

# The History of the Reformation...



HOW CHRIST  
RESTORED  
THE GOSPEL  
TO HIS  
CHURCH

## We Are all Beggars... Martin Luther

We come this morning to the end of our present study on the History of the Reformation. Now it is not really the end. It is simply the end of our time for the time being. There are other topics and other studies and other teachers that deserve a chance at your attention. Still, there is so much we could have looked at and ought to have looked at together and we will. We will come back later on and in a separate class examine Calvin and Swiss Reformers. After that, in still a different class we'll look at the English Reformation and the rise of the Puritanism. Then finally in still a separate class we'll look at the history of the how the Reformation worked its way into the life of America through men like Whitefield and Edwards.

All of that is on the docket and will occur, Lord willing, in the future.

For the present, however...it is time for me to draw our study to an end and yet I want you to know that I feel a measure of regret in doing so. There is so much I could have said and should have said and yet I have been constrained both by

time and by my own inability to make some of these important issues come alive the way I really wanted. I know perfectly well for example that I have only scratched the surface of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation and of Luther's life and work. I know I have glossed over many of the important people and events of Luther's life. Nevertheless, I am trusting that in God's kindness what we have studied together has given you a better understanding of things not just I perceived them but as they actually were.

I do want to thank you for your many words of encouragement.

You have consoled me with your kind comments and notes. I have been deeply encouraged by the fact that many of you have been encouraged to begin to study again the Reformation and the doctrine of justification and the life of Luther for yourself. I have been even more encouraged by those of you who are studying these things for yourself for the first time.

You could hardly do better and you could certainly do a lot worse.

And the reason for that, of course, is that in the Reformation as almost no where else in history the really important issues were actually the really important issues. The issues were the authority of the Bible, the content of the gospel and the mission and identity of the church. All of those issues are issues of life and death issues. All of those issues are issues of heaven or of hell.

All of those issues were just as important for farmers and tradesmen as they were for theologians. That is why I like the studying the Reformation. That is why I like studying Luther. That is why I like talking about the doctrine of justification.

They are all so imminently practical. For surely, no doctrine is more pertinent that the doctrine that will sustain us in that day in which we find ourselves standing before God Almighty in judgment. In that day, whether your car started every time or your children called as often as they ought to have done or your prescriptions got filled on time or your checkbook balanced or your husband showed you the attention you were due will not matter to you one single whit. All of those things will melt into the recesses of your mind and care. All the things...all those things that you thought were so practical and relevant will be taken over by one, single, overarching concern and that is what God will do with you and why. That is what will ultimately matter. It is ultimately the most practical thing a person will ever know.

I think Luther understood that. I think he understood that at the very core of his being. Or to say it another way...I think Luther believed that the gospel could even save a Christian. I think he believed that the gospel could even save him. Now that sounds like a strange thing to say. I mean Christians are already saved aren't they? But what I mean by the gospel being able to save Christians is that the comfort of the gospel is able to provide encouragement to strengthen a Christian to continue to work and serve and live even in the midst of otherwise debilitating grief, suffering and sorrow. The gospel can actually redeem a person's life from the pit, even if they are already a Christian.

I think there is no better evidence to prove that than the way Luther died.

Now the remarkable thing about Luther's death is that very few of his biographers really touch upon it. Roland Bainton, for example, the author of *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* writes:

The last sixteen years of Luther's life, from the Augsburg Confession in 1530 to his death in 1546, are commonly treated more *sparsely* by biographers than the earlier period *of his life*, if indeed they are not omitted altogether. There is a measure of justification for this comparative neglect because the last quarter of Luther's life was neither determinative for his ideas nor crucial for his achievements. His own verdict in 1531 was more than a grim jest, namely, **'Should the papists by their devouring, biting, tearing help me to put off this sinful carcass and should the Lord not wish this time to deliver me as he has so often done before, then may he be praised and thanked. I have lived long enough. No one will feel Luther's full weight until he is gone.'** He was right; his ideas were matured; his church was established; his associates could carry on, as indeed in the public sphere they were compelled to do because for the remainder of his life he was under the ban of Church and state.<sup>1</sup>

Now what is funny about Bainton saying that is that he does in his book exactly what he says all the other biographers do. He simply leaves out the details of Luther's death altogether. Like so many of Luther's biographers Bainton more or less has Luther ride off into the sunset. But Luther did not ride off into the sunset. He died and his death, to my way of thinking, was a wonderfully Christian death.

