

Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's Who in Christian History*.

LUTHER, MARTIN (1483-1546)

Father of the German Reformation

THE EARLY YEARS

Born at Eisleben in Thüringe, Saxony, Luther attended school at Mansfeld, at Magdeburg under the Brethren of the Common Life, and at Eisleben. He then went to university at Erfurt (1501), where he came under Nominalist influence and learned Greek, graduating B.A. in 1502 and M.A. in 1505. He had intended to study law, but due to a narrow escape from death by lightning, he changed his mind and in spite of his father's objections became an Augustinian monk in 1506.

In the Erfurt monastery he did further theological study, was made a priest in 1507, and with his transfer to Wittenberg in 1508 read for the B.D. (1509) and began to teach moral theology, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and the holy Scriptures. A visit to Rome on Augustinian business (1510-1511) opened his eyes to the corruption prevalent among the higher clergy. Returning to Wittenberg he took the degree of D.Th. in 1512 and was appointed to the chair of biblical studies, which he occupied for the rest of his life. He also became sub-prior of the Wittenberg house.

Outwardly Luther was building up a successful monastic and academic career but inwardly he was troubled by a conviction of sin that his diligence in monastery life could not relieve. John Staupitz, his vicar-general, proved to be a good counselor at this period. And Luther also read widely in Augustine, Tauler, and the German mystics collected in the volume called *German Theology*. He also received help from the work of contemporary French theologian Lefèvre d'Étaples on the Psalms. His biblical reading, especially in preparation for his classes on the Psalms (1513-1515), Romans (1515-1516), and Galatians (1517) proved to be the decisive factor. It was probably during this period, perhaps in 1514, that he had the famous Tower experience when he came to realize that God's righteousness in [Romans 1](#) is not the justice that we have to fear but the positive righteousness that God gives believers in Christ—it is a righteousness they receive by personally trusting in Christ.

THE YEARS OF PROTEST

Luther might easily have held and taught his new understanding of justification without interference or vital reforming impact. His colleagues at Wittenberg both on the theological faculty and in the monastery supported him, and church life went on undisturbed. In 1517, however, Luther was aroused when just across the border from Saxony John Tetzel preached an indulgence in which crude theology was accompanied by the crassest materialism. In protest Luther rapidly drew up ninety-five theses for debate, which he posted on the door of the Castle church on October 31, 1517. When translated and widely circulated, these theses brought an explosion of anti-church feeling that wrecked the indulgence. Given practical application in this way, Luther's theology could no longer go unnoticed, and he came at once under ecclesiastical pressures ranging from attempts at intimidation to promised favors for compliance.

Luther refused to be silenced. He won over many Augustinians at the Heidelberg disputation in 1518. He argued, not incorrectly, that he was defying no dogmatic definition of the church. Pressed by Eck at the Leipzig disputation in 1519, he claimed the supremacy of the authority of Scripture over all ecclesiastical authority. Continuing his own preaching and teaching, he defended the theses in his *Explanations* (1518) and showed how the righteousness of sinners lies in the alien righteousness of Christ in his *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (1518). When Charles V,

the newly elected emperor, stepped up the pressure, Luther responded in 1520 with three powerful works that have come to be called his primary treatises. In the *Address to the German Nobility* he appealed to the princes to throw off papal oppression. In the *Babylonian Captivity* he attacked the current sacramental system. In *The Freedom of a Christian Man* he expounded the complementary theses that the Christian is both a free lord subject to none and also a servant subject to all. The writings of this period also include his *Treatise on Good Works*, which shows how faith finds expression in works, and his *Sermon on the Mass*, which teaches the priesthood of all believers.

By the middle of 1520 papal patience was at an end, and a bull was drawn up ordering Luther's recantation and the burning of his works. Protected by the elector Frederick, Luther denounced the bull, and the theology faculty solemnly burned a copy at a ceremony on December 10, 1520. Early in 1521 a stronger bull of excommunication was prepared that, if carried out, would have deprived Luther of civil rights and protection. Before its execution Charles V agreed to give Luther the chance to recant at the diet to be held at Worms. Here Luther made his resounding confession before the emperor, princes, and other rulers: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God ... Here I stand, I can do no other."

THE YEARS OF RECONSTRUCTION

The situation after Worms seemed hardly favorable for positive reform. A majority at the diet decided to apply the papal bull. In order to shield Luther against violence, Frederick arranged his "kidnapping" on the way home and hid him in the safe castle of the Wartburg under the guise of George the Knight. Luther, however, grasped the opportunity to begin the work of translating the New Testament directly from the Greek into superbly simple and idiomatic German, which served as a model for William Tyndale's English rendering. He finished this work in the fall of 1522 and followed it up with an Old Testament translation from the Hebrew. This, of course, took much longer and was not finished until 1534. The completed Luther Bible proved to be no less tremendous a force in the German-speaking world than the King James Version was later to be in the English sphere, and it must be regarded as one of Luther's most valuable contributions to the German church.

