

The Reformer: Martin Luther

How a German priest challenged authority – and changed the world



Church bells rang through Juterborg (*YOO-tur-borg*), a small town in Germany. Jugglers performed and people sang hymns in the square. The year was 1517.

A group of **friars** paraded past the swelling crowd. They carried a document on a satin pillow. It was an order by the Pope – the leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

One of the friars, Johann Tetzel, spoke to the crowd. He said that the Pope's order granted the sale of **indulgences**. For a few coins, Tetzel said, people could earn God's forgiveness for any wrongdoing, no matter how bad. They could even buy forgiveness for the sins of dead friends and relatives. "As soon as the money in the box rings, the soul from Hell's fire springs," Tetzel said.

But not all Catholics were happy about the sale of indulgences. Martin Luther, a priest and professor from the German town of Wittenberg, was especially angry. In October 1517, he wrote a protest called the 95 Theses. (A *thesis* is a statement of a position or an argument.)

"He who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences," Luther argued. According to legend, he nailed a copy of the 95 Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg.

Luther's goal was to persuade Catholic officials that selling indulgences was wrong. In the process, the 33-year-old priest started a religious revolution. The legacy of this time of upheaval – known as the Reformation – still divided Christians today.

A Changing World

At the time Luther spoke out, Europe was experiencing a Renaissance, of rebirth, of art and learning. Trade was expanding. The invention of the printing press in 1440 had allowed ideas to spread faster than ever before.

In Western Europe, people were beginning to question the power of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church often persecuted the followers of other religions. A Pope could declare any Christians who opposed him, even a king, a **heretic**. Heretics could then be **excommunicated**. They were often burned at the stake.

But by the 1500s, Europe's leaders had grown less afraid of the Church. Increased trade and communication had made them richer and more powerful. They also resented having to share power and tax money with Rome, the Church's seat of power.

Many ordinary Europeans resented the Catholic Church as well. Priests often led lives of luxury, and donations were used to build grand churches rather than to help the poor. As one Catholic scholar wrote, "The monarchy of Rome, as it is now, is a [disease] to Christendom."

Questioning Authority

Luther taught Bible studies at the University of Wittenberg. He believed that indulgences put God's forgiveness up for sale. To be forgiven, he said, people needed to prey and change their behavior.

Luther went a step further. In his 95 Theses, he questioned the Pope's authority to forgive people who were dead. This was important because Catholic belief holds that the Pope's word is law. In Luther's day, Christians who spoke out in disagreement were declared heretics.

Luther's theses unleashed pent-up anger about Church corruption. His popularity soared, while the sale of indulgences plummeted.

In 1520, Pope Leo X ordered Luther to **recant** his writings. Instead, Luther launched even more stinging attacks. He called the Pope "the greatest thief and robber that has come or can come into the world, and all in the holy name of Christ!" That year, Pope Leo excommunicated Luther, saying, "We can no longer allow a serpent to creep through the field of the Lord."

Words to Know:

- **Excommunicate** [v]: to deprive an individual of the rights of church membership.
- **Friar** [n]: a person of a Catholic order (group) similar to a monk.
- **Heretic** [n]: someone who rejects church beliefs
- **Indulgence** [n]: a pardon by the church for one's sins
- **Protestant** [n]: individual who protested against the Roman Catholic Church
- **Recant** [v]: to say that one no longer holds an opinion or a belief

Luther responded by burning the Pope's order of excommunication. Normally, he would have been arrested. But Frederick of Saxony, the Prince who ruled Luther's area of Germany, realized that the public would be outraged. Still, the Pope banned Luther's writings and had his books burned.

The Diet of Worms

In 1521, Germany's noblemen held a diet, or meeting, in the city of Worms (*vermz*). The nobles invited Luther to this assembly. They hoped that the outspoken priest could reach a truce with Rome.

The Pope's representative asked Luther once again to disavow his writings. Luther stunned his supporters by asking for a day to think it over. If he were to give in, their movement might collapse. But the next day, Luther said that he would not recant, "because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

A Wide Influence

Luther became the champion of **Protestants**. In 1534, he translated the Bible into German. Until then, all church writings, including the Bible, had only been available in Latin – which few people outside the Church understood. Soon, almost every German home had one of Luther's Bibles. It was the first time that a

published work had reached so many people.

But Luther and other Protestant leaders quarreled over how to interpret the Bible. This split Protestants into denominations (religious divisions), which still exist today.

Luther was also deeply hostile toward Jews. He called them "nothing but thieves and robbers." If they refused to become Christians, he said, they should be expelled from Germany or forced to live in barns.

Luther also angered many people during the Peasants War. In 1524, German peasants, who lived almost as slaves, revolted against the wealthy nobles. Luther sided with the nobles. He called the rebels "murderous and plundering hordes" who should be killed "just as one must kill a mad dog." By 1526, the revolts had been crushed, and at least 100,000 peasants were slaughtered.

Still, Luther is considered one of the most important people who ever lived. The Reformation that he sparked proved to be a turning point in world history. It ended the Catholic Church's domination of Europe and created one of the world's leading religions. Today, there are more than 400 million Protestants – almost one quarter of the 2.1 billion Christians worldwide.

Fast Facts

- Some scholars say that there is no evidence that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Others say that he did – it was like posting a message on a bulletin board.
- The word *Protestant* comes from the Latin word *protestans*, which means *one who protests*. It was first used in 1529 when Roman Catholics tried to limit the practice of Lutheranism, an early Protestant movement.
- Today, the Lutheran Church, which is based on the teachings of Martin Luther, is the largest Protestant denomination in Germany and Scandinavia.
- About 51 percent of Americans are Protestant Christians.
- U.S. civil-rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was named after Martin Luther.

1. What was Martin Luther's main goal when he nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the church?

2. Why did the Catholic Church begin to lose power and influence during the Renaissance?

3. What was the ultimate result of Martin Luther's 95 Theses?

4. Why was Luther's criticism of the Church's intolerance ironic?
