

## The Eve of the Reformation

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Events from another time and another culture often influence people in interesting ways. We who call ourselves Lutherans look back to what happened in Germany in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as events that shaped the history of the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran Reformation is celebrated on October 31. On that date in 1517 Dr. Martin Luther posted a series of 95 theses, statements for discussion and debate. He nailed them to the door of the Castle Church, where Dr. Luther often preached. He was a professor at a newly established university in Wittenberg, Germany. Dr. Luther was asking for discussion on some abuses that he felt undermined the saving work of Jesus Christ. This call for discussion started far more than just debate. From the events that followed came a church dedicated to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that God himself has solved the problem of human sin, death, and punishment.

Lutherans, however, do not look at the events we shall discuss in these lectures as the beginning of the Lutheran church. Luther never intended to start a church, much less a church named after him. The beginning of the church was that wonderful day 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and gave them power to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Known as the Day of Pentecost, Christians consider it the birthday of the church. Lutherans consider all of church history as part of their history and heritage. For 16<sup>th</sup> century Lutherans, that history and heritage included the development of the whole Christian church through the early days of persecution, through the historical councils, through the split between eastern and western Christianity, through the writings of the church fathers, through the historic patterns of worship, and most important of all through the Holy Scriptures themselves. The Lutheran Church is not a new church. But it is a church committed to the truth of God's grace in sending Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, to the truth of faith as God's gift to people to enable them to have the benefits of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as their own, and to the truth of the Scriptures in testifying to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself first proclaimed and lived this good news. The Apostle Paul wrote about it in his letters in the New Testament, especially in the Epistle or Letter to the Romans. This Gospel of Jesus Christ was what Luther rediscovered in his day first for himself and then for Christians throughout Germany, Europe, and ultimately the world.

As we begin this discussion of the Lutheran Reformation, it will be helpful for us first to spend a little time becoming familiar with life in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and in the

church of Luther's day. This evening we shall look at some of the cultural and political realities of that day. We shall examine what was happening in the western church, including the efforts of some individuals who had attempted reforms in the church prior to Martin Luther. We shall explore the theology of the church of that time to see what people believed and how theology was taught and explained. Events do not happen in isolation. They occur in an historical context or situation. In order to understand the Reformation, we must take a look at how things were at that time.

First, not unlike today, the world was going through an important technological change. We live in a time when the management of information is taking on a dramatic and significant change. It is already hard for many of us to imagine life without computers, modems, instant communications, e-mail. Luther's time had experienced a similar technological revolution. In the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century, the printing press had been invented. Only a few years before Luther, the only way to make a copy of a book or document was for someone to take a pen and ink and to copy a book one word at a time. The printing press changed that. What someone said or wrote could now be mass produced, transported to readers elsewhere, and quickly distributed and discussed. Luther, his supporters, and his enemies certainly made use of the technology of the day. His writings were widely distributed within days of their completion, sometimes as Luther once remarked, almost before the ink was dry or he could revise what he was saying.

Culturally, the 16<sup>th</sup> century was a time of change. For many years Europe had been under what was called the feudal system. In the Middle Ages, the feudal system left power fragmented in small local estates or manors. There was little or no national identity. A small number of people owned and controlled the manors, while the majority of people were agricultural workers. A small minority of people were clergy or members of religious or monastic orders. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this system was no longer intact. New groups of people had developed, starting with merchants, people involved in trade from one area to another. As time went on, cities of trade, banking, and industry developed. Many of these cities were independent and controlled their own territories. Power was becoming regional in nature. Monarchies appeared in England, Spain, and France. In Germany power was still in the hands of the regional princes, but they elected a monarch, the Holy Roman emperor, as he was still called. Intertwined in all of this was the church, whose power was often political as well as spiritual. The details of the political situation are indeed beyond the scope of what we want to go into. The complexities of the political realities were enormous. What is important is that the tensions between the princes of Germany, the emperor whom they elected, and the church of Rome provided a climate in which the Reformation found a way to flourish. The political systems of the Middle Ages had broken down, and the resulting tensions and power struggles created an environment in which the Reformation could flourish and the Reformers could be protected. In fact, as time went on, religion and religious ideas even became part of the conflicts.

