

Church History, Lesson 17

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez.)

The Context of the Reformation

Continued corruption in the Catholic Church:

- We've commented repeatedly on the corruption of popes specifically and the church in general.
 - At one point leading up to the Reformation there were 3 different popes at one time.
 - The councils called to deal with the divisions and abuses within the church were compromised because the bishops were a product of the corruptions.
 - Queen Isabella complained in November of 1500 that the majority of clergy were living in open concubinage and that any effort on the part of the civil authorities to bring the clergy to justice was met with resistance, sometimes even armed resistance.
- All of these corruptions finally led Christians to distrust the church. "How could the laity trust a sacrament of penance administered by a clergy that seemed to have no sense of the enormity of sin? The religious conscience of Europe was divided within itself, torn between trust in a church that had been its spiritual mother for generations, and the patent failures of that church." (Gonzalez)

The desire to "return to the source" of Christianity:

- When Constantinople fell in 1493, Europe, especially Italy was flooded with scholars with different views than those common in the Western church.
- They also brought manuscripts with them that demonstrated how many changes had taken place with the copying and recopying of ancient texts, including the Bible.
- Scholars began to become more familiar with Greek. This meant that scholars could compare the Latin Vulgate with the original Greek of the New Testament.
- When combined with the reality of corruption in the church and the general discontent of the populace with the condition of the church, all of this led to a desire to "return to the source" of Christianity. AND... these scholars desired to return to the "source" of Christianity primarily through the study of the Bible!

Discontent among the masses:

- Conditions for average people were NOT improving. In fact they were getting worse.
- Peasants especially were being exploited by landowners.

Feudal system ending:

- As the monarchs accrued more power to themselves, they forced the landholding nobility to serve the national interest.
- Also, national languages were becoming the "national cultural glue", and the influence of Latin as the European "lingua Franca" was waning.

Scientific discovery and the printing press:

- As new continents were discovered and travel to Asia became more frequent, "the world was changing".
- Flat earth theory was debunked by the circumnavigation of these same explorers.
- Great advances were being made in medicine, mathematics, and physics.
- And all of these discoveries could be readily made available to other scholars and to the population in general through the printing press.

“Humanist Reformers”:

- Those who worked for the reformation of the Catholic Church from within through scholarship and “returning to the source” of Christianity were called “humanists”. This does not mean that they exalted human nature above all else (as it would mean today) but it meant that they devoted themselves to the study of “the humanities” and sought the improvement of society and reformation of the church through this scholarship.
- The most important of these “humanists” was Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Erasmus of Rotterdam:

- Erasmus’ father was a priest, his mother was a physician’s daughter.
- He studied classical literature. Then, when he was visiting England a group of scholars got him interested in studying the Bible and reforming the church.
- He was highly influenced by Stoicism and Platonism. Consequently he promoted ruling the passions through reason. He encouraged “fairly ascetic discipline” but certainly NOT monasticism. He felt that monasticism was part of the problem in the church because the cleric withdraws from the life of the world around him instead of living life in the midst of human affairs.
- He wrote on how a “Christian soldier” could live a life of devotion in everyday life and avoid pagan vices. And by “pagan vices” he meant the extravagances and scandals of the popes and prelates of the church!
- Erasmus promoted a peaceful and internal reformation of the church. Royalty and nobility across Europe came under his influence through his writings. And his followers became influential secretaries to various courts throughout the land.
- It seemed like the reformation from within that Erasmus wanted was about to begin.
- **But then the Protestant Reformation broke out!** A reformation built on tolerance and moderation became impossible.

Martin Luther’s Journey to Reformation

■ Luther’s childhood and background...

- Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany in 1483. His father was a prosperous but not necessarily wealthy miner and foundry owner. His father, Hans Luther, very much wanted Martin to enter law.

■ Education...

- Everything that Luther studied at the University of Erfurt would have been related to theology. Roland Bainton says that his education there could have just as well prepared him for the ministry as it could have for law. Everything that they studied was intended to instill in the students a fear of God and reverence for the church.
- Complete fear of God was instilled in the medieval mindset. Everyone knew what to do if you wanted to be rescued from the wrath of God. If you didn’t want to risk the idea of waiting until your deathbed to make an act of contrition and then plead for God’s grace, then you would enter the monastery.

■ Two Thunderstorms...

- On a hot day in July, when Martin was 21, he was walking back to school after a visit with his parents, when a thunderstorm came up and he was knocked to the ground by lightning. In his fear, cried out to St. Anne, Mary’s mother and the patron saint of miners, for help. He vowed that if she saved him from the storm, he would become a monk.
 - 15 days later he presented himself to the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.
 - For the first year, Martin’s terrors of God seem to have settled down.

