

Luther and the Protestant Reformation

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I. What is the “Protestant Reformation”?

II. The Causes of the Protestant Reformation

1. The moral interpretation
2. The doctrinal interpretation
3. The sociological (social-political-economic) interpretations
4. The central religious factor

III. The Story of Martin Luther (1483-1546)

1. Spiritual struggle of the young monk: seeking salvation and acceptance by God.
2. The “Tower Experience” or the discovery of the true meaning of God’s righteousness. [See the appended TEXT] “The righteous shall live by faith.”(Rom 1:17); “Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law” (Rom 3:21). God’s righteousness or justice could mean:
 - i. that quality in God by which God is righteous and just.OR,
 - ii. that quality in God by which God makes a person righteous – justifies - i.e., an active righteousness in God for the sake of sinful human beings. Justification by grace through faith has to do with the second meaning (ii).
3. The renewed meaning of faith as trust, not mere intellectual assent.
4. The “95 Theses” and the conflict over the sale of “Indulgences” (the remission by the church of the temporal penalty due to forgiven sin, in virtue of the merits of Christ in his death for human sin)
5. The question of ultimate authority in the life of a Christian: Pope or Holy Scriptures (Bible)?
6. Final break with Rome: Luther’s excommunication (1521)

IV. Appeal for Reform to the Emperor and the Secular Authorities

1. 1520: *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*
2. The Structure of the Writing: Introduction – The Three Walls - Abuses to Be Discussed in Councils – Proposals for Reform
3. The Three Walls:
 - a. The first wall: the temporal authority (political powers) has no jurisdiction over the spiritual (i.e., the clergy) and that the spiritual class or estate is higher than that the temporal.
 - b. The second wall: the claim of the Roman church officials that the Pope of Rome is the only and final interpreter of the Holy Scripture (the Bible).
 - c. The third wall: only the Pope has the right to call a general council of the whole church.

Tearing down these three walls would bring about a fundamental change in the structure and authority of the church of his times and also in the manner of the presence of the church/Christianity in society.

V. *The Impact of the Reformation on Europe and the Modern World*

1. Division of the Church in the West: the place of religion in society; the rise of tolerance
2. Critique of the Church's authority; social upheaval and revolutionary movements (e.g., The Peasants' Revolt 1524-25)
3. Growth of nationalist feeling in Europe
4. New conception of vocation/work: eliminating the distinction between the sacred and the secular (the priesthood of all believers).

TEXT

“Certainly I had been seized with a greater ardor to understand Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, but as Virgil says, it was not ‘coldness of the blood’ which held me up until now, but one word that is chapter 1 ‘the Justice of God is revealed in it [the Gospel]’. For I hated this word ‘Justitia Dei’ [Justice of God] which by the use and consent of all the doctors [teachers of the Church] I was taught to understand philosophically of that formal or active justice (as they call it) with which God is just, and punishes unjust sinners.

For, however irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience. Nor could I trust that I had pleased him with my satisfaction. I did not love, nay, I hated this just God who punished sinners and if not with ‘open blasphemy’ certainly with huge murmuring I was angry with God, saying: ‘As though it really were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned with original sin, and have all kinds of calamities laid upon them by the law of the ten commandments, God must go and add sorrow upon sorrow and even through the Gospel itself bring his Justice and his Wrath to bear!’ I raged in this way with a fierce and disturbed conscience, and yet I knocked importunately at Paul in this place, thirsting most ardently to know what St. Paul meant.

At last, God being merciful, as I meditated day and night on the connection of the words, namely, ‘the Justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written, “the Just shall live by Faith”’, there I began to understand the Justice of God as that by which the just lives by the gift of God, namely, by faith, and this sentence, ‘the justice of God is revealed in the gospel’, to be that passive justice, with which the merciful God justifies us, by faith, as it is written ‘The just shall live by faith’.

This straightway made me feel as though reborn, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From then on, the whole face of scripture appeared different. I ran through the scriptures then, as memory served, and found the same analogy in other words, as the Work (*opus Dei*) of God that which God works in us, Power of God (*virtus Dei*) with which he makes us strong, wisdom of God (*sapientia Dei*) with which he makes us wise, fortitude of God, salvation of God, glory of God.

And now, as much as I had hated this word ‘Justice of God’ before, so much the more sweetly I extolled this word to myself now, so that this place in Paul was to me as a real gate of paradise. Afterwards, I read Augustine, ‘On the Spirit and the Letter’, where beyond hope I found that he also similarly interpreted the Justice of God: that which God endues us, when he justifies us.” (from Luther’s Preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*)