

Martin Marty, 'Martin Luther' – A Study and Discussion Guide

1. The Hunger for Certainty, 1483-1519

The world of the Catholic religion, c. 1500. How are people saved – faith and works.

Luther's religious world before 1512. What was his chief fear? Why did he decide to become a priest? Being afraid that he was not saved, what did he do to seek assurance that he was among the elect? Which works?

What were his *Anfechtungen*? What was his image of God? How to placate him? Was he angry with God? Was Luther a neurotic?

How could he have access to God? Any interest in mysticism? Through scripture? Which ones – Paul's 'Romans' and 'Galatians'.

In what way was Luther a wrestler like Jacob?

What were indulgences? How were they abused by hawkers like Tetzl? Luther's 95 Theses 1517. Compare Luther's understanding of repentance (inner) rather than penance (outer).

Luther's "conversion" – his insight about faith as a gift from God rather than earning our way into his favor through works or by keeping the divine law. God (the Father) retains his rather forbidding, distant, and hidden image; Jesus' obedience and submission to his Father reassures him; we should imitate Jesus.

As time passes, his attack on the authority of the pope and the Councils held in the past; holds that the pope and the councils could err. Luther's source of certainty – scripture.

Political situation in Germany prevents the Emperor and the Pope from moving rapidly against him; international rivalries; the Turks, the autonomous princes.

Luther's associates – Melancthon (moderate and at Luther's side until his death) and Karlstadt (radical and often a thorn in Luther's side).

2. Defining the Life of Faith, 1520-1525

Mutual denunciation with Rome – Pope characterizes Luther "the wild boar that threatens to destroy the vineyard"; soon the Pope is the Antichrist.

'Address to the Christian Nobility' – implications of the idea of the priesthood of all believers on the means of salvation and the organization of the church.

'On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church' – denunciation of the Church's domination of the faithful through the sacraments and the priesthood.

'The Freedom of a Christian' – certainty of salvation through the *joyful* exchange with Jesus Christ.

1521 – the dramatic, heroic confrontation with the Emperor at the Diet of Worms –
"I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand."

Wartburg: His famous translation of the Bible (tweaking some phrases).

He continues to struggle against his doubts – *Anfechtungen*.

What are good works and the law of God good for?

The Evangelicals are outflanked by the radicals in several places; they now have to watch out for the Catholics and the evangelical radicals.

Luther's principles of interpreting the Bible: the essence of understanding the Bible is that its purpose is to reveal Jesus Christ; some books are closer to Christ than others; watch out for 'Revelations', 'James', and 'Hebrews'; always rely upon the Holy Spirit to understand Scripture correctly.

Luther the man: good company; intemperate, ill-tempered; alienating polemical style; not methodical thinker.

The state – he always remained dependent upon princes and friendly to them, since it was they who preserved order and might eventually guarantee his church.

The Peasants' Revolt 1524-25 – religion has little to do with it; Luther horrified by disorder, denounces the revolters violently, sides with the authorities.

Living the Faith, 1525-1530

Luther's defense of the body – the legitimacy of physical pleasure against the ascetic tradition of the Church. And his defense of marriage. He marries Katherine von Bora and lives fairly happily with her; she is sometimes his comfort and protection against the devil – "pigtales on the pillow".

Lutheran service consists of the Word – prayer, scripture reading, and preaching; songs are important. He insisted that there be a clergy, although not *a caste* like Catholic priests. As disorders and inconsistencies become more common, he increasingly sidles up to the princes to preserve order.

Luther seems to expect the end of the world to be imminent (makes him think organizing his church is less important?).

Luther placed high importance on education, which was mainly religious. The importance of learning the catechism and teaching the commandments, perhaps in response to the *antinomian* tendencies among some evangelicals (i.e., why law important since we are saved through faith?).

Extensive controversy with famous Catholic humanist scholar Erasmus about free will. Erasmus insists on free will (to choose good or evil, God or mammon); Luther replies that his will is in bondage but that through his faith he has found himself to be free.

Erasmus the humanist insists that God is out in the open, ready to be discovered in part by human intelligence. Luther later says that reason is the devil's whore if humans think that through it we could reach God and understand his plan. He almost gets himself in trouble by insisting that God is hidden and is ungraspable by human effort; this might lead to the conclusion that scripture unreliable?

Luther confutes the Anabaptists, who insist on adult baptism since faith is a precondition of baptism. Luther insists on traditional practice of infant baptism as the way in which God gifts his grace to us.

Colloquy at Marburg 1529 to try to find unity with Swiss reformer Zwingli on the Eucharist. No agreement. Zwingli insists that the Eucharist is a commemorative and symbolic event; whereas Luther says take the word of the Lord literally, 'This is my body'. Jesus is present simultaneously in heaven and bodily in the Eucharist, whereas Zwingli insisted it is blasphemy to hold something so absurd.

4. The Heart Grown Cold, the Faith More Certain, 1530-1546

Luther's last fifteen years as a time of bad health (e.g., debilitating kidney stones) that might have been partly responsible for his inflexibility ("I will not budge an inch.") and ill humor as he awaits the Last Judgment (the end of the world). He railed often against the immorality of the citizens of Wittenberg.

The Lutheran Reformation spreads to northern Germany and into Scandinavia.

The Augsburg Confession chaired by Melancthon excluded the Swiss and defined a Lutheran Church that is definitively broken with the Catholic Church.

He scandalizes many by recommending bigamy to the prince Philip of Hesse.

His aggressive and scurrilous attacks on the pope; and on the Turks, who are menacing Central Europe in the 16th century.

Particularly vicious attacks on the Jews; focuses on the rabbis, who keep the Jews from accepting Christianity by their misinterpretation of the Bible – they refuse to see it (Hebrew and Christian testaments) as Christ-centered – revealing God’s plan.

Luther officially still hopes in the 1540s for a general council that would lead to Christian unity; but he rejected significant concessions and didn’t really believe in the council. Meanwhile the papacy firms up the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent.

European politics often favored the survival of the Lutherans: e.g., the Turkish threat to Europe often distracted Catholic rulers from their plans to crack down on the Protestants.

Until the end he is still afflicted with his *Anfechtungen*. But he seems to have died confident and comforted.

Afterword

His often subservient attitude toward the political powers; he helped perhaps instill in Germans a passivity and subservience to political authority that would be fateful in later centuries.