

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

Martin Luther's Early Years: Did You Know?

Little-known or remarkable facts about Martin Luther's Early Years

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At birth, Martin Luther's name was Martin **Luder**. He later changed it to the more academically respectable **Luther**.

Christopher Columbus set sail when Luther was in grammar school. Michelangelo was completing his Sistine Chapel ceiling as Luther began teaching theology.

Luther had probably eight siblings, yet only one of Luther's brothers (Jacob) and only three of his sisters survived to adulthood.

As a schoolboy, Luther preferred music to any other subject, and he became proficient at playing the lute. He gave away his lute when he entered the monastic cloister at age 21.

Before he became a friar, Luther was well on his way to becoming a lawyer. He had earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees in the shortest time possible.

While walking back to law school in 1505, Luther encountered a frightening thunderstorm. During the storm he cried out in fear, "Help me, St. Anna! I will become a monk." He kept his vow.

Early on as a reformer, Luther publicly concluded that penance (the church sacrament involving confession of sin) wasn't a sacrament at all. Yet he continued to daily confess his sins to another person for most of his life.

Luther once said he had not even seen a Bible until he was 20 years old.

Luther translated Erasmus's Greek New Testament into German at the headlong rate of more than 1,500 words per **day**.

Luther publicly criticized the abuse of indulgences more than three years before he published his 95 Theses on the topic.

After 1521, Luther spent the rest of his life as an outlaw.

Luther once supervised 10 monasteries. As a district vicar, he held administrative authority for 10 Augustinian monasteries in Thuringia and Saxony.

When Luther became a priest and celebrated his first Mass, in 1507, he trembled so much he nearly dropped the bread and cup. He became so terrified of the presence of Christ in the sacrament that he tried to run from the altar.

Luther raised so much hostility that it was rumored—and taken seriously for a time by some respected intellectuals of the day—that he was the product of a bathhouse liaison between his mother and the Devil. At the Diet of Worms he was condemned as a “demon in the appearance of a man.”

Luther almost died at age 19. On his way home from school, a dagger pierced his leg, cutting an artery. Only because he was with a friend, who fetched a doctor, was his life saved. Lying at the edge of the road till the doctor came, he cried to the mother of Jesus, “O, Mary, help!” His Wittenberg friends later criticized him for appealing to Mary instead of Jesus.

In 1520 and 1521, Luther was the rage in Germany. Posters of Luther (singlesheet woodcuts) sold out as soon as they went on sale, and many were pinned up in public places.

By the end of his life, Martin Luther wrote 60,000 pages, yet he hoped that “all my books would disappear and the Holy Scriptures alone be read.”

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From the Editor: Dwarfed By a Giant

KEVIN A. MILLER

Martin Luther needs no introduction. "In most big libraries," writes historian John M. Todd, "books by and about Martin Luther occupy more shelf room than those concerned with any other human being except Jesus of Nazareth."

Historians track gradual and complex processes, so they hesitate to attribute too much significance to any single individual. With Luther, there's little danger of overdoing it

Consider these statements by historian Kurt Aland: "...with Martin Luther's posting of the Theses on October 31, 1517, the proud structure of the Western church fell in ruins within a few years"; "...the intellectual life of the modern age would not have come into existence without Luther and the Reformation."

Time magazine's Richard N. Ostling calls Luther "the last medieval man and the first modern one...." Think of a significant aspect of modern life—politics, education, religion, family life, media. You can't discuss any of these without mentioning Martin Luther. Not bad for a "son of a peasant" (as he called himself) who dropped out of law school.

And this barely touches his earthquake-like effect on the church. Pope Leo X called him "a wild boar in the vineyard," because he uprooted and tore apart longstanding doctrines and practices. Yet many modern Catholic theologians concede that "on the matter of truth, Luther is a lifesaver for Christians."

Since Martin Luther needs no justification for being featured in *Christian History*, the real question is one many of you have posed: *Why haven't you covered him sooner?*

We've had valid reasons about scheduling, but one reason is that we couldn't conceive of how. How could we capture Luther in a magazine format? It felt like trying to park the Goodyear blimp in a one-car garage.

The situation called for extraordinary measures. We've taken them:

- We have expanded our editorial coverage in this issue by a full 20 percent.
- We have included a full-color foldout timeline. Such a timeline costs a lot of money, more than our editorial budgets allow. But we decided to break the bank for the sake of providing you with an excellent visual presentation of Luther's life.
- For the first time in the magazine's history, we have decided to devote two full issues to a single person. This issue focuses on Luther's early years, the critical ones when he broke from Rome. Next year we will publish a companion issue that covers Luther's later years and his legacy.

We hope you enjoy reading about Luther's first 40 years, from his birth to the year 1523. Next year we'll cover the turning points of his marriage (and Peasants' War) in 1525, his conflicts with other

reformers, his impact on worship, and much more. We think you'll agree that Luther's story is so interesting, and so significant, that it well deserves a second volume.

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The Accidental Revolutionary

In his quest for spiritual peace, Luther had no idea he'd leave his world in turmoil.

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An adviser to sixteenth-century tourists remarked that people who return from their travels without having seen Martin Luther and the pope "have seen nothing." This man later became a bishop of the Holy Roman Catholic Church and one of Luther's opponents.

Another person read Luther's works and declared, "The church has never seen a greater heretic!" But upon reflection he exclaimed, "He alone is right!" This man became a reformer, and Luther regularly made private confession to him.

How could one friar and professor evoke such conflicting reactions?

The answer is simplicity itself. This man, who continues to speak after half a millennium, either taught the core of the Christian faith correctly or is still leading souls astray. As he himself put it, "Others before me have contested practice. But to contest doctrine, that is to grab the goose by the neck!"

Unspectacular Childhood

Contrary to some romantic speculations, Luther's childhood had almost nothing to do with his becoming a revolutionary theologian. He was born almost in transit on November 10, 1483, at Eisleben (about 120 miles southwest of modern Berlin), where both parents may have worked as domestic servants.

Within the year, the family moved to Mansfeld, where his father, Hans Luder (as it was locally pronounced), found work in the local copper mines. Hans quickly climbed, perhaps with the help of relatives, to ownership or part-ownership of several mines and smelters. He even became a member of the city council. Cranach's painting of the elderly Luder shows him in a fine woven coat with a fur collar.

Luther remembered his childhood in part for (in today's terms) its physical abuse. He was beaten by both his mother and father in truly frightening ways. He became so estranged from his father on one occasion that Hans sought *his* forgiveness. But Hans did come to his son. As Luther also remembered, "He meant well by me." Perhaps the strict discipline reflected no more than a family that willed to be successful, and was so. There was certainly nothing unusual about it.

There is also no evidence of anything unusual or rebellious about the family's piety. Margaretha, Luther's mother, shared the common superstitions of the time. For example, she blamed the death of one of her sons on a neighbor, whom she regarded as a witch. Hans joined in seeking a special indulgence for the local parish church. As a youngster, Luther imbibed a religion in which one had to strive for future salvation just as one had to work for material survival.

A Far-Sighted Decision

In this setting, two unspectacular matters set Luther apart.

First, Hans (who could have satisfied himself with having the lad learn to read, write, and cipher, and then go into the family business) sent the boy to Latin school and finally on to the University of Erfurt. In making this farsighted decision, Hans was ambitious not just for his son, but also for the entire family. If he succeeded, young Luther would become a lawyer, who, whether in the church or at court, could then provide handsomely for both parents and siblings.

Second, the youth who left home before his fourteenth birthday proved to be extraordinarily intelligent. He earned both his baccalaureate and master's degrees in the shortest time allowed by the statutes of the University of Erfurt. He proceeded directly to the faculty of law. He proved so adept at disputations (public debates that were the principal means of learning and teaching) that he earned the nickname "The Philosopher." Hans was so pleased that he gave his son the costly gift of the central text for legal studies at the time, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.

From Law to Legalism

Unfortunately for Hans's plans, the fledgling law student began to have doubts about the status of his soul and, with them, the career his father had securely set before him. In 1505, when Luther was not yet 22, he took an officially sanctioned, yet unexplained, leave from the university. He visited his family to seek, it appears, their advice about his future. On his return to Erfurt, as Luther fought his way through a severe thunderstorm, a bolt of lightning struck the ground near him.

"Help me, St. Anne!" Luther screamed. "I will become a monk!"

After his vow to St. Anne, the familiar patroness of miners, Luther spent several weeks discussing his decision with friends. Then, in July 1505, as was the requirement upon entering monastic life, he gave away all his possessions—his lute, on which he was proficient; his many books, including the "*Corpus Juris Civilis*"; his clothing and eating utensils—and entered the Black Cloister of the Observant Augustinians. As was customary, he endured more than a month of examining his conscience and being interrogated by the appropriate authorities before proceeding to the novitiate (a further year of scrutiny before becoming a friar).

By all evidence, Luther was extraordinarily successful ("impeccable" was a later description) as an Observant Augustinian, just as he had been as a student. He did not simply engage in prayer, fasts, and ascetic practices (such as going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself), he pursued them earnestly. As he later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

He became a priest within fewer than two years of entering the Black Cloister. He was sent to Rome as the traveling companion for a senior brother on crucial business for the Observants in Germany. In addition, his superiors ordered him to undertake the study of theology so he could become one of the order's teachers.

Worthy of Study

At this moment Luther began to be someone worthy of study in his own right. The fears and anxieties that drove him into the Black Cloister left him during his first year or so there, but then they intensified. Although he sought to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, he found no consolation. He was increasingly terrified of the wrath of God: "When it is touched by this passing inundation of the eternal the soul feels and drinks nothing but eternal punishment."

The command to study academic theology meant he could investigate his struggles intellectually. He later commented that he went "where my temptations took me," meaning that he dared to investigate the issues that most troubled him. But it was slow going: "I did not learn my theology all at once....but like

Augustine through much study, teaching, and writing.”

In the process, Luther’s attacks of doubt about his salvation became objective realities that he studied—almost in the manner that a mathematician puzzles over a difficult problem.

The Horns of Luther’s Dilemma

As a beginning theology student, Luther was taught the prevailing orthodoxy, and parts of his early lectures as a professor show he believed it.

His teachers, following the Bible, taught that God demanded absolute righteousness, as in the passage “Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” People needed to love God absolutely and their neighbors as themselves. They should have the unshakable faith of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son.

Furthermore, when they were not perfect, people were to repent in a fully contrite manner, not for the selfish purpose of saving themselves. And where the individual couldn’t be absolutely righteous, the church would step in with the grace of the sacraments.

Luther later remarked, “I was so drunk, nay, submerged in the doctrines of the pope that I could have happily killed (or cooperated with anyone who killed) whoever took but a syllable of obedience away from him.”

Luther, however, was plagued by one problem, and it eventually drove him away from what he had been taught. Human beings were incapable of the selfless acts and states of mind the Scriptures required. The most crushing to Luther was the perfectly scriptural obligation to be contrite, to repent.

In the late Middle Ages, repentance most commonly occurred in the course of sacramental confession and penance, according to which the sinner confessed, was forgiven, and then performed penitential acts that completed the process. But Luther knew that in the midst of this most crucial act, he was at his most selfish. He was confessing his sins and performing his penance out of the intensely human instinct to save his own skin. Yet because of the human tendency to sin, one could hardly confess enough.

This critical issue remained vivid in Luther’s mind. He commented later, “If one were to confess his sins in a timely manner, he would have [had] to carry a confessor in his pocket!” As his teachers knew, this fact could lead to despair (or as it was believed then, the sin against the Holy Spirit). In Luther’s case it occasionally did.

Who Could Be Righteous?

During his early years, whenever Luther came to the famous “Reformation text”—Romans 1:17—his eyes were drawn not to the word **faith**, but to the word **righteous**. Who, after all, could “live by faith”? Only those who were already righteous. The text was clear on the matter: “the righteous shall live by faith.”

Luther remarked, “I hated that word, ‘the righteousness of God,’ by which I had been taught according to the custom and use of all teachers ... [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.” The young Luther could not live by faith because he was not righteous—and he knew it. During this turmoil, Luther often approached Johann von Staupitz, his superior, about his doubts, sins, and outright hatred of a righteous God. He came so often that Staupitz once commanded him to go and commit a real sin: “You want to be without sin, but you don’t have any real sins anyway ... the murder of one’s parents, public vices, blasphemy, adultery, and the like. These are sins. ... You must not inflate your halting, artificial sins out of proportion!”

But Luther wasn't comforted: "Yet my conscience would never give me assurance, but I was always doubting and said, 'You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.'"

Contradicting Everything

The critical moment (or rather, moments) in Luther's life resulted from a decision by his superiors. They, and Staupitz in particular, ordered him to take his doctorate and become a professor of the Bible at Wittenberg University. Depending upon one's point of view, this was either one of the most brilliant or stupid decisions in the history of Latin Christianity.

Luther resisted the call, saying, "It will be the death of me!" but he finally relented. He soon acquired his mature self-identity as a professor or *doctor ecclesiae* (teacher of the church), behind which he frequently took refuge, even to the point of commonly signing his name, *D. Martinus Lutherus*.

More important, the revolution in his theological thinking occurred in the professor's lecture hall and study from 1513 to 1519. Luther began by reinterpreting the righteousness of God and then extended this interpretation to the central issues in Christian theology.

About late 1513 or early 1514, when he arrived at Psalm 72, he explained to his students, "This is what is called the judgment of God: like the righteousness or strength or wisdom of God, it is that with which we are wise, just, and humble, or by which we are judged."

This is a remarkable sentence. The last clause is what Luther was taught; it was the prevailing orthodoxy: God judges by his righteousness. But the first clause—God gives us righteousness—he would teach increasingly. In fact, a little later during these very lectures, he utterly rejected the common doctrine and asserted instead that all the attributes of God—"truth, wisdom, salvation, justice"—were "the things with which he makes us strong, saved, just, wise."

On the heels of this change came others. The church was no longer the institution that boasted apostolic succession; instead it was the community of those who had been given faith. Salvation came not by the sacraments as such but by their role in nurturing faith. The idea that human beings had a spark of goodness (enough to seek out God) was not a foundation of theology but was taught only by "fools" and "pig theologians." Humility was no longer a virtue that earned grace but a necessary response to the gift of grace. Faith no longer consisted of assenting to the church's teachings but of trusting the promises of God and the merits of Christ.

