Modern European History

Unit 3 – Reformation and Exploration

Martin Luther Reading

**Martin Luther as Professor in Wittenberg (1512-17)**

After receiving his doctorate in Theology in 1512, Luther took a position as Theology Professor at the Wittenberg University ‘Leucorea.’ He gave lectures over the Psalms (1514-15), Letter to the Romans (1515-16), Letter to the Galatians (1516-17), and Letter to the Hebrews (1517-18).

This time is characterized by Luther’s grappling with religious understanding. His decisive religious enlightenment is said to have come during his intensive study of the Letter to the Romans during which time he realized that people receive justice through the grace of God, not through good works: *“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” (Romans 1:17)*

Luther himself stated that he came to this decisive realization in the study room of the Wittenberg monastery. When this actually happened is disputed; it is also known as the Tower experience. A circle of theologians began to form around Luther. In 1514 Luther became priest for Wittenberg’s City Church.

**The 95 Theses and their Results (1517-1519)**

From 1514 Luther was not only theology professor at Wittenberg University but also the priest at the City Church in Wittenberg. So he was also responsible for the salvation of his parish. Luther observed that many people in Wittenberg were not coming to him for confession any more. They were going to towns in Brandenburg or Anhalt like Jüterbog or Zerbst to buy Indulgences (primarily the Peter’s Indulgence).

The practice of buying indulgences, which quasi replaced confession and allowed people to buy their salvation, was completely repulsive to Luther. He strongly believed that one lived a life of humility in order to receive God’s grace.

After 1507, trade in Indulgences took a steep climb because both the Papal Court and Bishop Albrecht von Brandenburg Germany’s representative for the sale of indulgence were in great financial trouble.

In addition, the Dominican monk, Johann Tetzel, sold indulgences in the region around Wittenberg in a very ostentatious manner. Many stories started popping up about him such as that Tetzel could redeem the sins of the deceased. Further sayings of Tetzel, such as, “When the money clangs in the box, the souls spring up to heaven”, also brought protests from Luther.

**October 31, 1517, “Nailing the 95 Theses to the Door of the Castle Church”**

Prior to October 31, 1517, Luther had preached against the indulgence trade. After reading an instruction manual for indulgence traders, he wrote a letter to his church superiors hoping to get rid of this abuse. In this letter he included 95 Theses which were to be used as the basis for a discussion on the topic.

That Luther hammered his theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg belongs to the realm of legends.

**Reactions to the 95 Theses**

Luther sent his 95 Theses to a few bishops and some friends; therefore he did not expect or receive a prompt response. By the end of 1517, however, copies of the 95 Theses had been printed in Leipzig, Nuremberg and Basel. Some humanists and princes passionately approved of the theses, but parts of the Roman Church completely rejected them. The most vehement voice against the theses was the Indulgence Priest Tetzel, who supposedly categorized Luther as a follower of the heretic Jan Hus and threatened to have him burned at the stake.

At first the bishops reacted mildly, they informed the Pope of the ‘rebel within the ranks’ and instructed Luther’s direct superior to take a moderate roll in calming him. A few bishops actually welcomed Luther’s ideas for reform.

**Events up to 1519**

Because of increasing pressure, Luther found it necessary to explain and clarify his theses in writing. In 1518, Luther himself said that he only wanted to take care of an abuse (indulgence) and was not striving to unhinge the papacy with his theses.

The avalanche, however, was now unstoppable. The Papal Court reacted drastically to the alleged heretic and in 1518 an inquisition was begun in Rome. This quieted down in 1519 during the search for a successor to the deceased Emperor Maximilian. Once Karl the V was elected as emperor, the fight against Luther and his followers continued.

**Luther Distances Himself from the Papacy**

Because of constant attacks from the Roman Church, Luther was forced to shape his ideology into an autonomous theology. During the years 1520-1521 he worked on the three great works *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, The Babylonian Captivity,* and *The Freedom of the Christian Man*, thereby emotionally cutting himself off from Rome. The inquisition against Luther was taken up again in 1520, partly because of these works. The peak of the inquisition came on June 15, 1520, with the Papal Bull of excommunication in which Luther was ordered to recant his teachings.

**Burning the Papal Bull of Excommunication and Excommunication**

Luther reacted in protest. He burned the Papal Bull along with the book of church law and many other books by his enemies on December 10, 1520 in Wittenberg where the Luther Oak stands today. He is said to have yelled: *“Because you, godless book, have grieved or shamed the holiness of the Father, be saddened and consumed by the eternal flames of Hell.”* This behavior caused a conclusive and irrevocable break with Rome.

On January 3, 1521 the Pope excommunicated Luther. The Emperor, however, felt forced to accept Luther because of the pro-Luther mood in the empire and because of the influence of various princes who were hoping to weaken the Pope’s political influence through Luther. As a result, the rebel was guaranteed safe escort on his trip to the Imperial Diet of Worms.