Now how a man or woman died was considered to be much more important in Luther's day than it is in ours. You see in his day, the manner in which a man or woman died bore important testimony to their faith. In our day, death is often masked over by drugs and pain medication. We seem to have the idea that death is something that ought to be slipped into like an old easy chair or an old pair of house shoes. But in Luther's day, they did not have any of the modern capabilities we do and men and women often died speaking and encouraging those around them. A person's last words were believed to characterize the heart and belief of the person who died. You can see how Luther's death might have

been of intense interest to his enemies. Had he died poorly, his death might have been held up and a visual parable of the fact that his life and faith were less than heroic.

Now I think that is what most of his enemies expected. I think they expected him to die a violent and shameful death. I think they expected him to recant his views and to lapse back into his pre-Reformation views and beliefs. I think even some of his friends expected him to die poorly. I think they expected that Luther's impetuous nature and fiery temper would come back to haunt him but they were wrong about that. Luther died trying to make peace...trying to reconcile two brothers back in his home town of Mansfield.

Now I think that is remarkable. I think everyone that reads about the death of Luther is sort of taken back by that fact. That is...I think they are taken back by the fact that Luther ever devoted any of his time to trying to reconcile anyone. You see most people only think of Luther the fighter and there is a reason for that. You see sometimes Luther could be quite contentious. I know that is a shock to all of you to be told that only as we come to the end of our study. But he could be. When he was arguing for what he believed to be truth, he could be quite litigious. He was not above name calling and he was not above coarse language and by that I mean just plain old cursing.

Those that hated knew that very well but those that loved him knew it too.

Calvin once wrote about Luther, **"Even if he calls me a dog, I will continue to call him father."**

Now why would Calvin have ever written that? I think he wrote it because he feared it as a very real possibility. You see Luther went after anyone whom he thought erred. Late in his life, he especially went after the Swiss and the Swiss reformers and that is surprising especially since they held so much truth in common. You would have thought Luther would have been a bit more pragmatic about whom he attacked but he was not. He only cared about the truth.

You can see that especially, I think, in Luther's explosive reaction to Ulrich Zwingli.

Zwingli was the head of the Reformation in Zurich. He was an ardent fan of Erasmus and he was a military figure, as were almost all of the Swiss, and he was a wonderful classical scholar. Zwingli appreciated and admired Luther and Luther's contribution to the Reformation. But he came to many of his own decisions about the Reformation independently of Luther and he disagreed with Luther over the issue of images and over the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup>

Philip of Hesse, one of the most important nobles in Germany, thought it was important that their two groups unite against the catholic princes, tried to get the two men together to make peace. So they did meet and they tried to settle their differences at the Marburg Conference in October 1529 but were unable to get past the issue of the Lord's Supper. Zwingli held that the Lord's Table was simply a memorial in which Christians recalled the death of Christ in their partaking of the sacrament. In his view, he was very close to where most Baptists are today. Luther, on the other hand, held that Christ's body was actually present in the elements...that is, in, with and through the elements and he deeply

resented Zwingli minimizing Christ's presence. They were unable, of course, to come to any sort of middle position. Luther probably did not help matters much. You see when Luther first sat down at the table across from Zwingli he took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and drew a big circle on the black table cloth covering the table between them and wrote the words **"This is my body"** inside the circle. He said later that he hadn't done it to try to intimidate Zwingli or anyone else but had simply done it to keep the main point of his argument fresh in his mind.

But you can see how it might not have helped and it is so Luther-like.

Anyway they were unable to come to any sort of middle position and Luther later wrote:

**"One or other of us,"** said he to the Strasburg mediator, **"must be ministers of Satan — the Swiss or ourselves."**<sup>3</sup>

That is the way Luther was. He was fairly inflexible. He was dogmatic. He was intransigent. He could not and would not nuance anything. In the years between 1529 and 1545, Luther wrote against the Swiss and the Anabaptists and many others with almost reckless abandon. In fact, in 1545 Calvin wrote this protest to Melanchthon, Luther's assistant.

