THE LAST YEARS OF MARTIN LUTHER

Prayer
Scripture: John 8:51; Ps. 118:14-19, 28, 29
Hymn: 326 "A Mighty Fortress"

The last fifteen years of Luther's life were some of his happiest. The course of world events and the progress of his Reformation were such as to enable him to die in the belief that he had restored the Gospel and the Sacraments of early Christianity. In spite of failing health that often resulted in great suffering, Luther found much joy in his family, his friends, and the spread of Reform. There were many dark hours with vexing problems and fearsome prospects, but over and over Luther called on family and disciples to put their trust in God. To the end both princes and peasants looked to him as the leader of God's people. His enemies called him "The German Pope." To his followers he was the trusted interpreter of God's Word and the final arbiter of all disputes.

THE COURSE OF THE REFORMATION IN GERMANY

THE RECESS OF THE DIET OF SPEIER OF 1526:

The Emperor Charles V was not able to attend the meeting of the Diet of Speier in the summer of 1526 but he sent orders that the Edict of Worms should be enforced against Luther. The Lutheran princes stood firmly together and even Catholic princes agreed to the Recess of Speier. Both understood that the Turkish threat made it advisable to postpone consideration of the Lutheran problem. Both sides agreed to the Recess according to which, pending a reforming council or national assembly, each territorial ruler should "so to live, govern, and carry himself as he hopes and trusts to answer it to God and his imperial majesty." This meant territorial control of religion. It afforded the Lutherans much needed time to consolidate their position.

THE DIET OF SPEIER OF 1529:

When the Diet met in 1529 the situation had changed. The Emperor had defeated the forces of France and the pope and was able to demand that they join him in crushing the German revolt. The Emperor urged a Catholic majority to begin to move against the Lutherans. The Recess of 1526 was revoked. The Emperor called for the enforcing of the Edict of Worms, ordered Lutheran princes to prevent no one from holding Catholic masses in their lands, to cease making changes in religion, and demanded that they suppress Zwingianism and Anabaptism.

The Lutheran princes drew up a strong protest from which they gained the name "Protestants." They insisted that the unanimous agreement of two parties could only be dissolved by the unanimous agreement of the two parties. They denied the right of the majority to abolish the Recess of 1526 and asserted the right of the minority to reject the will of the majority. The Emperor and the Catholics rejected the protest and began making plans for the meeting of the Diet at Augsburg the next year.

Fearing that the Emperor intended to crush the Protestants with force, Philip of Hesse took the lead in trying to build a union of Protestants. The desire for such a union was strengthened when Otto von Pack, an official of the Duke of Saxony, reported to Philip that he had seen a treaty made by Catholic princes in which they agreed
unite to exterminate the Lutherans. The treaty was later discovered to be a forgery, but Philip was busily engaged in trying to form a union of German princes, Zwinglians, and French. Luther and some of the princes did not believe it would be right to use force to resist the emperor.

To find a theological basis for their union the German princes and theologians held a number of meetings that produced the seventeen articles, known as the Schwabach Articles, announced at Schwabach on October 16, 1529. The articles expressed the anti-Zwinglian sentiments of Luther.

THE MARBURG COLLOQUIY:

Philip of Hesse insisted that Luther and Zwingli meet at Marburg in October, 1529, to try to work out a theological agreement that could serve as a basis for a political union of the Germans and Swiss. Both Philip and Zwingli felt the religious question would have to be settled on the battle field. The meeting resulted in failure. Luther could not bring himself to approve of using force against the emperor and he and Zwingli failed to agree on the Lord's Supper. The failure gave the Catholics the opportunity to crush the Swiss before attacking the Germans.

