

# HOW IMPORTANT WAS MARTIN LUTHER?

by Allan A. MacRae, Ph.D.

Many people today do not realize anything about how very important in our Christian history Martin Luther is. Among those lives that were greatly influenced by the writings of Martin Luther were John Bunyan, author of Pilgrim's Progress, and other great allegories of the Christian life, and John and Charles Wesley who 200 years after Luther's death vastly influenced thousands for the cause of Christ.

Luther's realization of the crucial problem of sin was central in his development as a great leader. Carl Menninger, once known as the Dean of American psychiatrists, felt constrained to launch a campaign to bring back the concept of the guilt and shame of sin. He believed America's moral slide could not be reversed unless we accept personal responsibility for the evil we do and repent.

As a young student Luther was making progress in the university. It looked as if he had a great future before him. He was beloved of his classmates. His father wanted him to become a great lawyer, and one day to the dismay of his father and his classmates he called his friends together, gave away his books and his musical instruments and said, "I am dying today as far as you are concerned. Tomorrow I enter a monastery to seek forgiveness of my sin." He had come to such a realization of the terrible nature of sin that it overshadowed his desire to be called great.

In the monastery he tried everything thing they told him to do to get forgiveness of sin. He laid on the floor all night weeping

for his sins. He counted his beads over and over. He repeated prayers over and over. Yet he felt worse, not better.

Then Staupitz, the head of the Augustinian order in Germany, visited the monastery and was told how this fine young monk was in such despair, unable to find any hope. He talked to Luther and said, "Brother Martin, do you believe the Apostles' Creed?" "Certainly," replied Luther. "I believe everything the church holds." "Well," said Staupitz, "the Creed says, 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins.' Do you believe that?" "Of course I believe it; it's in the Creed," said Luther. "Then, why don't you take it? It's there. Why don't you believe it?"

Luther felt better for a while, then he felt worse again. He went through several experiences of having this said to him. Then he found a Latin Bible in the library, and he began to read it. He read in Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith," and found the answer to his problem of sin that had plagued him all his life.

Once he had a firm hold on this truth he became an influence on other monks who had the same problem with sin in their lives and he pointed them to Jesus Christ as the Savior. When the Elector of Saxony asked Staupitz to start a university in Wittenberg, Luther became one of the faculty who was particularly beloved for his lectures on the Scriptures.

Staupitz was impressed with Luther's ability to teach and give help to the other monks. One day he said, "Martin, next Sunday I want you to preach in the parish church in Wittenberg." Luther replied, "I could not preach." Staupitz said, "I'm the head of the

Order and that's my directive. You are to preach next Sunday." Luther said, "I could not preach. I'd die if I tried to preach." "Die then," said Staupitz, "but I want you to preach!" So the next Sunday Luther faced the common country people and explained the terrible nature of sin and the wonderful grace of God that makes it possible for Him to righteously forgive sin because of the work of Christ on Calvary's cross." Using illustrations from his peasant background that reached their hearts he soon became one of the most beloved preachers there.

Later when the Reformation began, Luther found the people needed hymns to sing. So he wrote perhaps 100 hymns including "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and the lovely little lullaby "Away in a Manger."

Along with his realization of the awful nature of sin he came to see that God's Word, the Bible, is the sole source of authority in religious matters. When he found that church authorities were taking positions contrary to what Scripture clearly teaches, he strongly took the stand that nothing else can compare in authority with the Bible. The clear teaching of Scripture was sufficient to decide all matters of faith and practice. In the providence of God Luther was enabled to proclaim this truth with an ability that went way beyond previous reformers, and his life was marvelously protected till the movement he began became strong enough not to be overcome by those who had destroyed previous reformers.

Luther realized in 1517 that the church needed to be reformed and thought it could be done from within by pointing out from

Scripture the errors in doctrine it was teaching. He circulated his essays dealing with these errors to friends and professors throughout Germany. They looked at these theses, found them interesting and put them away. Nothing came of it.

Six months later Luther was preaching in his parish, speaking out against abuses that were leading people astray. A Dominican monk named Tetzel was going from town to town selling indulgences to get money to build the great St. Peter's church in Rome. He was as superb orator but did not adhere to the truth. To sell his indulgences he would say, "What value is your money when your eternal life is at stake? Come here and put your money in this box and get one of these indulgences and you are saved for all eternity. Think of your parents who have died and are now in purgatory. But just as fast as your coin drops into this box the spirit of your departed one goes from purgatory to heaven." He said, "These certificates of indulgences, in the Pope's name, will give complete forgiveness of all sins, past, present, and future."

Luther determined something must be done about this wicked practice. He felt that careful discussion by scholars would clarify the matter and put an end to Tetzel's abominable commercial undertaking. Luther said, "If the pope had the power to free people from the results of their sin, why wouldn't he just give it to everybody? Why should he charge money for it?"

