



Martin Luther's
Life, Thought, and
Lasting Legacy

BEYOND

THE *95 THESES*

Stephen J. Nichols

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and Lasting Legacy

Stephen J. Nichols



P U B L I S H I N G

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For Benjamin Hunt Nichols

*May you grow to appreciate and embrace
the rich heritage of Christ's church.*

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PREFACE

MARTIN LUTHER stepped out of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. In this building he and his fellow Augustinian monks, university scholars, and students taught and learned, ate and drank, prayed and slept. Here Martin Luther lived. Here, too, he wrote. He passed through the gate and headed west, guided by the bell tower and steeple of the Schlosskirche, or Castle Church, that rose over the town of Wittenberg. Luther likely could make the trip in his sleep. One kilometer later he arrived at his destination.

Martin Luther had been troubled in the months of 1517. In fact, Martin Luther had been troubled for the past dozen years and, sadly, more years still. In 1505 he had found himself caught in a violent thunderstorm, which he had taken to be nothing less than God's judgment over his soul and God's way of snuffing out his life. Having no alternative, Luther had cut a deal. He would enter the monastery, devoting his life to the quest for piety and peace with God—if only God spared his life from the crashing thunder and streaking lightning.

In the years leading up to 1517, Luther's troubles increased. Peace seemed ever more to elude him. He had high hopes for the church—and at the time there was only

one, the Roman Catholic Church—yet he experienced wave upon wave of disillusionment. His trip to Rome, the Holy See, left him utterly deflated.

Then Luther started to hear stories that made his skin crawl and his stomach churn. In the neighboring regions, an indulgence sale was occurring. The Peter Indulgence, as it was called, resulted from a deal struck by Albert, Archbishop of Mainz, and Pope Leo X. Unprecedented, the indulgence offered purchasers a free pass to paradise, no need to stop in purgatory. It also offered release from purgatory for one's relatives, one's suffering relatives. All one had to do was throw a coin into the coffer.

That summer, Luther managed to get a copy of "The Summary Instruction." This document, prepared by Albert and his theologians, gave explicit instructions to the indulgence sale preachers—Luther called them "hawkers." The document was troubling enough, as it made a mockery of church law. What made the matter far worse was that Luther's own parishioners from Wittenberg were traveling to Albert's region, purchasing indulgences, and spiraling downward in their lives. What incentive did they have to do otherwise? They had their indulgence. They had their Get Out of Jail Free card.

Luther poignantly felt the strain. The indulgence had the Pope's seal of approval, yet it was patently without warrant. Luther's inward tensions mounted as he could not help but see the damage being done.

As fall came to Wittenberg, the air grew crisper, and the leaves changed their colors, Luther could be silent no more. He was a Doctor of Sacred Theology. He was a priest. He had training, and he held a position that obligated him to serve the church, even if that meant calling the church out. So he filled his inkwell, sat at his desk, and set to work.

By the time he finished writing, he had ninety-five

separate arguments and observations on the indulgence sale. He readied himself for a debate. He wrote a letter to Albert, Archbishop of Mainz, that same day. Luther planned to post the letter along with a copy of his theses where his fellow Wittenberg scholars could engage the debate. He took his copy and a mallet and headed west out the gate to the Castle Church doors.

Five hundred years later, we celebrate this moment in history—for it made history. What Luther did on that last day of October in 1517 started the Protestant Reformation, impacting both church and culture for five full centuries and counting. It was truly a remarkable event, executed by one of history's most colorful figures.

The posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the church door stands as the epochal moment in Luther's life. But it does not stand alone. Other defining moments would come after October 31, 1517. Much more would flow from Luther's quill and inkwells than the *Ninety-Five Theses*.

This book offers a guided tour of Martin Luther's life, writings, and thought. It is offered not in the hope that we merely enshrine Luther and his legacy but that in the hope that we too might find the same confidence in God, the Mighty Fortress; in God's sure and certain Word; and in Christ and his finished work on the cross—alone. May we look back and be filled with gratitude for Luther's life and legacy.

May we also look ahead. If Christ delays his return and the church sees the year 2517, will there be cause to celebrate our acts and our legacy?

Our celebration of the past reminds us of our obligation in the present and our commitment to the future. Looking ahead seems to be the best way to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I AM GRATEFUL TO my friends at P&R Publishing, including Bryce Craig, Amanda Martin, and Ian Thompson. Thank you for your support of this new edition. I am also thankful for my colleagues at Ligonier and at Reformation Bible College. I have long wished that I could travel back in time and have just one meal with Luther. Working with R.C. Sproul is close enough. Caleb Gorton, Anthony Salangsang, Megan Taylor, Emberlee van Eyk, and Jeanna Will all helped to get this to the finish line. Without the kind encouragement of Chris Larson, this new edition likely would not have happened.