THE DIET OF AUGSBURG OF 1530:

In January of 1530 Charles V went to Italy to be crowned Emperor by the pope. From Italy he sent a call for the Reichstag to meet in Augsburg. He sent an invitation to the Protestants to prepare a list of their criticisms of the church and a statement of their beliefs. Since Luther was under the double ban Melanchthon took the lead in drawing up the criticisms and the statement of faith that would be known as the Augsburg Confession. The first part consisted of the articles of faith of the Schwabach Articles. The second part gave the Lutheran position on giving the cup back to the laity, denied the sacrificial character of the Lord's Supper, opposed clerical celibacy, and called for the abrogation of monastic vows. Melanchthon tried to be as yielding and conciliatory as possible. He omitted such topics as purgatory, the veneration of saints, transubstantiation, the universal priesthood of all believers, and the sole authority of Scripture. Luther was opposed to any compromise. Many of the Protestant princes distrusted Melanchthon and considered him naive. Some Catholic princes saw hopes of compromise. Campeggio demanded that the Edict of Worms be enforced and that no Protestant preaching be allowed in Augsburg while the Diet was in session. Eck published a pamphlet listing over four hundred heresies that had been preached by Protestants.

The Zwinglian-inclined Southern German cities of Strassburg, Constance, Memmingen, and Lindau, led by Butzer drew up and submitted the Confessio Tetrapolitana, with strong condemnation of Catholic ceremonies and an affirmation of the authority of the Bible. The Catholics strongly rejected it as heretical and deserving of no consideration.

The Elector of Saxony moved Luther to the castle at Coburg to keep him in safety and to have him near enough to Augsburg for consultation. Luther was kept informed of the proceedings at Augsburg and received a number of important visitors, including Butzer who persuaded Luther to take a more friendly attitude toward Zwinglians. Butzer wrote down his impression of Luther as one "who truly feared God, and sought sincerely the glory of God."
The emperor appointed a commission composed of Campeggio, Eck, Cochlaeus, Faber, and others to review the Augsburg Confession. They prepared their *Confutatio* (Refutation) that was presented to the Diet. The Catholic majority declared that the Protestants had been duly confuted and they were given until April 15, 1531, to conform to Catholic practice or they would be crushed by force.

Luther and the princes had considered any attempt to compromise with the Catholics as vain. Melancthon, crushed by the results, hastily prepared his *Apology*, which came to be considered the classic defense of Lutheranism.

In February, 1531, Philip of Hesse took the lead informing the Schmalkaldic League to meet the imperial threat.

**THE DEATH OF ZWINGLI:**

On November 20, 1531 the alliance of the Catholic Cantons in Switzerland defeated Zwingli and his alliance of Protestant Cantons. The Protestants were forced to give up alliances with foreign powers and to pay heavy indemnities. Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's son-in-law, became the leader of a Swiss Protestantism that concentrated on spiritual work and avoided political involvement. The Protestants in Switzerland were strong enough to keep the Catholic Cantons from being able to join in the wars between France and Germany.

**THE RECESS OF NUERNBERG:**

April 15, 1531 passed quietly without the war that the Protestants had feared. Butzer had aided Philip of Hesse in building up the Schmalkaldic League. The emperor feared another war with Francis I and Pope Clement VII. He also feared an attack by Suleiman and the Turks. When the Diet met at Nuernberg in the summer of 1532 the emperor promised that no attacks would be made upon the Protestants and called on the Protestants to support him against the Turks.

The Recess of Nuernberg gave the Protestants almost fifteen years to consolidate the Lutheran position. Philip of Hesse worked vigorously and successfully to build up the Schmalkaldic League. Duke Ulrich brought Wuerttenberg into the League—the first large territory in Southern Germany to join. A number of northern cities and states of Germany were won for Lutheranism: Gosler, Brunswick, Goettingen, Lueneburg, Bremen, Hanover, Mecklenburg, Anhalt and Pomerania. When Duke George, the Catholic prince of Saxony died, his son, Henry, joined the Lutherans. Mainz, Trier, and Cologne were leaning toward Protestantism and more cities in Southern Germany drew closer to Lutheranism.

Charles V was involved in a war with the Barbary corsairs of Algeria and Tunisia. Then came the third war with France with Francis I concluding a treaty with Suleiman and the Turks to help him against the emperor. The war ended with the inconclusive Treaty of Nice (June, 1538).