I wish that our fellow-feeling might enable me to console you, and to sympathize in your heaviness, and that it might also impart the power in some degree, at least, to lighten your sorrow. If the matter stands as those in Zurich say it does, then they are just in what they have written. Your Pericles (he is talking about Luther) allows himself to be carried beyond the bounds of propriety with his love of thunder, especially seeing that his own case is by no means the better of the two. We all acknowledge how

much we are indebted to him. And I am willingly submit and am quite content, that he may always bear the chief sway, provided he can manage to conduct himself with a bit of moderation. Nevertheless, the Church we must always be on guard, lest we pay too great a deference to men. For it is all over with her, when a single individual, be he whosoever you please, has more authority than all the rest, especially where this person does not scruple to push the limit of just how far he may go.<sup>4</sup>

But Calvin's words didn't really change Luther very much. I doubt if Melancthon ever even raised Calvin's concerns with Luther. He was to the end quite obstinate in his opposition to what he perceived to be error. But I for one am glad about that. I am glad that he was the kind of man that he was. A lesser man could not have endured the times. Still, I wince at some of the things Luther said. In fact, when Zwingli was later killed in a battle against Catholic forces Luther said, "It was a judgment for his views."<sup>5</sup>

However, if you read the account of Zwingli's death written by Martin Bucer you'll find that Zwingli's death was pretty noble. He was mortally wounded first by hurled rock and then by a lance and when some of the soldiers of the Catholic opposition stopped to ask him if he needed a priest he just lay there under a pear tree looking up to heaven with his hands folded on his chest and shook his head no. When they asked him if he wanted an image of the Virgin Mary he again shook his head no. Then they asked him if he was a heathen and he shook his head no and then, of course, they figured out who he really was...and ran him through and then quartered his body and burned the pieces in a fire mixing his ashes with the intestines of a hog they had killed earlier but that is beside the point.

He died as well as anyone has ever died on a battlefield.

But I digress. The point I was making is that Luther's death was important to Luther's friends and foes alike. Everyone wanted to know how Luther died and when I say that I don't mean that they were interested in a forensic analysis of what killed him but rather the manner in which he faced death. The question everyone wanted to know was, **"Did Luther's faith sustain him in his hour of death?"** Now what I want to do in the few minutes we have left this morning is just relate the events of his death to you and let you decide for yourself.

In December of 1545, Luther was called to act as a peacemaker between two brothers who happened also to be nobles...they were counts...and they ruled in the province in which he was born, the province of Mansfield. The two brothers were named Albrecht and Gerhard. Now this particular Albrecht is not the same Albrecht who had started the indulgence controversy. He was a different man altogether who just happened to have the same name as Luther's old nemesis, the Archbishop of Mainz. Now this man named Count Albrecht had already caused Luther and Luther's family a measure of discouragement and grief. As Count of Mansfield he had attempted to bring all of the copper smelting in the region under his control. Now you will remember that Luther's father had owned and run several copper smelters. Well, Luther's brother and brother in law also ran copper smelters and it turned out that Albrecht wanted to bring all of the copper smelters in Mansfield under his control...up until that time the copper smelters had owned their leases by hereditary right. Now the reason Albrecht wanted to do that was so he could sell off of the leases and increase his tax revenue. For Albrecht it was a good business decision. For Luther and his family, it appeared as if Albrecht was trying to ruin them. Luther protested to Albrecht on behalf of his brother and his brother in law and wrote Albrecht a very nasty letter explaining to him that the reason Albrecht struggled so hard to

understand the doctrine of predestination was because he was abusing his poor subjects with excessive taxation. In other words, Luther told him that his sin had darkened his ability to understand God's truth. One historian says that when Albrecht received Luther's letter he grew so angry he threw it down on the floor and jumped up and down on it stomping it in a fit of anger.<sup>6</sup> Luther had the ability to bring that out in people even as an old man.

Anyway, Albrecht's brother Gerhard owed Albrecht a sum of money and Albrecht forced him to transfer both his debts and income to him until Gerhard made good his debt. Once he gained control over Gerhard's income he raised taxes on all of Gerhard's subjects basically trying to squeeze every last drop of money he could out of his brother and his brother's subjects. Luther and everyone else understood and despised Albrecht's greed. Luther appealed to the Elector John Frederick and eventually Albrecht was arrested and put in jail which further increased the instability of the region.