In short, Luther worked a revolution that contradicted everything he had been taught. Like certain revolutions in our own time, it lay there, ready to explode, and even the principal was unaware of its potential.

Chain Reaction

In fact, what happened was more like a long but powerful chain reaction than a sudden explosion. It started on All Saints' Eve, 1517, when Luther formally objected to the way the short, dumpy Johann Tetzel was preaching a plenary indulgence.

Indulgences were documents prepared by the church and bought by individuals either for themselves or on behalf of the dead. As a result, the living purchaser or the deceased would be released from purgatory for a certain number of years. In the second instance, a plenary, or total, indulgence would release a person altogether and was seldom offered. In any case, the money from indulgence sales was used to support church projects, such as, in the case of Tetzel's sales, the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in

Rome.

Tetzel carefully orchestrated his appearances to excite public interest. He crafted his sermons to delight and persuade, often ending with the now famous, "Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"

Luther simply wanted to question the church's trafficking in indulgences. He challenged all comers to debate the practice in proper academic fashion. But events snatched the matter from his hands.

His **95 Theses** were translated into the common language and spread across Germany within two weeks. Luther was asked to debate the underlying theological issues at Heidelberg, during the Augustinians' regular meeting in spring 1518. He then underwent an excruciating interview with Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg that fall. It was so painful, as Luther recalled it, that he could not even ride a horse, because his bowels ran freely from morning to night.

Faceoff over Authority

Luther had good reason to be anxious. The issue quickly became not indulgences, or even Tetzel's indulgences (which were extraordinary by any estimate), but the authority of the church: Did the pope have the right to issue indulgences?

The substance of the original matter—whether humans could draw on the treasury of Christ's merits, deposited with the church, to alter their standing with God—was of little concern to Luther's opponents. In fact, they were repeatedly forbidden to debate it with him. The question was instead whether the church could declare that it was so and rightly expect obedience.

The core issue became public at the Leipzig Debate in late June 1519, a magnificent occasion. Students from Wittenberg came armed with staves. The local bishop tried to forbid the debate, and Duke George of Saxony, who sponsored it, set out an armed guard to guarantee it would proceed in an orderly fashion. In the end, it became apparent Luther was working a revolution that struck the church itself.

In brief, Luther declared that "a simple layman armed with the Scriptures" was superior to both pope and councils without them. Luther thus richly merited the bull [papal document] threatening excommunication that came in mid-1520. He responded by burning both the bull and the canon law.

His Three Most Important Essays

Luther then spelled out the practical consequences of his theology. That summer he wrote what are arguably his three most important treatises: ***The Address to the Christian Nobility***, ***The Babylonian Captivity of the Church***, and ***On the Freedom of a Christian***. With these three essays he set himself and his (by now) many sympathizers in opposition to nearly all the theology and practice of late medieval Christendom.

In the first, he urged rulers to take the necessary reform of the church into their own hands, while arguing that all Christians were priests.

In the second, he reduced the seven sacraments first to three (baptism, the Lord's Supper, and penance), then to two, while radically altering their character.

In the third, he told Christians they were free from the law (in particular the laws of the church), while they were bound in love to their neighbors.

"I Will Not Recant"

The Diet of Worms, held in the spring of 1521, was thus in one sense little more than the backwash from a ship that had already set to sea. The Holy Roman emperor Charles V (who was also Charles I of Spain) had never been in Germany. He called the Diet, or meeting, in order to meet the German princes, whom he scarcely knew by name and desperately needed to court. But this friar by the name of Luther also needed to be addressed.

Luther left Wittenberg to attend the Diet convinced he would finally get the hearing he had requested in 1517. As he was ushered into the Diet, Luther was awed to see Emperor Charles V himself. He was surrounded by his advisers and representatives of Rome, Spanish troops decked out in their parade best, electors, bishops, territorial princes, and representatives of great cities. In the midst of this august assembly sat a table with a pile of books.

Luther was asked if he had written the books, and if there was a part of them he wished to recant. He was taken aback; this was not going to be a debate but a judicial hearing. Luther became confused, stumbled, and begged for another day: "This touches God and his Word. This affects the salvation of souls. ... I beg you, give me time."

He was given one day, and back in his quarters he wrote, "So long as Christ is merciful, I will not recant a single jot or tittle."

The next day's business at the Diet delayed Luther's return until evening. Candlelight flickered off the crowd of dignitaries jammed into the great hall.

He was asked again, "Will you defend these books all together, or do you wish to recant some of what you have said?" Luther replied with a short speech, which he repeated in Latin.

There were three kinds of books in the stack, he declared. Some were about the Christian faith and good works, and these he certainly wouldn't retract. Some attacked the papacy and to retract these would be to encourage tyranny. Finally, in some he attacked individuals (and, Luther admitted, perhaps too harshly), but still these couldn't be retracted because these people defended papal tyranny.

Surely, the reply came, one individual could not call into doubt the tradition of the entire church! Then the examiner declared, "You must give a simple, clear, and proper answer. ... Will you recant or not?"

Luther replied, "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

Then he probably added, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."

Knight George

When negotiations over the next few days failed to reach any compromise, Luther was condemned. Still he was granted safe conduct, as he was promised before he came, but only for another twenty-one days.

But as Luther and his companions made their way back to Wittenberg, four or five armed horsemen plunged out of the forest, snatched Luther from his wagon, and dragged him off, half running and half stumbling. In short order, he was told that it was his own prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, who had abducted him to keep him safe. He soon arrived at the Wartburg, one of Frederick's castles. Luther was an outlaw; anyone could kill him with out fearing reprisals from an imperial court of law.

Luther despised his enforced stay at the Wartburg. As “Knight George” (his new identity), he now ate like a nobleman, and his new diet upset his alimentary canal. He missed his friends in Wittenberg, and he hated being removed from the fray. He even made plans to seek a call to the University of Erfurt where he would be outside the elector’s jurisdiction. That failed, but he did manage to commandeer a horse and make a flying trip to Wittenberg, from which he returned much relieved at the course of events among his friends.

In spite of his complaints about enforced solitude and his own “laziness,” Luther’s ten months on ice were among the most productive of his life. The theological and scholarly works continued, with his touching and almost autobiographical *Commentary on the Magnificat*, the uncompleted *Postillae*, and the translation of the New Testament, of which he did a rough draft within eleven weeks.

But what began with his lectures and the *95 Theses* was now turning into a popular movement. He felt obliged to respond to people’s practical questions. He did so in treatises such as *On Confession: Whether the Pope Has the Authority to Require It, On the Abolition of Private Masses*, and above all, *On Monastic Vows*.

The last stands as one of the most extraordinary works ever written by a public figure. Throughout Germany, and at Wittenberg in particular, monks and nuns were fleeing their monasteries and cloisters—some for reasons of conscience and some for the sake of convenience. To despise the religious was becoming commonplace. At the same time, defenders of the old church insisted upon the inviolability of monastic vows.

Fully consistent with his *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther took a middle road. The sole question was whether and how one could best serve the neighbor. If one did so in holy orders, then one should remain. On the other hand, monastic vows were not binding, and if one could serve the neighbor better outside the monastery or cloister, then one should live in the world. The freedom to serve thus became a hallmark of the Reformation in Lutheran Germany.

His Controversial Decisions

As his revolution expanded, Luther was increasingly thrust into the public arena. He openly returned to Wittenberg, in early spring of 1522, and without asking the elector’s permission, retook his pulpit and preached on the obligation to love the neighbor. The decision to return grew from his conviction that the inchoate reform movement there (some asserted that Christians *must* marry and the monks and nuns *must* become laypeople) was not respecting Christian freedom or weak consciences.

In time Luther was forced to make further decisions, many of which are still controversial.

When unrest resulted in the Peasants’ War of 1524–1525, he first condemned the princes and then exhorted them to crush the revolt.

When Erasmus, the famous humanist scholar, doubted that the truth could be known about whether humans had free will, Luther replied that “the Holy Spirit is not a skeptic” and accused Erasmus of being no Christian at all.

When the Swiss reformers Zwingli and Oecolampadius questioned whether Christ’s body and blood were really in the elements of the Lord’s Supper, Luther replied, “Mere physics!” and helped inflame the controversy that ultimately divided the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

His Promethean effort to create a new clergy and reformed church also brought the civil authorities more directly into the daily governance of the church.

His decision to marry a runaway nun, Katharina von Bora, scandalized many. For Luther, the shock was waking up in the morning with "pigtails on the pillow next to me."

Of the continuing efforts to create the German Bible, he said, "If God had wanted me to die thinking I was a clever fellow, he would not have gotten me into the business of translating the Bible."

Throughout these decisions and actions, Luther exhibited amazing consistency. The hallmark of his life is the way he joined his forceful personality and his forceful doctrine. For him, doctrine was never a merely intellectual or scholarly matter. Instead, it was life itself. In the preface to the ***Large Catechism***, he urged Christians to read and reread their catechisms, for "in such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and fervor." He wanted all Christians to become people taught by God.

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The Parents Luther Feared Disgracing

Were they caring and firm—or so harsh they drove him to rebel against every authority in his life?

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"I am the son of a peasant," Luther once said, "and the grandson and the great-grandson." Martin's father, Hans Luder, was indeed of humble peasant stock. But he became a copper-mining entrepreneur. Hans worked hard to climb the social ladder of the middle class. His motto: "A free peasant is nobody's slave."

Hans married Margaretha (also known as Hannah) Lindemann, daughter of an established middleclass family that included doctors, lawyers, university professors, and politicians. Martin's career track of university education (with the goal of practicing law) was probably influenced by relatives on his mother's side.

Hans was proud when his son earned a master's degree. He dreamed of Martin's future career in law and the financial rewards it would bring the family. So he was furious, at least initially, when his son decided to enter a monastery.

When Martin was ordained, Hans attended his son's first mass. Afterward, Martin asked his father if this new career wasn't better than being a lawyer. His father rebuked him, "Haven't you heard the commandment to honor your father and mother?"

Rebellion Against Harshness?

The older biographical portraits of Hans and Hannah were stern, based on a few stray comments from Martin's later recollections of his childhood. He remembered his father once whipping him so badly that he "ran away and felt ugly toward him" until his father worked to regain the boy's trust. Martin was also reported by his students to have said: "My mother once beat me with a cane for stealing a nut, until the blood came. Such strict discipline drove me to the monastery, although she meant it well."

Comments like these led some twentieth-century biographers, influenced by modern psychological theories, to trace Martin's deep inner conflicts as an adult to his parents' harshness. Hans in particular was seen as a tyrant who indirectly sparked the Reformation by provoking Martin's rebellion against authoritarian fathers of all stripes—Hans, the pope, and even God.

More recent scholarship, however, looks skeptically at the conclusions of such "psychohistory." The severe discipline Martin recalled was common in his day, and numerous other clues from his life show he was highly esteemed by his parents.

Luther was deeply devoted to both Hans and Hannah, and he desired that they approve of his controversial career. Later in his life, when writing *On Monastic Vows*, Martin dedicated the book to his father. He wrote that his father's earlier rebuke about honoring parents had been right: "You quickly came back with a reply so fitting and so much to the point that I have scarcely in my life heard any man say anything that struck me so forcibly and stayed with me so long."

On his way to the ecclesiastical hearing at Augsburg, when he feared the heretic's stake lay ahead,

Luther's thoughts turned to the welfare of his mother and father. "Now I must die," he said. "What a disgrace I shall be to my parents!"

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What Was Luther's World Like?

The boy grew up in exciting, harsh, and violent times.

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Luther lived in exciting times, the era of Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Copernicus, and Columbus. Even today, the splendor of life at a Renaissance court excites the imagination.

However, the young man and his family were utterly untouched by the era's larger events. Not a single Luther was aware of Columbus's voyages. None knew of the glories of Renaissance art and literature until much later. Instead, they endured the harsh realities of life in northern Europe, where violence was part of everyday life.

A local drought, a terribly wet spring, or an early frost could force grain prices up as much as 150 percent over the previous year. Many people were reduced to begging for food.

Peasants often sought recourse for grievances not in the courts but with fists, knives, and clubs. Beggars and the homeless—which included many maimed, insane, and mentally retarded—were so numerous that authorities on the west bank of the Rhine would periodically round them up and drive them over to the east bank. From there, other soldiers would march them deep into the Black Forest and on to central Germany.

The Plague stalked Europe at the time. In Strasbourg, to take one local example, it took the lives of 16,000 of the 25,000 inhabitants and left deserted 300 villages in the region.

If this was an age of death, it was also an age of pilgrimages, saints, and relics. The search for spiritual security colored everything. Christ was often pictured on a throne with a lily (resurrection) coming from one side of his head and a sword (damnation) coming from the other. The burning question was, "How can I avoid the sword and earn the lily?"

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

The Breakthrough

When, where, and how did Luther make his astounding discovery of justification by faith?

Dr. James M. Kittelson is professor of history at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, and author of *Luther the Reformer* (Augsburg, 1986).

I was seized with the conviction that I must understand [Paul's] letter to the Romans ... but to that moment one phrase in chapter 1 stood in my way. I hated the idea, "in it the righteousness of God is revealed." ... I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners ...

At last, meditating day and night and by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. ... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open. —Martin Luther

Martin Luther turned the preface to his collected Latin works, written the year before he died, into an extended autobiographical comment. Almost in passing he included a now-famous remark: "I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open."

Historians have come to call this event "the tower experience" or the "evangelical breakthrough," and they have tried to date it and identify where it occurred.

When: Early or Late?

Luther's preface also reports that "Meanwhile, already during that year, I had returned to interpret the Psalter anew." Luther then adds that he was forced to break off these lectures when Charles V called the Diet of Worms. Consequently, Luther could be referring only to his second lectures on the Psalms (held from late 1518 to the Diet of Worms in 1521) rather than those of 1513–1515.

Moreover, the most cursory reading of his earlier lectures on the Psalms, and those on Romans (1515–1516), Galatians (1516–1517), and Hebrews (1517–1518) clearly reveals that his mind was in motion almost from the moment he first entered his lecture hall. Thus, all the evidence supports dating Luther's breakthrough between 1518 and 1521, as he was preparing his normal university lectures.

Where: Bathroom or Study?

