



The Just Shall Live By Faith:

The Conversion of Martin Luther

Martin Luther is one reformer whom I would have liked to have met. He was at ease having conversations with his family and students, all sitting around the table. These conversations were recorded by students as *"Luther's Table Talk"*. Reading some of these talks, one finds the conversation colourful indeed! Luther was an earthy man; he would walk to the pulpit with manure on his boots.

A painting in the Rijksmuseum shows the reformers around a table. A burning candle pictures the way the Reformation, by the light of the Word, uncovered the darkness which had obscured the gospel. In the foreground are two prominent reformers: Luther and Calvin. God raised up Luther in the fullness of time to rediscover the gospel. *Every reformation in the church always begins with a work of reformation in the soul of him who is called to reformation. Luther's reforming was the fruit of reformation in his own heart. Luther could say, I have believed; therefore I speak.*¹ We need to look at Luther's conversion; for only then will we understand his work of reformation.

1. Coming to the Light

Childhood and early education

To understand Luther, we must understand that his conversion was not an isolated event in his life. We can trace Luther's development in grace from his boyhood. And in tracing this work of God, we see the riches of the covenant of grace and the wonder of God's providence.

Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, on November 10th, 1483. To commemorate the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, Dr. Robert Godfrey taught a special course on Luther at Westminster Theological Seminary in California in 1983. I was privileged to attend this course. The *National Geographic* printed an excellent article on Luther in October, 1983 and the Post-Master General of the USA issued a postage stamp commemorating Luther's anniversary in the same year.

Luther came from a peasant family, his mother was a pious Catholic. She, especially, instilled the fear of God into her strong-willed son. Martin entered school at age five. He was a good student, learning Latin, which was basic to the curriculum. Martin had to make a mark on a slate each time he did not know the lesson or failed to obey his teacher. At the end of the week this slate was wiped clean, but only after the teacher spanked him, one blow for each mark. The student who performed the poorest had to wear a donkey mask from noon to the end of the day, the other students addressing him as a donkey.

University education and monastery

Martin entered the University of Erfurt when just seventeen years old. The curriculum was the *trivium* which included: 1) grammar (study of classical texts) 2) rhetoric (public speaking) 3) dialectic (logic). Luther became so adept at logic that he was nick-named "the Philosopher".

Four years later, in 1505, Luther entered law school. For a graduation gift his father gave him a copy of *Corpus Juris Civilis*, the main textbook of law at the time – an expensive gift! His parents expected him to earn a law degree so he would qualify for a good position. He could then marry into a rich family, and support them in their old age.

But God was about to change their plans with His plan. Six months later Luther went home for a visit. Walking on the road to Stotternheim, he encountered an awesome thunderstorm. Thrown to ground by the force of the storm, Luther cried, *St. Ann, help me! I will become a monk*. He called upon Saint Ann for she was the patron saint of miners, his father's occupation. After returning to law school he threw a party for his friends. He then announced that they would never see him again, and gave away his possessions, including the legal text book from his father. Not long after, Luther knocked on the foreboding doors of the Black Cloister, the home of the Observant Augustinian monks in Erfurt. We should ask why Martin Luther made such a drastic change, apparently so suddenly.

Luther was a deeply religious person; and from youth on, the question often arose in his heart, *Oh, when for once shall I become holy and do enough in order to receive the grace of God?* He sat under the penitential preaching of his day which was a continual preaching of hell and damnation. Penitential preaching placed a heavy burden of guilt on the hearer from the curse of the law, but never lifted this burden with the grace of the gospel. This abuse of preaching goes a long way to explain why Martin Luther later almost separated the law from the gospel. The church taught that the wrath of God can only be propitiated by man's good works, by holy living. His picture of God was that of an angry judge, like the picture he saw every Sunday as a boy in the stained glass window of the church of Erfurt. Here Christ was painted as in John's vision in Revelation, with a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. He understood nothing of the grace and mercy of God for sinners.

The monastery offered peace for his tortured spirit. Even the vow to become a monk was comforting, for it was meritorious. By it one brought the highest offering to God. Just as baptism symbolises a rebirth, so becoming a monk meant being born again to live a holy life before God.

If a monk did the very best he could do, then God would give him His grace as a reward. The thunderstorm only confirmed a decision which had been percolating long before in Luther's tortured mind.

