

Martin Luther

by J.C. Philpot

J.C. Philpot's sermon highlights Martin Luther as a divinely chosen instrument whose gradual revelations of truth sparked the Reformation and emphasized the supremacy of God's word over human authority.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:9, Acts 9:15, Romans 3:24, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12

Topics: "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about how God raises up chosen instruments throughout history to accomplish His purposes, such as Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Paul, emphasizing the importance of these individuals in advancing God's kingdom. He highlights the significant roles of Athanasius, Augustine, Wycliffe, and Luther in combating error and corruption, particularly Luther's pivotal role in the Reformation. Philpot delves into Luther's personal struggles, his deep reverence for the Word of God, and his unwavering commitment to truth, showcasing how Luther's experiences shaped the Reformation and established the supremacy of Scripture over man's authority.

Transcript

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When anything great has to be done on earth for the glory of God and the advance of his kingdom, his usual, if not invariable way has hitherto been to raise up some one instrument, or several instruments, whom he endues with grace, wisdom, and power for the work to be done, and whose labors he blesses to bring about the end that he has determined should be accomplished. Joseph to feed the children of Israel in Egypt; Moses to bring them out of the house of bondage; Joshua to lead them into the promised land; the Judges that succeeded Joshua, such as Gideon and Jephtha, to deliver them from the various captivities into which they fell; Elijah to destroy the idolatry of Baal, and restore the worship of the God of their fathers; Ezra and Nehemiah to bring them back from Babylon, and rebuild the city and temple--all these are so many marked instances of the Lord's using special and chosen instruments to bring about his appointed ends. Had it been his sovereign will, he might have worked otherwise. He might, for instance, have impressed it at once on the minds of all the children of Israel to leave Egypt without any particular leader or guide, or under one of their own choosing; or he might have made them, as one man, by a simultaneous rising, burst the chains of the Midianites without the sword of Gideon; or he might have led them back to himself from the worship of Baal without the ministry of Elijah. But no! he would select and

qualify some one individual who should be his chosen instrument, and in whom and by whom he would work by his Spirit and grace to accomplish his destined purpose.

When we come down to New Testament times, we see the same principle still at work, and the same agency employed. The Lord Jesus Christ chose disciples that they might be constantly with him, to receive the words of life and truth from his own sacred lips, and, when baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire, to go forth as apostles to preach the gospel among all nations for the obedience of faith. Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles, is a special instance of the point we are seeking to establish, and one which sets it in the fullest, clearest light. How striking in this point of view are the words of the Lord to Ananias concerning him: "Go your way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." (Acts 9:15.) All that the Lord did by Paul he might have done without Paul. With a look, a touch, a word, a breath, a nation might have been born in a day, or myriads have started up, like the bones in the valley of vision, and stood up upon their feet an exceeding great army.

But no! Paul was to be the chosen vessel to bear his name before the Gentiles. The mad Pharisee, the bloodthirsty persecutor, the waster of the church of God, was to preach the faith which once he destroyed. He who stood by when the blood of the martyred Stephen was shed, and, consenting unto his death, kept the clothing of them that slew him--this was the man who was to suffer all things for the elect's sake, to be in labors more abundant than all his fellow-servants, and to travel from sea to sea, and from shore to shore, that by him as a chosen instrument the Lord might open the eyes of elect Gentiles, and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.

In the times which followed the New Testament records, when error and corruption had done their sad work, we still find the same principle in operation when God made his right arm bare. When Arianism, in the fourth century, threatened to drown the truth as it is in Jesus as with a flood from the mouth of the serpent, and the faithful few, like Eli, sat trembling for the ark of God, Athanasius was raised up to assert and defend the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity. So alone did this chosen instrument stand, and so boldly did he maintain the field, that it was a common saying of the period, "Athanasius against all the world, and all the world against Athanasius." But we owe it, humanly speaking, to this undaunted champion that the grand foundation doctrine of the Trinity was preserved to the church. When Pelagianism, or the doctrine of human merit, rather more than a century later, was spreading its poisonous influence far and wide, Augustine was raised up to expose and overthrow it. When the densest darkness of Popish error, and, we may add, of Romish oppression, was settling deep and wide on this country, Wycliffe was called forth to herald in, and, as it were, antedate the Reformation. When Wycliffe's followers here, and John Huss, Jerome of Prague, to whom his writings had been blessed, on the continent, were crushed by the iron hand of persecution, and the Romish church seemed to have secured for herself undisputed sway over the minds and liberties of men, God raised up Luther, and wrought by him the greatest and most blessed work since the days of primitive Christianity.