Luther writes elsewhere that the breakthrough occurred when he was *In cloaca*, which literally means "in the toilet." Some writers have thus suggested that Luther was sitting on the toilet at that moment; the revelation was a release from parentally induced anal retentiveness.

Dispensing with the toilet theory is easy. "in cloaca" was a bit of monastic slang better rendered as "in the dumps" or "in the pits." Luther meant that the realization occurred when he was despondent or depressed. He wrote that the event transpired "at last (after) meditating day and night and by the mercy of God. ..." Hence, he was likely in his study, which was located not in the tower but in the arch over the main gate into the monastery.

How: Suddenly or over Time?

The crucial question concerns the nature of the event: Was it something that happened suddenly, a conversion in the twinkling of an eye?

Such a conclusion is most unlikely. The evidence of Luther's early lectures shows that, like most thinkers who are extraordinarily blessed, he had come to this understanding far earlier than he realized it. In his preface, Luther was referring to that moment when he said to himself, "Aha! Now I know!" when in fact, he had known (or been knowing) it for some time. As he explained, it happened "at last" and "I did not learn my theology all at once."

Ultimately, what matters most about Luther's breakthrough is not the precise date or location, but the fact that it happened.

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Dr. Luther's Theology

A young professor's startling insights into the graciousness of God.

Dr. Timothy George is the founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. A member of Christian History's editorial advisory board, he is the author of *Theology of the Reformers* (Broadman, 1988).]

One day in 1511, Luther and his monastic mentor, Johann von Staupitz, sat under a pear tree in a garden near their cloister at Wittenberg. The vicar-general told young Luther he should become a professor of theology and preacher. Luther was taken aback. "It will be the death of me!" he objected.

"Quite all right," said Staupitz. "God has plenty of work for clever men like you to do in heaven!"

Luther did receive his doctor's degree—just over a year later, on October 18, 1512. That day he also received a woolen beret, a silver ring, two Bibles (one closed, the other open), and a commission to be a "sworn doctor of Holy Scripture." He took that commission seriously. It guided his theology and his career as a reformer. Years later he declared, "What I began as a Doctor, I must truly confess to the end of my life. I cannot keep silent or cease to teach." In his view, the Reformation happened because the pope tried to hinder him from fulfilling his vocation of expounding the Scriptures.

Dying to Be a Theologian

Though he held a doctor's degree, Luther was no mere member of the learned guild of scholastic theologians. His theology grew out of his anguished quest for a gracious God. For Luther, theology was not simply the academic study of religion. Rather, it was a lifelong process of struggle and temptation. As Luther never tired of saying, only experience makes a theologian. "I did not learn my theology all at once," he said, "but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me. ... Not understanding, reading, or speculation, but living—nay, dying and being damned—make a theologian."

Out of Luther's struggles emerged a theology that shook the foundations of medieval Christendom. Though Luther appreciated the protests made by such forerunners as John Wycliffe of England and John Hus of Bohemia, he recognized his own efforts as qualitatively different. "They attacked the life," he said. "I attack the doctrine."

For example, Luther's protest against Tetzels sale of indulgences in 1517 did more than call for church reform. It challenged the church's identity. In this sense, Luther emerged as the most radical of all sixteenth-century reformers. His radical views can be crystallized in three statements on Scripture, faith, and grace.

Sola Scriptura: Scripture Alone

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther declared his conscience captive to the Word of God. But that declaration did not mark his decisive theological break with the Church of Rome. That had happened two years earlier, in July 1519, at Leipzig.

Luther's opponent in the Leipzig Debate was an accomplished professor at the University of Ingolstadt, John Eck. In German, Eck means corner, and he boxed Luther into one. He forced Luther to admit that popes and church councils could err, and that the Bible alone could be trusted as an infallible source of

Christian faith and teaching.

Under duress, Luther articulated what would come to be the formal principle of the Reformation: all church teaching must be normed by the Bible. The following year, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther stated: "What is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed." Late medieval theologians placed Christian tradition alongside the Bible as a source of church doctrine. Luther emphasized instead the primacy of Scripture.

However, Luther did not reject tradition outright. He respected the writings of the early church Fathers, especially those of Augustine, and he considered the universal statements of faith, such as the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, binding on the church in his day. But all creeds, sayings of the Fathers, and decisions of church councils must be judged by—never sit in judgment upon—the "sure rule of God's Word."

For Luther, the church does not take priority *over* the Bible; instead, the church is the creation *of* the Bible. It is born in the womb of Scripture. "For who begets his own parent?" Luther asked. "Who first brings forth his own maker?"

Arguably, Luther's greatest contribution to the Reformation was his translation of the Bible into German. He wanted common people—the farm boy and milkmaid—to "feel" the words of Scripture "in the heart."

Luther held a high view of the inspiration of the Bible, calling it once "the Holy Spirit book." But what truly distinguished his exegesis was his ability to make the text come alive. For him, Bible stories were not distant historical acts but living current events, as we see in his treatment of Gideon: "How difficult it was for [Gideon] to fight the enemy at those odds. If I had been there, I would have messed in my breeches for fright!" Thus, for Luther, the Bible is no mere depository of doctrine. In it, a living God confronts his people.

Sola Fide: Faith Alone

Martin Luther developed his understanding of justification amid the moralism and mysticism of late medieval religion. He made strenuous efforts to find a gracious God, doing penance according to the dictates of scholastic theology. Ultimately he became frustrated to the point of despair.

Luther's "discovery of the gospel," as it has been called, came during his scholarly labors as a *Doctor in Biblia*. The pivotal text was Romans 1:17. "At last, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words 'the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the righteous person shall live by faith,' I began to understand that 'righteousness of God' as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God; and this sentence, 'the righteousness of God is revealed,' to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'the righteous person lives by faith.' This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light. ... And now, where I had once hated the phrase, 'the righteousness of God,' I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me."

Luther considered justification by faith "the summary of all Christian doctrine" and "the article by which the church stands or falls." In the *Smalkald Articles* of 1537 he wrote: "Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed."

According to the medieval understanding of justification, which was derived from Augustine, a person gradually receives divine grace, eventually healing sin's wounds. But in his mature doctrine of justification, Luther abandoned the medical image of *impartation* for the legal language of *imputation*: God accepts Christ's righteousness, which is alien to our nature, as our own. Though God

does not actually remove our sins—we are at the same time righteous and sinful (*simul justus et peccator*)—he no longer counts them against us.

To use Luther's words, it is a "sweet exchange" between Christ and the sinner: "Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and him crucified; learn to pray to him despairing of yourself, saying 'Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness and I am thy sin. Thou hast taken on thyself what thou wast not, and hast given to me what I am not.'"

Medieval theologians considered faith one of the three theological virtues, along with hope and love. They emphasized faith's cognitive content and saw it as a virtue formed by love. But to Luther, such faith is not sufficient for salvation. (Even demons have it, Paul wrote.) Truly justifying faith—*fiducia*, Luther called it—is something more. It means taking hold of Christ, hearing and claiming God's promise, and apprehending our acceptance by God in Jesus Christ.

Sola Gratia: Grace Alone

Moderns often see Luther as the apostle of human freedom and the father of rugged individualism. But this view misunderstands his theological "Copernican revolution." Copernicus' calculations removed earth—and thus, humanity—from the center of created reality. Likewise, Luther's theology changed humanity's place in the process of salvation.

For Luther, salvation was anchored in the eternal inscrutable purpose of God. Luther anticipated the human-centeredness of later Protestant piety and guarded against it by insisting that God's grace comes from outside ourselves. Faith is not a human possibility, nor a dimension of the religious personality; it is a radical and free gift of God.

"This is the reason why our theology is certain," Luther explained. "It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive."

Luther's doctrine of divine sovereignty in human salvation came to fullest expression in his famous debate with Erasmus over grace, free will, and predestination. For Erasmus, humans, though fallen, remain free to respond to grace and thus cooperate in their salvation.

Luther, however, saw the human will enslaved by sin and Satan. We think we are free, he contended, but we only reinforce our bondage by indulging in sin. Grace releases us from this enslaving illusion and leads us into "the glorious liberty of the children of God." God wants us to love him freely. But that is only possible when we have been freed from captivity to Satan and self.

Solo Christo: Christ Alone

Like later reformer John Calvin, Luther believed that dogmatics (the study of religious dogma) could not be divorced from polemics (the art of argumentation). The gospel was besieged by foes without and within the Christian church. It could be set forth, then, only in opposition to competing claims.

Each *sola* faced an enemy: ***Scripture alone***, against Scripture subordinated to a false understanding of tradition; ***faith alone***, against works-dependent righteousness; and ***grace alone***, against a theology of human merit.

Stated positively, each *sola* affirmed the centrality of Jesus Christ. Christ is the sole content of Scripture and the principle for selectivity within Scripture. Luther criticized the Epistle of James because it did not

proclaim Christ sufficiently. "Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching," he wrote. "Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it!"

Christ is the center of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith. Through Christ's substitutionary death on the cross God has acted to redeem fallen humanity. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther writes, "We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart."

Likewise, the doctrine of grace can be approached only through the cross, through the "wounds of Jesus" to which Staupitz had directed the young Luther in his early struggles. As Luther advised Barbara Lisskirchen, a woman who worried she was not among God's elect, "The highest of all God's commands is this, that we hold up before our eyes the image of his dear son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Every day he should be the excellent mirror wherein we behold how much God loves us and how well, in his infinite goodness, he has cared for us in that he gave his dear Son for us. ... Contemplate Christ given for us. Then, God willing, you will feel better."

Luther's legacy does not lie foremost in the saintliness of his life. His warts were many; his vices sometimes were more visible than his virtues. Luther's true legacy is his insight into the gracious character of God. "What else was Luther," asked Karl Barth, "than a teacher of the Christian church whom one can hardly celebrate in any other way but to listen to him?"

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Protestants' Most-Famous Document

What did Luther actually say in the 95 Theses?

THE EDITORS

Martin Luther's **95 Theses** are often considered a charter, a bold declaration of independence for the Protestant church.

But when he wrote nearly 100 points of debate in Latin, Luther was simply inviting fellow academics to a "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," the theses' official title. (The debate never was held, because the theses were translated into German and distributed widely, creating an uproar.)

What were indulgences? In the sacrament of penance, Christians confessed sins and found absolution for them. The process of penance involved **satisfaction**—paying the temporal penalty for those sins. Under certain circumstances, someone who was truly contrite and had confessed his sins could receive partial (or, rarely, complete) remission of temporal punishment by purchasing a letter of indulgence.

In the **95 Theses**, Luther did not attack the idea of indulgences, for in Thesis 73 he wrote, "... the pope justly thunders against those who by any means whatsoever contrive harm to the sale of indulgences."

But Luther strongly objected to the abuse of indulgences—most recently under the salesmanship of Johann Tetzel. And in the process, Luther, though probably not fully aware of it, knocked down the pillars supporting many practices in medieval Christianity.

Key Statements

Here are thirteen samples of Luther's theses:

1. When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, says "Repent ye," etc., he means that the entire life of the faithful should be a repentance.
2. This statement cannot be understood of the sacrament of penance, i.e., of confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priesthood.
27. They preach human folly who pretend that as soon as money in the coffer rings a soul from purgatory springs.
32. Those who suppose that on account of their letters of indulgence they are sure of salvation will be eternally damned along with their teachers.
36. Every Christian who truly repents has plenary [full] forgiveness both of punishment and guilt bestowed on him, even without letters of indulgence.
37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has a share in all the benefits of Christ and the Church, for God has granted him these, even without letters of indulgence.

45. Christians should be taught that whoever sees a person in need and, instead of helping him, uses his money for an indulgence, obtains not an indulgence of the pope but the displeasure of God.

51. Christians should be taught that the pope ought and would give his own substance to the poor, from whom certain preachers of indulgences extract money, even if he had to sell St. Peter's Cathedral to do it.

81. This shameless preaching of pardons makes it hard even for learned men to defend the pope's honor against calumny or to answer the indubitably shrewd questions of the laity.

82. For example: "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love ... for after all, he does release countless souls for the sake of sordid money contributed for the building of a cathedral? ..."

90. To suppress these very telling arguments of the laity by force instead of answering them with adequate reasons would be to expose the church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies and to render Christians unhappy.

94. We should admonish Christians to follow Christ, their Head, through punishment, death, and hell.

95. And so let them set their trust on entering heaven through many tribulations rather than some false security and peace.

Within two months, Johann Tetzel fired back with his own theses, including: "Christians should be taught that the Pope, by authority of his jurisdiction, is superior to the entire Catholic Church and its councils, and that they should humbly obey his statutes."

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

The Decisive Documents of 1520

After Luther published these three works, there was no turning back.

MARTIN LUTHER

**Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation
Trumpet Blast For Reform**

Since the Roman curia would not reform the church, Luther said, the German princes had that right and responsibility. Playing on the German leaders' sense of national pride, he urged them to implement some two dozen church reforms. In the process, Luther set forth the famous doctrine that every Christian is a priest. The work's large first printing sold out in two weeks.

In the excerpt here, Luther explains how the "Romanists" have barricaded themselves from reform—and he then demolishes their barricades.

The time for silence is past, and the time to speak has come. ...

The Romanists have very cleverly built three walls around themselves. Hitherto they have protected themselves by these walls in such a way that no one has been able to reform them. As a result, the whole of Christendom has fallen abominably.

In the first place, when pressed by the temporal power, they have made decrees and declared that the temporal power had no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, the spiritual power is above the temporal.

In the second place, when the attempt is made to reprove them with the Scriptures, they raise the objection that only the pope may interpret the Scriptures.

In the third place, if threatened with a council, their story is that no one may summon a council but the pope. ...

Attacking the First Wall

Let us begin by attacking the first wall. It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate, while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 [vv. 12–13] that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.

The pope or bishop anoints, shaves heads, ordains, consecrates, and prescribes garb different from that of the laity, but he can never make a man into a Christian or into a spiritual man by so doing. He might well make a man into a hypocrite or a humbug and blockhead, but never a Christian or a spiritual man. As far as that goes, we are all consecrated priests through baptism, as St. Peter says in 1 Peter 2 [v. 9] .

