God of the Bible. And once more, the Roman Church was short on answers.

"Staupitz arranged for his young protégé to undertake graduate studies in theology at the University of Erfurt... (Luther) excelled in (his theological) studies, eventually receiving a doctorate of theology....In due course, Staupitz (also) arranged to have Luther to succeed himself as professor of Bible at the recently founded University of Wittenberg....the goal (however)...of finding peace with God...continued to elude him." --James Payton Jr

"Staupitz reasoned, Luther will be so busy (studying theology), that he won't have time for his intractable self-examination. Again the cure proved worse than the disease. As Luther...received his doctorate, and began lecturing in theology, he was driven back to the writings of Augustine and from there to Paul. What he found at first (he found again)--an insurmountable obstacle: he was unrighteous, and the holy God demanded righteousness. This plagued Luther more than it did his contemporaries (in the University). They had...a rather low view of the righteousness of God, thinking that this standard could be met by merely racking up enough merits, enough righteous deeds. Luther knew it wasn't a matter of quantity but of quality. We are not merely sinners because we sin; we are sinners at the very root of our being. Sin isn't just a matter of what we do; it's a matter of who we are. And nothing we can do, even if we are considered saints, can overcome that." --Stephen J Nichols

3. Breakthrough at Wittenberg

-Within a few years of teaching at the University of Wittenberg, Luther came to four main theological convictions—all which would not only put but him in direct contrast with the Roman Church, but also change the way he interpreted the Bible—especially the New Testament.

a) The primary source for Christian knowledge was the Bible grammatically and historically understood.

-The philosophy of Aristotle as well as other ancient pagan works, were believed by many in Luther's day (including many within the Roman Church), to be the learning grounds of the Apostle Paul and the writers of the New Testament. Which meant that there was something to be learned from studying these ancient sources; if a person was to truly understand theology and the Christian Faith, they first needed to understand Aristotle. Luther became convinced that this was wrong. The Bible was the primary source, given from God and therefore not built upon the thinking of ancient philosophers—pagan or otherwise!

“By 1516, Luther was clear that the primary source of Christian theology was not the scholastic tradition, still less the philosophy of Aristotle. It was the Bible...Although the importance of the Bible had always been recognized in Christian theology, Luther began to accentuate it in a manner that would ultimately lead into dangerous new theological territory.” –Alister McGrath

-In far greater proportion than these ancient pagan works, the Roman Church also embraced a view of interpretation which included allegory and the use of “progressive revelation”—a practice still embraced today. Essentially what this view teaches is that though the events in Scripture are bound within an historical timeframe and historical facts whose authors communicate through the accepted language, symbols and figures of speech of their day, the divine meaning behind their human words and historical context is much larger and ever changing to accommodate the ever changing world around us. What that meant is that the same text of Scripture could be interpreted differently and both be right: each suitable for their given time period/situation. It is the Roman Church (and her popes and cardinals) who determine what interpretation is correct for the present time. And why there also can be disagreement in interpretation between popes over time and they still be considered infallible—when interpreting Scripture for the Church.

-This (too) then Luther now stood against, employing the grammatico-historical method in interpretation: the original intention of the authors as communicated through the language and their historical context is the correct and only meaning for every period of time/situation.

“Lecturing on the Psalms...Galatians and Hebrews, Luther used the ‘new learning’ of (the) Renaissance...to interpret the Bible by the grammatico-historical method, breaking free from the methods and concerns of the traditional (method).” –N.R. Needham

b) Righteousness/Justification is the gift of faith in Jesus Christ.

-Through his teaching at Wittenberg and possibly also through the help of his friend and colleague, Philip Melancthon*, Luther was eventually led to consider Paul's epistle to the Romans. In his study of

that text, Luther was shocked and at the same time confused with Paul's treatment of the righteousness of God in Romans 1:16-17:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith'". --NASB

-Up to this point, Luther had seen the righteousness of God as nothing but bad news—since by that righteousness, all men stood condemned. It made no sense then to Luther that Paul would call it "good news"—which is what the term "gospel" means.

-However, as Luther studied these verses more closely, he realized that Paul was speaking of a different righteousness: one that saves rather than condemns. In other words, what the Apostle Paul was declaring was not the righteousness of God as His character, which stands against the character of the sinner in judgment, but rather the righteousness of God found in person and work of Jesus Christ; a righteousness which secures salvation for the sinner based solely on Christ's death upon the cross and therefore is not at all dependent upon the merits or works of the sinner himself.

-This new way of thinking about the righteousness of God impacted/revolutionized/changed Luther's thinking more than any of the other changes which were to come in the future. This also became his driving hermeneutic in Scripture: everything in the Bible points either positively or negatively to Christ's work on the cross which makes us righteous/just before God. Negatively, the portions of Scripture dealing with the Law—or which give commands—are there only to condemn and show us our need for a righteousness which is outside ourselves and through the work of cross. Positively, the bible paints the picture of a God, who though holy and wrathful, is also loving and gracious. And this grace is best seen in His gift of Christ. This view was later coined by Luther the "theology of the cross".

-The Bible therefore was to be understood/divided into the categories of Law and Grace—both meant to cause us to look to the cross.

"(In 1513 Luther) came to understand that the Apostle Paul's phrase 'the righteousness of God' (Romans 1:17) does not mean the righteousness by which God punishes sinners, but the righteousness which he graciously gives to sinners as a free gift of salvation." --N.R. Neeeham

-In regard to Rome, it must be stated that though this was a breakthrough in Luther's thinking, it was not so much for them. Other than his view on the Law and Grace, the Roman Church was (and still would be) in agreement with the rest: God's righteousness did have a positive side in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Where the real schism in thinking rested on this point between them and Luther was not this truth, but the meaning of faith and grace and the appropriation of such righteousness/justification to the sinner.