The monk

Within the walls of the Black Cloister on the picturesque banks of the Gera River, Luther sought peace for his troubled heart. If salvation could be found in this way, Luther was determined to find it. He was one of the monks who sought to take heaven by storm. He often fasted, prayed, and slept without blankets. Sometimes when he was satisfied with himself, doubts would arise:

Have you fasted enough? Are you poor enough? Of his life in the monastery Luther said:

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.²

In the year 1510 Luther was ordered to go to Rome to settle a dispute which arose in the Augustinian order. He was excited to go, for now he had a great once-in-a-life-time opportunity to earn merit for himself and his family. We must understand the Roman Catholic system of merit and indulgences. In the Catholic system some holy men and Christ died in the black. This meant that they were better than they needed to be for their salvation. Of course, the average person died in the red! The Catholic Church taught that the Pope had the power to transfer some of that surplus merit to the average person's account. This transfer of merit was called an *indulgence*. Such a transfer was given when the receptor performed certain good works or paid a sum of cash. No one questioned whether the pope could transfer credit to remit penalties for sin on earth. For example: a pilgrim who prayed before Elector Frederick the Wise's famous relic collection in Wittenberg would have 2,112,151 years and 205 days less purgatory to suffer.³ The big question of the day was whether or not the Pope could mitigate the pangs of purgatory for those who had already died. So Luther was busy in Rome, a treasure house of relics. While he visited all the important relics, he also saw the awful corruption of the Church. The Italian priests could say six masses when he was

still on the first. Then they would scold him with “*Passa, Passa*”; get a move on! They mocked the sacrament: *Bread thou art and bread thou wilt remain*. When climbing the stairs to Pilate’s palace doubt suddenly flooded his mind: *Who knows whether it is so?* A picture in the *National Geographic* shows the intense emotion on the faces of those who are still climbing these stairs today.

Nevertheless, at this time Luther remained still a devout son of the church. He said, “*I was so drunk, yes, submerged in the pope’s dogmas that I would have been ready to murder all ... who would take but a syllable from obedience to the pope*”.⁴

2. Struck by the Light

The Professor

After his return, Luther was transferred from Erfurt to a monastery in Wittenberg. Here, by the providence of God, Luther’s break-through came. It all had to do with the sacrament of penance. One had to confess all his sins to a confessor, who would then grant him absolution. This meant that the confessor would declare his sins forgiven. Luther confessed daily, sometimes for hours at a time. His confessor grew weary, and finally told him to commit a serious sin worth confessing. Luther’s problem was that he could not remember all of his sins.

He realised that he did not even know all of his sins. He was like the Psalmist who pleaded:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23-24

Luther discussed his problems and concerns with Johann Von Staupitz, vicar of the Augustinian order and his confessor. Like all effective ministers, Von Staupitz, himself, was aware of the struggles of the soul. He thought that Luther was dwelling on himself too much, so he urged him to seek forgiveness in the blood of Christ. But this was the problem for, to Luther, Christ was the terrifying judge! Then Von Staupitz took the most unusual step. He told Luther that, being the learned doctor he was, he should begin preaching; and that he should assume the chair of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Luther balked; he told Von Staupitz that this amount of work would kill him. “*That’s all right,*” Von Staupitz replied, “*God has plenty of work for clever men to do in heaven*”.

The Gospel

Luther began to lecture to university students on the Scriptures, beginning with the Psalms in 1513. In Psalm 22, he was struck by the words, “*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*” What could this mean? Christ was forsaken by God, Christ suffered torment, but why should Christ have suffered such torments? Luther could understand why he should suffer as cast off from God, being the weak, sinful and undeserving man he was. But Christ was divine, pure, entirely without sin! The only answer was that Christ suffered in his place. Luther was discovering the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.

Luther lectured in Romans from 1515 to 1516. Very soon came to these words in the first chapter:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

Romans 1:16-17

He left the large room where the monks socialised and went up into his study in the monastery tower to ponder the meaning of these words. He puzzled over the meaning of the phrase *the righteousness of God*. What did *righteousness* mean? To him it meant the *justice* of God as an

attribute of God. He prayed, and pondered as to how the justice of God was revealed in the gospel. He read and studied further and came to: The righteous man (*just* in many translations, but it is the same word as righteous, *dikaios*) shall live by faith (Rom.1:17b). Luther's scholarly eye saw that this was the same Greek word used in verse 17a! Then he began to see the true meaning of *the righteousness of God*. Formerly he understood righteousness of God to be an active, punishing righteousness, which demands that man keep the whole law of God. He was looking at righteousness as the divine attribute of perfect justice which is *in* God. Now he understood that the righteousness was called *of* God, for it came *from* God. This way of righteousness was demonstrated through Christ's work on the cross. If a sinner places his faith in Jesus Christ, he is justified; he appears before God just as if he never sinned. Luther understood that the just shall live by faith means not by their own works of righteousness. This faith brings one to Christ who is perfectly righteous and who justifies the sinner.

Born again

This understanding was Luther's breakthrough! Listen to how Luther describes his conversion:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore 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 his 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 to me a gate to heaven.⁵

We must realise that the full doctrine of justification by faith was not worked out immediately in Luther's understanding. Like most of us, Luther's knowledge grew gradually over the course of many years. Luther expresses the doctrine of justification by faith most clearly in his commentary on Galatians. He began lecturing on Galatians in 1516, but his commentary on Galatians was not published until 1535. This doctrine of justification by faith alone is the heart of the Reformation. Any compromise with Rome on this doctrine compromises the heart of the gospel.