The time of the Reformation was a time also of new ideas. The Renaissance had been unfolding for the past two centuries. Local languages had developed. Spanish, French, and Italian developed from Latin, the language of the church. German, English, and the Scandinavian languages developed from the ancient languages of northern Europe. As languages developed, so did national identities. People felt a kinship to their fellow countrymen, their fellow citizens. Rivalries developed with others. Part of the success of the Reformation was due to the differences between the Germans and their neighbors. Growing nationalism was a force that enabled local leaders to give the Reformers some protection and even asylum from the forces that opposed the Reformation.

The Renaissance was also a time in which a new idea called humanism arose. Humanists above all celebrated the abilities, achievements, and potential of people. It was a time in which literature, art, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and science flourished. The glories of ancient Greece and Rome were rediscovered and the emphasis of the ancients on human achievement became influential. This was also the time in which explorations to North America were initiated. Columbus discovered what he called the New World in 1492. People were open to discussing new ideas, to exploring new ways of thinking, and to looking at the realities of the past from a fresh perspective.

The church of the day in the west was the Roman Catholic Church. There was only one church. Over the past 1500 years the church had developed. It was a political as well as a spiritual institution. It was a church in need of change. There had been some attempts at reform in the previous century. Perhaps the most notable were John Wycliffe in England and John Hus in Bohemia.

John Wycliffe was a professor at Oxford University in England. He gained a reputation as a philosopher who challenged the traditional scholastic theology of the time, especially its ability to prove the doctrine of the church from human reason. He had a very high regard for the Holy Scriptures. Wycliffe believed that everyone should be free to read and interpret the Scriptures for himself. He began the work of translating the Bible into English. He was also critical of what he saw were abuses in the church—the merit people attached to pilgrimages or trips to holy sites, the worship of images and the saints, and the ways in which monks and nuns had turned monasticism into a way of salvation. He rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the idea that the bread and the wine of Holy Communion are physically changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Wycliffe died in 1384.

John Hus was a disciple of John Wycliffe. Hus was a member of the faculty of the University of Prague. He was a very good preacher. Hus accepted many of the views of Wycliffe and incorporated them into his own teaching and preaching. He also rejected transubstantiation and believed that people who receive communion should receive both the bread and the wine. He protested the sale of indulgences, which, as we shall describe more fully tomorrow, was a means for people to reduce their obligation to suffer for their sins. He was excommunicated and burned at the stake in 1414. The same council that

condemned Hus also condemned Wycliffe and ordered that Wycliffe's bones be burned for his heresies. It was dangerous to be a reformer.

As we look at the condition of the church around 1500, it was showing signs of weakness in at least three areas. First, the church had not positioned itself to be able to adjust to the changes that were going on in the world around it. Second, moral corruption had become widespread within the church. Third, there was a long struggle between the authority of church councils and the authority of the Pope or the Bishop of Rome. Increased power for the Pope led to abuses and departure from the teachings of Scripture.

First, the church could not adapt to change. Over a thousand year period, the church had developed an outward organization and structure. It could not adjust to the new realities of national monarchies and a new world of trade and commerce. In the old model, the church had vast temporal as well as spiritual power. The church often was the state. The danger was that the spiritual functions of the church and especially of the Pope would be lost in the details of temporal, political administration. The church was not only powerful, but it was wealthy. The wealthier it got, the more resistant to change it became. Anything that happened in the way of reform that would appear to threaten either the power or the wealth of the church was resisted. Not even church councils prevented this concentration of power and wealth in the Pope at Rome.

