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Part I

Luther's life and context

1 Luther's life

ALBRECHT BEUTEL

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YEARS AS A STUDENT

From the outside, Luther's life passed by simply and steadily.¹ With few exceptions, his whole life took place within the territories of Thuringia and Saxony, mostly in Wittenberg, the electoral capital at the Elbe river, and its surroundings. Only a few journeys led Luther beyond this small sphere of life: on behalf of his order to Rome (1510/11), to Cologne (1512) and Heidelberg (1518); later on behalf of a Reformation consensus to Marburg (1529), and also on his own behalf to Augsburg (1518) and Worms (1521). Equally, with regard to his profession, Luther's was a remarkable and steady character. From entering the monastery through to his last moment, Luther always remained a man of the word: as a preacher, professor and writer.

During Luther's life the horizon of world history and humanities was in the process of becoming radically changed. The following names must stand for many others representing this era: the two emperors Maximilian I and Charles V, the popes Leo X, Clemens VII and Paul III (Council of Trent), as well as the names of such artists and scientists as Raphael, Michelangelo, Dürer, Copernicus and Paracelsus. However, as far as Luther is concerned these changes could be deceptive because his childhood and youth had not been touched by the spirit of humanism or of the Renaissance. Limited to the provincial surroundings of his hometown, Luther grew up as a typical child of the late Middle Ages – just like thousands of other boys around him.

On November 10, 1483 Luther was born as the eldest of probably nine sisters and brothers at Eisleben in what was then the county of Mansfeld. The next morning he was baptized and named Martin after the saint of that day. Coming from a Thuringian family of farmers, his father Hans Luder, not being entitled to inherit, sought his luck in one of the most advanced business opportunities: the copper mines of Mansfeld. During the course of his life he was able to gain a well-respected economic and social position through enormous hard work and thrift. We know only a very little about his wife Margarethe, Luther's mother. She came from a family named

4 *Albrecht Beutel*

Lindemann, resident in Eisenach. As the wife of a venturesome entrepreneur and as mother of her large family, she had to work hard throughout her whole lifetime. Martin Luther was well aware of the fact that, as he put it, the bitter sweat of his parents had made it possible for him to go to the university.

Their parenting principles were strict, but not unusual for that time. Luther does not seem to have come to any harm. In fact, he honored the memory of his parents with love and respect. The devotional life at home also followed common church practices. Luther lived most of his life away from his parents' home after he turned fourteen.

Between about 1490 and 1497 Luther attended the town school in Mansfeld. Thereafter his father sent him to Magdeburg, probably because one of his friends also changed to the cathedral school there. Luther found accommodation with the "Brethren of the Common Life," a modern religious movement emanating from the Netherlands. Only a year later he moved to the parish school of St. George in Eisenach. Closeness to his mother's relatives may have played a role in this decision. Later Luther criticized the rigidity in late medieval schools. At any rate he owed them his proficiency in the Latin language, his familiarity with ancient Christian culture and his love for poetry and music.

In spring 1501 Luther enrolled at the University of Erfurt. He stayed at a hostel, whose life followed strict monastic rules. To the prerequisite studies of liberal arts, which were mandatory for any prospective theologian, lawyer, or medical doctor, Luther devoted himself passionately. And after four years, in the shortest time possible, he graduated with excellence. When he was awarded his master's degree in spring 1505, he took second place out of seventeen candidates.

Then Luther turned toward the study of law, as was his father's desire. After having visited his parents, Luther got caught in a summer thunderstorm nearby Stotternheim on his way back home on July 2, 1505. A lightning bolt, which struck right beside him, scared him to death and caused him to vow: "Help me, Saint Anna, I will become a monk!" That Luther entered the monastery, but not before another fifteen days had passed, shows that he did not act under the effect of mere emotions, but that he became a monk only after careful self-examination. We will have to see his decision against the background of a deep existential fear, whose resolution he tried to force but whose dramatic expression it only became, since even in the Erfurt convent of the Augustinian Hermits, he was barred from the religious peace for which he had longed.