Luther was above all a family man, and so I am grateful to my family for their unstinting love. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther's Legacy

IN SHEER TERROR, he made a vow to his patron saint. In disillusionment, he questioned the practices of the church to which he gave his very life. In firm resolve, he nailed his list of protests to the church door. In utter joy, he grasped the liberating idea that the righteousness of God is given, not earned. And in the face of intense spiritual battle, he cried out to God, his “mighty fortress,” his “bulwark never failing.” These are the defining moments of Martin Luther’s life. Most, if not all, Christians know these defining moments. Most also know that with every mallet swing on the church door at Wittenberg, Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation. But much more, these events also serve to shape our lives, as well, for they embody the Reformation and form the foundation of Protestantism. One historian has even remarked that any vestige of Christianity in Western culture is entirely owing to this man, Martin Luther.

Yet, while Luther is very well known, beyond some significant moments, much of his life remains a mystery to most Christians. And while his writings form the bedrock

of Protestantism and articulate the essential principles of Reformation theology, they largely go unread by many today. This current lack of familiarity with Luther's work is precisely the reason for this book. It is an attempt to put his long-lost descendants in touch with their legacy, an invitation to spend some time at Luther's table, to examine his life and hear his ideas. These ideas, however, are not mere relics of the past. To be sure, his thought inspired a whole generation in his own day. But, it also has the power to impact the church today and to ignite our own generation to a passionate quest for God and his truth. Biographies of Luther abound, and specialized works on his thought fill many bookshelves. His own writings continue to be published centuries after his death. With all of this attention given to Luther, one may rightly ask why. What is it about Luther that demands so much attention?

Luther's Legacy

Luther's role as the catalyst of the Reformation stands at the forefront of reasons for the perennial interest in him. Imagine a world without Protestantism. If you were a young Augustinian monk in the early decades of the sixteenth century, this is actually not such a difficult situation to imagine. For Luther, reality was a world without Protestantism. His choices were clear: either the Roman Catholic Church or paganism. As a monk, of course, he embraced the former. When Luther died in 1546, however, the world had changed drastically. Between Roman Catholicism and paganism now lay a whole range of choices including Lutheranism, Anabaptism, Reformed, Anglicanism, and Presbyterianism. These religious options were simply not the case in 1517. In that year, Luther initiated a sea change of reform that would shake the entire world.

Before Luther's challenge to the church, various attempts

at reform had occurred. Some movements, such as the *Devotio Moderna* (New Devotion), criticized the lackadaisical spirituality, as well as the enormous wealth, of the church. Though its objections ran deep, the movement lacked a theological base from which to mount its critique. Other movements, though more theologically oriented, did not succeed in overhauling the church either. John Wycliffe in England and John Hus in Bohemia (the modern-day Czech Republic) mounted formidable challenges, but finally were crushed by Rome's power. Hus was burned at the stake, and while Wycliffe died of natural causes, the church, nevertheless, exhumed his body and burned his bones.

Though these pre-Reformation reformers did not bring about lasting reformation, they laid an important foundation upon which Luther built. In fact, Luther recognized these pre-Reformation reformers' invaluable contributions. From Wycliffe, Luther realized the importance of placing the Bible in the people's hands in a language they could understand. From Hus, Luther learned to challenge the various church practices and functions that were opposed to Scripture. From the *Devotio Moderna*, Luther also understood that the church's lack of spiritual vigor should be challenged. Yet, unlike this movement, he knew that such a challenge must be built upon a theological foundation. In fact, as he debates Erasmus over the will, Luther underscores that the central concern for the church is a theological one. Take away doctrine, Luther argues, and you have no church.

Luther grew skeptical of the church's basic theological understanding from the mid-1510s when he began lecturing on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews at Wittenberg. His first salvo against the church, however, came as he contemplated the severe problems caused by indulgences. This error, of course, led to the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* at Wittenberg. Through this event, and

also his recovery of the doctrine of justification by faith, his courageous stand before both the church and empire at the Diet of Worms, and his tireless commitment to building a church upon Scripture alone, Luther served as the Reformation's architect. His work at Wittenberg rippled across the German lands and throughout Europe. By the time of his death, Protestantism and the new evangelical church were firmly established.

Secondly, Luther garners attention not solely for his involvement in Reformation events, but also because of his role in shaping Reformation ideas. Perhaps more than any other person, Luther shaped the presuppositions that define Protestantism. Theologians use a series of Latin expressions to capture these concepts. Known as the "Reformation *Solas*," they include *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone; *sola fide*, faith alone; *sola gratia*, grace alone; *solus Christus*, Christ alone; and *soli Deo gloria*, to the glory of God alone. These ideas all take root in Martin Luther's thinking. That they continue to define Christianity is a lasting testimony to Luther's influence.

Luther also attracts attention because of his colorful personality. "Indiscretion," Luther once remarked, is "said to be my greatest fault." Consequently, both his writings and actions are humorous, poignant, and vivid. His colorful personality extends to his conversations and writing. Reading through his "Table Talk" selections will undoubtedly cause some to blush on occasion. Further, when it came to engaging his enemies, Luther seldom showed restraint in his language. In some sense, these are not necessarily positive traits. Nevertheless, Luther's transparent demeanor and, at times, candidness provide numerous anecdotes and vignettes that continue to fascinate readers today. Historical figures sometimes may be one-dimensional to later generations of readers. We may piece together a sense of the person through various accounts, but typically we see the personal portrait dimly.

