

The History of the Reformation...



HOW CHRIST
RESTORED
THE GOSPEL
TO HIS
CHURCH

The Little Red Bible Chained to the Wall... Martin Luther

Five weeks ago we started our study on the History of the Reformation. We started with Luther nailing his 95 Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg and then worked our way backward from that wonderfully, historic event. Now my purpose in doing that was to show that Luther's action was not really the beginning of the Reformation but was rather the culmination of a whole series of reforms and protests, reforms and protests that had begun much earlier. That is why I wanted to show the connection between Luther and Huss and then between Huss and Wycliffe. That is why I wanted to show the connection between Wycliffe and the Lollards. I wanted you to see that the struggle was well underfoot when Luther came along.

Now, it seems to me that throughout history there has always been a tension between those that love the authority of the Word of God and those that love the authority of the institutions of men. Now I say that not because I have any axe to grind at all. I am a carefully examined, duly ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America. I love our church. I love our denomination and

I am committed to being a good churchman in our denomination as are the other pastors and elders in our church. I am committed to that idea and process for the rest of my life. But I have no illusions that our denomination is infallible.

It can make mistakes. It has made mistakes.

That is why we ought never to be committed to our church, to our denomination, right or wrong. We ought rather to be committed to our church with the fervent hope that it may always be right. We ought to pray that God will give us good men to make wise and godly decisions and to guide our denomination in paths of righteousness.

Certainly our Lord has been gracious in that regard up to now. I believe that right now our denomination is healthy...that is, that it is theologically sound...that it is solidly orthodox...and my prayer is that it will stay that way. But if history is any guide...it probably will not. If history is any guide, it is more than likely that one day our denomination will lapse into a soft view of Scripture and then an even softer view of the saving work of Jesus.

Oh, most of us won't be alive to see it...**I certainly hope I do not live to ever see it happen...**but if history is any guide it is almost certain to happen. That is why we ought to make every effort to faithfully examine our ministers...to faithfully examine our seminary professors and to rigorously defend our Confession of Faith. Now we don't do that because we think our Confession of Faith is infallible. No, we do that because we believe our Confession of Faith to be a faithful explanation of what the Word of God teaches.

We do that because for us the final authority is the Bible itself. We remain committed, without reservation, to its authority. We know the Word of God is dependable. We trust it. We believe it. We submit to it as unto the Lord.

And, of course, you know all that.

But I bring all that up because there is a very real sense in which the Reformation was spurred on by the Bible. That is, it was spurred on both by the presence of the Bible and by the theology of the Bible.

We saw that, I think, in both the lives of Huss and Wycliffe and we certainly saw in the lives of the Lollards. These men, these men and women, came to face the truth and embrace the truth of the Bible and it stirred their souls. In some cases they came to embrace the truth of the Bible though the preached Word. In other cases, they came to embrace the truth of the Bible simply through reading the Bible. The Bible caused men to reevaluate their understanding of salvation and it caused them to reevaluate their understanding of the authority of their own institutionalized church. That particular truth is self-evident, I think, when you study the history of the Reformation. I know it is self-evident when you study the history of the lives of the reformers.

But it is most evident in the life of Martin Luther.

Luther was born shortly before midnight on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Germany.¹ Later in his life, neither he nor his mother was certain about the exact year in which he was born but 1483 is now the generally accepted date. Luther often laughed and said that that had something to do with his complete

disregard for horoscopes and astrology and you can see why. It is pretty hard to prepare someone's astrological chart if you don't know when they were born.

Anyway, Luther was baptized the next day, November 11th, which happened to be St. Martin's Day. He was given the name "**Martin**" in honor of the saint being celebrated.² His parents, Hans and Margarete, had only recently moved to Eisleben where his father was either a miner or the owner of a small smelter that smelted copper from the diggings of the miners. At the time of Luther's birth, his parents were very poor.