LUTHER is perhaps one of the strongest instances which can be adduced of the truth of the principle we are seeking to establish--that not only does the Lord work by human instruments, but usually by one select instrument; and it is with a special eye to him in this point of view that the preceding sketch has been traced out. For lack of seeing this, not only the character of Luther, but the very nature of the Reformation itself, has been totally misapprehended. The only writer in the multitude of authors, civil and religious, who have drawn their pens in behalf of or against the Reformation, who seems to have thoroughly seen this, is D'Aubigne; and in the clear appreciation of this point lies the chief value of his work. He clearly saw that the Reformation was worked out in Luther's soul, and that thus Luther was not so much a Reformer as the

Reformation; in other words, that the abuses, the errors, the burdens against which he testified by voice and pen with such amazing energy and power, were errors and burdens under which his own soul had well near sunk in despair; and that the truths which he preached with such force and feeling had been brought into his heart by the power of God, whose mighty instrument he was. Thus as error after error was opened up in his soul by the testimony of the Spirit in the word of truth and in his conscience, he denounced them in "thoughts that breathe and words that burn;" and similarly, as one blessed truth after another was revealed to his heart and applied to his soul, he declared it with voice, and pen dipped in the dew of heaven.

The Reformation, therefore, at least in Germany, was, so to speak, gradually drawn out of Luther's soul. He did not come forth as a theologian fully furnished with a scheme of doctrines, or as a warrior armed at all points, but advanced slowly, as himself a learner, from one position to another, gradually feeling his way onward; taking up, therefore, no ground on which he had not been clearly set down, and which he could not firmly maintain from the express testimony of God. It is true that this gradual progress of his mind involved him at times in contradictions and inconsistencies, not to say mistakes and errors, which his enemies have availed themselves of to sully and tarnish one of the noblest characters, both naturally and spiritually, that the world has ever seen. It is the distinguishing feature of low, base minds to fix their eyes on the blemishes of those noble characters, whose excellencies they cannot understand for want of similar noble feelings in themselves. Any one can censure, criticize, and find fault; but any one cannot admire, value, or rightly appreciate, for to do so requires a sympathy with that which deserves admiration. Envy and jealousy may prompt the detracting remark; but humility and a genuine approval of what is excellent for its own sake will alone draw forth the admiring expression. Admiration, or what a popular writer of the present day calls "hero-worship," should not indeed blind us to the faults of great men.

But a discerning eye, while it admits Luther's inconsistencies, sees displayed more manifestly thereby the mercy and wisdom of God. The Lord, indeed, was no more the author of Luther's errors than he was of Luther's sins, but as he mercifully pardoned the one, so he graciously passed by the other, and over-ruled both to his own glory. Several great advantages were, however, secured by the slow and gradual way whereby Luther advanced onward in the path of Reformation.

1. He won his way thereby gradually and slowly in the understanding, conscience, and affections of the people of God, who received the truth from his mouth and pen by the same gradual process as he himself had learned it. Had he at once burst forth into all the full blaze of truth, the light would have been too strong for eyes sealed in darkness for ages. But, like the sun, his light broke gradually upon the eyes of men, and thus they could follow him as he clambered slowly up to the full meridian. Thus he and those whom he taught grew together, and the master was never so much in advance of the pupil as to be out of sight and hearing.

2. Again, by this means, as each corruption of doctrine or practice was laid open to the conscience of the Reformer, or as each truth was made sweet and precious to his soul, he spoke and wrote under the influence as then and there felt. As he gathered the manna fresh, so he filled his omer, and that of his neighbors who had gathered less. The showbread, after being presented before the Lord, was eaten by the priest and his family at the end of the week, before it was spoiled by keeping; and when that was being eaten, fresh was set on the holy table. If Luther and his spiritual family ate together the bread of truth which had been placed before the Lord for his approving smile, while still retaining all its original flavor and freshness, was not that better than if, by long keeping, it had in a measure lost its original sweetness?

3. But further, if Luther had at once come forth with his sweeping denunciations of the Pope as Antichrist, without the minds of men being gradually prepared to receive his testimony, his career, humanly speaking, would have been short, and he would have been cut off at once by the iron hand of the Papacy, and not only his work cut off with him, but his very name now might have been unknown. Charles V., it is well known, regretted to his dying day what he considered the grand error of his life--not violating the safe conduct he had given Luther to come and return uninjured from the Diet of Worms, and not burning him to death as a heretic on the spot, as his ancestor, Sigismund, had burnt John Huss and Jerome of Prague, a hundred years before.