Second, added to this situation was deep moral corruption. The leadership of the church was so concerned with its material problems that there was little possibility of maintaining the discipline necessary to keep bishops and priests concentrated on their spiritual ministries. Many of the bishops and priests were plainly immoral. They demanded fees for religious services because they were under intense pressure to keep revenue flowing into the church. Except for traveling friars or monks who went about from place to place preaching the Word, seldom were there sermons or proclamations of the Word of God. Because of the perceptions of immorality and greediness on the part of many clergy, there was a popular feeling of resentment against priests, bishops, and the church.

Third, the church abandoned the ancient principle that made the whole church through its councils responsible for the preservation of doctrine and teaching. When doctrine and teaching became the sole responsibility of the Pope at Rome, the church was headed into problems. Doctrine became secondary to the material and monetary interests of the church. It is no wonder that teachings arose whose results benefited the treasuries of the church. The Pope was building the finest church yet in Rome. And he needed money. The doctrines and teachings of the church were distorted to encourage the maximum income from the people. They thought that they were giving their money to buy their souls and the souls of their loved ones out of suffering in a place called purgatory, where they believed they would have to suffer until all the consequences of their sins had been fully paid for. In reality, they were supporting the financial interests of the papacy.

The church of 1500 was in need of Reform. Even many Roman Catholic thinkers of today will admit that had Luther not come along, someone like him would have been necessary. The church was in need of reform.

Let us consider in detail the theology of the day. As we shall discuss more fully tomorrow, Luther decided early in his life to become a monk. It would be good for us to examine what monks and priests were taught about God, about the Scriptures, and about salvation. In order to understand the Reformation, we need to understand the theology of the church.

Officially, scholasticism was still the theology of the day. Its chief spokesman was Thomas Aquinas, a theologian of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Aquinas intertwined Aristotelian philosophy with a statement of the Christian faith in his most famous work, *Summa Theologica*. It is difficult for us today to think in the patterns and categories of someone like Thomas Aquinas. His arguments get very complex. Aquinas certainly recognizes the necessity of God's grace to deal with the human problem of sin. But Aquinas is not willing to admit that man is totally helpless to act. He admits that the good of human nature is diminished by sin, but not eliminated. A natural inclination to virtue remains even in the damned. These few sentences do not do justice to Aquinas' thought and arguments. But they help us understand the theological climate of the day in which people believed that what they did in this life affected where they spent eternity. The theology of the day, at least as popularly taught and believed, did not rule out earning salvation through the good deeds one might do in life. Jesus Christ brought about salvation through his death and resurrection by taking care of the eternal punishments for the sins of people. But most people still believed that they had to take care of the remaining consequences of their sin. They would either have to suffer for it for a long time in purgatory before they were ready to enter heaven or they would have to earn enough merits through their good deeds and their purchase of merits through indulgences to get themselves or their loved ones through purgatory more quickly.

Luther most likely studied a newly emerging tradition and variation of scholasticism called the *via moderna* or the "modern way." It was being taught at Erfurt, where Luther studied. At the heart of the *via moderna* was the idea that God created the world the way it is. God could have created the world any way He wanted to. But he did not. Therefore, the philosophical questions about the nature of God, the will of God, or other issues which theologians of the day liked to address were not all that important.

What was important was God's purposes here and now in the world he did create. God is simply God. This foundation, however, led to another important question. What were God's intentions? What did God plan to do with the human beings he had created? In particular, how could a God who was truly righteous be convinced to be merciful to miserable, weak, and transient human beings who continually violated his laws?

In this viewpoint, God was God, morally right and beyond question. His righteousness flowed from his mighty power. Whatever God is, is good, simply because

God is God. Human beings must abide by whatever God might decree. Righteousness is a quality of God, something that God has simply because He is almighty. On the other hand, just as righteousness was a part of God, sin belonged to human beings. They constantly violated God's laws.