Luther thought a little jail time would do Albrecht some good.

But he also saw that prolonged disharmony and instability in an evangelical province was bad for Reformation. So, he set about to negotiate a settlement between the two brothers and to restore order and peace to the province.

Now I want you to think about that. Luther was at that time the most famous man in the world and he was involved in negotiating a financial settlement between two brothers who were out to wreck each other and he did that for he perceived to be the benefit of the Kingdom of God. It is a very strange thing historically.

It would have been a little like have Billy Graham negotiating a settlement between two Tarrant county commissioners. He was a very big gun mediating a very small dispute. But the reason he did that, of course, is that he understood the tenuous nature of the Reformation. He wanted to maintain peace among the evangelicals so they would be united when the catholic princes finally assembled to try to undo the Reformation.

Luther would not live to see the war but he anticipated it perfectly.

So Luther took Melanchthon and went down to Eisleben to negotiate a settlement between the two men. While they were there Melanchthon got sick and Luther felt compelled to take him back home. That meant, of course, that later in the month Luther would have to return by himself.

Near the end of January 1546, Luther and three of his sons set off again for Eisleben. It was very cold. Luther's wife Katy and Melanchthon both were very worried about him. He seemed very feeble.

Still he went. When they came to a river swollen with winter rain and huge ice flows, they were unable to pass. (In a letter to his wife he wrote that the river was a huge female Anabaptist that wanted to baptize him all over again.<sup>7</sup>) Luther stayed in the town next to the river and preached on the Apostle Paul's conversion. He encouraged the saints there to venerate the Apostle Paul by holding to his doctrine and not by venerating his relics.

He people of Mansfield sent sixty armed riders to help him cross the river.

Luther began to feel dizzy and fainted. Everyone assumed it was because he was so cold from crossing the river.

When he got to Eisleben he stayed with the city clerk. The people of the city furnished him all of the beer and wine he could drink.

He preached in Eisleben four times. He preached on January 31<sup>st</sup>, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, February 7<sup>th</sup> and February 14<sup>th</sup>. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, he oversaw the ordination of two new ministers.

The various groups involved in the negotiations met every two or three days simply because Luther was unable to meet more often. He sat through and involved himself in the negotiations although he found them extremely tedious. He was so weak that he was only able to participate for an hour to an hour and half at a time.

He wrote in a Bible in his room, **"If the Son is for us, who can be against us?"**

Katy became desperately worried about Luther.

Luther chided her lack of faith, as if God could not create **"ten Doctor Martins"** if one of them died: **"Free me from your worries. I have a caretaker who is better than you and all the angels; he lies in the cradle and rests on a virgin's bosom, and yet, nevertheless, he sits at the right hand of God, the almighty Father. Therefore be at peace. Amen."**<sup>8</sup>

On February 16<sup>th</sup>, Luther's secretary John Aurifaber found a piece of paper in Luther's room on which Luther wrote in German, **"We are all beggars this is true."**

Shortly after supper on the seventeenth, Luther went, as was his custom, to his room to pray at the window. He began to feel a terrible tightness in his chest almost certainly an attack of angina pectoris. About ten o'clock Luther lay down in his bed. He began to quietly say to himself Psalm 31:5.

Count Albrecht and his wife arrived and Count Albrecht's wife gave him a medication made of grated unicorn and no I have no idea what that might have actually been. Luther slept for an hour or so.

At about one o'clock Luther awakened with another attack of pain. He expected matter-of-factly that he would die in the city where he had been born and baptized. He moved again from the bedchamber to the day bed in the room and once more commended his soul to God. They sought to warm him with hot towels. His hosts, the city clerk Johann Albrecht and his wife, were summoned, along with the two physicians of the city and finally Count Albrecht himself and his wife, Anna, who was familiar with drugs. The pain and fear continued. When he began to sweat, Luther saw it as a symptom of death. In a prayer he gave thanks to the God of all comfort, the Father of Jesus Christ, that he had revealed to him his Son, **"whom I have believed, whom I have loved, whom I have preached, confessed, and praised, whom the pope and all the godless revile and blaspheme."** Here once again he named the content of this life in a positive and definitive way Luther commended his **"little soul"** to the Lord Christ. He was sure that death would not be able to snatch him from God's hand. He based this on John 3:16: Anyone who believes in the Son, whom God gave in love, will not perish, but have eternal life. He stood firm in the words of Ps. 68:20: **"Our God is a God of salvation; and to God, fix belongs escape from death."** Echoing the words of the aged Simeon (Luke 2:29) he said with confidence: **"Lord, let now thou thy servant depart in peace. Amen."** Finally, he repeated Psalm 31:5 three more times, and became silent.

