

Martin Luther as pastor and preacher

By Erroll Hulse

For about 1000 years before the great Reformation of the 16th Century, the Christian Church was in a state of steady decline. By 1517 when Luther sounded the alarm that brought spiritual awakening to the Church after 1000 years of decline and corruption, the situation was desperate. Indulgences to free people from purgatory were sold on authority of the Pope. The money was used to build St Peter's Cathedral in Rome. A priest by the name of Johan Tetzel was the chief salesman hawking these indulgences. It was this deception and wickedness in particular that aroused Martin Luther to write 95 statements exposing the corrupt practices of Rome. Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The Printing press had only recently been discovered. The 95 theses were translated from Latin into German immediately by the media of the day and rapidly and widely spread. In a very short time Luther was spoken of everywhere as the monk who had defied the Pope. The Reformation had begun. Luther pulled the rope which rang the bell which awoke the world from a thousand years of sleep. The Church and the world would never be the same.

Students of the 16th Century Reformation admire the unusual gifts with Luther was endowed. He translated the New Testament into German in just eleven weeks at the Wartburg and that with the highest quality. Later working with fellow scholars, the translation of Old Testament followed. He took Christianity out of the domain of the monastery and provided the common people with a pattern of godly family life. He provided the German people with catechisms and needed expository works to make the Bible relevant. 57 large volumes of writings came from his pen. He also contributed generously to music used in the churches. In 1524 he published 23 hymns of which he was the author. The famous, 'A mighty fortress is our God', came later. He said, 'Next to theology I give to music the highest place and greatest honour.'

Fred W. Meuser noted that Luther's preaching ministry was remarkable, his productivity prodigious – almost miraculous when we he achieved this within the framework of lecturing, protesting against churchly abuses, translating, writing scores of theological treatises adjusting to marriage and children, carrying on a voluminous correspondence, and attending almost endless meetings and conferences.¹

Here I will concentrate on Luther as pastor and then as preacher and this within the context of his life.

A sketch of Luther's life

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben. His parents were deeply religious and hard working. Hans Luther worked in the copper mining industry. He was never rich but he spent what he could on the education of his children.

Luther was well prepared for the work to which he was called. He earned the best academic credentials the medieval German Church could confer. Universities were not established in the German Empire until the middle of the fourteenth century, Prague (1348), Vienna (1305), Heidelberg (1368), Cologne (1388), Erfurt (1392), and Leipsig (1409).² Frederick the Wise

established a new university in Wittenberg in 1502 which Luther would cause to become famous. Hans Luther wanted Martin to become a lawyer. He paid for him to become a student at the Erfurt University in 1501 which had a good reputation. He studied for his MA which he achieved in the shortest time possible graduating with excellence and coming second out of seventeen. It was during July of 1505 that Martin was caught in a thunder storm. He was terrified that he would be killed by a lightning strike. He vowed that he would become a monk. His parents were deeply disappointed by his decision. Hans Luther was outraged and disowned Martin. Later he was reconciled. Martin entered an Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, August 1505 at the age of 21. He was ordained priest in 1507.

At that time Johannes von Staupitz was vicar general of the German Augustinian monasteries. He wished to free himself from the responsibility and it was obvious he prepared Luther to be his successor. Under his spiritual guidance Luther graduated through all levels of theological study up to and including his doctorate – and this within the shortened time frame possible. Five years of study was the minimum requirement. .

All this took place in spite of the fact that Martin was in spiritual turmoil. He was tormented having no assurance of salvation. He tried everything including fasting and confession of all known sin. At any rate in 1513 he began lecturing on the Psalms. He went on to expound Romans and then Galatians and Hebrews. This intense study of the Scriptures was the means of his conversion. He wrestled with the meaning of the word ‘righteousness’ in Psalm 31 and followed that up by studying the New Testament equivalent in Romans 1:17. When he saw that God’s righteousness is a free gift received by faith he was instantly liberated. He declared, ‘Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise’.³

In 1525 Luther married an ex nun Katherine von Bora. They were provided with a large house and property rather like a small farm which Katie managed very well. Hospitality had to be provided constantly for students and for a stream of visitors from all over Europe.

