

Sunday, May 8, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 32 Luther's German Bible and the Early Swiss Reformation

Luther's German Bible

- “In 1520, Luther took the decisive step that would lead to the fledgling Reformation breaking free from the limited confines of academia and becoming a popular movement. He began writing works in German, rather than the more scholarly Latin.” (McGrath, 50)
- “Luther would continue to use Latin when it suited him; after all, he wanted his ideas to travel throughout Europe, and Latin was the cosmopolitan language of his day. Yet Latin was a language of exclusion, which ensured that common people could not share in the political and religious discussion of the elite. Luther chose the most accessible and inclusive language of the region to reinforce his message of reform.” (McGrath, 50)
- The publication of *The Appeal to the German Nobility* in 1520 stated that the laity should have the right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Making the Bible available in the German language thus became a priority. Luther argued that the medieval church had built walls around the Bible, in an attempt to exclude ordinary Christians from reading and interpreting it. (McGrath, 50-52)
- During his ten-month confinement at Wartburg, Martin Luther, with pen in hand, translated the New Testament into the German language of the common people from Erasmus' 1519 Edition of the Greek New Testament. (Brake, 83, 235)
- After being reviewed by his associate Melancthon, Luther published his German Bible in September 1522. As if carried by the wings of the wind, it spread from one end of Germany to the other, and to many other countries. (Miller, 748)
- “Even the papal historian, Maimbourg, confesses that “Luther's translation was remarkably elegant, and in general so much approved, that it was read by almost everybody throughout Germany.” (Miller, 748)
- “It was a national book. It was the book of the people—the book of God. This work served more than all Luther's writings to the spread and consolidation of the reformed doctrines. The Reformation was not placed on its own proper foundation—the word of God which lives and abideth for ever.” (Miller, 748)
- “The following statistics show the wonderful success of the work: “A second edition appeared in the month of December and by 1523 seventeen editions had been printed at Wittenburg, thirteen in Augsburg, and twelve at Basel, one at Erfurt, one at Grimma, one at Leipsic, and thirteen at Strasburg.” (Miller, 748)
- “Meanwhile Luther proceeded in the accomplishment of his great work—the translation of the Old Testament. With the assistance of Melancthon and other friends, the work was published in parts as they were finished, and wholly completed in the year 1530,” (Miller, 748)

- Luther's literal word for word translation of Erasmus's Greek New Testament is the first complete Bible translation from the original languages into a modern vernacular language of Europe. (Ruckman, 470)
- Luther's German Bible served as the source for the following vernacular translations:
 - 1523—Dutch New Testament
 - 1524—Danish New Testament
 - ???—Swedish New Testament
 - 1540—Icelandic New Testament
 - 1541—Hungarian New Testament
 - 1562—Croatian New Testament
 - 1584—Hebrew New Testament used for missionary work amongst the Jews of Slovenia (Ruckman, 470)

The Paradox of Luther

- Luther can not be considered a model of Christian decorum. Rather, he was a blunt and sometimes crude writer who was almost as likely to embarrass his supporters as to edify them. (Noll, 164)
- After some of the first Protestant reforms were instituted, a great falling away took place in the school and universities of Germany as parents concluded that weaknesses in the Catholic Church automatically spilled into the educational systems historically linked to the church. . . Parents who did not see to their children's education were "shameful, despicable, damnable parents who are no parents at all but despicable hogs and venomous east, devouring their own young," according to Luther. (Noll, 164)
- "Neither, at a more serious level, is it possible to remember Luther as a well-balanced, healthy-minded personality. Luther never enjoyed the serenity, the holy demeanor, or the victorious Christian life that many other worthies in the history of the church exemplified. He was, by contrast constantly beset by internal struggles, doubts, and depressions. In his rapid shifts of mood he could be nearly manic." (Noll, 165)
- "Most seriously, Luther was also manifestly a sinner, especially by the standards he himself proclaimed from the Scriptures. With his open personality, moreover, Luther's marks of spiritual disobedience were all too obviously on display. Of special damage in the history of the West were Luther's harsh denunciations of the Jews in 1543, just three years before his death." (Noll, 165)
- "In extreme language Luther called upon the rulers of Germany to drive the Jews out of their lands, take most of their wealth, and forbid their rabbis to teach." (Noll, 165)
- "In short, what made Luther's teaching an important turning point were not his impeccable spiritual credentials. To be sure, he could be genuinely compassionate, deeply loving, and unexpectedly humble, and he had many extraordinary gifts. But it was much more the vision of God that gripped Luther, and which he then communicated through sermons, tracts, and treatises, that made a mark on the history of Christianity. That vision of God, which shattered many of the religious conventions of Luther's day,

first broke through to the depths of his own being and then forced the West as a whole to pay attention.” (Noll, 166)