Luther's father was outraged by his son's unexpected turn: All plans he had made for his eldest son's life and career seemed to be thwarted. This

Luther's life 5

conflict would cast a shadow over the relationship between father and son for many years to come and only in 1525 when Luther got married was it finally resolved.

During his first year as a novice, Luther subjected himself to an intense study of the Bible. He also familiarized himself with the rules and regulations of the monastic life. The strict way of living, which was predominant there, did not pose any problems to him. But soon it became apparent that even the most painstaking obedience to the three monastic vows Luther had taken at his profession (obedience, poverty, chastity) did not lead to the inner peace for which he had longed. An excessively pursued practice of confessing did not help either. It only increased his religious distress. Thus it was no coincidence that Luther got stuck in the high prayer during the first mass he had to read as a newly ordained priest. The young man who all of a sudden found himself facing God so closely was left speechless in his fear. Filled with awe of the sacred he tried to run away from the liturgy but his teacher admonished him to stay and finish mass.

In the figure of the *pantocrator* – the ruling and judging Christ – Luther's fear of God became symbolically intensified. The anxieties and melancholies that haunted Luther throughout his entire life were fed from this image of the Judge of the World, so real for him during his early years. Yet Luther never lost himself to his religious anxieties. He rather felt spurred on to study the Bible more intensely. Unlike the approach of the scholastic tradition, Luther would not read the Scriptures for intellectual purposes but for existential meditation. Even later the professors at Wittenberg were always quite impressed by their young colleague's outstanding knowledge of the Bible. The fact that Luther felt at home in this book more than in any other became the characteristic trademark of his theology: No matter what he read from the fathers and teachers of the church, he would always relate it to the Bible and compare it with its original message.

In 1507, the same year he was ordained as a priest, Luther was selected by his superior to study theology. In Erfurt the Augustinian Hermits had established a general course of studies for their members. As a doctor of theology the respective chair had to fill the professorship of theology at the university as well. Through the works of Gabriel Biel, also von Ockham, Duns Scotus, Petrus of Ailly and Thomas Aquinas, Luther was introduced to Christian dogmatics. However, Augustine was the figure who became of utmost importance to Luther. Having studied his works most diligently, Luther preferred him over all other scholastics, turning him King's evidence for his reformational renewal. In addition to these scholastics, he also came in contact with the Aeropagitic (Dionysios, Gerson), the Roman (Bernhard von Clairvaux) and the German mysticism (Tauler) as well as the German

6 *Albrecht Beutel*

humanism (Reuchlin, Wimpfeling), though in a more limited, philology-oriented manner.

At that time Johannes von Staupitz served as vicar general of the German monasteries of the Augustinian Hermits. Today there is still very little known about his theology, which was highly influenced by Augustine. He attached great importance to the study of the Bible in his monasteries. To Luther he became an important supporter and father confessor, seeking to alleviate Luther's fear of punishment and eternal damnation by pointing out that God only intends to punish the sinful nature in humans but seeks to win the person of the sinner for himself. In a somewhat modified manner this distinction can also be found later in Luther's writings. At one point Luther tormented himself with an almost maniacal urge to confess, when von Staupitz, a pastor of high standing, objected that he could not even produce any real sins, but just hobbling stuff and puppet's sins.

From fall 1508 to fall 1509 Luther was sent to the newly established university in Wittenberg where the Augustinian Hermits from Erfurt were in charge of one of the teaching positions. Due to a temporary vacancy Luther had to fill in as a Master of Arts, reading about the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle. After this interim in Wittenberg, Luther returned to the monastery in Erfurt. From there he accompanied an older fellow friar on a trip to Rome in winter 1510/11, where the latter was engaged by his order to settle business with the curia. Only in the late summer of 1511 did Luther move for good into the city which would make history through him and in which he himself would make history.