- Everything seems to point to Martin doing well in the atmosphere of meditation, singing, praying, reading, mass, and “mild poverty”.
- **1st mass** – Because Catholics believe that the wine and bread literally become Christ’s blood and body, Luther was absolutely terrified while presiding over his first mass.
 - This whole experience of terror at his first mass, caused Martin to pursue all the possible disciplines and good works that he possibly could as a monk.
 - He fasted often. He would sometimes cast off his blankets and nearly froze himself to death. Here are his own words:
 - “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.”
- Essentially, the terror of the literal thunderstorm sent him to the monastery to seek God, but at the monastery Luther became terrified of God!

▪ **Journey to Rome...**

- In the midst of all this work, Martin was given the privilege of representing his monastery in Rome. He spent one month there. While he was there, he observed many troubling things.
 - When he went to confession, the confessor was incompetent.
 - “The abysmal ignorance, frivolity, and levity of the Italian priests stupefied him.” (Bainton, 49)
 - The ‘mass priests’ could say 6 or 7 masses while he only said one.
 - He realized that many priests visited prostitutes, some of whom considered themselves virtuous because they limited themselves to women.
- The main privilege in going to Rome was to be able to access the righteousness of the saints through the purchase of indulgences. Luther availed himself of this opportunity, but he began to have doubts.
- He climbed Pilate’s stair, where Jesus was said to have stood, he said a Pater Noster for every step and kissed every step. When he got to the top, he stood up and said, “Who knows whether it is so?”
- His comment was that he had gone to Rome with onions and he came home with garlic.

▪ **Teaching and preaching at Wittenberg...**

- Sometime after returning from Rome with his garlic, Luther was moved to the University of Wittenberg.
- It was at Wittenberg that Luther met Dr. John Staupitz who was to become his spiritual mentor for much of his life. Later, Luther said, “If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz, I should have sunk in hell.” (Bainton, 53)
- Confession – Luther continued to be plagued by his doubts and fears. He first availed himself of confession.
 - Luther confessed regularly, sometimes daily. Sometimes he would confess for as much as 6 hours at a stretch.
 - Luther frustrated his confessor, Dr. Staupitz who finally said, “if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive – parricide, blasphemy, adultery – instead of all these peccadilloes.”
 - Here was the problem for Luther in confession. It didn’t relieve his guilt because he knew that he could confess for 6 hours and then remember something he had forgotten. He also knew that his memory was happy to block out past sins to protect his pride. He was realizing that it wasn’t individual sins that were the main problem. The main problem was that his whole nature was corrupt.

- Mysticism – Dr. John Staupitz was a mystic, so he recommended that Luther try the way of mysticism. The basic idea was that after a time of preparation, a person would seek to lose themselves in the being and love of God. Instead of all the striving of confession and other Catholic means of salvation, one would relax and seek to be lost in God.
 - But Luther found this to be impossible. How could he lose himself in a God that was hostile to him because of his guilt?
 - Eventually Luther began to think blasphemous thoughts about God [things like how can God abandon men, leave them alone to their own lusts and then damn them for their sins, that God could have prevented?] and when he confessed this Staupitz, the man didn't really understand, but he basically had two responses:
 - Staupitz pointed Luther to Christ, who shed his blood for the forgiveness of sin.
 - Staupitz also pointed Luther to the Bible by forcing him to study it. Staupitz had become the chair of Bible at the Wittenberg University, he assigned Luther the task of studying for his Doctorate of Theology and told him that he would begin preaching and teaching the Bible. Luther objected that so much work would kill him, and Staupitz's response was, "Quite all right, God has plenty of work for clever men to do in heaven."
 - Basically Staupitz was forcing Luther to deal with the primary source of our religion, God's Word, God's revelation of Himself in Christ, which is recorded for us in the Bible.

▪ Conversion

- Luther received his Doctor of Theology on October 19, 1512
- **Lectures on the Psalms** begin August 16, 1513. His approach to the Psalms was to treat it as a Christian book, and by the time he gets to Psalm 22, he is face to face with the Cross. Here he realized the Christ too was abandoned by God. Basically he saw God in a new way. Yes God was wrathful against sin, but He was also merciful to sinners.
- **Lectures on Romans** begin in April of 1515 and end September of 1516.
- **Lecture on Galatians** begin October of 1516.
 - You can see the importance of these lectures when you realize that he posted the 95 Theses one year later on October 31, 1517.
- **Wrestling with Paul's thoughts in Romans was a key to him. At first he trembled at the thought of a just God, but obviously Paul did not. He kept studying in hopes of finding the peace that he knew Paul had. What troubled him most was the phrase, "justice of God" or "righteousness of God" in Romans 1.17.**
- The "light came on" when he realized the connection between the gospel (death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus) and God's righteousness or justice. The meaning of God's justice is not simply God's wrath against sin. For those who believe it is revealed in the substitutionary atonement of the cross!

Luther's Testimony...

"I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

"Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith'. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became a gate to heaven...."