

Church History (25): The Life and Ministry of Martin Luther (2)

Having considered Luther's conversion, ninety-five theses, Heidelberg Disputation, and three treatises, we come this week to consider his appearance at Worms, ministerial labors, and domestic life.

I. The Life and Ministry of Martin Luther

1. *His appearance at Worms.* After Luther posted his ninety-five theses in 1517, he had two open debates with Rome (Cajetan at Augsburg and Eck at Leipzig). Through these debates, Rome grew cautious of Luther, and on June 15, 1520 a Papal Bull was issued. Entitled *Exsurge, Domine* (Arise, O Lord), it gave Luther sixty days to recant. Luther responded with *On the Detestable Bull of the Antichrist*. The lines were now drawn. "As for the papal bull, when the sixty days transpired, Luther burned it publically in Wittenberg. When the Pope heard the report of Luther, he excommunicated him and called for his immediate delivery to Rome" (Nichols).¹ Frederick the Wise intervened for Luther and kept him from going to Rome. "Instead, he was to appear before the Imperial diet or congress, at Worms in April 1521. Charles V, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, oversaw the Diet. This was Charles V's debut meeting with the princes and rulers of Germany, and he could not have designed a more difficult challenge. On the one hand, he was staunchly Roman Catholic and indebted to the Roman Church, on the other hand, he ascended to the throne largely through the influence of Frederick the Wise, Luther's protector" (Nichols).² "The pope and emperor hoped to do one of two things: either they would get Luther to recant, or else they would get the authority of this Diet to put him to death" (Beeke).³

Luther entered Worms on April 16, 1521 as a hero. He said of this event: "Even if the Emperor calls me to Worms in order to kill me, or to declare me an enemy of the Empire, I shall offer to come. With Christ helping me, I shall not run away, nor shall I abandon God's Word in this struggle."⁴ "The hearing itself was an impressive affair. At the front sat the youthful Emperor Charles V. Around the hall stood the most powerful politicians of the day. On a table before the emperor were laid all of Luther's books. And there stood Luther himself, apparently surrounded by his enemies and dangerously exposed" (Trueman).⁵ He was asked two questions: "Do you, Martin Luther, recognize the books published under your name as your own? Are you prepared to recant what you have written in these books?" "Luther asked for time to think about it. He was granted one day. The following afternoon he appeared before the diet again. Luther made a speech in German, justifying what he has written, and promised that if his opponents could prove he was mistaken from the Scriptures, he would be the first to throw his books into the fire" (Needham).⁶

Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of Scripture or by clear reason – since I believe neither the popes nor the councils by themselves, for it is clear that they have often erred and contradicted themselves – I am conquered by the holy Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not withdraw anything, since it is neither safe nor right to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.⁷

¹ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 40

² Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 40-41

³ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 33

⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:100

⁵ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 45

⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:100-101

⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:101

Luther was put under an imperial ban and his writings were condemned as heretical and ordered burned. He was now outlawed by the state and excommunicated by the church. He left Worms a marked man. "To be put under the ban of the Empire was a dreadful thing. It meant that no one could give Luther food or drink or shelter; that anyone who met him was bound to seize him and hand him over to the guards of the Emperor; and that when secured he was to be put to death. All this was to happen when the term of days mentioned in the safe-conduct had expired" (Lindsay).⁸ With motives no doubt mixed, Fredrick orchestrated his kidnapping, taking him to one of his castles at Wartburg. "Hidden at Wartburg, Luther grew a beard, sent word to some of his closest friends not to fear for him, and spent his time writing" (Gonzalez).⁹ "For almost a year, Luther assumed a new identity. During this time, Luther produced an immense literary output, including his translation of the Greek NT into German in merely four months. By 1521, Luther had accomplished more than most do in many a lifetime" (Nichols).¹⁰

Safely perched in the Wartburg Castle overlooking his 'land of the birds,' Luther began work on making the new song of the gospel accessible to the people. His German translation of the NT, though an intensely academic labor, was potentially as revolutionary as his burning of the papal bull and canon law. Both actions were public affirmations of reform. Luther's provision of a readable and accurate translation of the Bible was a stimulus toward universal education – everyone should be able to read in order to read God's Word. More immediately, his translation deprived the elite, the priestly class, of their exclusive control over words as well as the Word.¹¹