Luther as pastor

James M. Kittelson in his essay on Luther and modern Church history refutes the idea that reformation of the Church was the driving force in Luther’s personal development and in his career as monk, professor, theologian and even reformer. Kittelson suggests that his care of souls is the dynamic by which one can understand both his life and his works⁴

There are five spheres in which we note the function of Luther as pastor. The first is in his care for his own family. He and Katie had six children of their own, three sons and three daughters. One daughter died in infancy and Magdalena died aged about eleven. In the wider family that became part of this very large family were two daughters and four sons of a sister of Luther; Hans Polner, son of another sister; and another sister; and another nephew, the son of his brother, a great-niece, Anna Strauss, a lady teacher, Margarethe von Mochau; other tutors of the Luther children, at one time numbering six, and Aunt Lena mentioned in the letter to Hans, the same aunt who had escaped with Katie from the nunnery and who faithfully cared for the children until her death in 1537. To these more or less permanent members of the family must be added the numerous nuns and monks who found themselves without occupation, the twelve table companions who spent varying lengths of time under the

Luther roof, a steady flow of guests, and indigent pastors without pulpits. All who for any length of time took up their abode in the Luther House were considered members of the family and were expected to conform to the family customs. They were expected to study the Catechism, pray, and attend the family devotions, which included the reading from a family systematic teaching devotional on Sundays.

There was also provision for wholesome recreation in the Luther family life. A bowling lane in Luther's garden was much enjoyed by the young people and friends of the family. Sometime Luther himself found time to roll a few balls. The children had ample space for play in the roomy grounds of the Luther House. Music and singing were enjoyed by the family, and chess was a game much enjoyed by Luther. Time at the meal table gave Martin the opportunity to relate to his family, to visitors and to students who would often write down his sayings which later were published as his table talk. His sense of humour is often present. For instance he marvelled at how one collector of relics had managed to collect a feather from the angel Gabriel! He was surprised that there were eighteen claimed burial places of Christ's apostles in Germany when our Lord had only appointed twelve!

Martin was a master of Christology and loved the book of Hebrews. He adored the incarnation.

How many pastors compose hymns for their children like this moving carol?

Our little Lord, we give thee praise
That thou has designed to take our ways.
Born of a maid a man to be,
And all the angels sing to thee.

The eternal Father's Son he lay
Cradled in a crib of hay.
The everlasting God appears
In our frail flesh and blood and tears.

What the globe could not unwrap
Nestled lies in Mary's lap.
Just a baby, very wee,
Yet Lord of all the world is he.

The second sphere of shepherding or caring concerned Luther's fellow tutors in the University. The impact made by Luther on his fellow professors at the University of Wittenberg was immense. He did not rest until he had persuaded all 22 professors of the biblical truths upon which the Reformation were grounded. The entire faculty supported Martin through the most critical period of peril from 1517 to 1522 when he was excommunicated and his writings banned. Bonds of attachment were close. For example Melancthon said, 'If there is anyone on earth I love it is Martin and his pious writings. Never was there a greater man on the face of the earth. I would rather die than sever myself from that man.'⁵ Nicholas von Amsdorf was another who turned from Scholastic theology to become an ardent advocate of the Reformation. His closeness to Martin is seen in the fact that he travelled with him to the City of Worms and was at his side when he was kidnapped and spirited away to the Wartburg.

The third sphere of Luther's pastoral care involved his students. An examination of old records reveal that no fewer than 16,992 students enrolled at the University of Wittenberg between 1520 and 1560. Most came from Germany but some from England, France, Poland and Scandinavia. For instance two students from Sweden, Olaus and Lurentius Petri who trained under Luther, became preachers of unusual energy and effectiveness.

They were instrumental in turning the whole of their native country of Sweden from the Papacy to the Protestantism of the Bible.⁶

The fourth sphere of pastoral care concerned the people of Wittenberg who attended the Castle Church. We will see this as we view his preaching ministry there.