As his very own creation Elector Frederick the Wise had established a new university in Wittenberg in 1502, for which the imperial privilege had been granted whereas papal confirmation of the university was not given until 1507. Georg Spalatin, electoral court chaplain and tutor of the princes, became the crucial intermediary between court and university. Though Spalatin also cherished other theological ideas at first, Luther did not have much trouble in winning him for his own opinions. The bond of friendship that grew immediately between them turned out to be an essential cornerstone of the Reformation, lasting through the storms of decades.

In Wittenberg the two convents of the mendicant orders were each engaged with a professorship in theology. For the Augustinian hermits von Staupitz was the one giving the lectures. However, he wished to free himself from this responsibility and it was obvious he built Luther up into being his successor right from the start. Under his spiritual guidance Luther graduated through all levels of theology studies up to and including his doctorate – and all that within the shortest time frame possible, as five years of study were the minimum requirement.

Luther's life 7

On October 18 and 19, 1512 Luther was solemnly awarded his doctor of theology. The required fee of fifty guilders was paid by the elector himself. With the doctorate came the right of independent academic work. Anyone with a doctoral degree was entitled to voice his own opinion, which could then be heard in theological disputes – of course this was only as long as it resonated within the accepted teachings of the church. Even though at first Luther was most reluctant to pursue the academic career intended for him, it did not take him long to adjust and he would refer to his doctoral degree without any reservation whenever his authority as a teacher was questioned, be it toward the papal legate Cajetan, the elector Albert of Mainz, or the pope himself.

With his promotion Luther entered into a stage of his life which was characterized by extremely intense academic and spiritual work. Beside his academic responsibilities, he already faced an enormous workload as sub-prior and chairman of the general course of studies in Wittenberg, adding even more duties when he became district vicar of his order in 1515.

A TIME OF NEW DEPARTURES (1512–21)

Luther's series of early lectures – first on Psalms (1513/14), then on the Letters to the Romans (1515/16), Galatians (1516/17) and Hebrews (1517/18) – is an invaluable source of information for understanding Reformation theology. Those lectures document an exciting and far-reaching process during whose course of discoveries Luther got out of the rut of conventional theology more rigorously with each new insight: He interpreted the passages not with a scholastic's eye any more, but from the Bible's perspective, not on the background of traditional interpretations by church authorities, but within the framework of the whole biblical tradition. The debate as to whether Luther experienced his Reformation breakthrough in 1514/15 or somewhat later, in 1518, which has not been settled as yet, loses more and more of its importance when Luther's Reformation theology is not looked at as a sudden event, which might even have occurred overnight, but rather as a complex developmental process spreading out over several years, furthering sudden insights on a continuous basis. Without a doubt the most famous discovery of all is about God's righteousness (Rom. 1:17) – which is not based on demanding but on giving, not on the law but on the gospel.

Luther's early lectures seemed to make a fundamental reform of the theological course of studies absolutely necessary. His criticism of Aristotelian prerequisites for thinking grew steadily into a criticism of the entire scholastic theology. The call for a new reform of the theological study course was the inevitable consequence: away from Aristotelianism and the interpretation

8 *Albrecht Beutel*

of the Lombard's *Sentences* toward a study of the Bible and, with a proper distance, the church fathers as well. Luther's criticism found its preliminary peak in his – partly harshly termed – disputation theses “Against Scholastic Theology,”² which were published in September 1517, only two months before his famous Ninety-five Theses “On the Power of Indulgences” were announced, triggering a snowball effect. Strangely enough, at this time everything appeared to remain largely calm on the outside.

Beside his academic work Luther had also assumed responsibility for the parish of Wittenberg as a preacher. In their inseparable connectedness these two, lectern and pulpit, formed together the decisive continuum of Luther's theological existence. No later than 1514 he must have already filled in the preaching position at the town church of Wittenberg. Some of his sermons Luther sent immediately to press. However, the majority of his sermons – in the end somewhat over 2,000 – were handed down to us in form of shorthand transcripts. As a preacher Luther preferred a homiletic approach, which would closely follow the Bible passage. His interpretations were crafted in a down-to-earth manner without rhetorical pathos, but full of experiences from real life and faith. Beside the interpretation of individual passages from the Bible, Luther also liked to teach about central texts such as the Ten Commandments or the Lord's Prayer. Those catechistic series of sermons formed the basis from which, later, the two catechisms grew.

