

Dr. Martin Luther and the Reformation

Martin Luther was born in 1483. His parents were poor peasants. Like most parents of the time, they were strict disciplinarians and also raised Martin according to the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

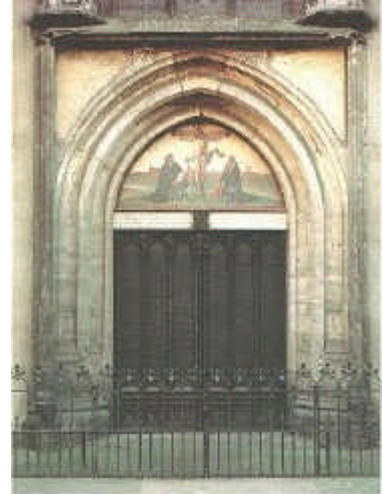
At the age of 5, Martin was already studying Latin in school. He began attending the school of a religious brotherhood in Magdeburg, Germany when he was 13. He was a brilliant student and received his Master of Arts degree from the University of Erfurt in 1505 and began the study of law. It was shortly after this that Martin had a religious experience. During a violent storm he was knocked to the ground by a lightning bolt. ***"Help me, St. Anne, and I'll become a monk"*** he cried. It was after this that he joined the Augustinian Cloister in Erfurt.



In 1507 Luther was ordained and left for the University of Wittenberg to teach moral philosophy. Three years later he journeyed to Rome on business for the Augustinians. While there he was shocked at the spiritual laxity in the Holy City. After returning from Rome, Luther earned his Doctorate of Theology. From 1513 to 1518 he lectured at the University of Wittenberg on Biblical Theology. At this time he began establishing himself and became widely known. In 1515 at the age of 32 Doctor Luther was appointed District Vicar for the Augustinian Order.

Throughout his career, Luther was torn by inner turmoil. He questioned that if man was ruled by sin, how could he hope to gain redemption in the eyes of God? He continually sought peace through *"good works"* -- including fasting and punishing his flesh. His failure to cleanse himself drove him to the edge of despair. Luther's crisis continued until study of the Holy Scriptures brought a new conviction that **salvation is not "earned" by works -- it is a Divine Gift of God.** It is through faith that man receives God's divine gift of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then his sins are forgiven by the sheer mercy of God. This Doctrine of Justification by Faith soon came to form the basis of Luther's religious thoughts. It was because of this that Luther began to question the Church's practice of Indulgence. According to the church, some people were better than needed in order to be saved. Their *"extra merit"* could be transferred via an indulgence to those whose salvation was in doubt. This was done by making a pilgrimage and paying a small sum. By Luther's time the idea was being abused and indulgences were on public sale. As a parish priest of Wittenberg, Luther protested this situation to the Archbishop of Mainz.

All of these things led to Luther writing his 95 Thesis and nailing them to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. There were three basic ideas: protest against the abuse of papal authority; challenge to the Pope; and denial of the "*extra merit*" theory behind indulgences. Most of the Thesis were not opposed to traditional Roman Catholic doctrine. The Church ordered Luther to appear in Rome to answer charges of heresy. Prince Elector Fredrick the Wise of Saxony, intervened and the Imperial Diet (**hearing**) was held in Augsburg, Germany, in October 1518. Luther refused to recant. Reform issues spread and the Pope issued a Bull (**Papal Order**) threatening Luther with excommunication. At the age of 38 Luther publicly burned the Bull and was excommunicated in January 1521. In April 1521 Luther, *the reformer*, appeared before the Imperial Diet at Worms. There Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, proclaimed Luther a heretic and put him under the Ban of the Empire and all of his works were banned.



After being declared a heretic and banned by the Diet of Worms, Luther was given asylum by Prince Frederick and spent a year at Wartburg Castle under Prince Frederick's care. While here he translated the Bible into German. He did this to make the Bible available to all people. During his absence from Wittenberg, the reform movement was progressing but becoming very disorderly and church property was being destroyed. The town council asked Luther to return and speak to the people. At great risk to his life he did this and pleaded with the reformers not to use violence, fearing the reform might lead to revolution. However, many German peasants, long being oppressed, felt the time had come to revolt. Luther called for swift suppression of the rebellious peasants. He lost the support among many radical reformers. Luther remained in Wittenberg where he wrote, taught and preached for the next 20 years. It was also here that in June 1525 at the age of 42 he married Katharina von Bora, a former nun, whom he had sheltered at one time in Wittenberg. Theirs was a happy marriage. They had six children of their own and gave a home to eleven orphans.

During his later years Luther managed to remain very prolific. Despite the Ban of Church and Empire, he continued on with his work. During his lifetime he published almost 400 works which included Biblical commentaries, catechisms, sermons and tracts. He also worked on revisions of his translation of the Bible. Luther was said to have an excellent singing voice and loved to sing his own hymns. He helped people take part in church by writing hymns, both words and music.

In 1546 Luther was asked to arbitrate a dispute in Eisleben. He traveled to the town of his birth and at the age of 63 died of a stroke. His body was interred in the Castle Church in Wittenberg, where he had posted his 95 Thesis almost 30 years before.

Of all the things Luther wrote about, his Reforms had the most impact. Some of the more important ones are the following. In Luther's "**Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation**" he urged the state to undertake reforms which the Church had neglected. The papacy should be a spiritual institution allowing finances to be handled by national churches.

In "**The Babylonian Captivity**" tract Luther reduced the number of Sacraments to two -- baptism and the Lord's Supper. He wrote these Sacraments, had visible signs of outward grace and were instituted by Christ Himself. It was Luther's intention to bring the whole congregation into the worship service. In 1526 he produced a vernacular liturgy, the German Mass. He also insisted that the laity be offered the wine as well as the bread in Holy Communion. It was his belief that the Word of God, received in faith and revealed as the Holy Gospel, was the true path to salvation. The Scriptures are the supreme authority in matters of faith and life. Luther taught that the individual conscience is answerable only to the Word of God. Christ alone is the intermediary between man and his Creator. Through baptism we are all members of the priesthood of believers.

Luther encouraged his close friend and colleague, Philip Melanchthon, to write the Augsburg Confession. Those doctrines expressed in 1530 are still basic to the Lutheran Church. Melanchthon claimed that Lutherans remained faithful to the true teachings of the Christian Church.

Martin Luther lived what he believed and became a turning point in history. He left behind a rich legacy of doctrines, literature and ethics. Above all he taught people to be faithful to their God.