**Luther at the Imperial Diet of Worms (1521)**

Luther, who through the church’s excommunication was practically declared a heretic, was invited to Worms by the Emperor who had been pressured by a few princes. Both the church and Emperor wanted Luther to recant his teachings while he was there. The princes who supported Luther hoped that through the forthcoming events the political power of Rome over Germany would be weakened. Luther’s powerful sovereign, Elector Friedrich the Wise of Saxon demanded that Luther not be outlawed and imprisoned without a hearing.

**The Trip to Worms**

Luther began his trip to Worms on April 2, 1521. The journey to the Imperial Diet did not embody the repentance the church had hoped for. The journey to Worms was more like a victory march; Luther was welcomed enthusiastically in all of the towns he went through. He preached in Erfurt, Gotha and Eisenach. He arrived in Worms on April 16 and was also cheered and welcomed by the people.

**Luther’s Appearance at the Imperial Diet**

Luther’s appearance at the Imperial Diet was described as objective, clever and well thought out. He had to appear before the Emperor twice; each time he was clearly told to take back his teachings. Luther didn’t see any proof against his theses or views which would move him to recant: *“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”*

***I am Finished!***

After he left the negotiations room, he said, “I am finished.” And he was for the time finished; Luther was dismissed, and not arrested because he had a letter of safe conduct, which guaranteed him 21 days of safe travel through the land. He headed home on April 25.

When Luther and the princes who supported him left Worms, the emperor imposed an Imperial Act: Luther is declared an outlaw (he may be killed by anyone without threat of punishment). On the trip home, Elector Friedrich the Wise allowed Luther to be kidnapped on May 4 (Luther knew about it beforehand). This took place on the one hand to guarantee Luther’s safety and on the other hand to let him disappear for a short while; there were even rumors of Luther’s death. This action also helped the Elector not to endanger himself because he could have been held liable for protecting an outlaw and heretic. Luther was taken to the secluded Wartburg and the Reformation had time to stabilize and strengthen itself.

**Luther as *Junker Jörg* at the Wartburg**

On May 4, 1521 Elector Friedrich the Wise allowed Luther to be brought to the Wartburg near Eisenach. The powerful Elector hoped that taking Luther out of the limelight would weaken the constant attacks against the Reformation.

Luther lived incognito at the Wartburg; he called himself Junker Jörg (Knight George) and “grew his hair and a beard.”

Luther suffered from the exile “in the empire of outlaws” and complained of various physical ailments. In addition the many fights with Satan, recounted both by himself and friends, like the proverbial Throwing of the Inkwell must have been difficult times for him to work through.

Since his childhood Luther was pestered by devils, evil spirits, and demons. He reported about such occurrences during his later life as well, these fears of being attacked increased especially during his time of seclusion at the Wartburg. Luther ascribed his depressions and mood swings to these ‘evil spirits.’

This constant fear of Satan is normal for the late-Middle Ages and rooted in the religious upbringing within his home and at school.

Luther defended himself against this constant hostility through prayer, ‘happy song’ or more rigorously: by throwing his inkwell. Luther, awakened by the devil during the night, supposedly courageously defended himself against Satan by throwing an inkwell at him.

Luther reported that he was often pestered by the devil during his stay at the Wartburg. His statement that he had ‘driven the devil away with ink’ is usually ascribed to his translation of the Bible rather than nightly fights at the Wartburg.

**Translation of the New Testament**

Luther devoted himself to a new task. He translated the New Testament from its original Greek into German within eleven weeks; the work was later edited by Melanchthon and other specialists and printed in 1522. This so-called “September Testament” was tremendously popular in Protestant areas and as a result made a large contribution to the development of a standardized written German-language.

Later, parts of the Old Testament were also translated. In 1534, a complete German language Bible was printed and also had a large circulation.

**Happenings in Wittenberg during Luther’s Absence**

Reformation theories were put into practice in Wittenberg which had become the center of the Reformation. In protest, three priests married in 1521 and the worship service was also altered. Luther watched these changes favorably from a distance, however, he stayed in close contact with his supporters in Wittenberg through letters.

It is important to emphasize the influence of Philipp Melanchthon and his work “Loci communes” (1521) which was the first formulation of Luther’s teachings and was also a foundation for the theological works of the Reformation.

**Luther Returned to Wittenberg and took over the ‘Scepter of the Reformation’**

After the first iconoclastic movement in Wittenberg, Luther returned from exile. He even annulled some of the reformatory changes that he saw as dangerous because they would force people into a new belief which he did not want to do.

Luther returned to Wittenberg on March 6, 1521 and with his ‘fasting sermons’ brought the Reformation movement of which he thought had gotten too radical back to his moderate line.