Added to this was the fact that there was another quality to God. Just as he possessed "*iustitia*" or righteousness, so he also possessed "*misericordia*," literally a grieving heart. As a result, there was one practical theological issue that overrode all others. How could this righteous God be begged, convinced, or otherwise decide that He should be merciful to individual sinners? In other words, how could this righteous God who tolerated no violation of the law turn his merciful side to me when I have broken his law? I know that I have not obeyed God's law. What hope is there for me that God might be merciful, kind, loving, and forgiving to me? Then, as now, theologians looked to the Scriptures for answers. The theologians of Luther's day answered this question in at least three ways.

First, an answer is suggested by Jesus' conversation with the lawyer in Matthew 22:37, 39. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . And . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself." What Jesus was telling the lawyer to do sounded simple enough. But the problem for the lawyer and for us all is that no ever does love either God or their neighbor completely and unselfishly. All human love begins with a love of self. Only partially and incompletely do we love God and others. Luther himself experienced the kind of fatherly love that was clouded by ambition. Luther's father wanted Luther to be a lawyer. When Luther decided to become a monk, his father's love changed. Or as someone else once said, give one toy to two children and I'll show you how wars start. Human love is conditioned by self-interest. Human love seeks to possess rather than to give. The greatest of human deeds is sinful, not because it is evil in and of itself, but because the intentions and motives of the doer are impure and selfish. Medieval theologians knew that all human motives were at best mixed. Whatever deeds flowed from these motives could not, therefore, satisfy the demands of a righteous God.

Second, another possible solution was human repentance. Those who recognized the terrible sins in their lives could repent. To be sure, there are both sins of commission and omission. It offends God not only when we do wrong, but when we fail to do what is right. The example of John the Baptizer suggests that God wants human beings to repent. But once again, medieval theologians recognized that people often repented for the wrong reasons. The problem again was the centrality of self. If the alternative to repenting was the threat of eternal fire in hell, punishment forever, then it would be in my interest to repent, whatever that may have meant I was supposed to do. In other words, the motivation for repentance was fear of punishment. This is selfish. It is only done for what would ultimately benefit the individual. The repentance of which John and Jesus both spoke starts with sorrow at having offended God and leads to a genuine desire to make amends for God's sake, not our own. Recognizing this, repentance that arose from a fear of punishment either now or forever is not the repentance that leads to salvation.

Third, there was the answer of faith. Jesus said in Mark 16:16, “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.” Almost everyone in those days was baptized, so that was not the problem. But faith was another issue. Theologians recognized that the kind of faith that was required was the kind of faith the Abraham demonstrated when he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham believed so deeply in God’s promises that he was willing to take the word of the Lord to slay his son, the one through whom the promises were to be fulfilled. Rare is the individual who would go to that degree in trusting the promises of God. Jesus even said that the disciples themselves were “men of little faith.” (Matthew 8:26) In short, medieval theologians recognized that most everyone could only demonstrate a partial and often weak faith, and this faith was not good enough.

The solutions that were offered, in short, did not work. The problem was that human beings could not offer anything of themselves that might please a totally righteous God who demanded absolute obedience. Every good deed that anyone could do fell short. There was always some element of human selfishness involved. The theologians knew human nature very well. At the heart of even the most generous act of giving was some self-interest. And even if there were some truly selfless deeds, could there ever be enough of them to counteract that disobedience. If people were to be judged by weighing their good deeds against their bad ones, the bad ones would always be greater.