Paul III had become pope (1534-49) and Charles V, irritated with the pope's support of France, considered calling a German national council in defiance of the pope. He sent Held into Germany in 1536, but Held did not follow the emperor's orders. Held declared an end to the Recess of Nuernberg and in 1538 formed a league of Catholic princes.

In 1537 Pope Paul III called for a general church council to meet in Mantua in 1537. The members of the Schmalkaldic League
feared the council would result in an attack on the League. They held their own congress at Schmalkalden in February, 1537, and declared that they would accept the invitation to attend the general council only if (1) the council were free of papal control; (2) all estates were represented on equal terms; (3) the Bible were made the sole basis of judgment; (4) the council met on German soil. This was equal to declining the invitation. The pope postponed the council.

The Protestant princes asked the aging and ailing Luther to draw up a new statement of faith. Luther had never been happy with the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. He felt death was approaching and wished to give a final statement of his doctrines and faith. He prepared what became known as the Schmalkaldic Articles, published in 1538. Though not formally adopted by the princes they soon came to be considered authoritative. They were a virtual declaration of independence from Rome. These articles set forth (1) the doctrine of justification by faith alone, (2) the abolition of the Mass as a sacrifice, (3) the use of monastic and other foundations for Protestant churches and schools, (4) denial of the divine right of the pope to rule the church.

The emperor replaced Huld with the archbishop of Lund, dropped ecclesiastical suits in the Imperial Court for six months, agreed to submit religious differences to an assembly of theologians and laymen in a meeting to be held in 1539, and in the Treaty of Frankfort of April, 1539, provided for a truce between the emperor and the League.

THE PROTESTANT-CATHOLIC COLLOQUIES:

Charles V, with a view to preparing for a general council called for a series of colloquies between Catholics and Protestants. He still hoped to restore unity to the church. Colloquies were held in Wagenau in June, 1540, in Worms in 1540, and in Regensburg in April, 1541. Eck and Contarini represented the Catholics. Melanchthon, Butzer, and Calvin represented the Protestants. Calvin won the respect of Melanchthon and Butzer. Butzer was the outstanding spokesman for the Protestants. At Regensburg the Spaniard Malvenna was outstanding for the Catholics. Contarini had strong hopes of peaceful compromise. When the pope rejected the doctrinal concessions Contarini had been willing to make, his influence was destroyed.

The colloquies made it clear to Charles V that he would have to crush the Protestants by force. He wanted a council that would make a few minor concessions, declare the Protestants duly refuted and unreasonable, and open the way to his crushing them.

The emperor became involved in a fourth war with France (1542-44). He defeated the French and in the peace treaty of September, 1544, the French agreed to help the emperor against both Turks and Protestants.

Pope Paul III finally called the General Council that met in Trent in December, 1545—a council that would be dominated by the spirit of Caraffa with no concessions to Protestants.

BITTER EXPERIENCES OF THE AGING LUTHER:

The last ten years of Luther's life were his happiest in spite of failing health. He suffered great pains from gall stones, gout, constipation, an ear infection with dizziness, and increasing chest pains from heart failure. He found great joy in his family. His
house was constantly filled with guests who sought counsel on all sorts of problems. He was busy with the university and continued to polish his translation of the Bible. The treasures of the humor and congeniality of his table are preserved in the Table Talk recorded by his disciples.

These years were marred by some bitter experiences that provoked bitter polemics. The Muenster Revolt of the Anabaptists attracted radicals of various types. Catholics blamed the polygamy, communism and anarchy on Luther. The disturbances raised by the fanatics provoked Luther to sanction persecution by the Lutheran princes. Luther strongly condemned the surreptitious activities of unordained persons he called "sneaks and hedge-preachers." In January, 1536, electoral Saxony arrested and tried three rustics for blasphemy and sedition and executed them.

Luther was involved in a bitter controversy with Johannes Agricola, a graduate of Wittenberg and Eisleben who returned to Wittenberg to teach. He was an ardent supporter of Luther until he turned antinomian and opposed the necessity of preaching the law of Moses. Luther insisted the law prepared the sinner for grace by making him aware of his sins. The antinomian controversy raged from 1537 to 1540. Agricola taught that the church consisted of congregations of saints. Luther taught that the church contained both earnest and hypocritical persons. The Christian had to fight as long as he lived and preaching the law incited him to continue the struggle. Luther began proceedings against Agricola as a heretic but Agricola fled to Berlin where he became court preacher.

