

Church History 101
Lesson 22
The Reformation Begins: Martin Luther

Key Concepts: Martin Luther (1483-1546) is one of the key figures in the religious revolution of the early 16th Century.

The Story: At first glance Martin Luther would have not seemed to be a revolutionary sort of person. He was raised in a very observant Roman Catholic family, studied for and was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. This training was accompanied by endless hours of fasting, prayer, pilgrimage and confession. He was well educated, with bachelor's degrees in Biblical Studies and Sentences (systematic theology) and ultimately a doctorate in Theology (1512). Yet even with his very orthodox training, there was within Luther a growing sense that people could not discover God through reason, or theology, but only through divine revelation. And for Luther the one place where that revelation could be found was in scripture and not in the traditions of the church.

Luther's role as a religious revolutionary/reformer began in 1516 when a Dominican Friar named Johann Tetzel received a Papal commission to sell indulgences (sort of a get out of purgatory free card) in Germany in order to help raise money for St. Peter's Basilica. Luther did not believe in the sale of indulgences as means of salvation, which he had come to believe could only be received as a free act of God's grace. So as a good academic he wrote a paper (later called the Ninety-Five Thesis) in opposition to indulgences. He sent this letter to his bishop. Unfortunately for Luther, the local arch-bishop needed the money from the sales of indulgences as badly as did the Papacy and so the church began to organize itself against Luther and his reforming theology.

While the church was moving through its judicial processes against Luther, he continued writing papers and pamphlets outlining his growing anti-Rome theology. These, along with the Ninety-Five Thesis were widely printed and distributed, becoming the first great theological works to benefit from the printing press. This led to two major outcomes. First, Luther denied that the Pope and church councils could speak for God and second, the church excommunicated Luther. The Holy Roman Emperor, who was charged with carrying out the excommunication declared Luther an outlaw, required his arrest and made it a crime to harbor him. Fortunately for Luther, a local ruler, Frederick III saved him by hiding him in Wartburg Castle, where Luther continued to write.

The results of Luther's work went far beyond anything he had imagined. They not only created a new church with a new theology but unleashed pent up hatred of the masses against the oppression of the church and many local rulers. It led to the burning of monasteries, convents and bishop's palaces as well as some 300,000 poorly armed peasants and farmers, supported by protestant clergy, rising up against the aristocracy. Luther was appalled and demanded that the authorities "...smite, slay and stab..." the rebels. This led to the deaths of more than 100,000 of the peasants. Luther also nurtured a hatred for Jews. He spoke and wrote against them declaring that their homes and synagogues ought to be destroyed; statements later used by the Third Reich.

We need to note that even as Luther could not comprehend political or religious freedom, he did understand Christian theological freedom. We see this in that he organized a new church, developed a new Mass, wrote a new catechism, authored hymns and translated the Bible into German so ordinary people could have access to it. Finally, his writings helped to open the door to a new understanding of God's grace which still informs Protestant churches to this day.

Questions

1. What do you think about Luther's contention that we are saved by grace and not works?
2. Have you ever changed what you believed about God? What was that like?
3. How do or don't you think that religious and political freedom go hand in hand?