Attacking the Second Wall

The second wall is still more loosely built and less substantial. The Romanists want to be the only masters of Holy Scripture, although they never learn a thing from the Bible all their life long. ... Their claim that only the pope may interpret Scripture is an outrageous fancied fable. They cannot produce a single letter [of Scripture] to maintain that the interpretation of Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the pope alone. They themselves have usurped this power. And although they allege that this power was given to St. Peter when the keys were given him, it is clear enough that the keys were not given to Peter alone but to the whole community.

Further, the keys were not ordained for doctrine or government, but only for the binding or loosing of sin. Whatever else or whatever more they arrogate to themselves on the basis of the keys is a mere fabrication. But Christ's words to Peter, "I have prayed for you that your faith fail not" [Luke 22:32], cannot be applied to the pope, since the majority of the popes have been without faith, as they must themselves confess. Besides, it is not only for Peter that Christ prayed, but also for all apostles and Christians, as he says in John 17 [vv. 9, 20], "Father, I pray for those whom thou hast given me, and not for these only, but for all who believe on me through their word." Is that not clear enough?

Attacking the Third Wall

The third wall falls of itself when the first two are down. ... The Romanists have no basis in Scripture for their claim that the pope alone has the right to call or confirm a council. This is just their own ruling, and it is only valid as long as it is not harmful to Christendom or contrary to the laws of God. Now when the pope deserves punishment, this ruling no longer obtains, for not to punish him by authority of a council is harmful to Christendom.

Thus we read in Acts 15 that it was not St. Peter who called the apostolic council but the apostles and elders. ... Even the Council of Nicaea, the most famous of all councils, was neither called nor confirmed by the bishop of Rome, but by the emperor Constantine. Many other emperors after him have done the same, and yet these councils were the most Christian of all. But if the pope alone has the right to convene councils, then these councils would all have been heretical. Further, when I examine the councils the pope did summon, I find that they did nothing of special importance.

Therefore, when necessity demands it, and the pope is an offense to Christendom, the first man who is able should, as a true member of the whole body, do what he can to bring about a truly free council. ...

God give us all a Christian mind, and grant to the Christian nobility of the German nation in particular true spiritual courage to do the best they can for the poor church. Amen.

On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church "Attacking a difficult matter"

Luther's friend Georg Spalatin asked him to write about the sacraments. Luther did, quickly reducing the traditional seven sacraments to three; he rejected confirmation, marriage, holy orders, and extreme unction. By the end of his work, Luther even made penance, though useful, less than a sacrament. That left only baptism and the Lord's Supper. Luther then challenged traditional understandings of the Lord's Supper: * that lay people should not receive the cup; * that the elements undergo transubstantiation into Christ's body and blood; * that the Mass is a sacrifice.

The work's title refers to the captivity of the Jewish nation under the Babylonian Empire (in the sixth century B.C.). So in his day, Luther argued, Christians had been carried away from the Scriptures and made subject to the papacy. If the papacy did not free the churches from

sacramental abuses, then it "is identical with the kingdom of Babylon and the Antichrist itself."

In the work, Luther not only attacked abuses of the sacraments, but totally redefined them. He called the book a "little song about Rome and the Romanists. If their ears are itching to hear it, I will sing and pitch it in the highest key!"

To begin with, I must deny that there are seven sacraments, and for the present maintain that there are but three: baptism, penance, and the bread [Communion]. All three have been subjected to a miserable captivity by the Roman curia, and the church has been robbed of all her liberty.

First Captivity

Now concerning the sacrament of the bread first of all ... the first captivity of this sacrament, therefore, concerns its substance or completeness, which the tyranny of Rome has wrested from us. Not that those who use only one kind sin against Christ, for Christ did not command the use of either kind, but left it to the choice of each individual, when he said: "As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of me" [1 Cor. 11:25]. But they are the sinners, who forbid the giving of both kinds to those who wish to exercise this choice. The fault lies not with the laity, but with the priests. The sacrament does not belong to the priests, but to all men. The priests are not lords, but servants in duty bound to administer both kinds to those who desire them, as often as they desire them. ...

Second Captivity

When the Evangelists plainly write that Christ took bread and blessed it, ... we have to think of real bread and real wine, just as we do of a real cup (for even they do not say that the cup was transubstantiated). Since it is not necessary, therefore, to assume a transubstantiation effected by divine power, it must be regarded as a figment of the human mind, for it rests neither on the Scriptures nor on reason.

Perhaps they will say that the danger of idolatry demands that the bread and wine should not be really present. How ridiculous! The laymen have never become familiar with their finespun philosophy of substance and accidents, and could not grasp it if it were taught to them.

Third Captivity

The third captivity of this sacrament is by far the most wicked of all, in consequence of which there is no opinion more generally held or more firmly believed in the church today than this, that the Mass is a good work and a sacrifice. And this abuse has brought an endless host of other abuses in its train, so that the faith of this sacrament has become utterly extinct and the holy sacrament has been turned into mere merchandise, a market, and a profit making business. Hence participations, brotherhoods, intercessions, merits, anniversaries, memorial days and the like wares are bought and sold, traded and bartered, in the church. On these the priests and monks depend for their entire livelihood.

I am attacking a difficult matter, an abuse perhaps impossible to uproot, since through centuries-long custom and the common consent of men it has become so firmly entrenched that it would be necessary to abolish most of the books now in vogue, and to alter almost the entire external form of the churches and introduce, or rather reintroduce, a totally different kind of ceremonies. But my Christ lives, and we must be careful to give more heed to the Word of God than to all the thoughts of men and of angels.

On the Freedom of a Christian The heart of the Christian life

This treatise, the most conciliatory of the three, was, Luther admitted, "a small book if you regard its size." However, "it contains the whole of Christian life in a brief form. " He sent it with an open letter to Pope Leo X, since, he wrote, "I am a poor man and have no other gift to offer." It proved to be Luther's final attempt to be reconciled to Rome.

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together, they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in 1 Corinthians 9 [v. 19], "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all," and in Romans 13 [v. 8], "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was "born of woman, born under the law" [Gal. 4:4], and therefore, was at the same time a free man and a servant, "in the form of God" and "of a servant" [Phil 2:6-7]

Let us start, however, with something more remote from our subject, but more obvious. Man has a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one. ... [and] these two men in the same man contradict each other, "for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh," according to Galatians 5 [v. 17].

First, let us consider the inner man to see how a righteous, free, and pious Christian, that is, a spiritual, new, and inner man, becomes what he is. It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom. ... One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ. ...

To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. ... Therefore it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith....

Since, therefore, this faith can rule only in the inner man, and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inner man. ... Wherefore it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

Colorful Sayings of Colorful Luther

A sample of the reformer's wit and wisdom.

COMPILED BY MARY ANN JEFFREYS

on Humility:

God creates out of nothing. Therefore, until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him.

If you perhaps look for praise and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend—then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way, you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey hears.

Affliction is the best book in my library.

on the Bible:

The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.

I'd like all my books to be destroyed so that only the sacred writings in the Bible would be diligently read.

on Marriage and Family:

Think of all the squabble Adam and Eve must have had in the course of their nine hundred years. Eve would say, "You ate the apple," and Adam would retort, "You gave it to me."

People who do not like children are swine, dunces, and blockheads, not worthy to be called men and women, because they despise the blessing of God, the Creator and Author of marriage.

on Faith:

Faith is the "yes" of the heart, a conviction on which one stakes one's life.

The truth is mightier than eloquence, the Spirit greater than genius, faith more than education.

Our faith is an astounding thing—astounding that I should believe him to be the Son of God who is suspended on the cross, whom I have never seen, with whom I have never become acquainted.

on Human Nature:

Nothing is easier than sinning.

Human nature is like a drunk peasant. Lift him into the saddle on one side, over he topples on the other side.

God uses lust to impel man to marriage, ambition to office, avarice to earning, and fear to faith.

Temptations, of course, cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.

A lie is like a snowball. The longer it is rolled on the ground the larger it becomes.

on Preaching:

When I preach I regard neither doctors nor magistrates, of whom I have above forty in my congregation; I have all my eyes on the servant maids and on the children. And if the learned men are not well pleased with what they hear, well, the door is open.

It is not necessary for a preacher to express all his thoughts in one sermon. A preacher should have three principles: first, to make a good beginning, and not spend time with many words before coming to the point; secondly, to say that which belongs to the subject in chief, and avoid strange and foreign thoughts; thirdly, to stop at the proper time.

on Church Practices:

A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a cardinal without it.

What lies there are about relics! One claims to have a feather from the wing of the angel Gabriel, and the Bishop of Mainz has a flame from Moses' burning bush. And how does it happen that eighteen apostles are buried in Germany when Christ had only twelve?

Farewell to those who want an entirely pure and purified church. This is plainly wanting no church at all.

on Music:

The devil should not be allowed to keep all the best tunes for himself.

I have no use for cranks who despise music, because it is a gift of God. Next after theology, I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.

on Christian Freedom:

Sometimes we must drink more, sport, recreate ourselves, aye, and even sin a little to spite the devil, so that we leave him no place for troubling our consciences with trifles. We are conquered if we try too conscientiously not to sin at all.

If our Lord is permitted to create nice large pike and good Rhine wine, presumably I may be allowed to eat and drink.

Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things.

on Prayer:

Oh, if only I could pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the

piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope.

No man should be alone when he opposes Satan. The church and the ministry of the Word were instituted for this purpose, that hands may be joined together and one may help another. If the prayer of one doesn't help, the prayer of another will.

I have often learned much more in one prayer than I have been able to glean from much reading and reflection.

on Himself

Next to faith, this is the highest art: to be content in the calling in which God has placed you. I have not learned it yet.

Our Lord God must be a pious man to be able to love rascals. I can't do it, and yet I am a rascal myself.

"[Others] try to make me a fixed star, but I am an irregular planet."

If I rest, I rust.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

Martin Luther's Early Years: Christian History Timeline

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Martin Luther

1483: Born at Eisleben, November 10

1484: Parents, Hans and Margaretha Luder, move family to Mansfeld, where Hans works in copper mines

1492: Attends school in Mansfeld

1497: Attends school in Magdeburg

1498: Attends school in Eisenach

1501: Enters University of Erfurt

1502: Receives B.A. at Erfurt

1505: Earns M.A. at Erfurt; begins law studies; in thunderstorm on July 2, vows to become a monk; enters Order of Augustinian Hermits

1507: Ordained and celebrates first Mass

1509: Becomes bachelor of Bible

1510: Visits Rome

1511: Transferred to Augustinian house at Wittenberg

1512: Becomes doctor of theology

1513: Begins lecturing on *The Psalms*

1515: Lectures on *Romans*; appointed district vicar over ten monasteries

1516: Begins lecturing on *Galatians*

1517: Begins lecturing on *Hebrews*; on October 31, posts "*95 Theses*" on indulgences

1518: At meeting of Augustinians in Heidelberg, defends his theology; in October, appears before Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg, but refuses to recant; in December, Frederick the Wise protects Luther from being handed over to Rome.

1519: Understands the "righteousness of God" as "passive righteousness with which God justifies us by faith"; in July, debates Professor John Eck at Leipzig and denies supreme authority of popes and councils

1520: Papal bull "**Exsurge Domine**" gives Luther 60 days to recant or be excommunicated; writes 3 seminal documents: **To the Christian Nobility**, **On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church**, and **The Freedom of a Christian**; burns papal bull and canon law

1521: Excommunicated by the papal bull **Decet Romanum Pontificem**; at Diet of Worms in April, he refuses to recant writings, and edict (in May) condemns him as heretic and outlaw; he is "kidnapped" and hidden at Wartburg Castle; begins translating the New Testament

1522: In March, comes out of hiding and returns to Wittenberg

1523: Writes **On Temporal Authority**

1524: Debates Karlstadt on the Lord's Supper; Luther's former superior, Staupitz, dies

1525: Writes **Against the Heavenly Prophets**; writes **Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes**, criticizing the Peasants' Revolt; marries Katherine von Bora; writes **Bondage of the Will** (against Erasmus).

1526: Writes **German Mass**; becomes a father (son Hans)

1527: Fights sickness and intense depression; writes "A Mighty Fortress"; daughter Elizabeth born; writes against Zwingli's views on the Lord's Supper

1528: Writes **Great Confession Concerning Christ's Supper**; grieves over Elizabeth's death; visits churches

1529: Attends Marburg Colloquy with Zwingli, but no agreement reached on the Lord's Supper; publishes **Large Catechism** and **Small Catechism**; daughter Magdalena born

1530: Luther's Father, Hans, dies; Luther, as outlaw, cannot attend the Diet of Augsburg, held in attempt to end religious division in the empire; Melancthon presents Augsburg Confession, a statement of Lutheran beliefs

1531: Begins lecturing on **Galatians**; son Martin born; mother, Margaretha, dies

1532: Writes **On Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers**; is given the Augustinian cloister in Wittenberg for his home

1533: Son Paul born

1534: Publishes German Bible; daughter Margaret born

1536: Agrees to Wittenberg Concord on the Lord's Supper, in attempt to resolve differences with other reformers, but Zwinglians do not accept it

1537: Draws up Schmalkaldic Articles as his "theological last will and testament"

1538: Writes against the Jews in **Against the Sabbatarians**

1539: Writes *On the Councils and the Church*

1541: Writes *Admonition to Prayer against the Turks*

1542: Drafts his will; daughter Magdalena dies

1543: Writes *On the Jews and Their Lies*

1544: Writes against Schwenckfeld's interpretation of the Lord's Supper

1545: Writes *Against the Papacy at Rome, an Institution of the Devil*

1546: Dies in Eisleben, February 18

1552: Katherine von Bora dies , February 18

Other Reformers

1469: (probably) Erasmus born

1484: Ulrich Zwingli born

1491: Henry VIII born

1496: Menno Simons born

1497: Melanchthon born

1498: Savonarola burned at the stake in Florence

1505: John Knox born

1509: John Calvin born; Henry VIII of England begins reign and marries Catherine of Aragon

1516: Erasmus publishes Greek New Testament

1518: Melanchthon becomes professor of Greek at Wittenburg

1519: Zwingli begins New Testament sermons; Swiss reformation is born

1521: Religious unrest in Wittenberg: private masses abolished, Karlstadt serves Communion in both elements, religious statues destroyed; Melanchthon writes *Loci Communes*; Pope titles Henry VIII "Defender of the Faith" for attacking Luther's views of the sacraments; "Zwickau prophets," early Anabaptists, arrive in Wittenberg