The fifth arena of shepherding concerned Luther's function as prior in charge of eleven Augustinian monasteries from May 1512. This oversight demanded much pastoral care and correspondence. In one instance he had to dismiss father Michael Dressel from his leadership role in the monastery at Neustadt for failing to keep peace and unity. This came after he had previously been exhorted in a most fraternal way by Luther to establish unity.⁷ Eventually the monasteries, and convents for nuns, would empty as the incumbents sought normal Christian employment.

Luther as preacher

Luther shared the preaching at the Castle Church in Wittenberg with John Bugenhagen his close friend and colleague who occupied the position of town pastor and professor in the University. Bugenhagen was often absent as he promoted the reformation in Northern Germany and in Denmark. Some years Martin preached 180 times. In 1522 it was less at 46, in 1530 as we will see about 40 times, and in 1540 just 43. Of the approximately 4000 sermons he preached about 2,300 have been preserved in some form. His preaching must be set within the context of all his other labours including seminary lectures, writing treatises, mentoring students, correspondence and attending conferences. It is a wonder he did not suffer from what we today call 'burnout'.

'For Luther, preaching was not a preacher's ideas stimulated by the prod of a text. It was the preacher's reflection about God and life. Christian preaching, when it is faithful to the Word of God in the Scriptures about our need and God's response to it, is God speaking. In the teaching and exhortation, he was faithful to the Word of God. When it presents Christ, faith becomes possible, it is God speaking. It is God's very own audible address to all who hear it, just as surely as if Christ had spoken it.

'Though Luther often said that a sermon is simply composed of teaching and exhortation, he did not preach in that way. He preached as if the sermon were not a classroom but a battleground! Every sermon was a battle for the souls of the people, and apocalyptic event that set the doors of heaven and hell in motion, part of the continuing conflict between the Lord and Satan. The Word is God's sword in this cosmic warfare through which the power of Christ invades life today.

'The sermon itself is, therefore, a saving event. When God speaks, things can never be the same again. God's Word touches the hearer, condemns, offers forgiveness, appeals and

draws. No one can listen in cool detachment on the perimeter in a neutral stance. One cannot go away from preaching in the same relationship as before. Neutrality means that the devil has won the skirmish. When the word about Christ is preached, God has spoken and one answers yes or no. There is no alternative.’⁸

With standards that he set himself like this it is not surprising that he was prone to discouragement. In 1530 he was disconsolate because he felt there was no progress in the sanctification of the congregation. From January 1530 to September he preached only three times and two of those were by the express command of the Prince. He often used hyperbole to express himself and this time he declared that had he known in advance what a miserable calling preaching was, then 24 horses could not have been enough to have drawn him into it! He viewed preaching as hard work and described it as, ‘a rotten office, whose misery is such that a person would rather be a swineherd!’ In 1528 he warned the congregation at the Castle Church that he would stop preaching unless he saw more fruit for the gospel. In his New Year sermon in 1530 he complained bitterly of their selfishness. A short time later he said he would rather preach to raving dogs than to them and that from now on he would confine himself to the classroom. It appears that he was refreshed by a stay (holiday) at Coburg and suddenly without any apology or explanation he resumed preaching in September 1530 and in 1531 he was back to his average of 180 sermons a year.’⁹

In his preaching Luther was popular and very direct in his style. He enjoyed a natural mastery of language. He taught preachers of the Reformation to preach in the language of the people. Martin was gifted in his ability to convey profound theology and devotion. He was subject to the standard training in rhetoric which was part of the university education of the late Middle Ages. Today we call this subject homiletics. Ulrich Nembach has shown that ‘Luther learned from the literary studies of the Renaissance to look at the traditional textbooks on rhetoric with a certain objectivity. He was critical of both Aristotle and Augustine. Quintilian, on the other hand, was very popular with Luther, and a good teacher for him to follow. He taught Luther a rhetoric appropriate for a teacher who aimed at showing his listeners how to live a good life. Among the Roman orators, Quintilian was relatively free of the affectations one usually associates with classical rhetoric, and, as Luther well understood, a preacher of the gospel has to get beyond rhetoric, as helpful as it may be.’¹⁰