2. *His ministerial labors.* Luther returned to Wittenberg on March 6, 1522. While Luther was in hiding at Wartburg, Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) and Andreas Karlstadt (1486-1541) led the reform in Wittenberg. "The leadership of the Reformation in Wittenberg, passed to Karlstadt and Melancthon. Under these men, things took a more radical turn" (Trueman).¹² Karlstadt sought to force the reform too quickly which created chaos and disorder. "Karlstadt spearheaded the Wittenberg Reformation, attacking images of Christ and the saints, condemning instrumental music in worship, and offering the wine as well as the bread to the laity in communion. He exhorted priests and monks to abandon their vows of celibacy and get married. Karlstadt took a wife and wanted to compel all the clergy to follow his example, denouncing celibacy as a positive evil" (Needham).¹³ This forced Melancthon to appeal to Fredrick to return Luther to Wittenberg. "Fredrick took little persuading, for he did not want the emperor taking an undue interest in the internal affairs of his territory, something that would certainly have resulted if anarchy had triumphed" (Trueman).¹⁴ "Luther returned to Wittenberg, ending his eleven months of hiding. Then, in a series of potent sermons preached over eight days, he managed to restore peace and calm to the disturbed city" (Needham).¹⁵

Crucial for Luther in these sermons were two things. First, faith must always be accompanied by love; and secondly, all true reform must be truly evangelical, growing from the freedom of the gospel, rather than from the compulsion of the law. Luther profoundly believed that no reformation could take place unless the gospel was thoroughly preached and kept central; further, the gospel must be recognized by the people in everything that was done in the name of reform. He felt that a forced law-motivated reform

⁸ T.M. Lindsay, *The Reformation*, 19

⁹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2:37

¹⁰ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 43-44

¹¹ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 91

¹² Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 46

¹³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:127-128

¹⁴ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 47

¹⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:130

such as Karlstadt had (in Luther's' view) been promoting, would only change people's behavior, but not their hearts. For Luther, inner spiritual reformation in the heart of the individual, setting him in a right relationship with God through personal faith in Christ, was always the great priority. And outward religious reformation, he argued, must flow from this inner conversion, as the free and willing act of the believer. Otherwise it was worthless.¹⁶

The mass is a bad thing: God is opposed to it; it ought to be abolished; and I would that throughout the whole world it were replaced by the supper of the gospel. But let no one be torn from it by force. We must leave the matter in God's hands. His Word must act, and not we. And why so, you will ask. Because I do not hold men's hearts in my hand, as the potter holds the clay. We have a right to speak: we have not the right to act. Let us preach; the rest belongs unto God. Were I to employ force, what should I gain? Grimace, formality, human ordinances, and hypocrisy. But there would be no sincerity of heart, nor faith, nor charity. Where these things are wanting, all is wanting, and I would not give a pear stalk for such a result.¹⁷

At his return to Wittenberg, Luther realized that many had become dissatisfied with his slower approach at reform, and others virtually worshiped him. Luther responded with a short treatise called, *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion*. In part he said: "I ask that men make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3 would not allow the Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I—poor stinking maggot-fodder that I am—come to have men call the children of Christ by my wretched name? Not so, my dear friends; let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians after him whose teaching we hold." After providing several reasons an insurrection would be inappropriate, Luther then provided three practical counsels: "There are three things you are to do. First, you are to recognize your own sin, because of which the strict justice of God has brought upon you this antichristian government. In the second place, you are to pray in all humility against the papal government. In the third place, you are to open your mouth by speaking and writing the truth of the gospel and the deceit of the pope and his papists, until he is exposed, known and brought into disrepute throughout the world. For we must slay him with words; the mouth of Christ must do it. That is the way he is torn out of men's hearts and his lies become known and despised. And when he is out of men's hearts, so that he has lost their confidence, he is already destroyed. This will do better than a hundred insurrections."

(1) His pastoral work. Upon his return Luther resumed his labors as pastor of the castle-church. "Here he instituted numerous reforms, including congregational singing, the use of German in addition to Latin, and a newfound emphasis on the sermon" (Nichols).¹⁸ "On his return to Wittenberg, he had a more difficult task before him: to effect a positive reformation of faith and discipline, worship and ceremonies. A revolution is merely destructive and emancipative: a reformation is constructive and affirmative; it removes abuses and corruptions, but saves the foundation, and builds on it a new structure" (Schaff).¹⁹ "Luther's primary devotion was to the church. From the time he entered the monastery until his death—and at every point in between—Luther thought about, wrote on, preached to, and

¹⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:130

¹⁷ Merle D'Aubigne, *The Triumph of Truth: A Life of Martin Luther*, 376-377

¹⁸ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 196

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:382

fought for the church" (Nichols).²⁰ In addition to Luther's pastoral labors, he continued as a professor in the University of Wittenberg until his death. The University of Wittenberg was founded in 1502 by Frederick the Wise. While a devout Catholic he remained tolerant of Luther's views. The influence the University had was international.