Luther, viewed as regards his natural temperament and disposition, is not a character that an Englishman can well understand, and still less an Englishman of our day and generation. He was a thorough German, but one of the old type, the old-fashioned German stock, closely allied to us in blood, and race, and mental qualities, but in manner and expression somewhat more homely, blunt, and coarse. He was quite a man of the people, being the son of a miner, and had all that rough honesty and plainness of speech and manner which marks the class whence he sprang. Such men, when grace softens their hearts, and refines their minds, are of all best suited for the Lord's work. Peter, the fisherman, and Paul, the tent-maker, Bunyan, the tinker, and Huntington, the coal-heaver--such men, when called by grace and qualified by heavenly gifts, are far better instruments than scholars and students who know nothing beyond their books, and are lost when out of the smell and sight of their library.

Luther, it is true, was a highly educated and indeed a very learned man; but he never lost, amid his dusty folios, his native simplicity of heart and manners. He was, therefore, frank, open, sincere, outspoken, but withal rough, violent, and often coarse--no, sometimes almost insolent in the tones of defiance that burst forth from him, almost as fire from a volcano. When once roused, as for instance by our King Henry VIII., he spared no one he considered the enemy of truth. Kings, emperors, princes, and popes, were all to him mere nine-pins, whom he trundled down one after another without any scruple or the least ceremony, if they seemed to stand in the way of the gospel. In that age of feudal obedience, when one class exacted, and the other paid, a servile respect, and a crouching deference of which we can form no idea, it was indeed a daring innovation for a shaven monk, and he by birth and blood but a miner's son, to defy the united strength of Pope and Caesar, and set up the word of God as supreme over the consciences of men.

Never, perhaps, did a man live since the time of the apostles, over whose own conscience the word of God exercised such paramount dominion. He had felt the power of that word in his soul. It had sounded the inmost depths of his conscience. In no recorded experience do we read of any man whom the holy, just, and righteous law of God more terrified and broke to pieces. It is wonderful to see a man of his powerful mind, one of the most fearless, bold, and energetic that ever came from the hand of the Creator, so terrified and almost distracted by the majesty and justice of God as revealed in a broken law. Three days and three nights did he once lie on a couch without eating, drinking, or sleeping, under the terrors revealed in the words, "the righteousness of God." He would sometimes shriek, and cry, and faint away under a sight and sense of the holiness of God, and his own sinfulness before him. No saint of God could more truly say, "While I suffer your terrors I am distracted;" nor did any one ever more find the word of God to be quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow--a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

And when mercy and grace were revealed to his soul, as they in due time were, from the very passage which had so terrified him (Rom. 3:24-26), what a supremacy of the word of God did this experience of law

and gospel establish in his heart! He could then take this two-edged sword, which had so pierced him, and wield it so as to pierce others. It then became in his hands a weapon not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.

In this supremacy of the word of God, as thus established in Luther's soul, lay the whole pith and core of the Reformation. When he found the old Latin Bible in the convent library, and day after day crept up to read and study it under the terrors of the Law, the accusations of a guilty conscience, and the temptations of the devil, God was planting in his soul that godly tree, under the boughs of which we are now living, and from whose branches we are still gathering fruit. When he stole away from sweeping out the church and the filthy rooms of the convent, and could, away from the bread-bag, which his brother monks compelled him to carry through the streets of Erfurt to beg victuals for them, read in secrecy and solitude that sacred book, the very existence of which they scarce knew, God was secretly sowing the seed of the Reformation in his heart. When that pale-faced, worn-out monk lay crying and groaning in his cell, under the most dismal apprehensions of the eternal wrath of God, he was, so to speak, travailing in birth of the Reformation and when deliverance came to his soul, the Reformation was born.

The supremacy of the inspired Scriptures, the paramount authority of the word of God over the word of man, seems a simple principle to us who have been cradled in its belief. In fact, it is one of those self-evident propositions which have only to be stated to be universally received. But simple and self-evident as it seems to us, it was not established until Luther brought it forth out of the depths of his own heart, and laid it down before the eyes of men, as God had laid it down in his soul. Never was a principle laid down by the voice and pen of man more fruitful in result. Hitherto the Bible was scarcely known, even to learned men; and being locked up in the original languages, Hebrew and Greek, to all others it was a sealed book. In the controversies that arose in the middle ages, it was scarcely ever appealed to, and was totally misunderstood. Decrees of Popes, acts of Councils, decisions of Universities, opinions of the Fathers, sentiments of learned men--these were the ruling authorities, and were appealed to in all disputed points as lawyers now quote established cases in a court of law.