1522: Zwingli's first Reformation debates; Ignatius Loyola begins work on *Spiritual Exercises*

1523: First two Reformation martyrs burned at the stake in Belgium

1524: Erasmus's *On Freedom of the Will*

1525: Anabaptist movement begins in Zurich, spreads to Germany

1526: Reformation spreads to Sweden and Denmark

1527: First Protestant university (Marburg) founded

1528: Bern, Switzerland, becomes Protestant

1529: Name *Protestant* first used

1531: Zwingli killed in battle

1534: Henry VIII becomes supreme head of Church of England

1535: Anabaptist uprising at Münster put down, and Anabaptists executed

1536: First edition of Calvin's *Institutes*; William Tyndale, Bible translator, burned at stake; Denmark and Norway become Lutheran; Erasmus dies

1538: Calvin expelled from Geneva

1540: Society of Jesus (Jesuits) formed

1540: Calvin returns to Geneva from exile

World Events

1452: Leonardo da Vinci born

1453: Turks capture Constantinople

1455: Gutenberg completes printing the Bible using movable type

1469: Lorenzo de' Medici rules Florence;
Ferdinand and Isabella marry

1470: Portuguese explorers discover Gold Coast of Africa

1471: Thomas à Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ*, dies

1473: Copernicus born

1478: Spanish Inquisition set up

1485: Treaty of Leipzig divides Saxony

- 1492:** Spanish forces conquer city of Granada, expelling Islamic Moors from Iberian peninsula; Columbus's first voyage to the Americas
- 1493:** The pope divides the New World between Spain and Portugal
- 1495:** Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper"
- 1497:** John Cabot reaches coast of Newfoundland; Vasco de Gama discovers west coast of India
- 1498:** Albrecht Durer paints *Apocalypse*
- 1499:** Swiss gain independence
- 1500:** Future Charles V born
- 1502:** Frederick, elector of Saxony, founds Wittenberg University
- 1506:** Pope Julius orders work on St. Peter's in Rome; Da Vinci's "*Mona Lisa*"
- 1508:** Michelangelo begins painting Sistine Chapel ceiling
- 1509:** Erasmus writes *In Praise of Folly*
- 1510:** First shipload of African slaves arrives in Hispaniola (Haiti)
- 1513:** Leo X (Giovanni Medici) pope; Balboa discovers the Pacific Ocean
- 1514:** Albert of Brandenburg becomes elector and archbishop of Mainz
- 1516:** Thomas More publishes *Utopia*; Concordat of Bologna assures French Catholic autonomy
- 1517:** Tetzl hired by Albert of Mainz to sell indulgences
- 1519:** Charles I of Spain is elected Holy Roman Emperor Charles V; Cortes enters Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan
- 1520:** Suleiman I becomes sultan of the Ottoman Empire (Turks)
- 1521:** Pope Leo X dies, succeeded by Hadrian VI
- 1522:** Magellan's expedition completes circumnavigation of globe; German knights organize against the emperor; France attacks Charles V; Diet of Nuremberg defers action on Edict of Worms
- 1523:** Clement VII becomes pope
- 1524:** Peasant Wars begin; Diet of Nuremberg fails to enforce Edict of Worms condemning Luther
- 1525:** Charles V defeats Francis I; Elector Frederick the Wise dies; France makes pact with Suleiman I

- 1526:** League of Torgau formed; First Diet of Speyer postpones enforcement of Edict of Worms
- 1527:** Imperial troops sack Rome; plague strikes Wittenberg
- 1529:** Second Diet of Speyer decides to enforce Edict of Worms; Turks lay siege to Vienna
- 1531:** Schmalkaldic League, a body of German Protestant groups, forms in self-defense against Charles V
- 1532:** Elector John the Steadfast dies; Diet of Regensburg and Peace of Nuremberg guarantee religious toleration in face of Turkish threat
- 1533:** Pizarro conquers Peru; Ivan "the Terrible" (age 3) ascends Russian throne
- 1534:** Paul III becomes pope
- 1535:** Emperor forms Catholic Defense League; France makes pact with Suleiman I; Thomas More beheaded for opposing Henry VIII
- 1539:** Catholic Duke George of Saxony dies;
Frankfurt Truce declared between Catholic and Protestant territories
- 1540:** Philip of Hesse, German prince, enters bigamous marriage with consent of Luther; conferences at Hagenau and Worms fail to reconcile Protestants and Catholics
- 1541:** At Conference of Regensburg, Melanchthon and Bucer reach agreement with Catholics on most doctrines, but Luther and Rome reject their work; Karlstadt dies
- 1543:** Copernicus writes that earth revolves around sun; John Eck dies
- 1545:** Ferdinand I and Suleiman I agree to truce; Council of Trent, for reform of Catholic Church, opens
- 1555:** Peace of Augsburg allows rulers to determine religion of their region

Preaching From the Print Shop

If Luther hadn't used the new printing technology, would there have been a Reformation?

Perry Brown is editorial director for the American Tract society in Garland, Texas.

Without printing, would there have been a Protestant Reformation? Would Luther have even survived?

Only a century earlier, both John Wycliffe and John Hus spawned movements of intense spiritual fervor. Wycliffe and Hus wrote prolifically also.

But, the absence of adequate printing technology limited the distribution of their works. As a result, their ideas did not spread as rapidly or as far as they might have. Wycliffe was condemned, Hus was burned at the stake, and history casts them as only harbingers of the Reformation.

Would Martin Luther have joined their ranks without access to a "modern" press? Would his revolutionary ideas have been contained? John Foxe, sixteenth-century author of the famous *Book of Martyrs*, would probably have said yes. "Although through might [the pope] stopped the mouth of John Huss," he wrote, "God hath appointed the Press to preach, whose voice the Pope is never able to stop with all the puissance of his triple crown."

Luther himself understood that books and pamphlets spoke long after he had left the pulpit. He referred to printing as "God's highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward."

Young Technology

It was only in the 1450s that Johann Gutenberg introduced technical printing advancements that made mass reproduction practical. When Luther posted his "95 Theses" some sixty years later, two dozen printing centers dotted Europe. Wholesale booksellers had developed distribution centers, and legions of traveling book hawkers crisscrossed the continent.

Ironically, Luther's introduction to the press's effectiveness may have been haphazard. Within two weeks of the posting of his "95 Theses," they were printed, without his permission, and distributed throughout Germany. Within a month, they had flooded Europe. Six months later Luther explained to Pope Leo X, "It is a mystery to me how my theses...were spread to so many places. They were meant exclusively for our academic circle here..." In a letter of March 1518 he admitted he "had no wish or plan to publicize these Theses," and that he had left it up to his friends to decide whether they would be "suppressed or spread outside."

Flooding Germany

Even if the printing of Luther's Reformation "manifesto" was unintentional, Luther quickly grasped print's potential for soliciting grass-roots support. He began writing prolifically—more than four hundred works, including commentaries, sermons, and pamphlets that attacked Catholic doctrine and promoted Reformation distinctives. Between March 1517 and the summer of 1520, thirty of his pamphlets ran through a total of 370 editions. If each edition was one thousand copies, then almost four hundred thousand of his pamphlets alone flooded Germany during the first crucial years. From 1517 through

1523, the first six years after Luther posted the "95 Theses," publications in Germany increased by seven times. Half of these writings were by Luther.

Luther's opponents knew the impact of his printed works. A nervous Charles V banned Luther's works in May 1521. In a letter that September, Catholic theologian Johann Cochlaeus complained, "Nearly all printers are secret Lutherans; they do not print anything for us without pay and nothing reliable unless we stand beside them and look over their shoulders."

Journalistic Savvy

Luther has sometimes been called the first great journalist. Why did his writings succeed?

1. He spoke in the common language. Luther, a highly-trained academic, was fluent in Latin, the academic's language. Most writings of the era were printed in Latin and thus reserved for society's scholarly elite. Indeed, in 1500 probably only 5–10 percent of Europeans could read at all.

But Luther's passion to promote the priesthood of even the most common believer could be satisfied only by appealing through the common language. He insisted on writing many of his works in German, particularly his monumental translation of the Bible. Soon shoemakers, tailors, and peasants could read the Scriptures and Luther's writings in their own tongue.

2. He used a common format. A second element in Luther's success was his use of the pamphlet format. He expanded the existing, single-page "broadsides" to multiple pages in quarto and octavo sizes. His pamphlets also feature some of the finest woodcuts and engravings of the times, so that even the semi-literate could catch the gist of his message. And in keeping with the need to reach all strata of society, his pamphlets were inexpensive. Like the broadsides popularized decades earlier, Luther's pamphlets were snatched up (or shared) by those of even the most humble means.

3. He was known by common people. Luther's crowning achievement was a German New Testament. Although it was not the first German translation of the Scriptures, Luther's fame apparently secured its success before the ink dried. Three thousand copies were printed in the fall of 1522 with a second edition following in December.

In the words of adversary Johann Cochlaeus, Luther's work was "so propagated and widely spread by the book printers that even tailors and shoemakers, indeed women and other simple idiots, who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel...read it eagerly, as if it were a fountain of all truth. Some carried it in their bosoms and learned it by heart."

Ultimately, Luther's message of justification by faith filled a longing in the German people that the established church's teachings did not satisfy. His common pamphlets in the common language ignited hope among common people. Martin Luther spoke to Europe from two pulpits—one in the church, and one in the print shop.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

Profit-Hungry Printers

Luther suffered from them, too.

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Martin Luther may not have secured the printing for most of his works. But he certainly reviewed, and sometimes bemoaned, what had been printed. His letter to friend Georg Spalatin in August 1521 reveals Luther's exasperation that his crafted ***Sermon on Confession*** had been hastily hacked at the press by a profit-hungry publisher:

"I cannot say how sorry and disgusted I am with the printing. I wish I had sent nothing in German, because they print it so poorly, carelessly, and confusedly, to say nothing of bad types and paper. John the printer is always the same old Johnny. Please do not let him print any of my German homilies, but return them for me to send elsewhere..."

"I shall forward no more until I learn that these sordid mercenaries care less for their profits than for the public. Such printers seem to think: 'It is enough for me to get the money; let the readers look out for the matter.'"

But in spite of sporadic poor printing, and a kingdom-wide ban on the books of this "notorious and stiff-necked heretic," Luther's works gained enormous popularity, far more than anything printed up to that time.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

The Bible Translation That Rocked the World

Luther's Bible introduced mass media, unified a nation, and set the standard for future translations.

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Martin Luther was many things: preacher, teacher, orator, translator, theologian, composer, and family man. He came to symbolize everything the Protestant Reformation stood for.

But perhaps Luther's greatest achievement was the German Bible. No other work has had as strong an impact on a nation's development and heritage as has this Book.

In Luther's time, the German language consisted of several regional dialects (all similar to the tongue spoken in the courts of the Hapsburg and Luxemburg emperors). How were these scattered dialects united into one modern language? The rise of the middle class, the growth of trade, and the invention of the printing press all played a part. But the key factor was Luther's Bible.

The Wartburg Wonder

Following the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther's territorial ruler, Frederick the Wise, had Luther hidden away for safekeeping in the castle at Wartburg. Luther settled down and translated Erasmus's Greek New Testament in only eleven weeks. This is a phenomenal feat under any circumstances, but Luther contended with darkened days, poor lighting, and his own generally poor health.

Das Neue Testament Deutsch was published in September 1522. A typographical masterpiece, containing woodcuts from Lucas Cranach's workshop and selections from Albrecht Durer's famous Apocalypse series, the **September Bibel** sold an estimated five thousand copies in the first two months alone.

Luther then turned his attention to the Old Testament. Though well taught in both Greek and Hebrew, he would not attempt it alone. "Translators must never work by themselves," he wrote. "When one is alone, the best and most suitable words do not always occur to him." Luther thus formed a translation committee, which he dubbed his "Sanhedrin." If the notion of a translation committee seems obvious today, it is because such scholars as Philipp Melancthon, Justus Jonas, John Bugenhagen, and Caspar Cruciger joined Luther in setting the precedent. Never before, and not for many years after, was the scholarship of this body equaled.

Forcing Prophets to Speak German

Luther remained the principal translator, however. His spirit motivated and guided the Sanhedrin in producing a translation that was not literal in the truest sense of the word. He wanted this Bible to be in **spoken** rather than bookish or **written** German. Before any word or phrase could be put on paper, it had to pass the test of Luther's ear, not his eye. It had to sound right. This was the German Bible's greatest asset, but it meant Luther had to straddle the fence between the free and the literal.

"It is not possible to reproduce a foreign idiom in one's native tongue," he wrote. "The proper method of translation is to select the most fitting terms according to the usage of the language adopted. To

translate properly is to render the spirit of a foreign language into our own idiom. I try to speak as men do in the market place. In rendering Moses, I make him so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew."

The translators used the court tongue as their base language but flavored it with the best of all the dialects they could find in the empire. Luther, a relentless perfectionist who might spend a month searching out a single word, talked at length with old Germans in the different regions. To better understand the sacrificial rituals in the Mosaic law, he had the town butcher cut up sheep so he could study their entrails. When he ran into the precious stones in the "new Jerusalem" that were unfamiliar to him, he had similar gems from the elector's collection brought for him to study.

Luther longed to express the original Hebrew in the best possible German, but the task was not without its difficulties. "We are now sweating over a German translation of the Prophets," he wrote. "O God, what a hard and difficult task it is to force these writers, quite against their wills, to speak German. They have no desire to give up their native Hebrew in order to imitate our barbaric German. It is as though one were to force a nightingale to imitate a cuckoo, to give up his own glorious melody for a monotonous song he must certainly hate. The translation of Job gives us immense trouble on account of its exalted language, which seems to suffer even more, under our attempts to translate it, than Job did under the consolation of his friends, and seems to prefer to lie among the ashes."

In spite of this, the Sanhedrin worked rapidly but accurately, translating in a tone more apologetic than scientific. The result was a German Bible of such literary quality that those competent to say so consider it superior even to the King James Version that followed it. And because it sounded natural when spoken as well as read, its cadence and readability have made it a popular Bible in Germany to this day.

The Book Must Be in German Homes

Germans everywhere bought Luther's Bible, not only for the salvation of their souls (if such was their concern), but also for the new middleclass prestige it conferred. It was the *must* book to have in their homes, and many Germans had no choice but to read it: it was likely to be one of the few books they could afford to buy.