3. Obedient to the Light

Ninety-Five Theses

In 1517 a Dominican monk named Tetzel tried to enter Frederik III's territory selling indulgences. Luther did not object to indulgences, but he objected to these indulgences because they promised to alleviate the suffering of loved ones already in purgatory. A spoof on indulgences went as follows:

As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.

The pressing issue was that money was needed for the construction of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Tetzel preached three highly emotive sermons; first he preached on hell; then on the pains of purgatory (He urged parents to listen to the cries of their little ones who had died.); then he preached on the comfort of heaven. Wouldn't it be worth paying few hundred dollars to give them this comfort now?⁶

To protest at these indulgences, Luther wrote ninety-five theses. On October 31, 1517, in the university fashion of the day, he nailed them to the church door of Wittenberg. Nailing ideas to the

church door was like posting an internet blog today. This meant Luther wanted to debate this issue. When his theses were soon published they caused a sensation throughout Germany. They attacked the authority of the Church of Rome, and therefore the authority of the Pope himself. All of this furor would have died down quickly, had the Pope reformed these greedy indulgences. Instead, the pope censured Luther's works and summoned him to defend his ideas before the authority of the Church.

Here I stand

In 1519 Luther was challenged to a debate with a great Roman Catholic defender, John Eck. Eck had a large, booming voice, and a mind like an iron trap. Luther had met more than his match. At this debate Luther stated that popes and councils had erred throughout the centuries. He rested his case on the final authority of Scripture. Eck accused him of harboring the same errors as John Hus, who was burned at the stake in Bohemia a century before.

It became increasingly clear that Luther's views were a serious threat to the authority of the Church in Rome. The Pope ordered that a papal bull be written against Luther condemning him. The bull was called *Exsurge Domini*, the full English title being, *Rise Up, O Lord, A Wild Boar Has Invaded Your Vineyard*. When Luther received his copy of the bull, he burned it publically. He then appealed to the Emperor for protection. In 1521 the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, called the Diet of Worms; which was an official meeting of the Holy Roman Empire.

We must realise that Luther was summoned to stand before the most powerful person in the world: Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. A painting shows us an overwhelming scene – Luther is a sweating monk before the great ones. At this meeting, John Eck pointed to a pile of books on a table: *Do you admit that you have written these books? And do you defend them all, or are you ready to recant what you have said in them?* Luther answered: *Yes, the books are mine; I deny none of them. But the second question I can't answer at this time. It has to do with faith and the salvation of souls and the Word of God. Therefore I humbly beg Your Imperial Majesty to give me time to think, so that I may answer without violence to the Word of God, or danger to my soul.* He was granted 24 hours to think this serious matter over.

The next day before the great of the world and the church he stood and stated in boldest terms:

*Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning – and my conscience is captive to the Word of God – then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.*⁷

Frederick ordered that Luther be seized on his way home, in order to protect him. He was captured and went into hiding in the Wartburg castle. Here he disguised himself, becoming Duke George. At the castle of Wartburg, he worked furiously, writing volumes and even finding time to translate the New Testament into German. This translation enabled the common man to read the Bible, a very important impetus for the Reformation.

4. Dispersing the Light

Reformer in the Church

Soon much of Germany was experiencing reformation and turmoil. Images were destroyed without any discretion, many monks and nuns married, and many excesses appeared. The Zwickau prophets taught that, since they had the Spirit, they did not need the Bible at all. Luther corrected such abuses by preaching and training preachers. He finished translating the Old Testament into contemporary German. Sometimes Luther and his helpers would spend two, three, or even four weeks to find the right way to translate a single word. While working on the Book of Job they once used four days to finish three lines. Luther said this about the Old Testament prophets: *We are now sweating over the prophets. Oh, what a big job to force the Hebrew writers against their will to speak German! They do not want to give up their Hebrew and speak in everyday German. It's just*

*like trying to force a nightingale to give up her beautiful song and imitate the cuckoo's monotone.*⁸ Soon the Bible was found in most homes in Germany, and many learned to read and to love the Word of truth.

Reformer in the home

Luther gives us a rich, refreshing view of the Christian's calling in all of life, especially in marriage and domestic life. He believed that it was far better for a priest to marry: Leaving a housekeeper and man alone is *like bringing fire and straw together, and trying to forbid blaze or smoke.*⁹ At the age of 42 he married 24-year-old Catharine Van Bora, a former nun who had been smuggled out of a nunnery in an empty pickled herring barrel. He called marriage the *school of character*, because no other institution shapes the characters of those who enter it so much.

Martin and Catharine had six children, but experienced the sadness of losing two daughters. Elizabeth died before she reached her first birthday.