The turning point in society, which Luther brought about not as an act of daring but unintentionally, was kicked off by his criticism of the widespread but not canonized practice of selling indulgences. By means of indulgences the church offered an opportunity to compensate for one's unatoned sin and punishments through money. Pope Leo X had reissued a plenary indulgence in 1515 for, among other territories, the church province of Magdeburg, near to Wittenberg. Many members of Luther's parish made eager use of this opportunity, lulling them into a false sense of religious certainty. First of all, Luther voiced his pastoral concerns from the pulpit. On October 31, 1517 he presented his critique of the indulgences in a concerned letter to Margrave Albert of Brandenburg, who was at the same time Archbishop of Mainz as well as of Magdeburg. His Ninety-five Theses “On the Power of Indulgences”³ were also enclosed in this letter. In his writing he called repentance a lifelong attitude expected of Christians. He expressed his particular disapproval of the fact that humans were more frightened of punishments set by the church than of sin whose forgiveness lies in God's power alone. Thus Luther's criticism of the indulgences aimed at the church's instrumentalization of Christian repentance.

Whether Luther actually posted his Ninety-five Theses on the castle church of Wittenberg remains uncertain – Melanchthon at least talks about

Luther's life 9

that only decades later. However, it is beyond any doubt that his theses spread throughout all Germany in no time and launched a meteoric development after they had been released at the end of 1517 and explained in German by Luther in March 1518.⁴ This marks the beginning of Luther's unprecedented writing activities. At the end of April 1518, when he visited his order's chapter in Heidelberg, he was already a famous man. With his theses of the "Heidelberg Disputation," in which he gave the theology of the cross as promoted by him a distinct image, he won some of his most important connections in southern Germany, among them Johannes Brenz, Martin Bucer, and Erhard Schnepf.

In summer 1518 Rome opened a trial for heresy against Luther. The situation appeared to be hopeless: The ban of the church would most certainly be followed by the ban of the empire. Luther asked his territorial ruler, Elector Frederick the Wise, to lend him his support with the emperor's consent so that the whole cause could come to negotiations in Germany. Frederick complied with his request, and because Rome had political reasons to reach an agreement with Frederick, Luther was indeed examined by a papal legate on German soil in October 1518, following the Diet of Augsburg. The interrogations were led by the papal legate Cajetan, a highly educated Dominican, who had the authority to readmit Luther to the community of the church if he would recant, but also to excommunicate him if need be. Through it all Luther remained steadfast. Therefore Cajetan demanded that Luther be extradited to Rome. That of course was flatly declined by Frederick the Wise, who demanded instead that Luther be heard before an unbiased court of scholars. Since Rome did not intend to bargain away Frederick's favor in view of the upcoming imperial election, no particular measures were enforced in the *causa Lutheri* for the moment.

Yet the debate continued. In summer 1519 the theology professor Johann Eck from Ingolstadt sought a confrontation with Luther. In the "Leipzig Disputation" they first debated about indulgences, but soon moved on to the question of papal authority. Provoked by Eck, Luther disputed that the pope's primacy was grounded in divine right and at the same time he also disputed the infallibility of the church councils: Those *might* not only err, but had certainly already erred, as with the Council of Constance (1414–18), for example, in the case of the Bohemian Jan Hus. The Leipzig Disputation helped clarify positions: From now on Duke George of Saxony saw his enemy in Luther. On the other hand many humanists, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, sided with Luther or at least showed solidarity while keeping their distance.

The breathing space which the year 1520 seemed to grant was used by Luther to give his theology a more clearly defined image in writing. With the

10 *Albrecht Beutel*

four main reformational works of this year he showed that he did not only aim at the criticism of a specific, ill-developed, practice of piety, but that he was on his way to renew the whole church and theology based on the gospel. He started out with the treatise *Von den guten Werken (Of Good Works)*.⁵ This fundamental writing of Reformation ethics Luther clothed in the form of an interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Faith alone, he stated at the beginning, is able to fulfill the first commandment. However, when a person in faith knows herself accepted by God without any contributing works of her own, she will not need to speculate about attaining God's salvation through her own activities, but fueled by her confidence in God will feel free to do good works as the most natural thing in the world. Following this line to practice a life lived out of faith, Luther also interpreted all the remaining nine commandments.