"Martin Luther was the typical busy pastor. He performed multiple duties, including writing, preaching, teaching, and administering. In any given week, he wrote numerous lengthy letters or worked on one of his many treatises, preached two times on Sunday and typically three more times during the week, lectured daily at the university, mentored students, and advised any number of fledgling pastors, churches, and even princes" (Nichols).²¹ But first and foremost Luther was a preacher. From the years 1522 to 1546, scholars estimate that Luther preached 5,800 sermons. Luther himself once said, "Often I preached four sermons on one day."²² "He has been called by many one of the best preachers of all time. Though some may debate this designation, few would doubt that he remains among the most prolific preachers in history" (Nichols).²³ "Preaching the Word is, for Luther, the powerful center of the church, the very foundation and instrument of reformation, individual and corporate. Luther's view of the Christian life, like his view of the success of the Reformation, was rooted first and foremost in the overwhelming power of the preached Word" (Trueman).²⁴

"If the Christian life is, for Luther, rooted in the corporate gathering of the church, especially in the preaching of the Word to the congregation, then the liturgy is also vitally important" (Trueman).²⁵ "Luther kept to traditional Catholic worship, except where it clearly contradicted Scripture. In 1526 Luther's new complete worship-book was finally published for use in Lutheran congregations. The normal Sunday morning service was set out as follows: Hymn or Psalm; prayer, Scripture reading from epistles; hymn; Scripture reading from Gospels; the Apostles Creed (sung by whole congregation); sermon; the Lord's Prayer (repeated by congregation); holy communion; prayer; benediction (Num.6:24-26)" (Needham).²⁶ "It wasn't until 1525, nearly eight years after he first came to public attention, that Luther implemented a fully German liturgy, and not until 1526 that the liturgy was published" (Trueman).²⁷

Luther revealed his reasons for liturgical reform in his short treatise, *Concerning the Order for Public Worship* (1523).²⁸ Here he identifies three major errors in the Catholic liturgy: "First, and worst, the Word has been silenced, by which Luther means that preaching has all but vanished, leaving only Bible reading and singing in its place. Second, the loss of the Word has meant that all kinds of nonsensical fables and hymns have crept into public worship. Third, the worship service itself has come to be regarded as a work offered to God" (Trueman).²⁹ Worship was viewed as somehow meriting or deserving God's favor. "Luther maintained, that if worship is not something offered to God to gain merit, then it must be understood within the context of God's own action. Worship is either a response to God's prior grace or itself a means of that grace" (Trueman).³⁰ In short, God came to man in worship, enabling him to respond.

²⁰ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 147

²¹ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 149

²² Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 210

²³ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 210-211

²⁴ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 94-97

²⁵ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 99

²⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:142

²⁷ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 100-101

²⁸ Martin Luther, *Works*, 53:11

²⁹ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 102

³⁰ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 102

This is why Luther stressed that the congregation, as congregation, should never meet without the preaching of the Word and prayer. He also argued for consistent public reading of the Bible in a manner that moves through the whole canon over a period of time. That might seem a tall order or an overly lengthy process, but Luther assumed that services would be daily affairs, probably at least twice every day. While he accepted that not everyone will be at every service, this idea surely reflected the fact that, in an illiterate age, it is only in such a context that people will come to know the Bible. And it also reflects the fact that, in Luther's theology, knowledge of the Word of God and regular exposure to it are absolutely basic to the Christian life.³¹

Luther gave the most prominent place to the sermon, which was another departure from previous custom. He arranged three services on Sunday, each with a sermon: early in the morning, chiefly for servants; at nine or ten; and in the afternoon a discourse from a text in the Old Testament. On Monday and Tuesday in the morning the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer were to be taught; on Wednesday, the Gospel of Matthew; on Thursday, the Epistle lessons should be explained; on Saturday, the Gospel of John.³²

(2) His major writings and hymns. "Luther was one of the most prolific writers of all time, easily among the top five Christian writers in output. He wrote 544 works that eventually were bound in fifty-four thick volumes in English (over a hundred in the German edition)" (Lawson).³³ Luther himself wrote hundreds of hymns. "The first Lutheran hymn-book was published in 1524. Popular melodies were used to make the singing easier, and the hymns were full of strong Lutheran doctrinal content. More than any other Protestant Church, the Lutherans were marked out by their love of church music and hymn-singing" (Needham).³⁴ "Without question, Luther's most famous hymn remains *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, which he wrote in 1527, the year the Black Plague swept through Germany" (Lawson).³⁵