Not much is known of his parent's earlier life, except that for a time his father had been an ordinary miner, which was certainly about the worst job possible in that day...that his father could not read...and that his mother and father had had another son before Martin and that he had died. We also know that his parents had a total of either four or five sons and four daughters and that one daughter and either two or three of the sons died as small children.³

Now, I include that last bit of information not to make you feel sorry for his family but simply to make you aware that life was very hard in that day. What seems to us to be unimaginable...the idea of losing four children...was not imaginable in that day...it was commonplace. Life was hard...times were hard and you can see that not only in Luther's upbringing and childhood but also in his later life and in the rearing of his own children.

A year after his birth, his parents relocated to Mansfield, Germany where his father went into business for himself smelting copper ore. Apparently he enjoyed a measure of success but throughout Luther's life parents remained extremely

frugal. You can see that in the simple way they lived and you can see it in how they responded to their children.

Luther once wrote that his mother whipped him so hard once it drew blood and that she did so over a single nut. But that shouldn't distress you too much. Discipline in that day was harsher than it is today and it is readily apparent from Luther's later writings that he loved his parents deeply and that he wanted very much to please them when he was able. About his severe punishment Luther wrote only this:

My parents treated my harshly, so that I became very timid. My mother one day chastised me so severely about a nut that the blood came. They seriously thought that they were doing right; but they could not distinguish character, which however is very necessary in order to know when, or where, or how chastisement should be inflicted. It is necessary to punish; but the apple should be placed beside the rod.

Now I mentioned the fact that Luther's parents moved to Mansfield when he was only a year old. Luther always considered Mansfield to be his hometown. That is true even though he only lived there until he was fourteen. When he was fourteen he was shipped off to school to pursue his education. After his fourteenth year, he never lived at home with his parents again.

Now, I want you to think about that for a moment.

From his fourteenth birthday on, he lived away at school, in someone else's home or in a monastery until his marriage some 28 years later when he was 41.⁴ Still, he always considered Mansfield in Saxony to be his hometown. That was true even though he was born and died in Eisleben in Thuringia. That is also the

reason that Luther called himself a Saxon. Mansfield was in the province of Saxony.

Luther first attended school in Mansfield at the age of seven. The school taught the “**trivium**”...that is grammar, logic and rhetoric and a little music. But it was not, according to Luther later on, a very good school. Most of the instruction involved endless repetition and drilling and the teachers were very harsh.

One historian writes this:

With diligence he learned the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. He was also instructed in reading, writing, and in the rudiments of Latin grammar. The teachers, however, were extremely severe and rude, and Luther complains in later life that the examinations were like a trial for murder. Still there was no other schooling to be had in his days, and his father had decided to give his son all the education he could get.⁵

And Luther received a great more than just education. Once he was beaten fifteen times with a rod in a single morning for failing to conjugate and decline some Latin forms that he had not yet learned.⁶ He wrote later that the trivial school had been for him both “**purgatory and hell**” and some writers think that he was unduly cowed by his education experience but I don’t think there is any real evidence of that. Luther used to tell a story about the fact that he and some of his classmates went out singing for sausages and one man came to the door to give them some and was a fairly loud and boisterous kind of man and Luther ran away out of fear before he even received his sausage but I don’t think that means that he was cowed...a little timid maybe but not cowed.

When he was fourteen Luther was sent by his parents to study at Magdeburg. A year later he transferred to Eisenach. Now the reason for that was probably very simple. While he was Magdeburg he had to live in a monastery with the Brethren of the Common Life. It must have been intolerably lonely for a fourteen year-old boy. But as I said, the next year he transferred to Eisenach where both his father and mother had relatives and while it is not likely that he lived with his relatives, he was able to occasionally share their company. For a portion of his stay in Eisenach Luther gained his meals by singing and begging for bread. Later on, Luther was taken in by a family and no longer had to beg for his bread.

There are two traditional stories regarding his life in that family. One story is that an older lady named Ursula Cotta heard Luther singing for bread and provided him a place to stay. Another story is that he simply stayed with the well-to-do family of one of his fellow students, Caspar Shalbe.⁷

It is hard to know which is correct but either way it must have been a very difficult time for a young teenager, so far from home...and so very poor. Nevertheless, Luther completed his studies...studies roughly equivalent to what we think of today as a high school education. He moved to Erfurt to attend the university when he was only seventeen years old.

