

The Church of the Servant King Soteriology Series

SO_6_Predestination & Election – Part 6 – The Historical Background – the Reformation Period – Luther

Introduction

In our last lesson, we saw that Gregory the Great (A.D. 540 – 604) developed a theology that included the semi-Pelagian influenced ideas of penance and progressive satisfaction for sin.¹ Gregory the Great represented a milestone in the development of Romish theology which was semi-Pelagian in orientation.² Attempts to turn the tide of semi-Pelagian thought towards a more Augustine oriented view are evidenced by such men as Gottschalk (A.D. 804 – 869) who carried the views of Augustine to their extreme logical conclusion, e.g. limited atonement and double predestination. Other men in the centuries leading up to the Reformation represented variations of Augustinianism (i.e. Anselm – A.D. 1033-1109 and Thomas Aquinas – A.D. 1224-1274). However, they were anomalies within the Church. The prevailing trend was semi-Pelagian – until the Reformation period.

From this time until the Reformation, the predominant trend within Catholic theology was a drift toward Pelagianism. There were some notable exceptions, such as John Wycliffe and Thomas Bradwardine, but for the most part Duns Scotus's [sic] emphasis upon God's foreknowledge of individual worthiness reflected the position of the church. When Martin Luther made his conspicuous appearance, this was one of the major points against which he contended.³

Officially, the Reformation began on October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Luther had no intention of initiating a break with the Roman Catholic Church and his posting of his theses were akin to an invitation to debate. The focus of his theses was upon the abuse of indulgences. Indulgences had come to be seen as a means of shortening one's period of time in purgatory.⁴ Luther only wanted to initiate reform

¹ John D. Hannah, "The Doctrines of Salvation (Sin and Grace) – Part III: The Medieval Church" (unpublished class notes in 510 N, History of Doctrine, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 1999), 20.10.

² As we have already seen, semi-Pelagian theology was in essence a compromise of Pelagian thoughts with elements of Augustinianism. For instance, while Pelagianism embodied the notion that man was essentially good and capable of producing a good that could satisfy God's righteousness, semi-Pelagianism acknowledged some detrimental influence of Adam's fall upon mankind so that mankind needed grace to assist in the production of "the good." Man had been morally weakened, but was not totally depraved (Augustinianism). Thus, semi-Pelagianism opened the door to the development of various systems of works (e.g. penance, indulgences, etc.) that gave one access to grace.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983, 1984, 1985), 912.

⁴ The concept of purgatory was derived from the apocalyptic book of 2 Maccabees 12:39-45. In this passage, Judas Maccabius makes a propitiation for those who had died that they might be released from their sins. This phrase was the basis in the 4th Lateran Council of A.D. 1215 for the establishment of an official sacrament. It was reinforced at the Council of Leon (A.D. 1274) and the Council of Florence (A.D. 1439).

within the Roman Catholic Church and restore the basic teaching regarding indulgences, i.e. that penance implies a true repentance. The ultimate result was that Leo X effectively excommunicated Luther in A.D. 1520.⁵

Martin Luther's Views

Martin Luther's (d. A.D. 1546) concept of man's activities in the salvation process revolved around the belief that man has no free will, but is in bondage. The implication in his teaching was that God the Father only draws men to salvation on a select basis (i.e. seeds of thought involving limited atonement) not a universal basis. He contended that there is absolutely nothing in man capable of reaching out to God (i.e. man is so totally depraved that man must be given the ability to believe). Luther's views need to be seen in light of the Pelagian error that he refuted which contended that man was capable of attaining salvation by his own willful choices. Luther believed in a double predestination; however, at times he manifested an inclination to deny the doctrine of reprobation (i.e. predestination of the unsaved) and to make predestination dependent upon God's foreknowledge.⁶

Some of the passages Luther used to support his views included Genesis 8:21; John 6:44; Romans 3:9; 8:7; 2 Corinthians 3:5; and Ephesians 2:5. I will list them below with Luther's understanding of the meaning of these passages. We will examine these and many other such passages in a future lesson.⁷

Then the Lord said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth. (Genesis 8:21b)

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. (Romans 8:7)
Luther believed that even the will of man was corrupt and unacceptable to God.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. (John 6:44a) *Luther not only believed that the unbeliever could not even make an endeavor to believe without the work of God, but questioned what God left to man's free will.*

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. (Romans 3:9) *Since all are under sin, this verse caused Luther to question man's ability to believe and the existence of man's free will.*

⁵ Dr. Garth Rosell, class notes of Steve Ellis in "The History of the Church Since the Reformation," Institute of Theological Studies for credit at Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall, 2000.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1937), 148.

⁷ I obtained these paraphrased interpretations of Luther from John D. Hannah, "The Doctrines of Salvation (Sin and Grace) – Part IV: The Reformation Church" (unpublished class notes in 510 N, History of Doctrine, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 1999), 21.1 – 21.6 in which Hannah quotes from Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), 278-279, 295-296, 310-311.

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God. (2 Corinthians 3:5) *In other words, even positive volition is from God.*

Even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). (Ephesians 2:5) *The ability to believe is from God.*

So much emphasis has been given to Calvin's views on predestination and election that it is many times overlooked that Luther held similar views. Luther's spiritual father was a Johann von Staupitz, an Augustinian monk who promoted Augustine's ideas, so much so that the University of Wittenberg, where Staupitz was dean of the theology faculty, became Augustinian in orientation. When Luther began wrestling with the subject of predestination, he initially followed the approach of the Ockhamists who believed that predestination was based upon God's foreknowledge of what man would do.⁸ However, as he studied more of the Scriptures and came under the influence of Staupitz's Augustinianism, his views began to change. By the time that Luther wrote his commentary on Romans which consisted of notes for lectures given between 1515 and 1516, he evidenced a firm commitment to Augustinianism.

An example is Luther's position in regard to Romans 8:28 – "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Luther uses this passage to point to God's sovereignty with respect to humans in the Old Testament, particularly his election of Issac and rejection of Ishmael, and his election of Jacob and rejection of Esau. He used Romans 9:6-18 to further support his opinion. Luther went so far as to claim that all objections to the Augustinian position came from fleshly wisdom or human reason. Erasmus was urged by the pope to refute Luther and this resulted in Erasmus publishing *The Freedom of the Will* in 1524 and Luther's reply in *The Bondage of the Will* in the following year.⁹

Conclusion

By the time of the Reformation, significant voices under the influence of Augustinian thought were coming on the scene that would forever mark a paradigm shift in the thinking of at least some of the church. In our next lesson, we'll study more about some of the other significant figures of the Reformation period on this subject.

⁸ Erickson, 912.

⁹ Ibid, 912-13.