

MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546)

It is 500 years since it is reputed that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg. The Reformation cannot be ascribed to one man, but without Luther's urgency of his new interpretation of the Christian message which challenged the very fabric of Christian ethics, history may well have taken a different course. Indeed, it was his relentless attack on the Catholic Church's canon law and his unwavering insistence on the doctrine *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), that resulted in the cleaning out of five hundred years of power and government. This led to his excommunication by Pope Leo X and the Bull *Exsurge Domine* which Luther contemptuously and ceremoniously burned in public in Wittenberg in 1520CE. The political atmosphere in medieval Germany was instrumental in aiding Luther in disseminating his message in a relatively short period



of time because the intellectual and spiritual turmoil of the Pope and Emperor were distracted by matters concerning the Italian wars, by the rapid spread of the printed word, the prevalence of anti-clericalism, nationalism, and the general hatred of the foreign Pope.

As student, friar and professor at Wittenberg, every page of Scripture revealed to him a God whom he had previously not known. Luther was in no doubt of the metaphysical nature of the battleground between Christ and the Devil and their cosmic battle for mastery over the Church and the world. Indeed, Luther was convinced of an approaching apocalypse wherein the Devil would become more frenzied in his challenge for the Christian soul, a prospect that terrified him and spurred him into urgent action. Luther's argument was based on his first hand witness of the extent of the breakdown in discipline in the Church on his visit to Rome in 1511CE. Essentially, it was the realisation that the Church invoked canon

law and papal might towards the sale of indulgences and also that the Pope and Church Councils claimed sole authority to interpret Scripture.

The origins of Luther's vision of reform was towards a return to the early Church as revealed in the Acts of the Apostles. Again, the development of his *Theology of the Cross* was much influenced by Tauler's *Theologica Germanica*. As an Augustinian monk in Erfurt, Luther was well schooled in the humanism and the late medieval scholasticism of pietist Gabriel Biel. Intensive study of St Augustine and St Bernard and their interpretation of history allowed Luther to decipher the events of his own time. His initial attack on the sale of indulgences was made public in 1514CE in his lectures and 95 thesis. The influence of his mentor Staupitz, (Vicar General in 1518CE) was vital because he granted Luther dispensation from the vow of obedience, thus freeing him from monastic constraints.

Luther's breakthrough (from the *Autobiographical Fragment* 1545CE) brought a Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone. He argued that Church doctrine which claimed that good works were essential to salvation had no foundation in Scripture. Luther was all too aware of Erasmus's conventional conscience orientated morality and it's practical application but he undermined this by arguing that possession of a man's

conscience although hotly contested by both God and the Devil is only freed through the grace of God. In his letter to Melancthon from the safety of Wartburg Castle in 1522CE Luther advised, 'Be a sinner and sin boldly, but more boldly believe and rejoice in Christ'. Luther's position was unshakable (*De Servo Artibrio* 1525CE).

Luther's earlier theological position, (1509-1514CE), common to the late Middle Ages was the *Via Moderna* (The Modern Way), a philosophy and doctrine of scholars such as the English Franciscan William of Ockham. Here, it was argued that God had entered into a covenant with man and justification was received and fulfilled by God's power. Luther moved away from this position by arguing that the righteousness of God freed the Christian from sin simply by the power of love. This argument would seem contrary to reason except when seen in the light of a crucified and hidden God. When Christ is placed central to salvation then the alien righteousness of Christ and the hidden God of the Cross is made manifest in human suffering. In effect, man must be humiliated by God in order to be justified by Him. Luther's perspective of the Cross had now changed from that of shame and degradation to one of glory and salvation. *Sola Fide!* (Faith alone)!

Luther's theology developed further towards the doctrine of predestination which again put him in conflict with Erasmus. Here he asserted that certain aspects of God will always remain hidden from man, and that God may predestine some sinners to death without cause. In effect, God's relationship with man was not to be found in the institute and sacraments of the Church but rather in the individual soul. Nevertheless, Luther was clear that baptism was not only the means to the inexpressible treasure of redemption but also the means of 'grabbing the Devil by the throat and Old Adam by the collar'. Indeed, every baptised believer is given sacerdotal status of priest, bishop and pope, thus enabling all Christians to be their own interpreter of Scripture albeit under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The priesthood of all believers! Although Luther remained faithful to the tradition of the Eucharist, he was not able to reconcile the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Rather, he replaced it with the doctrine of consubstantiation, the over riding principle being that Christ's body and blood are received simply by faith, (Marburg Colloquy in 1529CE, contra Zwingel).

Luther's insistence on *Sola Scriptura* which reached a wide public through copious publications, inflicted irreparable damage on the Catholic Church. By 1520CE he had burned his bridges through the publication of his three great treatises which were to remain the foundation of his doctrine. His *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, called on all Germans to reform. His theological treatise *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was a direct attack on the papacy for imposing false doctrine. This treatise contained the new theology and practice of Baptism and the Eucharist (also Penance later removed), which he claimed as the only sacraments founded in Scripture. For Luther, the authority of the Church lay not in the papacy but in its own members. In his third treatise *The Liberty of a Christian Man* he affirmed the doctrines of 'justification by faith' and the 'priesthood of all believers'. The Bible had become the whole religion of the reformer and the one true Church, defined not as a corrupt hierarchical institution, but as a spiritual body and congregation of the faithful without wealth and temporal jurisdiction.

By 1530CE the political fate of Protestantism had been decided at the Diet at Augsburg. Luther had liberated the Christian conscience from Papal decree and Canon law and had imposed on it the responsibility to serve the world at large. At the heart of this was the recovery of sound doctrine which he was prepared to test against the firm rock of Scripture, 'The just shall live by faith', (Romans 1:17, Habakkuk 2:4).

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