But Luther made short work with them all, and swept them away never more to stand. Never did earth witness, in modern days, a grander, more majestic, and, in its consequences, a more triumphant scene than Luther standing at the Diet of Worms, before the Emperor, the Princes, and all the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and dignitaries of Germany. A poor monk, holding by the word of God as felt in his conscience against all the majesty and wrath of Pope and Emperor--here was a sight for angels to look at (1 Cor. 4:9); and well might those ministering spirits wonder and admire the grace of God thus shining forth in a dying man. There he stood as the servant of the living God, with the word of the Lord in his heart and mouth. The Lord gave him faith thus to speak and act; honored it, and brought him off more than conqueror; and not him only, but the Reformation of which he there stood the living representative. The supreme authority of God's word over the consciences of men, and its paramount authority in all matters of faith, were then brought forth; and before that glittering weapon which the champion of God then drew from its sheath, and brandished before the eyes of assembled Germany, Popery sank down with one of its heads wounded to death. The word of God and the word of man there met face to face; truth and error were there put into the scale.

Scarcely did any man ever leave behind him such materials for a biography as "The solitary monk who shook the world." His works fill several thick folio volumes. He wrote hundreds of letters to his friends, nearly all of which are preserved; and well they deserve it, for they are full of sense and wisdom, as well

as of frank cordiality and warm affection. His very conversation, at his meals and in private--for he used to board and lodge students gratis, and his house was open to all refugees for conscience' sake--his "table-talk," was taken down, and occupies a good-sized volume. There is scarcely, indeed, any one man of whom we know so much--one may almost say too much, for all his weaknesses and failings are recorded as well as his better qualities. And as he, when not depressed with temptation and gloom, was lively and cheerful, and a great talker, his enemies have availed themselves of some of his speeches to tarnish and sully his bright name. But let such vipers gnaw the file! It is proof against their teeth and their venom. But to those who love truth and yet know their own hearts sufficiently to be prepared to meet great faults and blemishes, we would say, Such a man is worth studying, such a history is worth reading; for it is the history, not merely of a man most distinguished by nature and grace, but of a mind which has exercised the greatest influence over the minds of men, and, one may say, over the destinies of the church of God, as well as of nations, since the days of Paul.

Some of our ministers are trying to pick up a few scraps of the Greek and Latin languages, which they can never learn to be of the least use to them; for a language, like a trade, must be learned in boyhood and youth, to be thoroughly understood; and if not thoroughly mastered, will only mislead. Instead of all this useless toil, if they want some more reading than the Bible gives them, and wish for some trustworthy information of the state of things in times gone by, let them read such works as Foxe's "Book of Martyrs," D'Aubigne's "History of the Reformation," Milner's "Church History," Neal's "History of the Puritans." We do not name such works as substitutes for spiritual and experimental writings.

But all things have their place; and sometimes, when the mind, through temptation or sluggishness, cannot approach the purer fountains of truth, a book like D'Aubigne's "History of the Reformation" may be read not without profit. But it is not possible to lay down rules for any to go by. Some have no time, others no inclination, to read; and what little time they have they devote to the Scriptures. They cannot do better; there they have the truth in its purity, and need not forsake its streams for the turbid pools of man. It is not reading, learning, or study that can make an able minister of the New Testament. If so, the academies would give us an ample supply. But the greatest readers and most laborious students are usually the most ignorant of the teaching of the Spirit, and the work of faith with power. "The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, and adds learning to his lips"; and this learning is not of the schools. A man who reads his eyes out may be most ignorant, for he may know nothing as he ought to know; and a man who reads nothing but his Bible may be most learned, for he may have the unctuous teachings of the Holy Spirit.

There are three books which, if a man will read and study, he can dispense with most others.

1. The Book of Providence; and this he reads to good purpose, when he sees written down line by line the providential dealings of God with him, and a ray of Divine light gilds every line.
2. The Word of God; and this he reads to profit, when the blessed Spirit applies it with power to his soul.
3. The Book of his own heart; and this he studies with advantage, when he reads in the new man of grace the blessed dealings of God with his soul, and in the old man of sin and death, enough to fill him with shame and confusion of face, and make him loathe and abhor himself in dust and ashes.

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