- In contrasting Luther with Melanchthon his most trusted and influential associate, Schaff states that Luther was a man of war while Melanchthon was a man of peace. Luther’s writings smell of powder; “his words are battles,” and he “overwhelms his opponents with a roaring cannonade of argument, eloquence, passion, and abuse.” (Schaff, 194)
- There is little connection that can be made between Luther and Calvin in a personal and practical sense. Ruckman reports that Luther read probably two of Calvin’s works (*Reply to Sadoleto* and *Treatise on the Lord Supper*) in his lifetime. Although Melanchthon’s *Loci Theologici* preceded Calvin’s *Institutes*, Calvin is called the “leader and standard-bearer of theology,” for the Reformation. Luther’s theology, from a scholastic standpoint, was unsystematized, if we are to go by the standard judgment of the average historian. Martin Luther said that he was drawn to Melanchthon as a fellow reformer because he knew that he himself was incapable of systematizing anything. (Ruckman, 472-473)
- Broadbent is very critical of the structure of the Lutheran Church. “Instead however, of continuing in the way of the Word, Luther then built up a church, in which some abuses were reformed, but which in many respects was a reproduction of the old system. Multitudes who looked to him for guidance accepted that form in which he molded the Lutheran Church. Many, seeing that he did not continue in the way of return to the Scriptures which they had hoped for, remained where they were, in the Roman Catholic Church, and the hopes awakened among the brethren gradually faded away as they saw themselves placed between two ecclesiastical systems, each of which was ready to enforce conformity in matters of conscience—by the sword.” (Broadbent, 165)
- “Luther had seen the divine pattern for the churches, and it was not without an inward struggle that he had abandoned the New Testament teaching of independent assemblies of real believers, in favor of the National or State Church system which outward circumstances pressed upon him.” (Broadbent, 165)
- “Moreover, the powers arrogated to a priesthood alone competent to perform these rites (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) bring the nation under a domination in matters of faith and conscience, which, when working in unison with the State, or civil government, make free churches impossible, and religion a matter of nationality.” (Broadbent, 165)
- “With unprecedented power and courage, Luther had brought to light the Scripture truths as to the individual salvation of the sinner by faith, but failed when he might have shown the way to a return to Scripture in all things, including its teaching as to the Church. . . . Once the new Church was put under the power of the State it could not be altered, but Luther never pretended that the churches which he had established were ordered after the pattern of the Scriptures. While Melanchthon spoke of Protestant princes as “chief members of the Church,” Luther called them “makeshift Bishops” and frequently expressed his regret for the lost liberty of the Christian man and impendance of the Christian congregations that had one been his aim.” (Broadbent, 165-167)