Able to return from the Wartburg in 1522, Luther turned his attention to the sphere of worship. The main step here, as in relation to Scripture, was to make the services understandable by putting them in the native tongue. Luther, indeed, had no wish to cause friction by unnecessary changes in liturgical structure. The spiritual and theological reformation formed the heart of the matter for him. He thus produced conservative orders for baptism and the mass in 1523. The order of 1526, which included collects, canticles, and a litany, brought some reduction in the baptismal service. Even more significantly, however, it introduced new paraphrases and hymns for congregational use. Luther's own skill as a hymn writer and his musical interest and ability gave special importance to his work in this field, and even in translation some of his hymns-especially "A Mighty Fortress"-have been a constant source of spiritual strength and inspiration.

During his time in the Wartburg Luther had given much thought to the question of celibacy. Even earlier he had come to think that the only lifelong vow a Christian ought to take is that of baptism, i.e., of general discipleship. While in the Wartburg he wrote *On Monastic Vows*. His reforming work when he came back to Wittenberg included the dissolution of monasteries and the ending of clerical celibacy. The resources of the monasteries were made available for the relief of the poor, and marriages between former celibates became the order of the day so that, as

Erasmus noted, the tragedy of the break with Rome looked like it finished as a comedy-with everyone getting married and living happily ever after. Luther himself married the former nun Katherine of Bora, and they had a happy life with six children. Luther continued to live in what had been the Augustinian convent, and some of the students he had in for meals took down his conversation, now published in the volumes of *Table Talk*.

Spreading reform to the parishes formed an essential part of reconstruction. Luther saw clearly the need for education, and he thus issued an appeal for Christian schools in 1524, worked with Melanchthon on a plan for popular education in the instructions for the Saxon visitation of 1528, and preached to parents on the duty of sending children to school in 1530. Spiritual as well as secular instruction was needed to remedy the ignorance prevalent in the later Middle Ages. To help pastors provide this, Luther composed a Large Catechism in 1528 and then a more popular Small Catechism in 1529. In the latter he gave a simple exposition of the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the two sacraments. He also offered forms for confession, morning and evening prayers, and grace at meals. To supply more able pastors and teachers for the parishes he supported Melanchthon in university reforms, especially in the theological faculties.

The work of reconstruction could hardly be completed without a doctrinal statement. Luther had not begun the reformation with a prepared and developed theological position. He saw his way clearly in the matter of justification by grace and faith. When his applying of this teaching to indulgences brought it under attack, he quickly saw that Scripture must be the supreme authority in the church. He then began to work out the ramifications of these basic tenets in other areas but not in a systematic way. His colleague and friend Melanchthon issued a first doctrinal presentation in his work *Theological Common Places* (1521). Later Luther himself had a hand in the framing of the articles discussed at Marburg (1529), which were then incorporated into the *Confession of Augsburg* (1530)-although in relation to the latter he played more of the role of a consultant, and Melanchthon acted as principal writer. In 1536 Luther accepted the agreement with the South Germans expressed in the Wittenberg Concord, and in 1537 he offered a restatement of his essential theology in the *Articles of Schmalcald*, which reaffirm the early creeds, condemn medieval abuses, and give positive teaching on sin, law and gospel, the sacraments, justification, and the church.

Finally Luther contributed to positive reform through his constant preaching and writing. Collections of his sermons are available in the comprehensive editions of his works. His writings include many polemical pieces, but there were many constructive works too. Worthy of special mention are his justifiably renowned *Lectures on Galatians* of 1535, which are among the finest of his works and have had an influence extending well beyond the reformation period.

THE YEARS OF CONTROVERSY

From the publication of his *95 Theses* Luther was engaged in unending debate with the Roman Church. In addition, he soon found himself in disagreement with other reforming groups. Since he was plain, outspoken, and pugnacious, and came into collision with equally militant opponents, these controversies often took on a bitter edge that brought personal alienation and greatly hampered the general movement of reform.

A first problem arose in 1521 when Luther was in Wartburg. A little group from Zwickau, the Zwickau Prophets, came to Wittenberg and caused great confusion in the church. Visiting the city to deal with the issue Luther preached against the group and later summed up his criticisms in the work *Against the Heavenly Prophets*. Radicalism took a violent turn with Thomas Munzer,

who savagely denounced Luther and was himself denounced in return. When the peasants began to revolt in 1524, Luther sympathized with their demands, attempted mediation, and issued a call for peace. The uprisings increased in 1525 and under the influence of men like Munzer often took on a fanatical character. This led Luther to leave his mediatorial role and to call for the ruthless suppression of the rebels in the interests of divinely willed law and order. Although he still made a plea for economic justice, his attitude alienated many of the peasants and brought a rift.

