

MARTIN LUTHER – REFORMATION UNDONE?

In 1517, an Augustinian monk posted a notice requesting a public discussion at Germany's Wittenburg University. With these 95 Theses, thirty-three year old monk Martin Luther declared an end to the 1,200 year era of holy Roman Catholic hegemony over Christian belief and practice.

The single catholic church created 12 centuries earlier by Emperor Constantine would now be faced with a challenger over an issue as old as the dispute between the apostle Paul and Jesus' brother James. Was salvation from eternal damnation to be found as a matter of works or as a matter of faith?

For Luther, the issue at hand related to the increasingly pervasive practice of selling indulgences – relief from the eternal damnation or purgatory in exchange for a monetary contribution. The application of much of this *pay for grace* theology involved funding the construction of St. Peter's basilica in Rome.

The 95 Theses were aimed squarely at papal authority – both temporal and spiritual. Luther's thesis #5 launched the attack: "The pope has *neither the will nor the power* to remit any penalties beyond those imposed either at his own discretion or by canon law."

By the time he gets to Thesis #86, Martin has become somewhat more personal in his attack: "Again: since the pope's income today is larger than that of the wealthiest of wealthy men, why does he not build this one church of St. Peter *with his own money*, rather than with the money of indigent believers?"

The Reformation Luther launched carries forward as the dominant event of Christianity for the subsequent 500 years to this 21st century. Unfortunately, this reformation is incomplete. The Christian revolution was aborted – by none other than Luther himself.

BACKGROUND OF MARTIN LUTHER

The life of Martin Luther can be divided into distinct categories – as it has by numerous theologians and historians. At least three distinct phases can be identified – beginnings, reformation, church leadership and old age.

Luther's Beginnings: Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany on November 10, 1483. His father Hans was a copper miner. The older Luther had high hopes for Martin to become a professional man, a lawyer. At age 17, his father picked the University of Erfurt, one of the finest universities of the time – as the place for Martin's college education – and paid for by Hans.

After graduating 30th in a class of 57, Martin received his Masters degree. His father then arranged for Martin's entry into law school. On July 2, 1505, less than two months after

beginning law school, Martin was traveling his way back to Erfurt from his parents' home and became caught in a violent thunderstorm.

Luther was nearly struck by lightning and thrown to the ground. At this moment, he cried to Saint Ann to save him, vowing to become a monk if he escaped alive.

Just over 2 weeks later, Martin Luther entered the Black Monastery on July 17 – much to his father's displeasure. Luther saw this as perhaps the surest path to his own soul's salvation. As a grouping of Augustinian Hermits, the monastery was a strict though not austere order of mendicant monks.

In 1507, Luther was ordained and celebrated his first mass. The subsequent year he taught briefly at the new university in Wittenburg. In 1510, he and a traveling companion were sent to Rome to handle some of the orders' political affairs. Upon his return in April 1511, Luther was transferred to the newly constructed Black Cloister in Wittenburg.

In 1512, Luther received his Doctor of Theology degree. A year later, he became a lecturer on the Psalms. At age 30 (in 1513), he also became priest off-campus at Wittenburg's city church.

Two years later (at age 31), he was appointed vicar in charge of eleven Augustinian monasteries. That same year, he began a year of lectures on the subject of the New Testament book of Romans.

In 1516, plague struck Wittenburg. Luther stayed and the next year Johann Tetzel began selling indulgences on the borders of Saxony. This occurred through licensing action of Pope Leo X as a means to finance the construction of St. Peter's basilica in Rome.

Many of the customers for Tetzel's indulgences also were parishioners of Martin Luther. As one side effect, Luther noticed fewer people coming to confession. Luther was outraged.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* to protest the sale of indulgences. To elevate the level of protest, he also had a copy of the Latin text delivered to the archbishop, hoping to get an answer beyond that of a private disputation. Initially, Luther received little response, but in December Johann Tetzel wrote two sets of counter-theses after noticing a fall-off in the sale of indulgences.

Reformation: Less than one year after the posting on the Wittenburg door, Luther was tried (in absentia) on charges of heresy in Rome. Pope Leo also issued *Cum Postquam*, outlining the church's doctrine on indulgences (in direct opposition to Luther).

By early 1519, Luther was ready to recant and even send a letter of apology to the pope. In March, he actually sent a letter to Leo X, stating it was not his intent to undermine the authority of the pope or church. However, Luther also entered into a debate with Johann Eck. It was during this debate that he denied the primacy of the Pope and the infallibility of church General Councils.

In 1520, Luther completed three major works. The first was titled and addressed *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. It debunked the *three walls* on which papal authority had rested: stating that all believers are priests, there is no exclusive papal right to interpret the Scriptures, and a reformatory council of the church could be called by others than the pope.

In 1521, Martin Luther was summoned by Emperor Charles V to appear before the Diet of Worms. During the second hearing, Luther made his position clear: “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have *contradicted each other* – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me.”

In 1523, the first Protestant martyrs were burned at Brussels. In 1524, peasants revolted citing Luther’s teachings and demanding more just economic conditions. Luther also stopped wearing the religious habit.

In 1525, Martin Luther wrote *Against the Murderous and Thieving Hordes of Peasants*. At the Battle of Frankenhausen, 50,000 peasant lives were lost. By the time the uprising was quelled, nearly 100,000 lives were lost. The peasants believed Luther had betrayed them.

This same year, Martin Luther married former nun Katherine von Bora. They took up residence at Black Cloister, the former Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg.

Church Leadership & Old Age: Though married late at nearly age 42, Martin Luther clearly enjoyed family life. Over the next 9 years, Katherine gave birth to 6 children – two of whom would die before their father.