Luther never liked Erfurt the way he did Eisenach or Mansfield. It never held any of the same kind of pleasant memories he enjoyed in his childhood. That is probably because the life of a student there was very hard. Martin Brecht write in his biography of Luther that...

The living accommodations were spartan. There were large sleeping

quarters and common study rooms. One arose at four o'clock in the morning and went to bed at eight o'clock in the evening. The food as such was probably not had. There were two meals a day and meat four times a week. The exercises began at six o'clock in the morning and then the lectures were held. At ten o'clock there was the early meal, following which more lectures and exercises were held until five o'clock. Whoever did not abide by the *house* ordinances could be expelled...or lose his right to take the examinations.⁸

But Luther did abide by the regulations and completed his study in the shortest time allowable. He stood for and passed his baccalaureate examination in September 1502. That would have made him about nineteen years old. He graduated thirtieth in a class of fifty-seven.

Luther proceeded immediately to study for his master's degree, which meant he became immersed in the study of Aristotle.⁹ His studies took him two years to complete and we don't know very many of the particulars of his studies. We do know that while traveling home for an Easter break in either 1503 or 1504 he cut accidentally cut himself with his student's sword and very nearly died. Apparently, he cut the femoral artery just inside his thigh and nearly bled to death. His friend left him lying in the middle of a field and ran off to town to summon a surgeon. Luther says that as he lay there applying pressure to the wound to stem the flow of blood he called on Mary to save him. Later on he says that had he died there he would have died "**trusting in Mary**".

But other than that we do not know much about his Master's education other than the classes he took and the places he lived and that sort of thing. But we do know this...we know that during his Master's studies at Erfurt he saw and held

in his hand and read a Bible for the first time in his life. He was somewhere between twenty and twenty-two years old. Merle D'Aubigne writes:

The young student *treasured whatever time* in the university...he could snatch from his *academic* studies. Books were *still quite rare*, and it was a great privilege for him to profit *from* the treasures *contained* in this vast collection. One day — *after* he had then been two years at Erfurt, and was twenty years old — he was in *library opening*...one after another, to learn their writers' names. One volume *especially attracted* his attention. He *had never seen anything quite like it*. He read the title — it was a Bible...a rare book, *almost unknown* in those times. His interest *was greatly excited*: he *was astonished to find not just the fragments* of the gospels and epistles that the Church...read to the people during public worship every Sunday but *whole stories...complete stories*. *Until that moment* he had imagined that *the little snippets he had heard read in church* composed the whole Word of God. *And then he saw pages*...so many pages, so many chapters, so many books of which he had had no idea! His heart beat *with wonderful excitement* as he *held* the divinely inspired volume in his hand. *Eagerly* and with indescribable emotion he *turned* over these leaves from God. The first page *he read related* the story of Hannah and of the young Samuel. He read— and his soul *could hardly contain the joy it felt*...

He read about a child, whom his parents lend to the Lord as long as he lived; *he read* the song of Hannah, in which she declares that Jehovah **“raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes;”** *he read about the child* who grew up in the temple in the presence of the Lord; *he read about* those sacrificers, the sons of Eli, who are wicked men, who live in debauchery, and **“make the Lord’s people to transgress;”** — *he read* all this history, all this revelation and *it awoke in him* feelings that *he had never known before*. He *returned* home with a full heart. *And thought to himself*, **“Oh! that God would give me such a book for myself.”**...Luther was as yet ignorant both of Greek and Hebrew...The Bible that had filled him with such transports was in Latin. He returned to the library *over and over again* to pore over his treasure. He read it *and read it and read it* again, and then, in his astonishment and joy, he returned to read it once more. The first glimmerings of a new truth were then beginning to dawn upon his mind.¹⁰

D'Aubigne continues...