At the very same period Luther became entangled in an unfortunate if unavoidable controversy with the humanist scholar and reformer Erasmus. The two had much in common, sharing concerns for scholarship, for opening up the Scriptures, and for doctrinal and practical reform. Nevertheless, they differed sharply in character and also in theological approach. Under pressure to declare himself either for Luther or against him, Erasmus turned to the important issue of the freedom of the will and published a *Diatribes on Free Will* (1524). To this Luther made a sharp and almost scornful reply in his *Bondage of the Will* (1525). This work is a powerful statement of the Augustinian position that in matters of right conduct and salvation the will has no power to act apart from the divine initiative. Erasmus came out with a counter-reply, but Luther ignored this. Erasmus then aligned himself with the opponents of the Reformation, although still urging reform and maintaining friendly relations with various reformers.

The disruptive eucharistic controversy that split the Lutherans from the South Germans and the Swiss also began at this time. In answer to the Swiss, Luther defended his literal reading of the words "This is my body" in various works, especially *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ* in 1526 and *That These Words of Christ "This is my Body" Still Stand* in 1527. Unfortunately Luther adopted in this debate a coarse and vituperative style that did little to win over his opponents or commend his teaching. Philip of Hesse tried to achieve agreement at Marburg in 1529, but in the discussions Luther showed from the first a rigidity that doomed the effort to failure. Later Luther accepted the uneasy concord with Bucer and the South Germans at Wittenberg (1536). No progress was made with the Swiss, however, although it has been thought that if Luther had lived, Calvin might have broken the deadlock. Luther's concern was that in the saying "This is my body" the word "is" should be given its true force, but he opened the door to controversy by admitting a special mode of Christ's presence in the relation to bread and wine. The controversy became christological when, in reply to the truth that Christ in the body is now in heaven, Luther claimed that the body enjoys omnipresence through the communicating of the attributes of Christ's deity to his humanity. As a result christological as well as eucharistic differences continued between the Reformed and the Lutherans long after the death of Luther himself.

Luther ran into other difficulties, too. He hoped at first that the renewing of the gospel would open the way for the conversion of the Jews. When this hope was not realized, he made intemperate attacks on the Jews, thus putting a dark blot on his record. Philip of Hesse, the great champion of the Reformation, became a serious embarrassment when he secured the unwilling assent of Luther to his bigamous marriage in 1540. The development of armed religious alliances in the empire also worried Luther, for while he accepted the divine authorization of princes and valued their help in practical reformation, he struggled hard for the principle that the gospel does not need to be advanced or defended by military power. He was mercifully spared the conflict that came so soon after his death.

THE CLOSING YEARS

Pressured by ill health and harassed constantly by political and theological problems, Luther tended to display in his last years the less pleasant aspects of his virtues. His courage increasingly appeared as pugnacity, his bluntness as crudity, and his steadfastness as obstinacy. Instead of mellowing with the years, his opposition to the papists, the radicals, and other reformers became even more bitter. Nevertheless, he continued to work for military peace in the empire-and it is a tribute to his underlying desire for peace and reconciliation that the aim of his final journey was to bring together the quarreling rulers of Anhalt. As chance would have it, his itinerary brought him to the town of his birth, and it was in Eisleben that he died on February 18, 1546.

Luther stands out as a very human figure. As he said at Worms, he made no claim to special sanctity. He recognized himself when he stated that believers are at the same time both righteous and sinners. His faults were as easy to see as his virtues. He was not characterized by any hypocrisy or pretense. He saw and told things as they were, whether in relation to the gospel or in relation to himself.

This very human figure had extraordinary gifts. Perhaps the most striking thing of all about him was his versatility. Without being an outstanding linguist, he had a mastery of the biblical languages. This mastery went hand-in-hand with a rare theological insight. Luther could see to the heart of theological questions and express himself with astonishing originality and force. If he never put his theology together in a dogmatic, he contributed more to real theology than the vast majority of dogmaticians.

Yet Luther was no academician or theological theorist. His daily job was that of a professor, but he put his learning to work on many practical fronts. Theological and pastoral concern launched him into the attack on indulgences that toppled the medieval system. His linguistic skills produced one of the greatest Bible translations of all time. His combination of biblical knowledge with graphic simplicity of utterance and a vital reality of faith made him no less eminent and effective as a preacher. That he should have such lavish liturgical gifts, as well, seems almost incredible. Behind it all, of course, lay the passionate sincerity of one who had been brought to his thought and mission not by abstract speculation but by the realities of sin, grace, forgiveness, and faith. His written works fill many bulky volumes, but the words are all vibrant and challenging, for they came not merely from the study or podium but from life and action.

Luther did a work that probably no one else in his highly gifted age could have done. He did it because he had the required combination of learning, insight, character, and faith. When under God the hour struck in 1517, the man for the hour was there. The Reformation that had been arrested so long could no longer be delayed.

See: Martin Luther. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.

[Martin Luther](#)