Medieval theologians, however, did offer a way out of this dilemma. It is a rather complex argument, but we must understand it if we are to understand what Luther was trying to do in the Reformation. Luther understood this potential way out of the dilemma well, for he tried it for many years. His great insight, however, was that this solution, too, was not workable. Try as people may, there was no solution for the predicament of sin and guilt other than the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

The starting point for the medieval solution to the dilemma lay in the observation that people even in their sin and guilt still have a conscience. There is something in people that leads them to know when they have done wrong. Medieval theologians regarded this as “a leftover spark of the divine.” It was a small remnant of the way human beings were before the fall into sin. They called this by a Greek name, the *synteresis*. They believed that this spark of the divine was also involved in almost all human actions. In spite of human frailty and self-interest, there was a bit of the way God loves in all human deeds of love and kindness. This made the deed good—or at least partially good. People could still love others, even if it was not pure. People could still repent, even if it was only to save themselves from punishment. After all, even that kind of repentance was a beginning. And people could still believe that the teachings of Scripture and the church were true. In short, there was a little spark, a small fire, a little fire of kindling wood that could be fanned, encouraged, enhanced. People could not attain the perfection of God, but at least they could make a start by appealing to this little spark of goodness that people believed still lay within them.

But all theologians were agreed that this little spark was not enough for the Christian to finally achieve salvation. The theologians knew full well that the New Testament and especially Saint Paul insisted that salvation was from grace alone, “lest anyone should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) They recognized that sin still reigned in people’s hearts and lives. No matter how holy, how spiritual, how pious one’s outward life might be, it was not enough without God’s grace. There was no spiritual self-improvement program that would ever impress God.

The church was the link that connected people to the grace of God. The seven sacraments of the medieval church were the means by which people received the grace of God. These sacraments were the means through which the church could dispense the grace of God. Baptism was available to all after birth. Later there was confirmation. For those who chose it there was marriage. And for all there was confession and penance, the Mass, and, at death extreme unction or the last rites. For those who wished to do more, there were holy orders and the life of self-denial. People believed that this grace given them by the church through the sacraments added to their human initiative could complete the partial work of human beings and make these works pleasing to God.

The theology of the day amounted to a contract between God and human beings. God initiated the contract by creating a world that included the church and human beings who strove for self-preservation. Theologians believed that God did this to ensure that his grace would be protected. God located his grace both in the church and in the basic make-up of human beings. But there was an important place for human initiative and for human deeds. Individual human beings had active roles to play in their own salvation. They had to fulfill the human side of the contract. People summarized this teaching in a popular slogan that every university student learned by heart. “God will not refuse grace to those who do what is within them.” Preachers often encouraged people to use the abilities and gifts God had given them. Salvation would follow. Christians could earn salvation simply by doing their best. This belief was widely and firmly held in medieval theology. It made sense. It seemed to fit with the Scriptures. It appealed to human nature as it could be observed.

What the theologians thought, preachers preached. And what preachers preached is what many people did. People acted on their fears of being lost and condemned. Many pursued holiness through the church and through moral self-improvement. In his early days, Luther himself believed this. He summarized the Christian life as consisting of deeds that were “good according to their substance,” but “neither qualitatively nor quantitatively” sufficient for salvation. The grace from the church completed these incomplete deeds. In other words, Luther worked very hard to do good, to deny himself, to secure his own salvation, believing that grace would be added to his efforts. But the reformer could never be sure that he had done enough and was always worried about his eternal salvation. In doing this early in his life, we need to understand that Luther was doing what he was taught to do. He was doing what the church believed and proclaimed. He was no different from any other serious-thinking person who was concerned about how and where he would spend eternity.

There were a few variations on this basic theology. Johannes Tauler was the chief spokesman for a group of German mystics. They stressed the importance of one's personal, interior, private spiritual life. Erasmus, a Christian humanist, stressed the moral aspect of human life. He maintained that a careful reading of pious literature would reform one's heart and generate a love of one's neighbor. But these variations as well as the basic teaching of the church that grace was given through the sacraments and the sacramental system of the church all stressed the importance of people doing their best. All were agreed on how people were saved. In one way or another salvation was achieved when people fanned the spark of goodness that they believed remained in everyone. If people just did their best, God would be gracious. But the human side of the contract was that people had to do their best. And for serious people, defining the best they could do was a constant battle.