Most embarrassing for Luther was the bigamy of Philip of Hesse which removed him from the leadership of the Schmalkaldic League. Luther was shocked at Philip's proposal to take a second wife. When Philip threatened to seek the approval of the pope Luther gave his approval to the second marriage urging that Philip keep it secret. When the bigamy became known Luther advised a good strong lie. Luther's role in the affair proved a big embarrassment. Luther insisted that Philip had not told him the full truth, and that had he known all the facts he would not have touched the case.

Luther became increasingly troubled that all of Christendom was not accepting the Reformation. Enrollment in the universities was beginning to decline. Disputes were arising between Lutheran princes. An increasing number of Lutherans were hostile to Melanchthon and theological disputes were multiplying among the Lutherans. Luther's Catholic opponents in Germany, especially Duke George of Albertine Saxony, Duke Henry of Brunswick, and Archbishop Albert of Mainz, maintained a barrage of violent and abusive attacks on Luther. He replied in kind. The bitterness and violence of his attacks increased. In 1537 he published a translation of the Donation of Constantine, which he described as a "shameful, desperate, and wicked lie" used to support a despicable system. His tract "On Councils and Churches" (1539) was a defense of his claim that he had not started a new church but had restored the church of the apostles. His Against Jack Sausage (1541) was a bitter reply to Henry of Brunswick's attack on the bigamy of Philip of Hesse—Henry's life was just as scandalous. The most bitter of all Luther's polemics was his Against the Papacy of Rome founded by the Devil. He called the church "the hellish Roman Church," and added

One would like to curse them, so that thunder and lightning would strike them, hell-fire burn them, the plague, syphilis,
epilepsy, scurvy, leprosy, carbuncles, and all diseases attack them.

Bullinger declared he had never read anything "more savage or impudent." Luther's violence reacted against him and nullified any good he might have accomplished by pointing out the errors of his enemies.

In his later years Luther lost patience with the Jews. Earlier he had hoped the Christians could win them by tolerance and love. In 1543 Luther published vitriolic blasts against the rabbis, entitled, The Jews and Their Lies. Schem Hamphoras., and his Last Words of David.

SOME OF LUTHER'S LATER CONTRIBUTIONS TO REFORMATION

Luther originally maintained that the assumption of the role of bishop by the elector was only a temporary measure. The preaching of the Gospel would make Christians worthy of liberty and capable of directing church affairs. The Christians could call men to special offices. The local congregation should be autonomous. Troubles raised by radicals and fanatics caused Luther to weaken in his confidence in the people as a whole. He found it necessary to look to the leadership of the elector. The electors appointed superintendents to carry out supervision. Church courts composed of theologians and canon lawyers were established. As long as Luther lived the princes looked to Luther's leadership but maintained their own right to exercise authority over the church. Luther steadfastly refused to identify the invisible church and the territorial church. He did not want the people to call themselves "Lutherans."

To the very end Luther maintained a strong interest in establishing a good educational system for Germany. Much of the work was left in the hands of Melanchthon. Luther wanted educated pastors and teachers but he also advocated compulsory primary education for all. Luther believed all the people should be taught both Latin and German, they should read the ancient classics of Cicero, Vergil, Terence and Horace. He translated Aesop's Fables which he placed next to the Bible for compulsory reading. All should be taught music. Luther and his colleagues continually revised the university curriculum with a view to a scholarly ministry.

For Luther the Bible was the sole authority and basis of faith. Luther continued to revise his Bible to make it as attractive and useful as possible. Hans Lufft, a Wittenberg printer, published the completed Bible in 1534 with 124 woodcuts. To the end of his life Luther continued to revise and polish the translation. Above all Luther was an expositor of Scripture. He became increasingly intolerant of those who deviated from his interpretations.

