

Martin Luther

Synopsis

Born in Germany in 1483, Martin Luther became one of the most influential figures in Christian history when he began the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. He called into question some of the basic tenets of Roman Catholicism, and his followers soon split from the Roman Catholic Church to begin the Protestant tradition.

Early Life

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Saxony, in modern southeast Germany. His parents, Hans and Margarete Luther, were of peasant lineage, but Hans had some success as a miner and ore smelter. In 1484, the family moved to nearby Mansfeld, where Hans held ore deposits.

Hans Luther knew that mining was a tough business and wanted his promising son to have better and become a lawyer. At age seven, Martin Luther entered school in Mansfeld. At 14, he went to north to Magdeburg, where he continued his studies. In 1498, he returned to Eisleben and enrolled in a school, studying grammar, rhetoric and logic. He later compared this experience to purgatory and hell.

In 1501, Martin Luther entered the University of Erfurt, where he received a Master of Arts degree (in grammar, logic, rhetoric and metaphysics). At this time, it seemed he was on his way to becoming a lawyer. However, in July 1505, Luther had a life-changing experience that set him on a new course. Caught in a horrific thunderstorm where he feared for his life, Luther cried out to St. Anne, the patron saint of miners, "Save me, St. Anne, and I'll become a monk!" The storm subsided and he was saved. Most historians believe this was not a spontaneous act, but an idea already formulated in Luther's mind. The decision to become a monk was difficult and greatly disappointed his father, but he felt he must keep a promise. Luther was also driven by fears of hell and God's wrath, and felt that life in a monastery would help him find salvation.

Spiritual Anguish and Enlightenment

The first few years of monastery life were difficult for Martin Luther, as he did not find the religious enlightenment he was seeking. A mentor told him to focus his life exclusively on Christ and this would later provide him with the guidance he sought. At age 27, he was given the opportunity to be a delegate to a church conference in Rome. He came away more disillusioned, and very discouraged by the immorality and corruption he witnessed there among the Catholic priests. Upon his return to Germany, he enrolled in the University of Wittenberg in an attempt to suppress his spiritual turmoil. He excelled in his studies and received a doctorate, becoming a professor of theology at the university.

Through his studies of scripture, Martin Luther finally gained religious enlightenment. Beginning in 1513, while preparing lectures, Luther read Psalm 22, which recounts Christ's cry for mercy on the cross, a cry similar to his own disillusionment with God and religion. Two years later, while preparing a lecture on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, he read, "The just will live by faith." He dwelled on this statement for some time. Finally, he realized the key to spiritual salvation was not to fear God or be enslaved by religious dogma but to believe that faith alone would bring salvation. This period marked a major change in his life and set in motion the Reformation.

Rejection of the Roman Catholic Church

In 1517, Pope Leo X announced a new round of indulgences to help build St. Peter's Basilica. On October 31, 1517, an angry Martin Luther nailed a sheet of paper with 95 theses on the university's chapel door. Though he intended these to be discussion points, the Ninety-Five Theses laid out a devastating critique of the indulgences as corrupting people's faith. Luther also sent a copy to Archbishop Albert Albrecht of Mainz, calling on him to end the sale of indulgences. Aided by the printing press, copies of the Ninety-Five Theses spread throughout Germany within two weeks and throughout Europe within two months.

The Church eventually moved to stop the act of defiance. In October 1518, at a meeting with Cardinal Thomas Cajetan in Augsburg, Martin Luther was ordered to recant his Ninety-Five Theses by the authority of the pope. Luther said he would not recant unless scripture proved him wrong. He went further, stating that he didn't consider the papacy had the authority to interpret scripture. The meeting ended in a shouting match and initiated his ultimate excommunication from the Church.

Throughout 1519, Martin Luther continued to lecture and write in Wittenberg. In June and July of that year he publicly declared that the Bible did not give the pope the exclusive right to interpret scripture, which was a direct attack on the authority of the papacy. Finally, in 1520, the pope had had enough and on June 15 issued an ultimatum threatening Luther with excommunication. On December 10, 1520, Luther publicly burned the letter.

Excommunication

In January 1521, Martin Luther was officially excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. In March, he was summoned before the Diet of Worms, a general assembly of secular authorities. Again, Luther refused to recant his statements, demanding he be shown any scripture that would refute his position. There was none. On May 8, 1521, the council released the Edict of Worms, banning Luther's writings and declaring him a "convicted heretic." This made him a condemned and wanted man. Friends helped him hide out at the Wartburg Castle. While in seclusion, he translated the New Testament into the German language, to give ordinary people the opportunity to read God's word.

Though still under threat of arrest, Martin Luther returned to Wittenberg Castle Church, in Eisenach, in May 1522. Miraculously, he was able to avoid capture and began organizing a new church, Lutheranism. He gained many followers and got support from German princes. When a peasant revolt began in 1524, Luther denounced the peasants and sided with the rulers, whom he depended on to keep his church growing. Thousands of peasants were killed, but Luther's church grew over the years. In 1525, he married Katharina von Bora, a former nun who had abandoned the convent and taken refuge in Wittenberg. Together, over the next several years, they had six children.

Later Years

From 1533 to his death in 1546, Martin Luther served as the dean of theology at University of Wittenberg. During this time he suffered from many illnesses, including arthritis, heart problems and digestive disorders, and the physical pain and emotional strain of being a fugitive might have been reflected in his writings. Some works contained strident and offensive language against several segments of society, particularly Jews and Muslims. During a trip to his hometown of Eisleben, he died on February 18, 1546, at age 62.

Legacy

Martin Luther is one of the most influential and controversial figures in the Reformation movement. His actions fractured the Roman Catholic Church into new sects of Christianity and set in motion reform within the Church. A prominent theologian, his desire for people to feel closer to God led him to translate the Bible into the language of the people, radically changing the relationship between church leaders and their followers.