For very serious people such as Luther, it left him with terrible uncertainty, fear, and self-doubt. How much was enough? Could I ever do enough? How much self-denial is necessary? Everyone had to work at achieving salvation. And for people like Luther who desperately wanted to be saved, it was constant and never-ending work. Luther himself recognized the futility of this effort. The emphasis was on whether or not he had done enough. He was always worried that Jesus would damn and condemn him for his sin. His constant effort to fulfill his side of the contract caused him to lose sight of Jesus Christ as Savior and comforter and turn Jesus Christ into a jail-keeper and potential executioner of his soul. Luther evaluated those years of his life this way. "If anyone could have gained heaven as monk, I was surely among them."

James Kittelson, evaluating the effect of medieval theology on Luther, states the following:

During these years Luther discovered that true religion was far more than just the proper inclination of the heart and earnest attempts to work out his own salvation. But every time he tried to fan his own spark of goodness, he found that all he was doing was focusing his attention on himself. From his own teachers he knew that to think of himself was to be in his most sinful state. How then could he "do what was within him" without yielding to the basest of motives, the desire to save his own skin? How could he possibly confess every one of his sins when he knew that he did so only for the purpose of currying the favor of a righteous God who would surely condemn him for them? Every act of confession became yet another sin. The sincerity of the confession and of the acts of penance that followed was always in question. And if he himself questioned his motives, how could they not have been more than dubious in the mind of a God who knew all and was always right?

To all outward appearances, Luther was a highly successful monk. He was promoted to positions of responsibility and directed to become a priest, preacher, and theologian. He was a talented man who did everything expected of him and

more. But in the midst of all this success, Luther made the horrifying discovery that the world of late medieval religion—from its theology to its preaching to its monastic life and to the actual practice of ordinary Christians—was not working for him. About to become a professor and a teacher of the church, he had still found no peace.

This evening we have examined the culture of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and the theology of the church at the eve of the Reformation. God always times things in his own special way. Certainly this was true of the Reformation. We have seen how new technology was in place. The printed word could get the message of the Reformation out into the hands of people. The political situation was such that there was in place a rising nationalism in Germany and enough power outside the church to keep the Reformation and the Reformers from being crushed. We have examined the problems in the church of that day: resistance to change and the new realities, moral corruption, and the rise in authority of the Pope and the abuses that result from the concentration of power in the hands of one individual. We have taken a look at the theology of the day. We have noted that it did emphasize the grace of God, but only as it was understood to complete the merit of the good deeds of individuals. We have seen how the church of that day told people to do the best they could and to trust God to save them on that basis. We caught a glimpse of how someone like Dr. Martin Luther could not find peace of heart within that system.

Just in case there is someone here who cannot attend the rest of the lectures, I would be remiss if I didn't at least hint tonight at the solution Dr. Luther found. We shall go into it in depth in the rest of this series. What Dr. Luther discovered as he studied especially St. Paul's letter to the Romans was that Jesus Christ has done for us what we could not do ourselves. Trusting in our own deeds, our own good works, is futile and useless. Jesus came to save the ungodly and the disobedient. He came to save sinners. The good news is that Jesus took all our sins, all our evil deeds, all that we have done wrong, and he paid the penalty of these sins for us. As a result, God the Father forgives us, not because we are sorry, not because we do good, but because Jesus Christ has made things right with God. Into our outstretched hands, God pours out the gift of faith which binds us to Jesus Christ and God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. This realization is the heart of the New Testament proclamation and the discovery that Dr. Martin Luther made for himself. In Jesus Christ he finally found peace. It is this precious Gospel that is the heart of what Lutherans believe, confess, and teach. It is this precious Gospel that is the heart of the Lutheran Reformation. It is this precious Gospel that we shall discuss in various ways in the remaining lectures in this series. For this precious truth that God forgives sinners because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what the Reformation and the Lutheran church is all about.