Zwingli and the Swiss Reformation

- “The movements which produced the Reformed Churches arose almost simultaneously with those which had come through Luther. While they quickly became aware of Luther, they largely went their own way.” (Latourette, 747)
- Born in Switzerland in 1484, Ulrich Zwingli was another catalyst for change. His skill as a preacher led to his appointment as priest at the Great Minster church in Zurich in 1518. (Price and Collins, 136)
- The fact that Zwingli was Swiss cannot be overlooked. “Although nominally a part of the Holy Roman Empire, in practice Switzerland was substantially autonomous. It was divided into several cantons, some of them predominately rural in their Alpine valleys, and some with small cities such as Basel, Zurich, and Bern, which had well-to-do citizenry and where the Renaissance had been welcomed and humanism flourished. . . The independent spirit made revolt from Rome more natural than in some other regions. Here, too, was a trend towards democracy which had an effect upon the thought and organization of the Reformed Churches.” (Latourette, 747)
- “Zwingli was trained in humanism as knew Erasmus. He was concerned that Christianity should return to its roots in the New Testament, and he spoke out against clerical abuses in Zurich, such as the practice of priest taking mistresses.” (Hill, 254)
- “Having studied the New Testament, Zwingli was convinced that justification was by faith alone and that biblical authority superseded human interpretation. His attacks on such Catholic practices as Lenten fast and celibacy of the clergy soon stirred the bishop of Constance to act in 1522 demanding that Zwingli desist from any further attacks on Catholic traditions.” (Price and Collins, 136)
- “Yet the city council in Zurich endorsed Zwingli’s position on the supremacy of the Bible for all civil rule. During the next two years a series of public debates on church authority took place in Zurich. At the first, in 1523, Zwingli presented his *Sixty-seven Articles*, which declared that all veneration of saints, monastic orders, the primacy of the pope, absolution, indulgences, and the merit of good works were all human inventions and had no basis in the Bible.” (Price and Collins, 136)
- Later in 1523, Zwingli called for the destruction of all icons, statues, altars, organs, and church vessels such as chalices, which he had melted down. Even the service of the Mass as abolished being replaced with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper – for Zwingli rejected not only the idea of the Mass being a sacrifice, but even the belief that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. (Hill, 254)
- With the careers of Luther and Zwingli running simultaneously, one Lutheran realized that if Luther and Zwingli united their movements, their chances of survival would increase. So a meeting was arranged between the two men in the Germany city of Marburg in 1529. (Jones, 110)
- Two days of discussion (or 5 depending on the source) failed to produce a unified movement. The chief sticking point between the two men was of the question of how is Christ present in the Lord’s Supper. While both Luther and Zwingli agreed that

- transubstantiation missed the point they could not agree on the Biblical alternative. (Jones, 110)
- “According to Luther, the communion elements never change. Yet, in the bread and cup, Christ’s body is present within the visible elements. Christ’s bodily presence conveys grace to persons who are at peace with God. Nothing less could explain Jesus’ words, “This is my body.” This belief became known as consubstantiation.” (Jones, 110)
 - “Zwingli, on the other hand, taught that Jesus’ words merely meant, “This symbolizes my body.” (Jones, 110)
 - Clearly at an impasse the participants issued the following statement, “We have been unable to agree on the issue as to whether the true vine and blood of Christ are corporally present in the bread and wine. Still each party will prove toward the other its spirit of Christian love, insofar as conscience permits.” (Jones, 110)
 - Luther left the meeting by refusing to shake Zwingli’s hand, a gesture that moved the Swiss reformers to tears and ensured the existence of two separate movements. (Hill, 255)
 - While Zwingli’s position on the Lord’s Supper is sounder than Luther’s, He maintained the Augustinian heresies of infant baptism backed up by a church state. Thus while stating that nothing could not be proved by Scripture should be taught he never relinquished the Rome practice of infant baptism. (Ruckman, 480-481)
 - Zwingli helped to translate the Bible into Swiss and rejected the text of the Vulgate (Alexandria) in favor of the Greek Text of Erasmus. (Ruckman, 480)
 - “Zwingli perished (October 11, 1531) in an inter-cantonal war which arose from the attempt of Zurich to force Protestant preaching upon neighboring Roman Catholic cantons.” (Latourette, 749)
 - “Before death removed Zwingli from the scene, the Reformation was spreading to other Swiss centers and in it the views of Zwingli loomed large. Basel, Bern, and several other cities came over to the movement. At Basel, John Hussgen, Heusgen, or Hausshien, better known as Oecolampadius (1482-1531) was outstanding. Some of the cities of South Germany tended to side with Zwinglian views. They were led to this partly by their affinity with the Swiss and partly by their distrust and fear of the princes who were supporting Luther. Among them Strasburg, on the French side of the Rhine was prominent.” (Latourette, 750)
 - In 1535, the Reformation reached the city of Geneva Switzerland as the mass was suppressed and the monks and nuns were driven out of the city. The Genevan movement towards reform seems to have been as much from political and religious reasons. A commercial center, Geneva was attempting to achieve its independence of both its bishop and the Duke of Savoy. Its adopting of Protestantism aided it in the struggle. (Latourette, 751)
 - At this juncture John Calvin appeared on the scene and became the undisputed leader and Geneva and a figurehead of the entire Reformation.

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