

Martin Luther had a small head-start on Tyndale, as Luther declared his intolerance for the Roman Church's corruption on Halloween in **1517**, by nailing his 95 Theses of Contention to the Wittenberg Church door. Luther, who would be exiled in the months following the Diet of Worms Council in **1521** that was designed to martyr him, would translate the New Testament into German for the first time from the 1516 Greek-Latin New Testament of Erasmus, and publish it in September of **1522**. Luther also published a **German Pentateuch in 1523**, and another edition of the **German New Testament in 1529**. In the 1530's he would go on to publish the entire Bible in German.

Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 - February 18, 1546) was a Christian theologian and Augustinian monk whose teachings inspired the Protestant Reformation and deeply influenced the doctrines of Protestant and other Christian traditions. Martin Luther was born to Hans and Margaretha Luder on 10 November 1483 in Eisleben, Germany and was baptised the next day on the feast of St. Martin of Tours, after whom he was named. Luther's call to the Church to return to the teachings of the Bible resulted in the formation of new traditions within Christianity and the Counter-Reformation in the Roman Catholic Church, culminating at the Council of Trent.

His translation of the Bible also helped to develop a standard version of the German language and added several principles to the art of translation. Luther's hymns sparked the development of congregational singing in Christianity. His marriage, on June 13, 1525, to Katharina von Bora, a former nun, began the tradition of clerical marriage within several Christian traditions.

Martin Luther's early life

Martin Luther's father owned a copper mine in nearby Mansfeld. Having risen from the peasantry, his father was determined to see his son ascend to civil service and bring further honor to the family. To that end, Hans sent young Martin to schools in Mansfeld, Magdeburg and Eisenach. At the age of seventeen in 1501 he entered the University of Erfurt. The young student received his Bachelor's degree after just one year in 1502! Three years later, in 1505, he received a Master's degree. According to his father's wishes, Martin enrolled in

the law school of that university. All that changed during a thunderstorm in the summer of 1505. A lightning bolt struck near to him as he was returning to school. Terrified, he cried out, "Help, St. Anne! I'll become a monk!" Spared of his life, but regretting his words, Luther kept his bargain, dropped out of law school and entered the monastery there.

Luther's struggle to find peace with God

Young Brother Martin fully dedicated himself to monastic life, the effort to do good works to please God and to serve others through prayer for their souls. Yet peace with God escaped him. He devoted himself to fasts, flagellations, long hours in prayer and pilgrimages, and constant confession. The more he tried to do for God, it seemed, the more aware he became of his sinfulness.

Johann von Staupitz, Luther's superior, concluded the young man needed more work to distract him from pondering himself. He ordered the monk to pursue an academic career. In 1507 Luther was ordained to the priesthood. In 1508 he began teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg. Luther earned his Bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies on 9 March 1508 and a Bachelor's degree in the Sentences by Peter Lombard, (the main textbook of theology in the Middle Ages) in 1509. On 19 October 1512, the University of Wittenberg conferred upon Martin Luther the degree of Doctor of Theology.

Martin Luther's Evangelical Discovery

The demands of study for academic degrees and preparation for delivering lectures drove Martin Luther to study the Scriptures in depth. Luther immersed himself in the teachings of the Scripture and the early church. Slowly, terms like *penance* and *righteousness* took on new meaning. The controversy that broke loose with the publication of his 95 Theses placed even more pressure on the reformer to study the Bible. This study convinced him that the Church had lost sight of several central truths. To Luther, the most important of these was the doctrine that brought him peace with God.

With joy, Luther now believed and taught that salvation is a gift of

God's grace, received by faith and trust in God's promise to forgive sins for the sake of Christ's death on the cross. This, he believed was God's work from beginning to end.

Luther's 95 Theses

On Halloween of 1517, Luther changed the course of human history when he nailed his 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, accusing the Roman Catholic church of heresy upon heresy. Many people cite this act as the primary starting point of the Protestant Reformation... though to be sure, **John Wycliffe**, **John Hus**, **Thomas Linacre**, **John Colet**, and others had already put the life's work and even their lives on the line for same cause of truth, constructing the foundation of Reform upon which Luther now built. Luther's action was in great part a response to the selling of indulgences by Johann Tetzel, a Dominican priest. Luther's charges also directly challenged the position of the clergy in regard to individual salvation. Before long, Luther's 95 Theses of Contention had been copied and published all over Europe.

Here I Stand

Luther's Protestant views were condemned as heretical by Pope Leo X in the bull *Exsurge Domine* in 1520. Consequently Luther was summoned to either renounce or reaffirm them at the Diet of Worms on 17 April 1521. When he appeared before the assembly, Johann von Eck, by then assistant to the Archbishop of Trier, acted as spokesman for Emperor Charles the Fifth. He presented Luther with a table filled with copies of his writings. Eck asked Luther if he still believed what these works taught. He requested time to think about his answer. Granted an extension, Luther prayed, consulted with friends and mediators and presented himself before the Diet the next day.

