



Martin Luther— A Catalyst for Change

Christians around the world are commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation events ignited by the posting of Martin Luther's 95 Theses. These theses dealt with how believers come to terms with God's discipline and why buying divine indulgences were impossible and undermined God's judgment and grace. To understand that event, it is helpful to learn more about Martin Luther's education, life shaping experiences, his fear of being judged harshly as a sinner by God, and his concerns regarding Medieval Roman Catholic church practices.

Martin Luther was born in a small German town in 1483. Church was the center of life and church rules and laws governed every facet of German life. In that setting, with demanding and strict parents, Luther may have developed a fear of punishment and failing that dramatically influenced his later life. At the age of 18, Luther entered the University of Erfurt intending to fulfill his father's ambition that his son becomes a lawyer. Luther was an excellent student and active in music. One evening on a return trip to Erfurt, following a visit with his parents, he was caught in a frightening thunderstorm, which significantly jarred Luther. That night he made a decision to turn his life over to God and become a monk, a decision that sorely disappointed and angered his father. A short time later Luther entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.

It was a celibate life, with a strong focus on prayer, study, meditation, self-reflection, and self-denial. Services were held seven times a day. His disciplined life was spent in worship, prayer, and meditation. He reportedly said his confession four times during the day, often for several hours at a time in order to purge himself of sin. He believed that God's righteousness was a standard by which God measured sinners and found them wanting. As much as he confessed and repented, he still didn't feel saved. He didn't believe that his own efforts would ever please God. Searching out internal secret sins involved with motives, emotions, thoughts and even repressed feelings, led Luther to utter despair. His search for salvation became an obsession. He deeply cared about being reconciled with God.

An important turning point in Luther's life apparently occurred when he was chosen to go on a pilgrimage to Rome. While he felt honored to have been chosen, he found life in Rome to be so different from any other experiences he had. In Rome he saw all the wealth and power centered in the papacy; he saw priests who violated scripture and whose actions were sometimes immoral. He returned to the monastery unsettled and somewhat disillusioned with the church. He didn't feel Rome reflected Christianity as he understood it.

From Erfurt, Luther was sent to the monastery in Wittenberg where there was a new University. Luther studied and obtained a doctorate, and he was appointed professor of biblical studies at Wittenberg. There he would have both teaching and pastoral responsibilities. Even in this new setting, he was still focused on his painful spiritual struggles. He thought that God had set the bar so high that he would never earn salvation. He was trying so hard to be holy and he did not believe that his own efforts would ever reconcile him with God or that he could make any contribution to his own salvation even as an exemplary monk. ("If ever a monk should have gotten to heaven, it should have been I.") He continued to wrestle with the concept of righteousness; something he felt had to be earned from God. It was through merit that one could, if free of sin, earn salvation. It was in this setting, as he reflected further on his reading of Romans, that Luther developed a different and freeing perspective on righteousness. It was not something to be earned, but rather a gift from God. (See Romans 1:16-17).

Pope Leo, anxious to complete the Basilica in Rome and to assist Prince Albert, the Archbishop of Brandenburg, pay off debts, appointed and authorized a Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel to sell indulgences. Luther objected to Tetzel's flamboyant tactics and misuse of scripture to promote the sale of indulgences. Frustrated by this practice, Luther drafted a series of statements known as the 95 Theses. They were posted on All Saints' Eve, October 31, 1517, a day as some have written, "that changed the world". He challenged the practice of indulgences and invited scholars and church leaders to debate him. None did, but copies of his theses were widely distributed thanks to the availability of the printing press. The debate quickly shifted from an attack on indulgences to one on the authority of the church and the pope's right to issue indulgences. (Indulgences were like a spiritual credit, sold as certificates to church members. They implied forgiveness of sins and hasten the release from purgatory for themselves or a family member. Doing pious deeds or making a financial contribution to the church could earn these credits.)

Clearly the pope and church leaders were not pleased with what they perceived as heresy and an assault on church authority. Steps were taken to excommunicate Luther. The Roman Emperor, Charles V, convened a council in Worms, Germany, and invited Luther to attend. Luther reluctantly accepted the Roman Emperor's invitation, hoping perhaps that it would be another opportunity to debate this issue. Instead, he found himself defending his actions in a trial. He was asked to recant his theses and other writings. He refused. On the way home from Worms his friends kidnapped him and brought him to a remote location, Wartburg Castle. Some days later, the Emperor Charles V issued a decree declaring Luther an outlaw and heretic who should be arrested and killed. Luther remained in hiding at the Wartburg castle for nearly 10 months, during which time he translated the New Testament into German in a matter of weeks, and also wrote several books.

Luther secretly left Wartburg castle and returned to Wittenberg. When Luther left the castle and saw what was happening, he was shocked. In that short 10-month period, church reform was actively underway and a movement led by former colleagues and others gained a momentum that could not be restrained. Change was rapid, perhaps too rapid for Luther. It was not his intent to set off a revolution, but only bring about reform in church practices. He was upset to witness the violence taking place around him, the destruction of church statues and altars, and peasants on the farms and in the streets in revolt against their serf masters. (Peasant War, 1524-1525)

Throughout his life, Luther continued to be a tireless worker and prodigious writer until the time he died in 1546. He continued challenging medieval church practices and doctrine; he completed the translation of the entire bible into the vernacular German language. He argued that celibacy was not necessary for clergy, and later married a "runaway nun", Katherine von Bora. Together they had six children. He authored changes to the language and practices of the sacrifice of the Mass and to the system of Sacraments. His writings influenced other changes, some which took years to fully come to fruition. Although clearly a catalyst for change, some of Luther's actions were not without fault.

Martin Luther was also a troublesome figure. With a sharp tongue, he made harsh attacks on Jews, Catholics, Anabaptists, Muslims, and just about anyone with whom he disagreed. He also contributed to anti-Semitism in Germany. Jews frustrated him because they did not accept the gospel. When the "Peasant War" broke out, he condemned the peasants and exhorted the princes to crush the revolt. He was obstinate and stubborn on other issues where compromise would have led to less conflict. The Reformation entailed a split in the church and contributed to religious wars in that century and later.

Briefly summarized, some of Luther's lasting influences can be seen today in a number of ways:

- * His emphasis on the prominence of the gospel of forgiveness
- * His emphasis and support for increasing the value of the individual and liberty of conscience
- * His translation of the Bible into German vernacular helped unite a country and a language
- * He assumed that girls as well as boys should be taught catechism, a step toward coeducation
- * He insisted that marriage was just as important a vocation as monasticism,
- * He brought music into the church service. (In that era, singing belonged only to monks and priests.)