It was the first time a mass medium had ever penetrated everyday life. Everyone read Luther's new Bible or listened to it being read. Its phrasing became the people's phrasing, its speech patterns their speech patterns. So universal was its appeal, and so thoroughly did it embrace the entire range of the German tongue, that it formed a linguistic rallying point for the formation of the modern German language. It helped formally restructure German literature and the German performing arts. Its impact, and Luther's in general, were so awesome that Frederick the Great later called Luther the personification of the German national spirit. Many scholars still consider him the most influential German who ever lived.

Uncle of the English Bible

As might be expected, the German Bible's impact reached well beyond the borders of the empire. It was the direct source for Bibles in Holland, Sweden, Iceland, and Denmark, and its influence was felt in many other countries as well.

Most important, the Bible left a permanent impression on a great translator of the English Bible. William Tyndale, one of the Reformation's champions, had fled from England to the Continent about the time Luther was publishing his German New Testament. He, too, was translating from the original manuscripts, and possibly he and Luther met in Wittenberg.

One strong point of Luther's work that impressed Tyndale was the order given to the books of the New Testament. In previous Bibles, there had been no uniform arrangement; translators placed them in

whatever order suited them.

Luther, however, ranked them by the yardstick of *was treibt Christus*—how Christ was taught: the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John); the Acts of the Apostles; the Epistles, in descending order of the Savior's prominence in each; and, finally, the Revelation of John. Tyndale followed Luther's lead, as have virtually all Bible translators since.

Many phrases we know today came from Luther, through Tyndale. From the German's *natürlich*, Tyndale wrote *natural*, and the phrase *natural man* appeared in 1 Corinthians 2:14. Luther's *auf dem gebirge* became *was a voice heard* in Matthew 2:18. Tyndale translated from Luther *the place of dead men's skulls* in John 19:17, *Ye vex yourselves off a true meaning* in 2 Corinthians 6:12, *Doctors in the Scripture* in 1 Timothy 1:7, and *hosianna* in Matthew 21:15.

Like Luther, Tyndale eschewed the Latinized ecclesiastical terms in favor of those applicable to his readers: *repent* instead of *do penance*; *congregation* rather than *church*; *Savior* or *elder* in the place of *priest*; and *love* over *charity* for the Greek *agape*.

Both translations flowed freely in a rhythm and happy fluency of narration; and, wherever he could, Tyndale upheld Luther's doctrine of justification by faith. While in many instances the two translators must have reached the same conclusions independently, Luther's strong influence on the father of the English Bible is unmistakable. Since Tyndale's English translation makes up more than 90 percent of the King James New Testament and more than 75 percent of the Revised Standard Version, Luther's legacy is still plain to see.

Luther was exceptionally gifted in many areas. But the aspect of his genius perhaps most responsible for his impact is the one least heralded: his skill and power as a translator and writer. Had it not been for that, the Protestant Reformation and the growth of a united German nation might have taken an entirely different course.

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Martin Luther's Early Years: A Gallery of Friends and Enemies

Luther made plenty of both

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Leo X (1475–1521)

Prodigal pope who sought income from indulgences

Extravagant son of a notorious Renaissance family, Giovanni de' Medici was made a cardinal at the age of 13 and became Pope Leo X at 38. He has been described as "a polished Renaissance prince," and "a devious and double-tongued politician." Pleasure-loving and easy-going, Leo went on a wild spending spree as soon as he ascended the papal throne.

Expenses for his coronation festivities alone cost 100,000 ducats—one seventh of the reserve Pope Julius had left in the papal treasury. Leo's plans for rebuilding St. Peter's Basilica were estimated to cost over a million ducats. Within two years as pope, Leo had squandered the fortune left by his predecessor and was in serious financial embarrassment.

To keep up with his expenditures, his officials created more than two thousand saleable church offices during his reign. The estimated total profits from such offices have been estimated at three million ducats—but still they were not enough for Leo.

The sale of indulgences provided the pope with yet another source of income. To pay for St. Peter's, offset the costs of a war, and enable a young noble to pay for three offices to which Leo had appointed him, the pope issued an indulgence for special sale in Germany. A Dominican, Johann Tetzel, was given the task of promotion, Luther reacted with his theses, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Leo condemned Luther's teachings in 1520 with the bull *Exsurge Domine*, calling the reformer "a wild boar" who had invaded "the Lord's vineyard." When Luther refused to recant, Leo excommunicated him and called for the secular government to punish him as a heretic.

In 1521 Leo's armies defeated the French at Milan. Characteristically, he celebrated the triumph with an all-night banquet, from which he caught a chill, developed a fever, and died. In a brief seven years he had spent an estimated five million ducats and left behind a debt of nearly another million. With the papal coffers empty and the papal residence plundered, Leo's coffin had to be lit by half-burned candles borrowed from another funeral.

Johann von Staupitz (1469?-1524)

Luther's "most beloved father in Christ"

The dean of the theological faculty at the University of Wittenberg, Johann von Staupitz, became Luther's spiritual adviser when Luther came to study there in 1508. Staupitz, like Luther an Augustinian friar, guided his younger colleague toward Bible study and convinced him to study for the doctorate in theology. Luther addressed his esteemed mentor as his "most beloved father in Christ." The older man's personal piety and humility deeply influenced the reformer. But Staupitz couldn't always understand the younger man's inner struggles. Luther's scrupulous conscience led him to unceasingly confess his sins to Staupitz. Exasperated, Staupitz exclaimed: "Man, God is not angry with you.

You are angry with God. Don't you know that God commands you to hope?"

Summoned to Rome for a hearing in 1518, Luther longed to have his mentor nearby for moral support. So strong was the desire that he dreamed Staupitz came to him, comforted him, and promised to return. The hearing was moved to Augsburg, and Staupitz did, in fact, attend.

When the cardinal in charge of the hearing concluded Luther was a heretic, Staupitz—who was vicar-general of Germany's Augustinian friars—released Luther from his vow of obedience to the order. He may have been trying to distance himself from the outspoken friar, or he may have wanted to set Luther free. Whatever the case, Luther felt abandoned. "I was excommunicated three times," he said later, "first by Staupitz, second by the pope, and third by the emperor." In his last letter to Luther, however, Staupitz said that his love for Luther had never been broken, though he didn't understand the direction Luther had taken.

In later years Luther praised Staupitz for having led him into a knowledge of God's grace. "If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz," he said, "I should have sunk in hell."

Johann Tetzel (1465?-1519)

Peddler of indulgences

In 1516 the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel came to Germany, preaching Pope Leo X's indulgence to raise church funds. Soon the jingle was echoing: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Tetzel's sermons were crassly flamboyant as he played on the fears of simple people. "Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends," he told them, "beseeching you and saying, 'Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance.'"

Luther regarded Tetzel as "the primary author of this tragedy," and it was Tetzel's commercialism that incited Luther to post his **95 Theses**. Tetzel replied with his own **106 Theses**.

For his actions Tetzel earned a sharp rebuke from the papal envoy and the scorn of the local populace. As Tetzel lay dying in 1519, however, Luther wrote him a letter of comfort: "Don't take it too hard. You didn't start this racket."

Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560)

"The teacher of Germany"

When Philipp Melanchthon (his real name was Schwarzerd) delivered his inaugural lecture in 1518 as the new professor of Greek at Wittenberg, his fellow faculty member Luther listened expectantly. The young scholar stammered, but when he called for theologians to go "back to the sources, back to the Holy Scriptures," Luther rejoiced. He had found a brilliant new ally.

Melanchthon soon came under Luther's influence, taking up the study of theology, and he accompanied the reformer to the Leipzig Debate in 1519. Before long Melanchthon was publishing his own views, strengthening the reformed position with his careful, precise reasoning. He differed with Luther on some issues. But on the whole, he took the teachings of "the charioteer of Israel," as he liked to call the reformer, and cast them into a more rational and systematic form.

In 1521 the first edition of Melanchthon's ***Loci Communes*** appeared, the first ordered presentation of Reformation doctrine and a standard textbook of Lutheran theology for over a century to come.

Melanchthon was also the leading figure at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, offering there the Augsburg Confession, a Lutheran statement of faith that was largely his work.

Melanchthon was a peacemaker. With Luther he participated in the Marburg Colloquy, called in 1529 to settle religious differences between Lutherans and Zwinglians (though unsuccessful in that goal).

In addition, Melanchthon's extensive efforts to develop the German educational system earned him the title "the teacher of Germany."

Luther openly admitted that without Melanchthon's methodological skills, his own, largely

unsystematic work would have been lost. The depth of Luther's love for his younger colleague was clear on the day a church interrogator at Worms warned him that if he went down, Melancthon would be pulled down with him. Luther stood firm, but his eyes filled with tears.

Johan Maier Eck (1486–1543) **"That monster" who fiercely debated Luther**

Professor of theology at the University of Ingolstadt, Johann Eck was on good terms with Luther until the controversy over indulgences broke out. Eck's attack on Luther's theses especially galled the reformer, not only because Eck was an old friend, but also because he was—unlike those "perfidious Italians" who opposed Luther— a fellow German.

A public debate was arranged in 1519 at the University of Leipzig, with Eck on the one side and Luther (with fellow reformer Karlstadt) on the other. The scene was tense: Leipzig's town council provided Eck with a bodyguard of seventy-six men, while Luther and Karlstadt arrived in town with two hundred students armed with battle-axes. Charges and countercharges flew in sharp repartee for eighteen days.

The debate turned the focus of the controversy from indulgences to spiritual authority. Did the church have the right to issue indulgences? At last, the patron of Leipzig who hosted the debate, Duke George the Bearded, called it to a halt.

The next year Eck helped procure Luther's condemnation in the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*. In Luther's public response, *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist*, he suspected as much, claiming that the papal document was "the progeny of that man of lies, dissimulation, errors, heresy, that monster Johann Eck. ... Indeed, the style and the spittle all point to Eck."

The pope appointed Eck as his nuncio and special inquisitor to publish the document in the German areas of Franconia and Bavaria. But Eck met with considerable opposition. In Leipzig he had to hide for his life in a cloister; in Wittenberg, his own works were burned by university students, along with canon law and the papal bull. Nevertheless, for the rest of his life, Eck organized Catholic opposition to the Lutheran Reformation.

Karlstadt (1480?-1541) **The reforming "Judas" more radical than Luther**

Andreas Bodenstein, named Karlstadt after his birthplace, was a leading light on the faculty of the University of Wittenber. In fact, he conferred on Luther his doctor's hood.

In 1518 Karlstadt published his own theses setting forth reformation principles. At Leipzig the next year, he joined Luther in the debate against Eck.

Karlstadt emerged as a radical in the Reformation. In 1521 he held the first Protestant communion service—without vestments for the clergy, and with both bread and wine served to the laity. The next day he announced his engagement, a stunning move in an age of celibate ministers. He soon opposed Luther as a proponent of compromise.

In 1524 Luther issued a tract that attacked Karlstadt's extreme ideas as the work of a new "Judas." Karlstadt had to flee Wittenberg, and he denounced Luther as twice a papist and a cousin of Antichrist. But the next year on Luther's wedding night, at eleven o'clock when all the wedding guests had departed, Karlstadt showed up at his door, fleeing the Peasants' War and asking for shelter. Luther took him in. Karlstadt eventually joined the Zwinglian branch of the Reformation and settled in Basel, Switzerland, where he died of the plague.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466?-1536) **Star scholar of the Renaissance**

Desiderius Erasmus was a moderate man in the most immoderate of times. The most famous Renaissance scholar of his day, he called for reform but remained within the Catholic church. For his criticism of the church he was denounced by the Catholics, and for his refusal to join the Reformation he was blasted by the Protestants.

Like Luther, Erasmus urged a return to Scripture, helping theologians to do just that with a new edition of the Greek New Testament along with a fresh Latin translation (1516). He too preached a simple evangelical devotion to Christ in *The Handbook of the Militant Christian* (1503). And his scathing critique of contemporary religion in *The Praise of Folly* (1500) and *The Eating of Fish* (1526) easily equaled Luther's attacks on Rome in their ferocity.

Erasmus stated as late as 1524 that he believed Luther had done much good and was no heretic. But that same year he sharply and publicly parted ways with the reformer when he (Erasmus) published *The Freedom of the Will*. Luther responded in 1525 with a treatise insisting on *The Bondage of the Will*.

Luther was actually grateful to Erasmus for centering the debate at this point. "You alone," he said, "have gone to the heart of the problem instead of debating the papacy, indulgences, purgatory, and similar trifles. You alone have gone to the core, and I thank you for it." But he still saw Erasmus as a faint-hearted reformer who would not go far enough. Like Moses, Luther said, Erasmus could lead the people of God only so far, and he would ultimately die in the wilderness "without entering the promised land."

But Erasmus saw the situation in quite different terms. "The wise navigator," he observed, "will steer between Scylla and Charybdis," between the mortal dangers of two extremes.

Other Key Figures in Luther's Life

Thomas de Vio Cajetan (1469–1534)

Judge for Luther's hearing

Cajetan was an Italian bishop, cardinal, theologian, and general of the Dominican Order. He was put in charge of Luther's hearing at Augsburg in 1518, a stormy encounter that lasted three days. Cajetan had promised to proceed as a "father" rather than a "judge," but his instructions from Rome allowed for no discussion of the issues.

On the first day of the hearing, Luther prostrated himself in a gesture of humility, and the cardinal raised him up in a gesture of reconciliation. But Cajetan then informed Luther that he must recant immediately. Cajetan finally concluded the reformer was an obstinate heretic.

Referring to Luther's frequent rudeness in debate, Cajetan wrote confidentially to Rome, "What an animal!" For his part, Luther characterized Cajetan as a man no more fit to handle his case than an ass was fit to play a harp.

Lucas Cranach (1472–1553)

Illustrator of the Reformation

Much of what we know about the physical appearance of Luther, his family, and his friends comes from the portraiture of Lucas Cranach "the Elder," a German master of woodcuts as well as painting. In the early days of the Reformation he joined the Lutheran cause and became Luther's friend.

Works of Cranach include at least five portraits of Luther; pictures of Luther's parents, wife, and daughter Magdalena; portraits of Elector Frederick and his chaplain Georg Spalatin; and views of the town and Castle Church of Wittenberg. He also illustrated the first edition of Luther's German translation of the New Testament.