His love for family is an on-going legacy – reflected in the Christmas tree tradition begun for Martin’s family. And he composed the most basic of the Christmas carols “Away in a Manger.”

As a composer, Luther also wrote the *Smart Songbook* and “A Mighty Fortress is our God” in 1527. He wrote doctrinal text for the new Lutheran church, including a *Small and Large Catechism*.

While Luther found marriage enjoyable, advancing age and, perhaps, job stress led to growing health issues. Within two years of marriage, Luther began to experience heart problems as well as long-standing digestive and intestinal difficulties. By 1538 (age 54), deteriorating health (including uric acid stones) and arthritis were affecting his ability to work and write. The next year, Katherine experienced a miscarriage; Martin was by her bed much of the time.

Advancing age also brought on more violently polemical writings, capped by his polemic *Against the Jews* in 1543. In 1545, Luther wrote *Against the Papacy at Rome founded by the Devil*. Less than one year later, Martin Luther died during a visit to Eisleben, the home of his birth. Death was attributed to heart failure. The date was February 18, 1546, and Martin was 62 years of age.

REFORMATION INCOMPLETE

Half a millennium later, we live in the shadow of Martin Luther's heresy. Martin's heresy was not the doctrine of salvation by grace; he merely uncovered what Paul had written 1,500 years earlier.

Rather, Luther's heresy was his inability to put the concept of a priesthood of believers *into practice*. Luther's heresy was the imprimatur for Christianity – Protestant or Catholic – to continue down the same path of intolerance and repression that continue to obscure the diversity and true eclecticism of Jesus' message.

Part of the reason for Martin Luther's inability to shake the Catholic tradition of intolerance comes from his own proclivity to long bouts of depression. This natural predisposition was reinforced by Luther's preoccupation with the wrath of God. During a bout of this black horror, he could not bear to read biblical words such as those of Psalm 90: "For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed."

Luther's inability to fully trust in a priesthood of believers, in individual reason, came as the result of his own insecurities. Because Luther's God was a god of vengeance, Martin Luther similarly gave himself license to wreak havoc on those with whom he disagreed. As with the church he dedicated his life to tear down, this revolutionary reverted to what he earlier had disdained – a priesthood of one. Papal authority was no more; in its place was substituted Luther the new religious autocrat.

PECULIARITIES OF MARTIN LUTHER

Much like the apostle Paul, Martin Luther was a man of uncommon intellect and authority. One did not cross Luther lightly. Yet it is precisely the power of the man from which spring forth distinctive eccentricities.

The Vulgar Luther: Much of Luther's vulgar commentary focused on the digestive and excretory systems – where Luther himself often experienced physical problems. Luther was particularly haunted by the presence of the devil – who manifest himself in obscene ways.

Lutherly Exclusion: The Augustinian monk who railed against the egotistical excesses of the papacy increasingly came to emulate similar patterns of disfavor, then persecution for those *out of synch* with his own expectations.

On the canonical level, a particular target of Martin Luther's ire was the New Testament epistle of James. The epistle's assertion that "faith without works is also dead" absolutely rubbed Martin the wrong way (as it had the apostle Paul before him). Luther commented that James was "a right strawy epistle" and questioned whether a book of such inferior worth even belonged in the New Testament.

On a more practical level, Luther's disfavor had more catastrophic consequences. His ultimate condemnation of the Peasants' Revolt ultimately led to the loss of 100,000 lives. He came to

support the execution of Anabaptists who he felt disrupted the public order and refused to stay in banishment.

And in a sentiment with far-reaching consequences, Martin Luther came to advocate severe repression for the Jewish population in Germany, offering suggestions to: “Burn down their synagogues, forbid all that I enumerated earlier, force them to work, and deal harshly with them, as Moses did in the wilderness, laying three thousand lest the whole people perish.”

MARTIN LUTHER IN SUMMARY

With Martin Luther, we profile the last of the great heretics of Christianity. Luther took his historic stand at Wittenburg – placing himself in opposition to the combined weight of more than a millennium of accreted Catholic dogma. His 95 theses unleashed the forces of people, faith and politics against papal authority and the economic hegemony of a single European church-state.

More so than the other heretics of the Christian faith, Martin Luther changed not only the church, he altered the state. The economic and social energies unleashed by the Reformation heralded the end of feudalism, the triumph of capitalism, the resurgence of education, and eventually the swelling tide of democracy.

If the 21st century still resonates in the freedom and dynamic energy released by of these tidal forces, we also remain imprisoned within the socio-religious fortress that Luther reinforced. Jesus remains a caricature of the Nicene Creed which continues supreme.

To the dominant church of the era, Martin Luther’s heresy came in his challenge to papal authority. To those who value the divine, Luther’s heresy was the claim of salvation through grace, not works. But these heresies were nothing new; Luther was merely rediscovering and again unleashing the power of a Pauline ministry 1,500 years earlier.

The reformation of *protestants* that Luther launched carries forward as the dominant event of Christianity for the subsequent 500 years to this 21st century. Unfortunately, this reformation is incomplete. The Christian revolution was aborted – by none other than Luther himself.

For those who have lived in the ensuing five centuries of Luther’s legacy, the real heresy lies in Luther’s failure to complete the Reformation he started. Luther failed to throw off the shackles of Nicaea, to accept and celebrate diverse interpretations of the Jesus message, and to center a revived church on the message of creative conflict rather than monolithic uniformity. That time, that fulfillment of reformation, has yet to come.

Adapted from the chapter “The Heresy of Luther: Reformation Undone,” detailed in the 360 +/- page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. Check us out at www.jesustheheresy.com.