* Determining when Luther actually came to his conclusions on justification continues to be an issue of intense scholarly debate. Though the traditional date is somewhere around 1514, there are those who would place it closer to 1519 and Luther's interaction with Philip Melanchthon and his conclusions regarding the Bible's use of the Greek term *dikaioi* / . Though the correct date will most likely never be determined with absolute certainty, the traditional date still seems to be the most viable given one of Luther's statements regarding the way he viewed God's use of him and Melanchthon and the influence each of

these men exerted upon the other: "My job is to remove stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns, clear away wild forests. then along comes Master Philip, gently, softly sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts which god has abundantly given to him".

c) Faith is simply trusting in the person and work of Christ; and Grace the unmerited favor which God shows to us because of Christ.

-Based on his new understanding of the righteousness of God, as well as the writings of Paul and Augustine, Luther was led to also believe that faith was not about a commitment to the Roman Church's teaching and prescribed works (of merit); nor was grace considered to be an inward power through which meritorious works could be attained. Rather, faith was simply trust in Christ and His work—something the sinner expressed and lived out in personal relationship directly with God independent of the church; and grace, the unmerited favor of God toward us because of Christ.

-This did not mean Luther was completely against good works or the Bible's teaching on repentance. However, Luther saw both as passive acts in relation to the sinner; only made active after justification.

-That being said, the most radical aspect of Luther's view of faith (in relation to that of Rome) was as it related to the church. Since, it centered on only Christ and His work, and the sinner's personal relationship directly with God, the church essentially became unnecessary to one's salvation.

"The most radical element of Luther's doctrine...of salvation (was the aspect) of faith. There (was) no longer any need for intermediaries...There is no necessary role for the church...This was a radical idea, and once accepted, it would change everything. We are all limited and shaped by the assumptions of our culture, which are held to be self-evidently true and become absorbed as essential pieces of furniture in the mental worlds we inhabit. Yet Luther's radical new ideas (about faith) would prove these seemingly unshakeable assumptions to be vulnerable...The evidence (of history) shows that Luther (after taking) some time to think through the implications of this idea...was even at times reluctant to accept the inner logic of his own thinking. Thus Luther was not ready to abolish the institution of the church or its ministry. Yet (as a result) the church would now play a subsidiary role in the dispensation of salvation, subordinate to the direct encounter between the individual human being and God." -
-Alister McGrath

d) Believers are righteous and sinners at the same time ("*simul iustus et peccator*")

-Luther believed this was the right way to view a Christian since what God did in giving us the gift of righteousness/justification was an act of imputation, not infusion (or impartation). In other words, in Justification we are only declared to be righteous versus actually being/becoming righteous. The status of the sinner changes, but not his heart. And though Luther did believe there would be personal transformation in those whose status had been declared as righteous, it was simply a consequence of what was declared without it—never a precondition/pre-requisite.

-The Roman view was (and still is) completely different on both aspects of this view. According to them, a person is not righteous until they have accumulated enough merit on their own to vanquish their standing as a sinner. This is the point at which a person reaches sainthood: when their personal merit exceeds their sin. And though such merit has as its basis the work of Christ on the cross, such work (as merit) is not imputed to us---not is once and for all, full and final. Rather such work is infused over time

little by little as we avail ourselves of the means of grace/good works prescribed by the Church—most especially the Mass and Penance. In contrast then to Luther's view, we are not declared right in justification—we are actually made right (or are beginning to be made right). For the Roman Church then, justification was not about declaration but transformation. In modern terms, justification and sanctification were (and still are) seen as synonymous.

"The (Roman Church) understood (the term "justify" in the Bible) as meaning 'to make righteous', in the sense of moral transformation—the process by which a sinner is transformed in his soul into a just, holy, godly person...In medieval theology, this moral renewal endowed the believer with the grace-given ability to acquire 'merit'—qualities of personal goodness which would, when enough were acquired, entitle the believer to the rewards of heaven...Luther and Reformed theology broke decisively with this medieval concept of merit. The believer's acceptance to eternal life was...based on the imputation to the believer of Christ's righteousness." –N.R. Needham

"Perhaps the chief beneficiary of this insight was Luther himself. Convinced of his sinfulness and frustrated by his own impotence to free himself from the power of his sinful nature, Luther set out a theology of divine acceptance of sinners that made personal transformation and renewal the consequence, not the precondition of God's love. Humanity in this conception is like a patient who is under the wise care of a wise physician and on the way to recovery. The decision to treat does not presuppose the desired outcome but rather brings it about." --Alister Mc Grath

"Luther did think that the Holy Spirit changes the heart, but he came to believe that this change was not what the Bible was referring to when it spoke of 'justification'". –N.R. Needham

"God (first) purifies us by imputation, and then He gives the Holy Spirit, through whom we are purged more substantially. Faith purifies through the forgiveness of sins, while the Holy Spirit purifies effectively." --Martin Luther

II. Questions

1. Do you agree/disagree with Luther's "theology of the cross"? Why or why not? Make sure to provide biblical support.

2. Do you agree with Luther's view of faith and grace? Why or why not? Make sure to provide biblical support.

3. For Luther, justification and sanctification were two very different things, the Roman Church, they were/are the same. In the biblical text, are justification and sanctification separate or synonymous realities? How often does God declare us just?