In his writing *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung (To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Regarding the Improvement of the Christian Estate)*,⁶ Luther encouraged the target group to make active use of their right as secular authorities to lend their active support to a reform of Christianity. And all the more, Rome would take cover behind a threefold wall against all legitimate reform efforts: First, through the unbiblical division of Christianity between priests and lay people; second, through the claim that the pope holds the supreme power of teaching; third, through the presumptuous pretension that the pope alone was allowed to convene a council.

The "Nobility Treatise," written in German, was selling like hot cakes. Only a few days after its publication the 4,000 copies of the first printing were sold out. The Latin writing *Von der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche (On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church)*,⁷ however, was geared toward a theologically educated audience. In it Luther unfolded the baseline for a biblical understanding of the sacraments, which on the one hand sorted out confirmation, marriage, ordination and extreme unction, and with some reservation also repentance, as unbiblical, and on the other hand announced his fundamental opposition to the Roman Catholic understanding of the Lord's Supper. The explosive potential of Luther's new teaching on the sacraments can hardly be overestimated, not to mention its practical implications which, for example, would render private masses pointless. This in turn would also put many priests out of work and in general would make the separation between clergy and lay people irrelevant. Luther certainly did not have an impious destruction of the church in mind, but rather its basic Christian renewal. Yet Luther hit the vital nerve of current church practices. Erasmus commented on this writing with the laconic remark that the break with Rome could hardly be healed any more.

The best-known writing of them all explored *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (*On the Freedom of a Christian*).⁸ Luther portrayed Christians in their relationship to God as free, in their relationship to the world, however, as obliged to the service and compassion of their neighbor: Faith would set humans free from the compulsion for self-justification and therefore would render them free to serve their neighbors. In short, humans would be free out of faith in love.

The programmatic writings of the Reformation were hereby established. In the same year the proceedings against Luther were taken up again. As early as 1519 the two universities of Cologne as well as Löwen had already condemned Luther. On June 15, 1520 the bull threatening Luther with excommunication was finally issued, and in October 1520 it was publicly announced to have the force of law. Somehow Frederick the Wise was able to negotiate that Luther was not to be arrested at once but would first be interrogated at the Diet of Worms. On March 6, 1521 Luther was summoned before the emperor with the promise of safe-conduct.

The journey to Worms turned into a triumphal procession. Wherever Luther went, he was eagerly greeted with public interest and good will. In Leipzig the magistrate welcomed him with an honorary cup of wine, in Erfurt the rector of the university received him at the city wall with great splendor as if a prince was to be honored. Here in Erfurt Luther also preached in his order's church, which was overfilled to the point of mortal danger. When the creaking of the wooden gallery caused panic to spread, with great presence of mind he was able to avert the danger: Please stand still, he called into the crowd, nothing evil will happen, the devil just tried to frighten us.

Finally, on April 18, 1521, his crucial appearance in Worms became reality. In front of the emperor and the imperial estates Luther refused to follow their demand of renunciation. He did not feel the slightest obligation to the authority of the pope, he stated. Instead his conscience was bound to Holy Scripture. Therefore he could not and would not recant as long as his teachings could not be refuted through Scripture or clear reasoning. With reference to his conscience as solely obliged to the word of God, Luther had denied access to human faith to the two world powers, represented by the emperor and the pope.

Though the effort was made to continue negotiations in Worms, they did not produce successful results. On April 26, 1521 Luther set out on his return trip. Shortly before, Frederick the Wise had informed Luther that he would have him kidnapped on his way home so he could be brought to safety. This is exactly what happened on May 4: To all appearances an attack was launched and Luther was taken to his new refuge at the Wartburg