

Martin Luther: Reluctant Revolutionary

A PBS documentary titled *Martin Luther: Reluctant Revolutionary* came out in 2010. The sub-title is very accurate. Luther was a reluctant revolutionary. No one should think that Luther woke up one morning and decided, "I'm going to split the Church and start a new one of my own." Nor should anyone imagine that Luther nursed resentments for years and years against the Church that finally broke out as his religious revolution. If you read a biography of Luther you will learn that he was a faithful son of the Church. Luther commented:

“Be mindful of the fact that I was once a monk and a most enthusiastic papist when I began that cause. I was so drunk, yes, submerged in the pope’s dogmas, that I would have been ready to murder all, if I could have, or to co-operate willingly with the murderers of all who would take but a syllable from obedience to the pope. So great a Saul was I, as are many to this day [Luther was writing in 1545]. . . . I pursued the matter with all seriousness, as one, who in dread of the last day, nevertheless from the depth of my heart wanted to be saved.”

Luther was not the type of person who fell asleep in the back of the church or skipped chapel as a student. He was enthusiastic and intensely loyal. In this background, Luther was not unique among future Reformers. Almost without

exception the Reformers came from the ranks of the best and brightest in the late medieval Church.

When the indulgence controversy broke out in 1517 and the Reformation began, Luther was a seemingly average professor of the Bible at a new, small, and undistinguished university. For a number of years Luther had been explicating various books in the Bible. His focus was on *Psalms*, *Galatians*, and *Romans*. As he did so, his studies were moving him toward the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. These conclusions did not mean he was out of step with church doctrine. Many aspects of late medieval theology were not defined precisely and were the subject of debate. In addition, Luther's ideas were consistent with those of the Church Father, St. Augustine of Hippo. The idea of salvation by faith alone conflicted with the doctrine of indulgences, but it was the abuse of indulgences that first aroused Luther's ire.

To Luther, his pointing out that indulgences were being abused was an act of loyalty to the Church. The problem was that many highly placed people in the Church greatly benefited from the abuse of indulgences. They did not take kindly to anyone who threatened the spiritual drug trade of abused indulgence sales.

Initially Luther was humble and reluctant in his criticisms. His letters to church authorities pointed out the problem of indulgence abuse but did so in the

most humble and polite terms. The problem is that the church authorities' reception of his concerns was hostile and stand-offish. Luther was undeterred and as he became frustrated by the intransigence of the Church, his tone became increasingly critical and defiant. He was convinced by his study of the Scriptures that his ideas were true to the Gospel. That assurance gave him the courage and steadfastness to continue to assert that salvation by faith alone was the central focus of the Gospel. The composition of the Ninety-Five Theses was a public challenge to the Church. His persistence and fortitude put him on a path that step by step lead to his appearance before the Emperor Charles V.

It is important to remember what was at stake for Luther. For one thing, the possibility of being burned at the stake was a strong one. The imminent possibility that he might be captured and executed as a heretic caused Luther to avoid marriage even as many of his fellow reformers were getting married. Furthermore, if he was wrong, he faced a worse fate than death, he faced eternal damnation. There were also the more mundane but important fears such as alienation from his parents (remember, Luther and his father had a somewhat conflicted relationship) and his friends, mentors, and protectors such as George Spalatin, Johann von Staupitz, and the Elector Frederick the Wise. Luther had very good reasons to be cautious and even reluctant about becoming a revolutionary.

Nobody should assume that Luther was motivated by a craving for celebrity. He thought his new movement of religious reform should be called Evangelical. The fact that his followers came to be called Lutheran was something he opposed. In fact, the name “Lutheran” actually had its origin as a term of derision by opponents of reform just as Christian was a term of derision coined by pagans.

Luther wanted the pure Gospel to prevail, not the works of humans, including his own. As Luther put it in the preface to the 1539 Wittenberg Edition of his German writings:

“I would have been quite content to see my books, one and all, remain in obscurity and go by the board. . . . It was also our intention and hope, when we ourselves began to translate the Bible into German, that there should be less writing, and instead more studying and reading of the Scripture. For all other writing is to lead the way into and point toward the Scriptures. . . in order that each person may drink of the fresh spring himself, as all those fathers who want to accomplish something good had to do. . . . My consolation is that, in time, my books will be forgotten in the dust. . . .”

For Luther, the Gospel was all.