LUTHER'S FINAL MISSION

Late in 1545 the princes of Mansfeld became engaged in a bitter family quarrel and asked Luther to arbitrate. Luther, moved by a strong sense of duty, felt constrained to go to Mansfeld. The princes were his sons in the gospel. He could bring a love to the problems that would be missing in the justice of lawyers. The welfare of his home country was at stake. Luther was not well and it was a
bitter winter. Luther and his party, that included his sons Martin and Paul, set out on January 23, 1546. When they reached the River Salle it was flooding and they had to wait several days before they could cross by boat. The journey was more arduous than anticipated and Luther was extremely fatigued when he reached Eisleben. The next three weeks proved very trying. Luther's patience was tried by the incessant wrangling. Finally the dispute was settled on February 17.

Luther had not been well. At times his pains had been so great the negotiations had to be interrupted. He had a strong premonition that death was near. He spoke often of death. Frequently his friends found him standing before the window praying aloud and speaking of death. The Christian in death has to go ahead all alone. But he meets God. He will be with Christ and the angels. God will know the soul better than the soul knows itself. The soul will stand without works of the law, alone by faith. There will be no thought of any merit. All human accomplishments will be as rubbish. Over and over Luther declared, "We are debtors."

During these last days Luther marked a number of passages in his Bible that he found comforting, such as John 8:51 and Psalm 118:17.

Luther knew his wife, Kate, was worrying about him. He wrote her, "You are worrying for your God as if He were not almighty; He could create ten Dr. Luthers....Don't trouble me with your worrying. I have a better worrier than you and all the angels are. He lies in a manger and clings to a virgin's nipples; yet he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty" (February 7). A few days later he wrote to her, "Unless you cease worrying I shall worry that the earth will devour us in the end and that all the elements will pursue us."

...Is this the way you learn the Catechism and the Creed? Pray, and let God do the worrying! You have never been ordered to worry for me or for yourself. It is written: 'Cast all your cares on the Lord, for He cares for you'." In his last letter he commented on rumors that the emperor and princes were preparing for war: "But let them chatter. We shall wait to see what God will do."

On February 17 Luther remained in his room. To his friends he remarked, "Here in Eisleben I was born and baptized. What if I should remain here?" He added, "If I reconcile my dear sovereigns, the counts, and, God willing, carry out the aims of this journey, then I shall return home, lie down to sleep in the coffin, and give the worms a good fat doctor to devour." He slept for a time in the evening but when he awakened he was troubled with heart pains. The doctor was summoned. Luther declared, "Yes, it is the cold sweat of death; I shall give up the ghost." Once again he sang his hymn, "Death has become my sleep." He prayed, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit; Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth," (Psalm 31:5). He became quiet as though he were sinking away. One of his friends asked him, "Dearest father, do you confess Christ, the Son of God, our Savior and Redeemer?" He replied clearly, "Yes." With hands folded he passed away between two and three o'clock in the morning, February 13, 1546, in Eisleben.

LUTHER'S FUNERAL

A funeral service was held in St. Andrew's Church across the street from the house where he died. A second memorial service was held on February 20 and then between twelve and one o'clock the
funeral procession began the long, mournful homeward journey to Wittenburg. Across the countryside great crowds lined the streets, bells tolled, and school children sang hymns. On Monday, February 22, Luther's body reached Wittenberg, entering by the Elster Gate near the University. The procession was joined by his wife, the students and faculty, and towns people. Mounted Knights led the procession down the long narrow avenue to the Castle Church. It was filled to capacity. The body was carried through the door to which he had nailed The Ninety-five Theses. Bugenhagen delivered a eulogy declaring that one of the great leaders of history, a leading citizen of Germany and a national hero had departed from their midst. Melanchthon delivered a second eulogy, praising Luther as the greatest of theologians since the Apostle Paul. He spoke of Luther's unflagging zeal for the Gospel and pointed out that Luther's anger had never been unloosed for personal gain or satisfaction, but only when he felt the Gospel was hindered or the faith maligned. The body was buried in a grave beneath the floor of the church, directly in front of the pulpit, and a stone tablet was placed over Luther's final resting place.