

### Midterm

There were many factors that contributed to Martin Luther's psychological and spiritual crisis. Luther's childhood experiences and relationship with his father greatly influenced both his later life and his career. Luther's father, Hans Luther, was an extremely demanding and authoritative man who wanted his son to become a jurist, get married, and take care of his parents once they became elderly (Bainton, 17). Despite being greatly devoted to his father, Martin Luther chose to disobey his father's wishes and instead of becoming a jurist, entered the monastery (Bainton, 18). According to the text, once Luther entered the monastery, Hans Luther "Addressed him no longer with the familiar *Du* but with the politer *Ihr*" (Bainton, 17). Luther experienced a great amount of grief and guilt as a result of the parental disapproval of his career choice.

Martin Luther was arguably a very tortured man and suffered throughout his life from severe bouts with depression (Bainton, 20). In fact, Luther was so wrapped up in his sense of sin and unworthiness, that once he became an ordained priest, he was afraid to say mass and felt completely unworthy to do so (Bainton, 30). Regardless of the amount of effort Luther put into following in the ways of the church, he was unable to feel worthy, saved, or justified in the eyes of God (Bainton, 31, 40-41, Craft, 10-11). Luther recognized his unworthiness by stating "I am dust and ashes and full of sin" (Bainton, 31). Luther attempted to ease his suffering by doing works and confessing his sins to the point of excess, but he ultimately began to hate God because of his own seemingly unshakable misery. Luther felt both attracted to and repelled by God and felt that he could only find peace through God; however, Luther was "stupefied" on

how a transgressor could possibly “confront divine Holiness” (Bainton, 31). Luther came up with the word “Anfechtung” to describe all the despair and desperation he was experiencing.

Luther came to believe that God was a malevolent being who tortured human beings. Luther had medieval spirituality which caused him both religious terror as well as uncertainty. According to the text, he “Suffered from the savage’s fear of a malevolent deity, the enemy of men, capricious, easily and unwittingly offended if sacred places be violated or magical formulas mispronounced” (Bainton, 31). To Martin Luther, the image of God was that of an angry, disapproving Father with an oscillation between both wrath and mercy (Bainton, 21). Luther saw God as distant, impersonal, and frightening. Bainton describes a woodcut of Christ on the Day of Judgment which fits perfectly with Martin Luther’s image of God. According to the text, “A lily extends from his right ear, signifying the redeemed, who below are being ushered by angels into paradise. From his left ear protrudes a sword, symbolizing the doom of the damned, whom the devils drag by the hair from the tombs and cast into the flames of hell” (Bainton, 22). It is this very kind of image of God that greatly troubled Martin Luther. In fact, this image of God is what ultimately led him to enter the monastery in hopes he could save his soul from damnation. According to the text, Luther was struck by a bolt of lightning and saw a flash of “God the all-terrible, Christ the inexorable, and all the leering fiends springing from their lurking places in pond and wood that with sardonic cachinnations they might seize his shock of curly hair and bolt him into hell” (Bainton, 25).

Another factor that contributed to Luther’s psychological and spiritual crisis was his trip to Rome in 1510. During the course of his trip, he witnessed both the corruption and impiety of the Italian clergy (Craft, 11). According to the text, “The abysmal ignorance, frivolity, and levity

of the Italian priests stupefied him. They could rattle through six or seven masses while he was saying one” (Bainton, 37). Luther also considered much of the Italian clergy to be “flippantly unbelieving” as they addressed the sacrament (Bainton, 37). Luther’s trip to Rome was both eye-opening and shocking and gave him a negative view of the papacy. He began to feel much more critical of the structure of the Church especially in regards to the Church’s position on salvation (Bainton, 38, Craft, 11).

Luther was able to find his way out of his religious crisis by reading and reflecting on St. Paul’s Romans. Luther began to have a new view on God and came to believe that, “The All Terrible is the All Merciful too. Wrath and love fuse upon the cross. The hideousness of sin cannot be denied or forgotten; but God who desires not that a sinner should die but that he should turn and live, has found the reconciliation in the pangs of bitter death” (Bainton, 47). Luther no longer saw God as the stern Father or Christ as the frightening character on the Day of Judgment, but as a vulnerable, human redeemer who cared for human beings (Bainton, 50). Luther came to grips with the sovereignty of man and concluded that he was not saved by any action or work that he performed, but rather by God’s gift of grace. According to the text, “God does not condition his forgiveness upon the expectation of future fulfillment. And man is not put right with God by any achievement, whether present or foreseen. On man’s side the one requisite is faith, which means that God will keep his promises; and commitment to his will and way. Faith is not an achievement. It is a gift” (Bainton, 49). Luther believed that faith caused one to be free to love God and thus free to do great things and not be paralyzed by self hatred. Luther began to recognize The Holy Spirit as the spirit of understanding which penetrated the mind, so that one may understand God’s plan within the scriptures (Craft, 11). Luther argued

that “Faith not without works” and that good works may be a sign of salvation, but salvation is chosen by God, not by a person’s free will or free choice to do good works (Bainton, 49, Craft 7).

Luther’s new position that faith precedes decision as a free gift from God and saving grace is thus the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross led him to become very critical of both the privileges and actions of the papacy (Bainton, 56-60, Craft, 7, 11). What specifically angered him was the preaching of indulgences for the reconstruction of St. Peter’s in 1517 (Bainton, 56). According to the text, Catholics were encouraged to purchase indulgences as a means to limit their own time spent in purgatory for their sins as well as help limit the amount of time spent in purgatory for their departed loved ones. The saying “As soon as the coin in the copper rings, the soul from purgatory springs” was said by vendors to encourage the sale of indulgences (Bainton, 60). The hawking of indulgences versus practicing the true principles of repentance and forgiveness led Luther to angrily write and nail to the door The Ninety-Five Theses in which he criticized the existence of indulgences saying that they “do not remove guilt” or “effect reconciliation with God” (Bainton, 61). He also criticized the abuse of the papacy for selling indulgences as a means to simply make a profit (Bainton, 61). Although he was very critical of the papacy, Luther initially had no intention of breaking away from the Church.

Many may be quick to label Martin Luther as a neurotic man, but it seems that courageous, stubborn, and passionate are better terms to describe him. Luther was indeed obsessively and compulsively wrapped up in his own sense of sin and unworthiness, but his tenacity, conviction, and even his bad temper made him a very analytical and productive man (Craft, 10).

### **Works Cited**

Bainton, Roland H. Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther. New York: First Meridian Printing, 1977.

Craft, George. Summary 1A. Sacramento, 2011.