When the counselor put the same question to Luther the next day, the reformer apologized for the harsh tone of many of his writings, but said that he could not reject the majority of them or the teachings in them. Luther respectfully but boldly stated, "*Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other.*"

God help me. Amen."

On May 25, the Emperor issued his Edict of Worms, declaring Martin Luther an outlaw.

Luther in Exile at the Wartburg Castle

Luther had powerful friends among the princes of Germany, one of whom was his own prince, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony. The prince arranged for Luther to be seized on his way from the Diet by a company of masked horsemen, who carried him to the castle of the Wartburg, where he was kept about a year. He grew a wide flaring beard; took on the garb of a knight and assumed the pseudonym Jörg. During this period of forced sojourn in the world, Luther was still hard at work upon his celebrated translation of the Bible, though he couldn't rely on the isolation of a monastery. During his translation, Luther would make forays into the nearby towns and markets to listen to people speak, so that he could put his translation of the Bible into the language of the people.

Although his stay at the Wartburg kept Luther hidden from public view, Luther often received letters from his friends and allies, asking for his views and advice. For example, Luther's closest friend, Philipp Melanchthon, wrote to him and asked how to answer the charge that the reformers neglected pilgrimages, fasts and other traditional forms of piety. Luther's replied: *"If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign."* [Letter 99.13, To Philipp Melanchthon, 1 August 1521.]

Martin Luther's German Bible

Martin Luther was the first person to translate and publish the Bible in the commonly-spoken dialect of the German people. He used the

recent 1516 critical Greek edition of **Erasmus**, a text which was later called *textus receptus*. The Luther German New Testament translation was first published in September of 1522. The translation of the Old Testament followed, yielding an entire German language Bible in 1534.

Luther is also known to have befriended **William Tyndale**, and given him safe haven and assistance in using the same 1516 Erasmus Greek-Latin Parallel New Testament that had been the source text for his German New Testament of 1522, as the trustworthy source text for Tyndale's English New Testament of 1525-26.

Luther's Writings

The number of books attributed to Martin Luther is quite impressive. However, some Luther scholars contend that many of the works were at least drafted by some of his good friends like Philipp Melancthon. Luther's books explain the settings of the epistles and show the conformity of the books of the Bible to each other. Of special note would be his writings about the Epistle to the Galatians in which he compares himself to the Apostle Paul in his defense of the Gospel. Luther also wrote about church administration and wrote much about the Christian home.

Luther's work contains a number of statements that modern readers would consider rather crude. For example, Luther was known to advise people that they should literally "*Tell the Devil he may kiss my ass.*" It should be remembered that Luther received many communications from throughout Europe from people who could write anonymously, that is, without the specter of mass media making their communications known. No public figure today could write in the manner of the correspondences Luther received or in the way Luther responded to them. Luther was certainly a theologian of the middle-ages. He was an earthy man who enjoyed his beer, and was bold and often totally without tact in the blunt truth he vehemently preached. While this offended many, it endeared him all the more to others.

He was open with his frustrations and emotions, as well. Once, when asked if he truly loved God, Luther replied "*Love God? Sometimes I hate Him!*" Luther was also frustrated by the works-emphasis of the

book of James, calling it “the Epistle of Straw, and questioning its canonicity. Also irritated with the complex symbolism of the Book of Revelation, he once said that it too, was not canon, and that it should be thrown into the river! He later retracted these statements, of course. Luther was a man who was easily misquoted or taken out of context. While a brilliant theologian, and a bold reformer, he would not have made a good politician. But then, he never aspired to any career in politics.

Martin Luther and Judaism

Luther initially preached tolerance towards the Jewish people, convinced that the reason they had never converted to Christianity was that they were discriminated against, or had never heard the Gospel of Christ. However, after his overtures to Jews failed to convince Jewish people to adopt Christianity, he began preaching that the Jews were set in evil, anti-Christian ways, and needed to be expelled from German politics. In his *On the Jews and Their Lies*, he repeatedly quotes the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:34, where Jesus called them "a brood of vipers and children of the devil"

Luther was zealous toward the Gospel, and he wanted to protect the people of his homeland from the Jews who he believed would be harmful influences since they did not recognize Jesus as their Saviour. In Luther's time, parents had a right and a duty to direct their children's marriage choices in respect to matters of faith. Likewise, Luther felt a duty to direct his German people to cling to the Jesus the Jews did not accept. It should be noted that church law was superior to civil law in Luther's day and that law said the penalty of blasphemy was death. When Luther called for the deaths of certain Jews, he was merely asking that the laws that were applied to all other Germans also be applied to the Jews. The Jews were exempt from the church laws that Christians were bound by, most notably the law against charging interest.

Martin Luther's Death

Martin Luther escaped martyrdom, and died of natural causes. His last written words were, "*Know that no one can have indulged in the Holy Writers sufficiently, unless he has governed churches for a*

hundred years with the prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles... We are beggars: this is true."

(Source: **English Bible History website**)