Cranach's illustrations of the Book of Revelation were so impressive that one of Luther's opponents borrowed them for his own translations of the New Testament. The ironic result: a Catholic version of the Scriptures with illustrations of Rome as the "Babylon" of the Apocalypse!

Cranach was a banker as well as an artist. Though he loved Luther, he knew how the man's generosity could get him in financial trouble. So he once refused to honor the reformer's draft. Luther's response: "At least you can't accuse me of stinginess."

Girolamo Aleandro (1480–1542) **Scholar and vocal enemy**

Aleandro was an Italian scholar of classical languages. He worked with Erasmus, introduced Greek studies into France, became rector of the University of Paris, and helped fan the flames of Renaissance learning that contributed so much to the Reformation. Nevertheless, he became one of Luther's most vocal enemies.

Pope Leo X sent Aleandro to present Luther with the bull ***Exsurge Domine***, which condemned Luther's teachings and threatened excommunication. Aleandro also led the case against Luther at the Diet of Worms, a difficult task given Luther's popular support. As he wrote in a secret message to his superiors in Rome, "Nine-tenths of the people are shouting 'Luther!' and the other tenth are crying 'Death to the Roman Court!'"

In his Ash Wednesday sermon at the Diet, Aleandro vigorously denounced the reformer, saying Luther had "brought up John Hus from hell." Aleandro demanded a condemnation without trial and ordered Luther's books burned in several European cities. He also sent to the stake two monks preaching Luther's ideas in Antwerp—the first martyrs of the Reformation.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

The Political Luther

The reformer revolutionized more than people's views on the church.

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During the Schmalkaldic War, which broke out after Martin Luther's death, the Spanish troops defeated the Protestant princes and overran much of Saxony, including Wittenberg.

When the Spanish soldiers stood at Luther's grave in the Castle Church, they demanded that Luther's body be exhumed and his bones burned as befits a heretic.

But Emperor Charles V stopped them. He is said to have declared: "I do not make war on dead men!"

This story seems to be a golden legend, but it shows the passions Luther aroused. The Reformation Luther began was not merely a theological dispute but an event that disturbed all areas of life—social, economic, and political.

Pragmatic Philosopher

Luther's writings on church and state profoundly challenged the prevailing views. He formed his ideas, however, not as a political philosopher but as a person confronting real situations.

His correspondence, especially during the last fifteen years of his life, shows him constantly involved in political situations, advising and urging city councils concerned with "urban reformation," and chastising episcopal and secular princes.

For example, in replying to an inquiry made to him in 1528, he wrote, "You ask whether the magistrate may kill false prophets. I am slow in a judgment of blood even when it is deserved. In this matter I am terrified by the example of the papists and the Jews before Christ, for when there was a statute for the killing of false prophets and heretics, in time it came about that only the most saintly and innocent were killed. ... I cannot admit that false teachers are to be put to death. It is enough to banish."

Luther's final journey, in the dead of winter, was taken to restore amity between two territorial princes, brothers who had fallen out over property.

Cozy Relationships with Princes?

Luther enjoyed the protection and generosity of the electoral Saxon princes. Frederick the Wise (1486–1525) protected him from papal and imperial forces because Luther was his subject and the best-known professor at his recently founded University of Wittenberg (1502).

Religious reasons played a minor role at best, for Frederick understood little of the new evangelical theology and cherished his extensive relic collection until he died. He used the court chaplain and lawyer Georg Spalatin as a go-between with Luther to avoid compromising himself more than necessary during the dangerous controversies of the day.

Frederick's brother John (ruled 1525–1532) was a true believer in Luther's reform movement, and his son John Frederick (ruled 1532–1547) was a convinced evangelical who considered Luther his spiritual father.

These cozy relationships have led some to speak of Luther's Reformation as a "princes' reformation," meaning it was primarily a political revolution—local princes asserting their power against Rome under the guise of a theological dispute.

This assessment has been completely revised by contemporary historians. Why? Among other reasons: Luther's attacks upon the ecclesiastical princes in the early years, his harsh criticism of the secular princes during his later years, and the development of his theory of resistance. His polemic against Catholic Georg of Ducal Saxony combines theological arguments with devastating irony and ridicule.

In his letters and sermons, Luther often urged rulers to moderation and equity, but he named names when he blasted the evil princes, contrary to many of his contemporaries.

"There are lazy and useless preachers," he thundered, "who do not denounce the evils of princes and lords, some because they do not even notice them. ... Some even fear for their skins and worry that they will lose body and goods for it. They do not stand up and be true to Christ!"

And in regard to politicians, he once said they "are generally the biggest fools and worst scoundrels on earth, but God will find them out, better than anyone else can, as indeed he has done since the beginning of the world."

Place for Church and State

Although Luther's political views emerged in the heat of controversy, he was able to articulate a compelling theology of church and state.

Luther's doctrine of the church reversed medieval conceptions, for he restored the apostolic understanding of the church as the communion of saints. His teaching on the priesthood of all believers leveled the clergy to servants of the congregation. They do not enjoy a higher estate than do the laity, Luther taught, not even in their role as celebrants of the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

"Thank God, a child of seven knows what the church is," he wrote, "namely, the holy believers and the lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd."

He also wrote, "I believe that there is on earth, through the whole wide world, no more than one holy, common, Christian church, which is nothing else than the congregation, or assembly of the saints, i.e., the pious, believing men on earth, which is gathered, preserved, and ruled by the Holy Ghost, and daily increased by means of the sacraments and the Word of God."

If such views seem commonplace today, it is only because Luther revived them and made them stick. At the time, the church seemed universally arrayed against him and his doctrine of the church, so Luther hoped the lay princes, as Christians in authority, would serve as emergency bishops in reforming the church.

During his lectures on *Romans* (1515–16), Luther commented on "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities": "In our day the secular powers are carrying on their duties more successfully and better than the ecclesiastical rulers are doing. For they are strict in their punishment of thefts and murders, except to the extent that they are corrupted in insidious privileges.

"But the ecclesiastical rulers, except for those who invade the liberties, privileges, and rights of the church,

whom they condemn to excessive punishments, actually nourish pride, ambitions, prodigality, and contentions rather than punish them (so much so that perhaps it would be safer if the temporal affairs of the clergy were placed under secular power)."

Luther wrote that "since the time of the apostles, the secular sword and authority has never been so clearly described and grandly lauded as by me, which even my enemies must acknowledge." He knew the far-reaching implications of his reassertion of the apostolic view of the state.

Against Rome's century-long attempt to make the church dominant over the state, Luther wanted to show how church and state work together under God's rule. He argued that God works in the spiritual realm through the gospel and in the temporal realm through secular authority.

If St. Augustine stressed the negative role of the state ("a great robbery") as a curb on sin, Luther emphasized the positive role of secular authority. It served as the instrument of God's love, for laws are to conform to the basic natural law, which is the law of love (*lex caritatis*). Every legal order and regime is therefore under God, who works through persons in authority.

Good governing is a service to God, and poor or evil governance is an affront to God. Luther frequently referred to the ruler as a "father and helper," "gardener and caretaker," or "God's official." He emphasized that individual rulers were divinely instituted to restrain evil and prevent anarchy and chaos.

Resist Rulers?

Luther taught, however, that there is a great need for justice in the world, and that one has the duty to resist tyrannous rulers who violate natural law and political laws. While every subject should strive to be a good citizen and obey valid laws, if a regime establishes laws that are contrary to the natural law of love, the subject is bound to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29).

Under such conditions, withholding obedience to the government is necessary, and the subject is driven to passive resistance to rulers. Luther, in the light of Romans 13:1, for many years rejected the idea of active resistance to rulers (except for those "healthy heroes" or "wondermen" who, like Samson, are directly and unambiguously called by God to undertake a revolution against unjust rulers). He was realistic when he observed that "changing a government is one thing, but improving it is another."

Luther followed this teaching and put his trust in the Lord even when his own life was at stake. From May 1529 to late 1530 he refused to sanction resistance by Elector John to the emperor. (In the end he yielded only when legal experts convinced him otherwise on the basis of imperial law.)

In his 1534 *Commentary on Psalm 101*, Luther summarized his views: "The spiritual government or authority should direct the people vertically toward God that they may do right and be saved; just so the secular government should direct the people horizontally toward one another, seeing to it that body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home, and all manner of goods remain in peace and security and are blessed on earth. God wants the government of the world to be a symbol of true salvation and of his kingdom of heaven, like a pantomime or a mask."

The Most-Important Word

In that critical hour when he stood at Worms, Luther had resisted the temptation to unleash a popular national uprising against the pope and the emperor.

"I did nothing; the Word did and achieved everything," he reminisced many years later. "If I had wanted to start trouble, I could have brought all Germany into a great bloodbath. Yes, I could have begun such a

game at Worms that the emperor himself would not have been safe. But what would that have been? A fool's game! I did nothing but left it all up to the Word."

With such a force at the center of Luther's life and thought, it is no wonder that the Reformation touched and transformed so many aspects of medieval life.

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Luther's Political Nemesis

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Charles V (1500–1558) **Defender of the Catholic faith**

When Charles was elected emperor of the Holy Roman Empire at the age of 19, he became the most powerful man in Europe. His domains included Burgundy, the Netherlands, Naples, and Spain and Spanish America (and he laid claim to northern Italy as well). Though his rivals and enemies were formidable—France, the papacy, and the Turks—Charles's most urgent problem was the rise of the Lutheran movement.

After Luther's excommunication by the pope, he appealed to Charles: "For three years I have sought peace in vain. I have now but one recourse. I appeal to Caesar."

Charles called Luther to appear before the Diet of Worms in 1521, an already scheduled council of the German rulers. After days of examining Luther, Charles called in the electors and other princes to read them his decision:

"A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for a thousand years must be wrong. I have decided to mobilize everything against Luther: my kingdoms and dominions, my friends, my body, my blood, and my soul." The Edict of Worms, signed by Charles weeks later, banned Luther from the empire.

For many years other political difficulties preoccupied the emperor, allowing him to pursue only an irregular policy toward the Lutherans, which wavered between concession and repression. At the Diet of Augsburg (1555), the Protestant rulers finally forced him to accept the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*—the princes of the empire are to determine the religion of their lands.

By the following year, the burdens of the realms had grown too great, and Charles abdicated his throne to retire to a monastery, depressed and failing in health. When he died two years later, his last word was "Jesus."

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Luther's Political Allies

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Frederick III "The Wise" (1463–1525)

Pious medieval prince

Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, was both an avid collector of relics and a supporter of modern scholarship.

He was educated at an Augustinian monastery and made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He collected religious relics—19,013 of them, in fact, by the year 1520—with the wish that Wittenberg, as a depository of sacred items, would become the Rome of Germany. He had such rarities (it was claimed) as four hairs from the Virgin Mary, a strand of Jesus' beard, and a piece of the bread eaten at the Last Supper.

The pious Frederick also founded the University of Wittenberg. After inviting Luther (and later Melanchthon) to teach there, he found himself having to protect the troublesome professor of Bible.

When in 1518 Luther was summoned to Rome for a hearing, Frederick intervened and arranged for the meeting to take place on safer German soil. He also refused to execute the 1520 bull, *Exsurge Domine*, which condemned Luther. And after the Diet of Worms placed the reformer under an imperial ban, Frederick found him a hiding place at his castle, the Wartburg.

The Saxon ruler's reputation for justice earned him the title "the Wise," but his cautious nature earned him the nickname "the hesitator" from Luther. Scholars have debated how much Frederick accepted of Luther's doctrine; his chaplain and secretary, Georg Spalatin, made him familiar with Lutheran teaching, but Frederick never openly advocated reform. Nevertheless, he refused to suppress Luther, and in 1524 he ended the veneration of relics in Saxony (though he did protest the iconoclasm of Luther's followers).

Perhaps the best clue to Frederick's final position came when he lay on his deathbed in 1525. The prince asked to receive the Lord's Supper in both bread and wine—contrary to papal doctrine but in keeping with Luther's teaching. Luther preached at his funeral, and Melanchthon praised him as the prince who had done more than any other to advance the Reformation.

Georg Spalatin (1484–1545)

Go-between and confidant

When the disturbing political implications of Luther's teaching grew clear, he needed a friend in high places. That friend appeared in the person of Georg Spalatin, the chaplain and secretary of Elector Frederick of Saxony.

Spalatin began studying at Wittenberg in 1511 and was soon brought under Luther's influence. When the pope summoned Luther to Rome for a hearing in 1518, Luther asked Frederick to move the meeting to Germany, and Spalatin became the middle man in the negotiations. He also accompanied Frederick to the Diets of Augsburg and Worms to help negotiate with Luther's opponents.

Spalatin supervised the publication of many of Luther's works and became a trusted friend. In 400 letters to Spalatin, Luther shared everything from the deeply personal and intimate (e.g., how Spalatin should

make love to his bride!) to the mundane—"I have planted a garden and built a wall, both with marvelous success."

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Fool in Rome

As a young monk, Luther longed to see Rome. But his 1510 trip to the Holy City filled him with pain and doubt.

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Luther had hoped to gain spiritual strength through his visit to the Holy City, but he left Rome with mixed feelings. His journey to Rome was a business trip, concerning the affairs of the order. His personal involvement concerned a different aspect of Rome: incredible opportunities of furthering the cause of salvation for others and himself as well.

The indulgences offered for sale in Germany were only poor imitations of what could be purchased in Rome. There was first of all the opportunity of a general confession, which he wanted to seize to unburden his soul, making it as clean as it had been after baptism.

But his own salvation was not his sole concern. He celebrated mass in Rome daily; at the altar of St. Sebastian, he once even said several in a single hour. He caught himself regretting that his parents were still alive: "For I would have loved to deliver them from purgatory with my masses and other special works and prayers."

But priests from many European countries rushed to the altar with similar wishes in mind, so that it was difficult to put his pious intentions into action: "There is a saying in Rome: 'Blessed is the mother whose son celebrates a mass in St. Giovanni in Laterano on a Saturday.' How I would have loved to make my mother blessed there! But the waiting line was too long, and I did not get a turn."