Luther wrote 95 Latin theses primarily to combat this abuse of Tetzel and present the principles of salvation by faith, but God used it to start the Reformation in a way he never dreamed of.

Since a great crowd of people would be coming to church at Wittenberg on October 31, All-Saints Day, and many scholars would be among them he followed the customary practice of the time and nailed the theses on the door of the church as an invitation to debate the matter. He thought such discussion would clearly show Tetzel's practice was contrary to the church's teaching and these scholars would denounce it and it would be stopped.

When the people arrived at church that morning and saw the writing in Latin they wanted to know what it said. A man who knew Latin began to translate aloud into German. As he did so, the people asked, "Do you mean these indulgences we bought will not really accomplish anything? Have we been cheated?" "That's what it says," he answered. The people became very excited. Someone carefully translated the Latin into German, took it to the printer and had it printed in both German and Latin. It was printed and distributed, all without Luther's knowledge. Within three weeks copies had been distributed all over Germany. Within six weeks they were in Rome. Within nine weeks they were for sale on the streets of Jerusalem. Luther never dreamed such a thing would happen.

When Pope Leo X came back from a hunt and was walking down the hall, a man came running up to him and said, "Your Holiness, look at this!" The pope asked, "What is it?" The man said, "A paper that a German monk has written." Leo glanced at it and said in surprise, "Say, the German writes pretty good Latin doesn't he?" He handed it back and kept walking. Leo did not have the bad qualities of two of his predecessors. He was a lover of music, a lover of art, a lover

of good banqueting and hunting. He was said to have every quality to be a pope except for one. He had no interest in religion!

But this attitude soon changed when the funds needed to maintain his way of life began to drop off as Germans stopped buying the indulgences. Tetzal had to hide in order to keep from being stoned by people who felt they had been cheated. Leo started procedures to stop Luther's activities. He was ordered to come to Rome to be examined, and if necessary gotten rid of as Wycliffe, Huss and other reformers before him had been dealt with.

At this point the wonderful providence of God showed itself in protecting this man who had these marvelous abilities of presenting the truth. God protected him in a remarkable way through the good offices of Frederick the Wise, the ruler of Saxony, who protected him from those who sought to destroy him.

Finally Luther was made to appear before the emperor, Charles V, to answer to charges of heresy. When Luther came and stood before the assembled dignitaries all his books were laid on a table before him and he was asked, "Did you write these books?" Luther answered, "Yes, I did." They asked him, "Will you recant what is written in these books?" Luther said, "Will you give me a day to consider?" His request being granted, and after spending the night in prayer in the presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords, he feared not to boldly answer those who were mere earthly potentates.

When they asked him again if those were his books and if he was willing to recant the teachings in them, Luther said, "There

are three kinds of statements in those books. Any statements contrary to the Word of God, I gladly recant. Statements dealing with matters not specifically dealt with in Scripture one way or the other, these I gladly withdraw to please the Emperor. However, the statements in my books that are a direct presentation of the teachings of God's Word, it is impossible for me to recant because that would be to turn against my Lord. Those I stand by. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, so help me God."

After this Luther was placed under the ban of the empire and declared to be an outlaw. Anyone had a right to kill him or turn him over to the authorities. Anyone helping him was an outlaw. Again God protected him from those who would have destroyed him. He was hid in Wartberg castle for seven months and then he risked his life to help establish order in Wittenberg when some of those who took his teachings to an extreme were causing havoc.

For one who was so mightily used of God to open up the Bible to the people and let its light shine again after the darkness of the Middle Ages, it is painful to be reminded that Luther was not without his failures and weaknesses. As time went on the terrible strain he went through affected his health. He got irritable and became intolerant of those who differed with him on very minor points. At one time he agreed with the Swiss Reformers on 15½ out of 16 points of doctrine. But because the Swiss did not agree with him on the meaning of the Lord's Supper he said, "You are not of our spirit. I won't shake hands with you." And the Protestant Reformation in Europe was torn in two because of his emphasis on

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secondary matters. He failed by putting too great a stress on a minor point.

[ Equally lamentable was the attitude he later took toward the Jews. From an earlier attitude of sympathy with them because of the way they were unjustly persecuted by their enemies, he turned to take an abusive attitude against them for refusing to accept Jesus as their promised Messiah after he tried to reach them with the gospel. If only he could have seen how his unwarranted language against the Jews would be utilized four centuries later by the Nazis to feed the terrible fires of anti-semitism might he not have shown toward them the compassion of the Apostle Paul? ] God would have us realize that no matter how much a man may accomplish for Christ we never ought to idolize that man but understand that the only perfect one was the Man Christ Jesus.

Nevertheless, Luther was a man greatly used of God to remind people of the terribleness of sin, and to make clear to their minds the Biblical teaching of justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone. He sought to bring people back to absolute loyalty to the Word of God and to a determination to study this Book, which is the only true source of knowledge about God. ■