Thus had God led him to the discovery of his Word ...Perhaps for the first time his precious volume has now been taken down from the place it occupied in the library of Erfurt. This book, deposited upon the unknown shelves of a gloomy hall, is about to become the book of life to a whole nation. **In that Bible the Reformation lay hid.**¹¹

Another commentator writes that the little Bible among the stacks of books in the library at Erfurt was **"a little red Bible chained to a wall."**¹² I have read that same thing in other sources as well. But I am not sure whether it is true or whether it is legend but either way I want to say that I think D'Aubigne is right. I think if there is any one place or event that ought to be declared as the official starting place of the Reformation...that place ought to be Luther's discovery of the little Latin Bible at Erfurt. Certainly from that point on in his life he was committed to reading and learning the Bible for himself.

Now that is somewhat difficult for us to understand. Most of us...probably all of us have more than one copy of the Bible in our homes. Most of us have more than one translation. Most of us have some sort of commentary on the Bible. I have thirty-seven commentaries in my library at home on Paul's Epistle to the Romans alone. But that is not how it was in Luther's day. In Luther's day, no one owned a Bible...that is, a whole Bible. Bibles were copied by hand and whether it is possible for you to imagine or not...the church at large generally disapproved of private ownership of the Bible. The Roman Church of Luther's day thought that the private possession of the Bible was a matter of sedition and the reason for that was that the church of Luther's day wanted to be the dispenser of truth...that is, it wanted to be the sole interpreter of truth and allowing common

lay people to possess and interpret the Scripture for themselves struck hard against the authority of the church.

Let me just give you one example to make my point. When Luther arrived at Wittenberg he met a man Andreas Bodenstein. Bodenstein later became quite famous as a radical reformer himself. He called himself Karlstadt. Now here is my point, when Karlstadt gained his doctors degree in theology he did not even own a Bible himself. He did not own one and he had never read one all the way through. Now that is strange to us but was not in that day the least bit unusual. You see the study of theology in that day focused not on the Bible but on volumes and volumes of church dogma filtered through the categories of Aristotelian logic. It was catholic theology baptized in Aristotle.

I think you can find the exact same kind of thing today in any liberal seminary in America. There are a great many schools where the Bible is no longer the principal object of study. Rather philosophy and sociology and the like are the principal areas studied and the result of that is that pastors no longer have anything authoritative to preach. They do not reverence the Word of God and thus they do not preach the Word of God. They preach ethics and philosophy and the brotherhood of man and the Fatherhood of God but they have no text to inspire their congregations. It is funny how history repeats itself.

Anyway when Luther he decided to become of monk he was saturated with much the same kind of education...only Luther treasured in his heart the things he had read and learned from that little red Bible in the library at Erfurt. Because of that, he was never the same. In fact, I don't think the world was ever the same after that. Still, as much as loved the little red Bible chained to the wall in Erfurt,

he did not intend to study the Bible or theology for a living. He intended to become a lawyer. He wanted to become a lawyer. Certainly, his father wanted and expected him to become a lawyer but God had something else in mind for Luther. Shortly after he completed his Master's degree, two separate things occurred to prepare Luther and the world to go a different direction.

Luther graduated with his Master's degree in January of 1505. He graduated second in a class of a 17. He was given a reddish brown beret to wear and a Master's ring and his family held a party for him. Luther noted later that his father stopped calling him *du* but addressed him instead as *Ihr*, which means essentially that he stopped calling him "you" and starting calling him something more respectful...almost like "sir".

Now I have already made the point that Luther graduated in January with a Master's degree in philosophy because the summer term for lawyer was not scheduled to start until May 19th. That means that between his graduation and his beginning his studies in law, he had three month to do pretty much as he pleased and while there is no absolute proof of the fact, I think it is pretty clear from Luther's own writings that he spent a great deal of time with the little red Bible in the library.¹³

Now I mentioned that two important events occurred tat began to change Luther's direction. Both events were terrible tragedies. The first event involved the murder of one of his best friends. D'Aubigne writes:

A Report circulated in Erfurt that one of his university friends, a young man named Alexis, a man with whom he lived in the closest intimacy

was...assassinated. *When Luther determined* the truth of the report he was deeply grieved and...asked himself, **“What would become of me, if I were thus called away without warning?”** The answer filled his mind with...terror.¹⁴

The second tragedy involved a tragic attack of the plague that killed a number of students at the university. It also claimed the life of one of Luther’s principal examiners during his Master’s examination, a man who Luther admired and respected deeply.