Because Luther wanted to free his grandfather—Lindemann or Heine Luder—from purgatory, he scaled the Santa Scala on his knees, with an Our Father on each step, for by praying this way it was said one could save a soul. When he had arrived at the top, however, skepticism overtook him: "Who knows if it is really true?"

His flash of doubt arose from the conviction that God would not allow himself to be pinned down in this way. It was this sense of reverence, typical of his faith and piety from the start, which stayed with him on the road to Reformation.

Blasphemous behavior

Luther's experiences in Rome were ambivalent. He was convinced he would be able to find salvation in abundance in this center of Christendom and was thus determined to make the most of the unique opportunities being offered everywhere. For Luther, Rome was and would remain the glorious city of the steadfast martyrs, where the apostles Peter and Paul and the first Christians had witnessed to their faith with their blood. But noticing how much blasphemous behavior went on in the Holy City disturbed him deeply.

"Where God builds a church, the Devil puts a chapel next door"—would that this saying applied to Rome! But, as people put it, Rome was worse: "If there is a hell, then Rome is built on it." This saying would later take on a new significance when the monk became the reformer, unmasking the pope's alliance with the Devil.

Luther's criticism of Rome was not a result of his excommunication by the pope. Later he remembered clearly the shock and horror he felt in Rome upon hearing for the first time in his life flagrant blasphemies uttered in public. He was deeply shocked by the casual mockery of saints and everything he held sacred. He could not laugh when he heard priests joking about the sacrament of the Eucharist. In Erfurt his first Mass had set him shivering with awe; now in Rome he had to stand by while servants of God thought it funny to blaspheme the most sacred words of institution: "Bread thou art and bread thou shalt remain, wine thou art and wine thou shalt remain."

The rampant immorality he saw and heard about shattered his ideal of Rome; the saying that was in the mouths of so many contemporaries also proved true for him: "The closer to Rome, the worse the Christians." But his belief that the church in which he had been raised was the true church remained unaffected.

Luther was by no means alone in his criticism. Erasmus of Rotterdam, who had journeyed to Rome five years earlier, wrote as unambiguously: "With my own ears I heard the most loathsome blasphemies against Christ and his apostles. Many acquaintances of mine have heard priests of the curia uttering disgusting words so loudly, even during Mass, that all around them could hear it."

Ten years later Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, was advised against going to Rome—because of its stupendous depravity. It was Pope Hadrian VI who officially admitted the deplorable state of affairs. He had his nuncio read out a confession of guilt to the Diet of Nuremberg in January 1523: "We know that for years there have been many abominable offenses in spiritual matters and violations of the commandments committed at this Holy See, yes, that everything has in fact been perverted. ... The first thing that must be done is to reform the curia, the origin of all the evil."

But it was not the moral decay, the vice and immorality at the center of the church, that made Luther start to doubt whether the pope was indeed the vicar of Christ. Luther had been a "fierce papist," and for that reason later hesitated to publish his early writings, which were still "loyal to the pope." His misgivings began with the indulgence controversy in 1518–19, when he had to recognize that God's grace was for sale in Rome. Even after the papal excommunication had driven a wedge between Wittenberg and Rome, the reformer never claimed moral superiority. It is not the profligacy of the Church of Rome that divides us, [he explained, for] "there are just as many bad Christians among us as under the pope." It was not Rome, the proverbial cesspool of vice, that gave birth to Luther the reformer.

Luther's reminiscences of his trip to Rome are an invaluable aid to understanding why the Augustinian monk started on that lonely journey which would ultimately bring him to the Reformation breakthrough. The question he posed at the top of the Santa Scala—"Who knows if it is true?"—was gradually transformed into the fundamental quest for the reliable basis of all church doctrine.

It is illuminating to see Luther's trek to Rome in light of later events. Any serious search for salvation is subject to the question: who knows if it is true? For Luther, God's promise became the only life-sustaining answer that could provide certainty: the just shall live by faith.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years

Legends About Luther

Which are true? Which are not?

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Martin Luther became a legend in his own time. Soon after 1517, as the **95 Theses** made him famous, stories and pictures began to paint him larger than life.

One early woodcut portrayed Luther as a young monk holding an open Bible, while rays of light stream from a halo surrounding his head.

After the Diet of Worms in 1521, a popular pamphlet retold the story of Luther's appearance before Emperor Charles V—with characters and scenes from the Passion of Christ.

While Luther's followers were eager to make him a saint, his opponents were just as eager to discredit him. One of his earliest biographers, the Catholic critic John Cochlaeus, suggested that Luther seemed peculiar to his monastic brothers because he once suffered a fit during mass. When Luther heard the Gospel lesson (Mark 9:14–29) about the boy with the deaf and dumb spirit cast out by Jesus, he allegedly fell to the floor crying, "It is not me, not me!" This legend has continued to fuel suspicion that Luther suffered from a mental disorder; psychoanalyst Erik Erikson made it the subject of an entire chapter in his popular book *Young Man Luther* (1958).

Most misconceptions about Luther, however, arose harmlessly and only gradually. Like all myths, they contain a kernel of truth. Here are five often told experiences from Luther's life that need some clarification.

1. Thunderstorm "Conversion" A Damascus-road experience?

After Luther finished his Master of Arts degree at the University of Erfurt, he embarked on the study of law. Then, in the summer of 1505, after a visit to his parents' home, Luther returned to Erfurt. Frightened by a thunderstorm near Stotternheim, he cried out: "Help me, St. Anna! I will become a monk."

This sudden decision made on the road in a flash of lightning reminded contemporaries of the conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. The comparison remained popular well into the nineteenth century.

More than likely, Luther was indeed frightened by a storm near Stotternheim. By his own account he did vow to St. Anna, the popular patron saint of miners, that he would become a monk.

Were the storm and Luther's vow, however, akin to Paul's conversion? Not necessarily. Luther was certainly not converted in the sense that a formerly indifferent young man suddenly became serious about religion.

Furthermore, Luther regretted having made the vow. He not only adopted the monastic life but also, unlike Paul with Christianity, left it again.

Still, the experience did have marks of a conversion. When Luther entered the monastery, he went from living in the world to living in the cloister—a change that for centuries had been described as “conversion.” Like a new convert, he took his new life seriously. “If ever a monk could have reached heaven through monkery,” he asserted, “then it was I.”

2. “Tower Experience” Instant discovery?

According to older biographies, Luther discovered the gospel all at once while reading Paul’s Epistle to the Romans in the tower of the Augustinian cloister. That notion was based on direct and indirect sources supplied by the reformer himself.

In the direct source, a flashback written the year before his death, Luther described how a new understanding of God’s righteousness finally came to him after he had meditated day and night on Romans 1:17–18.

The indirect source is Luther’s *Table Talk*, a compilation (by students and associates) of Luther’s observations at meals during his later years. In the *Table Talk*, Luther located his discovery both in the tower and in the *cl.* of the monastery.

Some scholars, especially those favoring a psychoanalytical interpretation, read *cl.* as *cloaca*, “toilet,” and reconstructed a scene that connected Luther’s discovery with both physical and emotional release.

Recent research, however, has generally abandoned the image of Luther’s theological discovery as a sudden, momentary experience. All the sources are flashbacks. It is likely that the discovery came as the culmination of a long, painstaking attempt to understand Paul’s saying that the righteousness of God was revealed in the gospel (Romans 1:17). At the end of his flashback, Luther emphasized how hard he had worked at understanding Scripture, not how quickly he had arrived at that understanding.

Luther scholars still are not united on an exact date for Luther’s discovery. But most agree that between 1515 and 1518, as he diligently studied and lectured on the Bible in Wittenberg, Luther arrived at a new, positive understanding of righteousness as a gift of God received in faith.

3. Posting 95 Theses Did he nail them to the Castle Church door?

Countless Protestant bulletin covers for Reformation Sunday have pictured Luther as a rebellious monk nailing the **95 Theses** to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Luther himself never reported having engaged in such an act of protest.

The depiction of his posting the theses stems from his younger colleague, Philipp Melancthon, who was not in Wittenberg in 1517, and who did not record the incident until after Luther’s death. Nevertheless, the story became a standard part of Luther lore and Luther biographies until recently.

The posting of the theses was called into question by Catholic historian Erwin Iserloh in 1961. He pointed out that the debate to which the theses were an invitation never took place in Wittenberg. Further, in order to provoke discussion of papal indulgences, Luther sent the theses to his superiors in the church and to other scholars around Germany. According to Iserloh, the theses were not nailed; they were mailed.

This challenge by a Catholic historian at first elicited protests from Protestant scholars. They rightly pointed out that in other ways Luther did attack abuses in the indulgence trade. Attempts were made to

prove that Luther had indeed nailed the theses to the church door, even if they were meant only to announce a debate. Gradually, however, Iserloh's view has gained wider acceptance and softened the picture of how the Reformation began.

4. "Here I Stand!" Did he really say that?

In April 1521, Luther appeared before Emperor Charles V to defend what he had taught and written. At the end of his speech, the story goes, he spoke the famous words, "Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me."

The earliest printed version of Luther's address added these words, which were not recorded on the spot. It's possible they are genuine, but for almost a half century now, most scholars have believed they were probably not spoken by Luther.

A second misunderstanding arises when the words "Here I stand" are quoted as evidence of Luther's modern stand against the medieval powers of church and empire. Luther's speech was not a defiant, solitary protest, but a calm, reasoned account of why he had written the books piled on the table before him and why he could not recant their content.

Luther asserted that his conscience was captive to the Word of God and that he could not go against conscience. This was not, however, a modern plea for the supremacy of the individual conscience or for religious freedom. Though already excommunicated by Rome, Luther saw himself as a sworn teacher of Scripture who must advocate the right of all Christians to hear and live by the gospel.

5. Hurling An Inkwell at the Devil How did the spot get on the wall?

Whatever he might say at Worms, Luther had been guaranteed safe conduct back to Wittenberg. Because, however, Charles V declared Luther an outlaw, his prince, the Elector Frederick, had Luther kidnapped and placed in hiding at the Wartburg Castle.

Later stories of Luther's ten-month stay at the Wartburg frequently told of his battle with the Devil. The Devil constantly disturbed his work—as a fly buzzing around his head, or as a large, black dog in Luther's bed, or by making a racket to keep Luther awake. The most famous story told how Luther once threw an inkwell at the Devil. Guides showed enthralled visitors to the Wartburg the spot behind the stove where the inkwell had hit the wall.

The first evidence of a story involving an inkwell dates to the end of the sixteenth century. In that version, a former Wittenberg student claimed to have heard that while Luther was at the Wartburg, the Devil, dressed as a monk, threw an inkwell at the reformer.

In 1650 the first book to refer to an inkspot on the wall appeared, and thereafter the story told how Luther threw the inkwell at the Devil. Gradually, an inkspot appeared on the walls of other buildings where Luther had lived, and the story became a widely-known legend.

Although definitely a fabrication, this legend points to an important truth about Luther. He was a deeply devout man of his age who believed strongly in the existence of the Devil. The Christian life was a constant battle against the Devil, who was behind every evil act and disaster. Christians needed to pray every day, coached Luther in his *Catechism*, that God would forgive their sins and strengthen their faith so they could survive this struggle. The reformer spoke from experience; even though he trusted that God would finally defeat the Devil, he was also subject to attacks of doubt and spiritual despair. If Luther did

once launch an inkwell at his most dreaded adversary, he would not have been acting out of character.

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Martin Luther's Early Years: Recommended Resources

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Scholars have given the mature Luther more attention in recent years. The following books help trace Luther's actions and thoughts from the time he emerged from Wartburg Castle in 1522 until his death in 1546.

- Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford, 1975); *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–1546* (Cornell, 1983). Two of the finest books about the later Luther. Interestingly written and based solidly on the sources.
- Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532- 1546* translated by James L. Schaaf (Fortress, 1993). The third and final volume of what will likely become the standard multi-volume biography of Luther in English.
- H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Doubleday, 1980; Princeton, 1983). A colorful, well-written biography of the mature and aging reformer.
- Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* and *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, both translated by Robert C. Schultz (Fortress; 1966, 1972). Althaus systematically covers Luther's doctrinal and social teachings.
- Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, translated by Martin H. Bertram (Concordia, 1958). The book presents Luther's teachings on a wide variety of issues.
- Walter G. Tillmans, *The World and Men around Luther* (Augsburg, 1959). Interesting thumbnail sketches of the people, both friends and foes, who interacted with Luther.
- Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Interpreters of Luther* (Fortress, 1968). Eleven essays on how Luther has been interpreted from the sixteenth century through the twentieth century.

Luther's Grave: Safe beneath the pulpit of the Wittenberg castle church, where he preached.

By Luther

Luther wrote some 60,000 pages, much of it later in life. For the range of those writings, see the largest English collection—*Luther's Works: The American Edition*, 55 vols. (Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.). Helpful short anthologies include *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (Anchor, 1961) and *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull (Augsburg Fortress, 1989). Here are several key writings from the mature Luther.

- ***Eight Sermons at Wittenberg*** [Amer. Ed. 51, (67) 70–100]. Luther preached these in 1522 to restore peace and order following Karlstadt's excesses.

• **Seven Penitential Psalms** [AE 14, (137) 139–205] and **The Four Psalms of Comfort** [AE 14, (207) 209–277] express the great reformer’s pastoral concerns.

• **The Bondage of the Will** [AE 33, (3) 15–295] stands as one of Luther’s most influential writings. He responds to Erasmus and declares that humans are saved not by their own merit or works but solely by the unmerited grace of God.

• Luther wrote three main treatises on the Peasants’ Revolt: **Admonition to Peace** [AE 46, (3) 17–43], **Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants** [AE 46 (45) 49–55], and **An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants** [AE 46, (57) 63–85].

• **In That These Words of Christ “This Is My Body, ” Etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics** [AE 37, (3) 13–147], Luther deals with the position of Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bucer, and others on the Lord’s Supper.

• Two of Luther’s most distinctive commentaries on the Bible are **Lectures on Galatians** (1535) [AE 26, (1) 3–461; 27, (1) 3–149] and **Lectures on Genesis** [AK, vols.1–8]. Written during the last ten years of his life, these commentaries contain Luther’s final statements of his theology.

• **On the Councils and the Church** [AE 41, (3) 9–178] presents what has been called Luther’s “final judgment concerning the medieval church as well as the first broad foundation for a new doctrine of the church.”

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