**MARTIN LUTHER**

Martin Luther, one of the most notable theologians in Christian history, is responsible for initiating the Protestant Reformation. To some sixteenth century Christians he was hailed as a pioneering defender of truth and religious freedoms, to others he was charged as a heretic leader of a religious revolt. Today most Christians would agree that he influenced the shape of Protestant Christianity more than any other person. The Lutheran denomination was named after Martin Luther.

Martin Luther's Young Life

Martin Luther was born into Roman Catholicism in the small town of Eisleben, near modern Berlin in Germany. His parents were Hans and Margarethe Luther, middle-class peasant laborers. His father, a miner, worked hard to ensure a proper education for his son, and by age 21 Martin Luther held a Master of Arts degree from the University of Erfurt.

Following Hans' dream for his son to become a lawyer, in 1505 Martin began to study law. But later that year, while traveling through a terrible thunderstorm, Martin had an experience that would change the course of his future. Fearing for his life when a lightning strike narrowly missed him, Martin cried out a vow to God. If he lived he promised to become a monk. And so he did!

To the strong disappointment of his parents, Luther entered the Augustinian Monastery at Erfurt in less than a month's time. Some speculate that Luther's decision to pursue a life of religious devotion was not as sudden as history suggests, but that his spiritual quest had been in development for some time, for he entered the monastic life with great fervor. He was driven by fears of hell, God's wrath, and a need to gain the assurance of his own salvation. Even after his ordination in 1507 he was haunted with insecurity over his eternal fate, and disillusioned by the immorality and corruption he witnessed among the Catholic priests he had visited in Rome. In an effort to shift his focus from the spiritual state of his troubled soul, in 1511 Luther moved to Wittenburg to earn his Doctorate of Theology.

The Birth of the Reformation

As Martin Luther immersed himself deeply in the study of Scripture, especially the letters written by the Apostle Paul, God's truth broke through and Luther came to the overwhelming knowledge that he was "saved by grace through faith" alone (Ephesians 2:8). When he began to teach as a professor of biblical theology at the University of Wittenburg, his new found enthusiasm began to spill over into his lectures and discussions with staff and faculty. He spoke passionately about Christ's role as the only mediator between God and man, and that by grace and not through works, are men justified and forgiven of sin. Salvation, Luther now felt with all assurance, was God's free gift. It didn't take long for his radical ideas to get noticed. For not only did these revelations of God's truth change Luther's life, they would forever change the direction of church history.

Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Thesis

In 1514 Luther began to serve as a priest for Wittenburg's Castle Church, and people flocked to hear God's Word preached like never before. During this time Luther learned of the Catholic Church's unbiblical practice of selling indulgences. The Pope, according to his discretion from the "treasury of merits from the saints," sold religious merits in exchange for building funds. Those who purchased these indulgence documents were promised a reduced punishment for their sins, for the sins of departed loved ones, and in some cases, total forgiveness from all sin. Luther publicly objected to this dishonest practice and abuse of church power.

On October 31, 1517 Luther nailed his famous 95-Thesis to the University's bulletin board—the Castle Church door, formally challenging church leaders on the practice of selling indulgences and outlining the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone. This act of nailing his Thesis to the church door has become a defining moment in Christian history, symbolic of the birth of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther's vocal criticisms of the church were seen as a threat to papal authority, and he was warned by the Cardinals of Rome to recant his position. But Luther refused to change his stand unless someone could point him to scriptural evidence for any other attitude.

Martin Luther's Excommunication and Diet of Worms

In January of 1521, Luther was officially excommunicated by the Pope. Two months later, he was ordered to appear before Emperor Charles V in Worms, Germany for a general assembly of the Holy Roman Empire, a convention known as the "Diet of Worms" (pronounced "dee-it of Vorms"). On trial before the highest Roman officials of the Church and State, again Martin Luther was asked to renounce his views. And just as before, with no one able to refute the truth of God's Word, Luther stood his ground. As a result, Martin Luther was issued the Edict of Worms, banning his writings and declaring him a "convicted heretic." Luther escaped in a planned "kidnapping" to Wartburg Castle where he was kept protected by friends for almost a year.

Translating the Truth

During his seclusion, Luther translated the New Testament into the German language, giving ordinary lay people the opportunity to read God's Word for themselves and distribute Bibles among the German people for the first time ever. Although one of the brightest moments in Bible history, this was a dark time of depression in Luther's life. He is reported to have been deeply troubled by evil spirits and demons as he penned the Bible into German. Perhaps this explains Luther's statement at the time, that he had "driven the devil away with ink."

Martin Luther's Great Accomplishments

Under the threat of arrest and death, Luther courageously returned to Wittenburg's Castle Church and began to preach and teach there and in the surrounding areas. His message was a bold one of salvation in Jesus by faith alone, and freedom from religious error and papal authority. Miraculously avoiding capture, Luther was able to organize Christian schools, write instructions for pastors and teachers (Larger and Smaller Catechism), compose hymns (including the well-known "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"), put together numerous leaflets, and even publish a hymnbook during this time.

Married Life

Shocking both friends and supporters, Luther was married on June 13, 1525 to Katherine von Bora, a nun who had abandoned the convent and had taken refuge in Wittenburg. Together they had three boys and three girls and led a happily married life in the Augustinian monastery.

Aging But Active

As Luther aged, he suffered from many illnesses including arthritis, heart problems and digestive disorders. Yet he never quit lecturing at the University, writing against the abuses of the church, and fighting for religious reforms.

In 1530 the famous Augsburg Confession (the primary confession of faith of the Lutheran Church) was published, which Luther helped to write. And in 1534 he completed translation of the Old Testament in German. His theological writings are considerably extensive. Some of his later works contained violent writings with crude and offensive language, creating enemies amongst his fellow reformers, Jews and of course, Popes and leaders in the Catholic Church.

Martin Luther's Final Days

During an exhausting trip to his hometown of Eisleben, on a mission of reconciliation to settle an inheritance dispute between the princes of Mansfeld, Luther succumbed to death on February 18, 1546. Two of his sons and three close friends were at his side. His body was taken back to Wittenburg for his funeral and burial at Castle Church. His grave is located directly in front of the pulpit where he preached and can still be seen today.

More than any other church reformer in Christian history, the impact and influence of Luther's contributions are hard to adequately describe. His legacy, though highly controversial, has marched on through a parade of equally zealous reformers who modeled Luther's passion for letting God's Word be known and understood personally by every man. It's no exaggeration to say that almost every branch of modern Protestant Christianity owes some portion of its spiritual heritage to Martin Luther, a man of radical faith.

[**Martin Luther- biography**](http://www.mrprokop.net/resources.cfm?subpage=1332163)

1. Describe the conflicting views people had of Luther.
2. What kind of an education did Luther have before wanting to become a priest?
3. What event convinced Luther to become a priest?
4. How did his parents react to this news?
5. How did his teachings as a college professor conflict with the church?
6. Explain how indulgencies worked.
7. What act became a defining moment in the reform of the church?
8. What happened at the Diet of Worms? Describe.
9. How did Luther help the German people to understand the Bible?
10. How did Luther contribute to other reformers?