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The Reformation's Major Figures

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WEEK 3: The Reformation's Major Figures

BY DR. MARK ELLINGSEN (PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY, INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER)

TOPIC SUMMARY

It is good that we not concentrate on Martin Luther alone. Let's start with his friend (sort of), then get to his enemies, and finish with three other Reformers.

Philip Melancthon (1497-1560): Melancthon had an elite Renaissance education, far superior to Luther's. In fact, he was Luther's tutor in Biblical language during their years as colleagues at Wittenberg University. Melancthon seems to have adopted Luther's theological commitments and actually wrote the primary authoritative statement of Lutheran theology, *The Augsburg Confession*. But he was perceived by Luther as a bit too compromising, and after Luther's death he diverged from Luther on a number of significant theological points.

Frederick (1463-1525): The Elector of Saxony from 1486 until his death, he was Luther's ruler. Known as Frederick the Wise, he coveted such a title, wanting to be known as scrupulously fair and just. This was evidenced in his efforts to ensure that Luther received a fair hearing in proceedings with the Roman hierarchy and from other German princes. To that end he rescued Luther from possible persecution after the Reformer's condemnation by the majority of Electors of the Holy Roman Empire, hiding him in Wartburg Castle where the budding Reformer worked on his German translation of the Bible. Eventually Frederick became a supporter of Luther.

Pope Leo X (1475-1511) (Giovanni de' Medici): The Pope from 1513 until his death. He presided over the church at the outset of the Reformation and excommunicated Luther in 1520. He came to the papal throne with much promise, with a high-quality Renaissance education, a connoisseur of the arts; he seemed just the right man to finish the rebuilding of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. He sought to raise funds by selling indulgences, and his principal German ally was a bishop from a wealthy German family, Albert of Mainz, who was Luther's bishop.

Charles V (1500-1558): The King of Europe's super-power of the era, Spain, and also Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. A devout Catholic, he sought to quash the emerging Reformation movements militarily. Ultimately he failed, abdicating the throne to live out his days in a monastery.

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531): Led the Reform in Zurich. His most radical students became leaders of the Anabaptist Movement. But Zwingli is especially influential on some Reformed denominations like the Reformed Churches in Germany and the United Church of Christ.

John Calvin (1509-1564): Led the Reformation in Geneva. Plays the role Luther does for Lutherans in the Presbyterian Church and also influential in segments of the United Church of Christ.

KEY WORDS

Holy Roman Empire: A political entity created in 800 AD by the papacy aimed at facilitating the collaboration of the various European principalities not part of established kingdoms into a harmony. It included Saxony (the principality in which Luther lived). This loose confederation continued until 1806.

Anabaptist Reformers: A group of Reformers dedicated to restoring New Testament practices in the present. They were among the most anti-Catholic of the Reformers, seeking to do away with most Catholic practices, including infant Baptism. They were so-named because they practiced rebaptisms of those baptized as infants. The largest denominations with Anabaptist roots are the Mennonites, Hutterite Brethren, and the Amish.

WHERE DOES LUTHER STAND?

In Philip Melanchthon's eulogy at Luther's funeral, he spoke these words: "He was an important instrument, in the hands of God, of public utility; let us diligently study the truth he taught, imitating in our humble situations his fear of God, his faith, the intensity of his devotions, the integrity of his ministerial character, his purity, his careful avoidance of seditious counsel, his ardent thirst of knowledge. And as we frequently meditate upon the pious examples of those illustrious guides of the Church, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Paul, whose histories are transmitted to us, so let us frequently reflect upon the doctrine and course of life which distinguished our departed friend."

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- + One of the ways Melanchthon differed from Luther was in his understanding of free will. Melanchthon believed that we played an active role in our conversion whereas Luther saw conversion as solely the work of the Holy Spirit. What do you think? Why?
- + We might condemn the selling of indulgences. But how is that different from what we do when we stage fund-raisers to build our churches or enhance our church programs?
- + The other Protestant Reformers share many commitments with Luther, even teaching justification by grace through faith like he did. But they don't stress justification and freedom as much as Lutherans do, don't have our view of the Sacraments, and don't use the liturgy. Should these differences matter today? Why or why not?
- + Imagine you were a Roman Catholic in the sixteenth century. What might you have thought of Luther? What might Roman Catholics think of Martin Luther today?