There is a wonderful account of the effect of Luther’s preaching as he made his journey to the city of Worms to stand trial before Emperor Charles V and the panoply of the Roman Catholic Church. By this time at all levels of German society his was a prophetic voice. He was a hero. The smouldering antagonism between Rome and the German lands had been ignited into a fire which burned with fury. When on his way to Worms Luther stayed over at the University he knew so well. He was asked to preach on the text for the day which was John 20:19-31. He expounded that passage. Eoban Hess, a professor of the university at Erfurt, described the effects on the hearers of this sermon thus, ‘By the power of his mouth, hearts were melted like snow by the breath of spring as he showed the way to heaven’s goods which had been closed for centuries’. This sermon was published seven times that year.’¹¹

The description ‘hearts were melted like snow by the breath of spring’ is a vivid reminder of what preaching is all about. It is not merely the conveying of information for the mind. Yes preaching must be exposition of the Word of God but the purpose more than the provision of information. The aim is to move hearts to repentance and to holiness of life. The preacher addresses hearers in the wholeness of their being. An overhead projector can convey

information but does not have a personality like a Gospel preacher has through which the truth is applied to the consciences of men and women, boys and girls.

Luther continued as a professor in the University, teaching the Bible and theology until his death at the age of 62. Seminary work formed his basic work by which he earned his living.. To meet the urgent needs of reform Martin wrote in a prolific style. The printers literally waited at his study door for his next manuscript. Eventually thirty publishers were established in Wittenberg. The output was so great during the tense Reformation period from 1517 to 1524 that it has never been exceeded subsequently in Germany. The quality of his work did not decline.

On his way to settle a dispute that had broken out in Mansfield, the town where he was born, Luther was taken ill. He died in Mansfield. His body was taken back to be buried in the Church in Wittenberg the same church where he had nailed the 95 theses. Luther never accumulated money and Katherine was left with very little. Had the practice of royalties for his writings been instituted in those early days Luther would have been a wealthy man and Katie would have been very well endowed. As it was he did not think of money and financial matters were left to Katie. Thankfully the Elector made a provision for her. She died six years later.

By way of conclusion I would suggest that love for and care of people lies at the heart of an elder/pastor and it is that love combined with fervour for the glory of our triune God that inspires preaching.

Select Bibliography

A nine page select bibliography including a page of website locations is found in *Essays on Martin Luther* edited by Donald K. McKim, Cambridge University Press, 2003. Since he captures the time so well, Roland Bainton deserves his place as having written the most popular biography of Luther with the title *Here I Stand*. The Lion Paperback, 412 pages edition was published in 1983. A note says that over one million copies had been sold. My favourite biography is by the German, E G Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times*, Concordia, 1950. I value Richard Friedenthal's biography published by Weidenfeld and Nicholson in 1970, but this work as far as I know, is out of print. Also out of print is the excellent work of James Atkinson, *Martin Luther and the birth of Protestantism*, M M and S, 352 pages, 1968. Commended is Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther; An Introduction to his Life and Work*, T and T Clark, 1987, and James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*. Augsburg, 1986. Those who read German will value Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, 5 vols, Tubingen.

¹ Fred W. Meuser on *Luther as preacher of the Word of God*, in essays on Martin Luther edited by Donald K. McKim, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 136

² It is interesting to note that Oxford and Cambridge were constituted Universities soon after 1209. See appendix in *Who are the Puritans?* Erroll Hulse. EP.

³ Bainton p.65. According to Atkinson (p. 101) many distinguished Luther scholars, Boehmer, Vogelssang, Scheel, Wendorf, Stracke, Hermelink, Bauer, the list is long, have sought with great learning, some to pin-point the moment of Luther's break-through, others even to criticise any such pin-pointing.

⁴ Donald L. Mckim, p. 261.

⁵ Schwiebert p 297

⁶ see article by Erroll Hulse in *Reformation Today* number 172.

⁷ James Atkinson, p.132ff.

⁸ Fred W. Meuser, *ibid*, p. 137.

⁹ *ibid*, p. 146ff.

¹⁰ Nembach cited in Old, p. 6.

¹¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, volume 4, *The Age of the Reformation*, Eerdmans, 2002, p. 7ff.