He said, *My little Elizabeth is dead ... it is strange how sick at heart this has left me, so much do I grieve for her. I would never have believed that a father's heart could be so tender for his child. Elizabeth said good-bye to us in order to go with Christ through death unto life.*

Fourteen years later Magdalena became very sick. Shortly before she died, Luther stood at her bedside, fighting back the tears. *Magdalena, he asked, his voice quivering, "would you like to stay here with your father, or would you willingly go to your Father in heaven?" Magdalena looked up at him, trying hard to smile. Finally she answered, "Dear father, I'll do whatever God wills."* Later Luther wrote: *My dearest Magdalena has been reborn into Christ's eternal kingdom. Yet, though my wife and I ought only to rejoice and be thankful at such a happy journey and blessed end, we cannot. So strong is our love that we must sob and groan in heart under the power of killing grief.*¹⁰ Martin and Catharine made home life together a great joy. They practiced hospitality generously – he always giving everything away – she always struggling to balance the budget!

Reformer in society

Luther was convinced that the Reformation could succeed only if there were strong Christian schools to train children to be God-fearing citizens of both church and state. Few in those days went to any school, so Luther urged the princes to establish schools in their towns.

Not everyone agreed with Luther. Parents said that they needed the children at home to help out and that they were capable of teaching them all they needed to know. Luther's response was that too many parents fail to teach their children, because parents don't want to be bothered, don't know how, or don't have the time. He observed that most children were idle and wasted hours at games.¹¹

Luther's greatest failure was to keep balance in the peasant revolt. They read his *Freedom of The Christian Man* and received fuel from his ideas. But Luther failed to give them any support and urged the electors to crush the peasants. Luther's character flaw of a blind stubbornness was most black during this sad time. Sadly, his strong stubborn nature did much harm to unity of church in later days, particularly over the issue of the Lord's Supper.

Luther: The Christian experience

Throughout his life, Luther experienced recurring anxiety and depression, which contributed to his struggle of faith. He called these trials *anfechtung* (this word expresses more than anxiety – a deep tribulation and struggle of the soul). When he felt overcome by *anfechtung*, Luther found much comfort in the Scriptures. The Psalms and the book of Jonah were especially comforting. He could relate to Jonah, crying out to God in prayer from the belly of the whale. In 1527 Luther wrote "A Mighty Fortress is our God". This hymn was born out of his own struggles and victory. For Luther, solid ground was always found again on the Word of God and in Christ's work. Luther was musical and played the lute for his family. Of music he said, *The devil doesn't stay where there's music! Music is the greatest gift, indeed it is divine. It puts to flight all sad thoughts.*¹²

Luther was a colourful character. When a fellow pastor left for the farm he opined, *What wouldn't I give to look into the eyes of friendly cows, than have to look into the faces of those in my congregation!* Luther was fond of his dog, Tolpel (Blockhead). He describes Tolpel eyeing a piece of meat in his hand, his eyes absolutely riveted on the meat. *Ah, says Luther, if only I could pray the way that dog watches that morsel, all his thoughts concentrated on it.*¹³

Conclusion

Luther died in Eisleben, on February 18, 1546, at 63 years of age. He is buried beneath the pulpit in the Wittenberg Church. How remarkable that through his great flaws and gifts, God used him to shake the church to its very foundations. How do we summarize such a complicated character? Luther found it easier to begin a reformation than to consolidate one.¹⁴ Calvin was the man needed to write a systematic theology and to organise the entire Reformation. Luther was a wild flowing, rushing torrent; Calvin a quiet, gentle river running to the ocean. Melancthon put it this way: *Some have complained that Luther was too severe. I will not deny this. But I will answer in the language of Erasmus: Because the sickness was so great, God gave this age a rough doctor ... If Luther was severe, it was because of his earnestness for the truth, not because he loved strife or harshness.*

Luther was freed because he was captured by the Word of God. May the same be true for all of us.¹⁵

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Notes

¹ Kuyper, *De Kerk Hervorming*, p.36.

² Bainton, Roland, *Here I Stand: A life of Martin Luther*, p.34. I highly recommend this volume as one of the best biographies on Luther. One can find a large hardback version in some used Christian book stores.

³ *National Geographic*, Volume 164. No.4, October 1983, p.442.

⁴ Kittleson, James M, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*, p.60.

⁵ Bainton, pp. 49-50.

⁶ Nohl, *Frederick, Martin Luther, Hero of The Faith*, pp.29-30.

⁷ Kittleson, p.161

⁸ Nohl, p.101

⁹ *National Geographic*, p.444

¹⁰ Nohl, p.115

¹¹ Nohl, p.103

¹² *National Geographic*, p.455

¹³ *National Geographic*, p.455

¹⁴ *National Geographic*, p.450

¹⁵ Nohl, p.149