3. *His domestic life*. "Luther met his Katy (Katherine von Bora, 1499-1552) when she arrived in Wittenberg in April 1523 with other nuns who had escaped a nearby monastery. The Reformers were soon able to place or marry off all these nuns except Katherine (there were few possibilities for a single woman in the Middle Ages)" (Lindberg).³⁶ "If Luther at that time thought of preparing for any solemn event, it was to ascend the scaffold and not to approach the altar. Many months after this he still replied to those who spoke to him of marriage. 'God may change my heart, if it be His pleasure; but now at least I have no thought of taking a wife: not that I do not feel any attractions in that estate; I am neither a stock nor a stone; but every day I expect the death and the punishment of a heretic'" (D'Aubigne).³⁷ "A strong-willed personality, she let it be known that she was not pleased with the match proposed for her, but that Luther would do just fine. In the meantime, Luther himself was under continual pressure from others to marry: his supporters wanted a practical expression of Luther's support for married priests, and his father wanted grandchildren. On June 13, 1525 Luther married his Katy, to please his father and to spite the pope" (Lindberg).³⁸

³¹ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 102-103

³² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:488

³³ Stephen Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 344

³⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:143

³⁵ Stephen Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 346-347

³⁶ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 101

³⁷ Merle D'Aubigne, *The Triumph of Truth: A Life of Martin Luther*, 409-410

³⁸ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 101

I wouldn't give up my Katy for France or for Venice—first, because God gave her to me and gave me to her; second, because I have often observed that other women have more shortcomings than my Katy (although she, too, has some shortcomings, they are outweighed by many great virtues); and third, because she keeps faith in marriage, that is, fidelity and respect. A wife ought to think the same way about her husband.³⁹

"Luther's home was always open to students and friends, and thus he and Katy came to be the model of a pastor's family in Wittenberg. Luther and Katy offered students for the ministry a beautiful and loving, if warts-and-all, picture of what a minister's household should look like" (Trueman).⁴⁰ It was from these common conversations at the dinner table, that Luther's famous *Table Talk* statements come. As students asked Luther questions, his answers were written down and eventually published. "It was said Melancthon heard at times eleven languages spoken at his hospitable table" (Schaff).⁴¹ "In Luther's household the day began at sunrise, and the principal meal was of the day was eaten about ten o'clock in the morning. About five o'clock in the afternoon supper was served, and this meal was often shared by exiled clergymen, escaped nuns, government officials, visitors from abroad, and colleagues of Luther in the university. The realized atmosphere of the hospitable home was conducive to spirited conversations."⁴²

Katy and Luther had six children together. Two of these died young. Elizabeth died in 1528, less than a year after birth, and Magdalene died in 1542, as a young girl. Luther himself said: "There is no sweeter union than that in a good marriage. Nor is there any death more bitter than that which separates a married couple. Only the death of children comes close to this; how much this hurts I have myself experienced."⁴³

The sweets of domestic life soon dispersed the storms that the exasperation of his enemies had at first gathered over him. His Katy, as he styled her, manifested the tenderest affection toward him, consoled him in his dejection by repeated passages from the Bible, exonerated him from all household cares, sat near him during his restful moments, reminded him of the friends to whom he had forgotten to write, and often amused him by the simplicity of her questions. His letters overflowed with tenderness for Katherine; he called her 'his dear and gracious wife, his dear and amiable Katy.' Luther's character became more cheerful in Katherine's society, and this happy frame of mind never deserted him afterwards, even in the midst of his greatest trials.⁴⁴

"Luther died in 1546 while away from home on pastoral business. He died absent from the arms of his beloved wife. He wrote his final words on a piece of paper, half in German, half in Latin: 'We are beggars: this is true'" (Trueman).⁴⁵ "Jonas, Luther's friend and co-laborer, wished to receive from Luther a last testimony. He therefore rose, went up to his friend, and, bending over him, said, 'Reverend father, in your dying hour do you rest on Jesus Christ, and steadfastly rely upon the doctrine which you have preached?' 'Yes,' said Luther, so that all who were present could hear him. This was his last word" (D'Aubigne).⁴⁶

³⁹ Martin Luther, *Works*, 54:7-8

⁴⁰ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 189

⁴¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:135

⁴² From preface of the Works of Martin Luther, 54:ix

⁴³ Martin Luther, *Works*, 54:33

⁴⁴ Merle D'Aubigne, *The Triumph of Truth: A Life of Martin Luther*, 414

⁴⁵ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 194

⁴⁶ Merle D'Aubigne, *The Triumph of Truth: A Life of Martin Luther*, 418