<sup>VUL</sup> **Psalm 30:6**...in manus tuas commendabo spiritum meum redemisti me  
Domine Deus veritatis

<sup>NIV</sup> **Psalm 31:5**...Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.

Countess Anna especially tried to revive Luther by rubbing him with vinegar and aqua vitae. Jonas and Coelius shouted loudly, **“Reverend father are you ready to die trusting in your Lord Jesus Christ and to confess doctrine which you have taught in his name?”** A distinct **“Yes”** was his reply. With his final word Luther had made a confession of his cause. This was significant. After this he fell asleep and responded no more. His face became pale; his feet and nose grew cold. At about a quarter to three he took a breath and gave up his spirit. The reporters emphasized that Luther died peacefully.

The accounts of Luther’s death show again how deeply piety had been altered by him. All sacramental elements were missing. Of course, the no extreme unction, but neither did Luther make any last confession, although he treasured the practice of confession itself. Understandably, no last communion was offered, for Luther had otherwise had great reluctance about this practice. He had received the Lord’s Supper the Sunday before. Thus there were no priestly ministrations at all at his death. It was almost exclusively Luther himself who spoke, not the others present. This may have been a mark of respect in the face of his authority. His last statements consisted primarily of brief, confident prayers to God and Christ, including the traditional deathbed prayer from Ps. 31:5. The recitation of Bible passages served to reassure him. His confidence corresponded to the confession of God and Christ that was his life’s work. Jonas and Coelius asked him expressly to confirm this at the end. Unlike the earlier situations when his life was threatened nothing is known about any word to his sons who were present or a final greeting to Katy. For the dying man, that was obviously not as important as his relationship to God and his vocation.<sup>9</sup>

The people of Eisleben prepared Luther’s body for burial. They appealed to the Elector John Frederick to allow them to bury Luther in the town where he had both born and had died. John Frederick said that, if necessary, he would send troops to collect Luther’s body and return it to Wittenberg. They complied. Luther’s pewter coffin started home in a wagon.

Along the way, massive crowds turned out to see him pass by. Thousands...tens of thousands paid their respects.

On February 22, 1546 Martin Luther was buried in the Castle Church at Wittenberg, the same Castle Church to which he had nailed his 95 Theses. He was buried in the floor of the church...directly at the foot of the pulpit.

Melanchthon delivered his eulogy and when he did he tried to explain Luther's impact on the world. He was quick to add that Luther had faults, many faults. But he was even quicker to add that God had used Luther to restore the gospel and that Luther had stood in the line of great prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptist. I think he was right but I think Luther had he heard it would have laughed out loud.

Let's pray.

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 373.

<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Walton, "The Spread of the Zwingli Reformation" from *Christian History Magazine* Volume 3, No. 1, 1984, 33. "You would have cleansed the Augean stable, if you had had the images removed, if you had not taught that the body of Christ was supposed to be eaten in the bread."

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, Book 11, Chapter 11, 1039-40.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Selected Works of Calvin Volume 4*, 1545, Letter 136. Parts of the letter are paraphrased or modernized by me for the sake of clarity.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Bainton, 322. In Table Talk #291 Luther is recorded as saying, "**The end of all heresy is the sword. We see this in the case of the pope, Münzer, Zwingli, the Arians, etc. They all started out [with a certain show of piety], but in the end they were driven to the sword. They were at first not wanting in the will [to carry out their intentions] but they didn't have the opportunity. Satan, as Paul said, can't deny himself. He must show himself to be a liar and**

**murderer. Moreover, I think that Cain's death also caused a great outcry. They said, 'Behold, Lamech has killed our father,' etc."**

<sup>6</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 369.

<sup>7</sup> Brecht, 371.

<sup>8</sup> Brecht, 373.

<sup>9</sup> Brecht, 376-7.