The outlaw’s return was dangerous, but the reformers achieved partial success as far as Luther’s safety was concerned: the Second Imperial Diet of Nuremberg declared the banishment of Luther as unenforceable. In 1524, however, at the Third Imperial Diet of Nuremberg the banishment was renewed, but the Reformation had rooted itself so deeply by then, that it seemed unlikely that Luther would be arrested. In the years that followed, Luther concentrated on spreading his beliefs through writings and sermons.

In the work *Of the Worldly Authorities, and How Much Obedience One Owes Them,* Luther formulated the basis for his political ethics. Luther’s moderate outlook comes to the foreground once again.

From 1522-1524 Luther’s preaching duties receive priority; he went on preaching trips throughout central Germany and during the fall of 1522 even preached in Erfurt and Weimar. Luther felt it was important to proclaim and illuminate the Gospel to the people. With his writings *On the Order of Worship* and *Formula missae* Luther carried out his reforms in the worship service.

A new order of social service was achieved with the use of a community moneybox: the social and educational responsibilities of the community were taken over by the income from the old church.

The reform of the school system was one of the most important of Luther’s duties. Some of the professors and students with their interpretations of Luther’s teachings had and almost shut down schools completely. The Reformation, however, needed well-educated pastors, teachers and civil servants. In his work “To the Councilmen of all Cities within German Territories; Christian Schools Ought to be Kept Up” Luther stated that authorities are obligated to guarantee a good education for the youth.

**Luther and the Peasants War**

Once again the Reformation found new enemies, this time radicals within its own ranks, called Swarmers and Mobbing Spirits by Luther.

Thomas Münzer, priest and former follower of Luther became a leader of peasant uprisings in Central Germany in 1525 which had already flared up in southwest Germany in 1524. The peasants, who called on the power of Luther’s teachings, demanded more just (economical) conditions, even if that meant the downfall of the authorities.

In his sermons, which he also held in the areas of unrest, Luther stood firm against using force; he only received refusals from the peasants who had hoped for his support. Luther nevertheless encouraged them to free themselves from the spiritual despotism of the authorities not from their economic or political influence.

From these experiences came the desolate work *“Against the Murderous and Thieving Hordes of Peasants”*, which is still a controversial work. The peasants were defeated on May 15 at the battle of Frankenhausen.

**Luther’s Role in Religious Discussions and his Relationship to Reformers in Other Movements.**

Luther’s moderate approach, his attitude towards the insurgent peasants and his compromises with sovereigns caused him to be accused by all sides. On the other hand, Luther was constantly under pressure to defend the Reformation politically and theologically against the Roman Catholic faction. Many of his ex-supporters did not want to help bear the burden of this thin line Luther was walking.

Already in 1524-26 Luther had fought with the Dutch humanist Erasmus von Rotterdam which caused lots of stress to the reformation and ended in a split among humanists who had previously welcomed Luther’s reforms.

The difference of opinion between Luther and Karlstadt or between Luther and the Swiss reformer Zwingli about the role of communion in the worship service led to the Marburg Religious Discussions of 1529, where only one partial agreement was reached.

Luther and Melanchthon were critically opposed to the Baptist movement; however, when the Baptist’s empire in Münster was overthrown in 1534-1535, the two condemned the treatment of the Baptist.

**Luther’s Last Years of Life (1540-46)**

During his last years of life Luther fought against many physical ailments. The death of his daughter Magdelena, in 1542, was also very difficult for him.

Luther’s relationship to people with different beliefs, especially the Jews, deteriorated drastically during these years. His 1523 work *Jesus was born a Jew* showed a conciliatory attitude; however, in later years the aging reformer sentenced all who did not want to convert to his beliefs. The strongly anti-semetic work *Jews and their Lies* (1543) came out during this period.

Luther continued to lead the Reformation in its fight against its enemies even in the last years of his life. With his 1545 work *Against the Papacy at Rome Founded by the Devil!* he performed his last blow against the Roman Church.

Luther continued his preaching duties despite his various disappointments and ailments. Luther continued to teach at Wittenberg University until the end of his life; his last lecture ended with the words: *“I am weak, I cannot go on.”*

Luther set off on his last trip on January 17, 1546, to his birthplace Eisleben (only in German). Although he was drawn with illness, he went to settle a dispute among the Mansfeld Counts. The negotiations ended successfully.

Luther did not have the energy to return to Wittenberg. He died on February 18, 1546 in Eisleben. On his deathbed, he prayed, “Into your hands, I command my spirit. You have saved me, Father, you faithful God.”

After the coffin was displayed for two days in Eisleben, Luther’s body was transported through Halle and Bitterfeld back to Wittenberg.

On February 22 Luther was laid to rest in the Castle Church in Wittenberg; Johannes Bugenhagen held the funeral oration.