Anyway, Luther was deeply affected by these two separate events and deeply concerned over the state of his own soul. So he read the little red Bible chained in the library and grieved the loss of his friends and wondered over the state of his own soul.

On May 19th, 1505, he started his doctoral studies in law at Erfurt. But he was not in his usual form. He disliked the study of law but was really just going through the motions wondering where he was going to get the strength to finish. At the end of June, his father called him home to Mansfield for a visit.¹⁵ It was the mid-semester break and some scholars think that his father called him home to discuss some possible future arranged marriage. It is hard to know for certain. One thing is sure; there was no discussion of his discontinuing his study of law. Still Luther believed he was approaching a turning point in his life. He was right about that.

On Wednesday afternoon July 2, on his way back to Erfurt from Mansfield about six miles outside of Erfurt Luther found himself in the middle of a terrible thunderstorm. Lightning was crashing all around him, striking trees and rocks

and running across the ground and then, in a blinding, deafening flash, a lightning bolt struck close enough to Luther to knock from his horse. It is uncertain whether he was actually struck by lightning or whether the lightning struck near the horse and raced across the ground or what...but one thing is sure. Luther wound up on the ground terrified and quivering with fear. His leg was severely injured.

He believed...no, he knew he was going to die and in his fear he cried out, **“St. Anne...help me! I will become a monk.”**

Now of all the things he might have said that seems just about the strangest especially looking back from this side of the Reformation. I would have expected him to cry out to Mary or to the Lord Jesus but he didn't...he cried out to St. Anne. Now for those of you that do not know, St Anne was venerated as the mother of the Virgin Mary.¹⁶ Luther said later that St. Anne had become his favorite saint and in that moment of terror she was the first person to come to his mind.

Obviously, Luther survived the storm. But he was a different man afterwards.

Luther believed he had met the terror of God and lived. It was an event that he played over and over in his mind the rest of his life. In that sense, Luther was very much like the Apostle Paul. He believed he had encountered God personally. He believed he had been forced to become a monk. He did not believe that the monastery was his natural inclination...or his natural desire. No, he believed he had been moved by supernatural forces to take a whole new way of life.

Luther took his vow quite seriously.

Still, he regretted that he had made it. His friends tried to dissuade him from keeping his vow but he was resolute. It took him two weeks to get his affairs in order...to sell his books and to decide what monastery to enter. He chose a strict one, the reformed congregation of the Augustinians. On July 16, 1505, he held a farewell party for himself with a few friends. The next day, with his friends accompanying him, he presented himself as a novice at the monastery gates. They tried one last time to dissuade him but he told them quite pathetically, **"Today you see me, but never again!"**¹⁷

He was wrong about that, just about as wrong as a man could ever be.

He then sent the news to his father, who was furious at his son for choosing to waste his life. Luther wrote later "he went crazy and acted like a fool." He sent word to Martin that he was disinherited but Martin sent word back to his father that that was all right as he no longer needed money...any money. His father stopped addressing him as **"Ihr"** and returned to addressing him as **"du"**. Some scholars think that his father was so angry because of an ongoing argument he was having with the church.

But the truth is that he had counted on his son to honor his family's name by becoming a rich and prosperous lawyer. Obviously now, that was not going to happen. Instead his son was going to honor by becoming one of the most famous men in all of history...as famous as Columbus, Napoleon or even Lincoln. But there was no way for Hans Luther to know that. He had provided for his son's education out of the depths of his poverty and he had expected his son to

support him and his mother in their old age.

That did happen by the way but he was right at that particular time not to expect it.

