

Martin Luther, Part 1

Historical Theology

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I. EARLY LIFE

A. BIRTH

A baby boy was born November 10, 1483 to Hans and Margarethe Luther in Eisleben, Germany and baptized as Martin Luther the next day on the feast day of St. Martin of Tours.

B. MOVED TO MANSFELD

The next year Hans moved his family to Mansfeld, the chief city of their region, where he became a prosperous businessman and also served in the town government.

II. EDUCATION

A. HANS' WISHES

Martin was the eldest of several children, and Hans thought he should be a lawyer. With law school in mind Martin was enrolled in school.

1. Latin Schools

Martin was enrolled in Latin schools first at Mansfeld then Magdeburg and finally at Eisenach.

a) Latin schools focused on the Trivium: grammar, rhetoric and logic

2. University of Erfurt

Martin enrolled in the University of Erfurt in 1501, completing a bachelor's degree in liberal arts in 1502 and a master's degree in 1505. After completing his master's degree he enrolled in a program of legal studies according to Hans' wishes.

3. From lawyer monk

Martin's career as a lawyer was to be very short lived. In July of 1505 Martin quit studying law, sold his books and entered the monastery in Erfurt of the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine. He claimed that a bolt of lightning had struck very near him when he had been caught out in a storm and in response to the shock and fear he experienced he vowed to St. Anna that he would become a monk. This is likely a response to promptings he had already experienced as he desired to find meaning in life. He had been exposed to scholasticism, Aristotle and other similar philosophers and had leaned toward studying philosophy over law, but he became convinced that philosophy could help him discover some truth through reason and logic, but that only divine revelation could lead a man to truth about God. So, he may have desired simply to have a way to study scripture more thoroughly.

III. MONASTIC LIFE

A. DEEP SPIRITUAL DESPAIR

Martin was dedicated to the Augustinian order. He devoted much time and energy to fasting, prayer, pilgrimage and frequent confession. Luther described this period of his life in this way, "I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my soul."

B. MORE EDUCATION

Luther's superior, Johann von Staupitz, decided Luther needed more work to keep him from "excessive introspection." The work von Staupitz chose was study. Thus Luther was ordained in 1507 and began teaching theology at the University of Wittenburg in 1508. That same year he received a Bachelor's of Biblical Studies degree, and in 1509 he received a 3rd Bachelor's degree in "The Sentences," by Peter Lombard from Erfurt University. In 1512 he received a Doctorate in Theology and joined the Senate of the Theological Faculty at Wittenburg. This is roughly akin to becoming a tenured professor in our universities. He would eventually succeed Johann von Staupitz as Chair of Theology Faculty at Wittenberg.

C. BOUNCING AROUND

Between 1507 and 1512 Luther moved around a fair bit. In 1507 he transferred from the monastery at Erfurt to the Augustinian monastery at Wittenburg to enroll at Wittenburg University. In 1509 the Augustinians sent Luther back to Erfurt then in 1510 he was sent to Rome. In 1426 the Pope had merged several smaller hermit groups who observed, "The Rule of Augustine," a short document by Augustine of Hippo describing rules for monks and monasteries. Some similar groups did not observe these rules. In 1510 Pope Julius II decided to merge observant and non-observant houses of monks in Germany and the observant monks chose Luther to be one of a pair of representatives to go to Rome and attempt to persuade the pope not merge the groups. The mission was unsuccessful, but did serve to further convince Luther that Roman Catholicism was more interested in political expediency than spirituality and righteousness.

D. THE REAL BENEFIT OF ALL THAT STUDY

Between 1510 and 1520 Luther offered classes in his various roles in Wittenburg University on Psalms, Hebrews, Romans and Galatians. Through the associated study of these books Luther became increasingly convinced that the Catholic church was in error on a number of significant points. One of the chief being the teaching that justification comes through the cooperative works of God and man.

IV. 95 THESES

A. INDULGENCES

Luther's own archbishop, Albrecht von Brandenburg owed a large sum of money to the Papacy in simony payments. He asked the Pope to authorize the sale of a special plenary indulgence. The Pope and von Brandenburg would split each sale 50/50, with the Pope getting both halves until the simony payments were settled.

B. JOHANN TETZEL

The indulgences deal having been struck Rome dispatched Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and successful indulgences salesman, to Germany to sell indulgences to the laity

C. LUTHER'S RESPONSE TO THE SELLING OF SPECIAL INDULGENCES

It is unclear how long Luther worked or had been working on his work "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," better known as, "The 95 Theses," but its publication soon became the watershed moment in his life. It truly was a call for a scholarly debate on the doctrines and practices related to selling indulgences. Luther appropriately posted it on the church door at Wittenburg, much like the public posting of meeting agendas at city hall and sent one to Archbishop von Brandenburg with his request that the sale of indulgences be stopped until his thesis was properly disputed and settled.

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