A few years later when Luther said his first mass, his father attended the service still holding a grudge. We will talk more about that particular service next week but after the service which Luther did not do very well he asked his father a question during a reception held afterwards, **“Dear father, why were you so contrary to my becoming a monk? You are perhaps not quite satisfied even now. The life is so quiet and godly.”**

His father responded in front of the other priests and guest with an angry outburst that he had obviously been saving up for some time, **“You learned scholar, have you never read in the Bible that you should honor your father and your mother? And here you have left me and your dear mother to look after ourselves in our old age.”**

“But father,” Luther replied, **“I could do you more good by prayers than if I had stayed in the world.”**

To which his father responded, **“God grant then that your visitation was not an apparition of the devil.”**

Anyway July 17th, 1505 Luther presented himself as a novice at the Augustinian Hermits monastery in Erfurt. He was placed on probation for a year or so to determine if he was serious about the vows he had taken as a monk. He was

given a little red Bible to read and he began the rigorous task of performing countless spiritual exercises. Oh, I should add that Von Staupitz, the abbot at the monastery Luther had joined, later remarked that Luther was the only monk he had ever met who had actually read the Bible prior to becoming a monk.

Luther adapted well to monastic life. He was well liked and he was a tireless worker. In 1507, Von Staupitz directed Luther to begin studying theology in order to obtain his doctorate. When he began his study, they took away his precious little, red Bible. Theology students were not permitted to read the Bible unsupervised. But they were too late.

In just two or three years, Luther had memorized the Psalter. He had memorized most of the New Testament. He was able to outline, in his head, the form and content of almost all of the books of the Bible.

Still, he mourned the loss of that little red Bible the rest of his life.

But it didn't really matter. The little red Bible had already done its work. But we'll see that and talk more about that next week.

Let's pray.

¹ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, translated by James L. Schaaf, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 01.

² James Strong & John McClintock, "Martin, (St.) of Tours" in the *Cyclopedia Of Biblical, Theological And Ecclesiastical Literature*. "The only extant literary relic of Martin is a short *Confession of Faith on the Holy Trinity*, which is published by Galland, *Bibl. Patr.* 7:559. He is the first who, without suffering death for the truth, has been honored in the Latin Church as a confessor of the faith. The festival of his birth is celebrated on the 11th of November. In Scotland this day still marks the

winter-term, which is called *Martinmas* (q.v.). In Germany, also, his memory continues to our day among the populace in the celebration of the *Martinalia*.”

³ Brecht, 7.

⁴ Luther was married on June 27, 1525 to Katherine von Bora, an ex-nun. He would have been forty-one years old.

⁵ Arthur H.C. Both, “Luther’s Family” in *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Result*, ed. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 16.

⁶ Brecht, 13.

⁷ Brecht, 19.

⁸ Brecht, 32.

⁹ Brecht, 33. He writes: “The next goal, which of course was sought by only a smaller portion of the students, was the earning of the master~ degree, with which the study of philosophy could be concluded. At this stage, the required course on Aristotle’s *Topics* concluded the study of logic. In natural philosophy several of his other writings were treated: *On the Heavens*, *On Generation and Corruption*, *Meteorology*, *On the Soul*, and *Parta Naturalia*. In mathematics, six months were devoted to Euclid, and then came a course on arithmetic and one on the planets. Only little of this appears to have stuck with Luther. Certain theoretical knowledge about music was also presented. Courses on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* took six months; on his *Nicomachean Ethics*, eight; on his *Politics*, another six; and on his *Economics*, one.”

¹⁰ J. H. Merle D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the 16th Century*, Book 2, Chapter 2, 184-5.

¹¹ D’Aubigne, 185.

¹² Albert H. Miller, “The Open Bible” in *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Result*, ed. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 16.

¹³ Brecht, 47.

¹⁴ D’Aubigne, 185. Paraphrased by me.

¹⁵ Brecht, 48. Some scholars think that Luther may have gone home to break the news of his leaving law school to his father but there is no reason to think that was the case.

¹⁶ James Strong & John McClintock, “St. Anna” in the *Cyclopedia Of Biblical, Theological And Ecclesiastical Literature*.

¹⁷ Brecht, 50.