This is not the case with Luther. And the portrait of Luther that emerges, despite his peccadilloes, is rather endearing.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a German Lutheran, at least at one point in his life, once said that we are “human, all too human.” This sentiment describes Luther, as well. Hailed by the German artist Hans Holbein as the “German Hercules,” Luther appeared to many as larger than life. Yet, in reality, while he had legs of iron, he nevertheless had feet of clay. Perhaps the most prominent fault in Luther is reflected in his harsh attitude toward the Jews later in his life. Rather than hide these faults, or overemphasize them, we are better served simply to acknowledge them. Despite Holbein’s depiction, Luther was human. This is not to excuse his faults, either. Rather, it reminds us that while we admire Luther, we must also see him as a sinner saved by grace.

Finally, Luther’s tireless commitment to the church assures him a prominent place in its history. He showed remarkable versatility, courage at defining moments, and stamina to endure the long haul. Rarely do we see the combination of the visionary who also implements his vision. Luther’s life offers one of the rare cases. Not only did he take a bold stand and point the church in the right direction, he committed his life to leading the church in the right path. Luther worked tirelessly, and often at a great personal sacrifice, to see that the church thrived in his lifetime and beyond. These reasons, and others, substantiate the widespread attention that Luther receives. In the chapters that follow, we will continue to explore why Luther not only receives such attention, but also why he deserves it.

Overview

We begin our tour of Martin Luther by taking account of his eventful life. In chapter 1 we trace the steps of his

early life along the road to the Protestant Reformation. After his education, and a traumatic experience during a thunderstorm, Luther enters the monastery. Roughly a dozen years later, the pope declares him a heretic. Following the decisive confrontation at the Diet of Worms, Luther enters his “exile” at the Wartburg Castle. In chapter 2 we continue his life’s narrative, beginning with his return to Wittenberg and ending with the last decades of his life.

Part 2 presents various discussions on Luther, the reformer. In chapter 3 we offer an overview of his theology. The next chapter engages the *Three Treatises*, pivotal texts from the fall months of 1520. Luther’s theological magnum opus, *The Bondage of the Will*, is the focus of chapter 5, addressing what Luther called the “vital spot” of the Reformation. Here we explore this crucial text as it unfolds Luther’s understanding of the human will and God’s sovereignty. In chapter 6, we examine the Lord’s Supper and the role that it played in the Reformation. Part 2 comes to a close as we look at Luther’s thought and writings on ethics. Some key historical events in his day, such as the Peasants’ War and the plague at Wittenberg, enable us to see Luther’s thought applied.

Luther devoted the majority of his energies to the church’s theology and practice. In Part 3, we continue our tour of Luther’s life and thought by examining his contributions to church life. *The Small Catechism*, the subject of chapter 7, endures as a testimony to Luther’s realization of the church’s role in properly training the next generation. Chapter 8 looks at a unique text in church history, Luther’s “Table Talk.” Here Luther transparently lives out his theology before his family, colleagues, and students, as they all gather around his dinner table. Because of the foresight of both Luther and some student scribes, we can listen in on those conversations. While we all know Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our

God,” we may not be familiar with the prominent place music played in his life. Chapter 10 provides an opportunity to delve into this part of Luther’s experience. In chapter 11, we explore Luther’s ideas regarding the “true church” by studying one of his lesser-known, but profound, texts, *On the Councils and the Church*. Finally, Luther left behind an enormous amount of sermon material. We examine one sermon in particular, “On How to Contemplate Christ’s Holy Suffering,” as representative of his approximately 6,000 sermons.

Overall this book introduces both the life and thought of Martin Luther. It is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of either. Ideally, it would be helpful to include many more texts and issues to show Luther in all his genius. Practically, however, that would try the patience of reader and writer alike. The most comprehensive collection of Luther’s writings in English fills fifty-five volumes, which only covers approximately half of his work. Consequently, I have chosen the texts and concerns that seem pivotal in Luther’s thought. This book, then, is intended as an acquaintance with Luther which will serve as the gateway for further exploration of his life and thought. The conclusion offers some suggestions and guidance for continuing your journey.

Following Luther’s death, his close friend the artist Lucas Cranach painted one last portrait of the reformer. Cranach captured Luther’s entire life and purpose in this three-paneled painting, which was installed at the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The right panel depicts Luther in the pulpit, proclaiming the Word of God, as he faithfully shepherds his flock. With an open Bible before him, he stands pointing to his congregation. On the left panel, an assembled congregation listens intently to the reformer. Cranach painted Luther’s wife Katie, a son, and even his daughter Magdalena, who had died a few years before, into the congregation. They are not, however, looking directly at Luther. The center panel

depicts Christ on the cross. Taken collectively, the three panels poignantly express Luther's passion as he points to Christ for all to see. More specifically, as they look to Luther, he points them to Christ. So I offer this book which, although it points to Luther, directs us to Christ. Ultimately, that is Martin Luther's legacy.

PART ONE

LUTHER, A LIFE

MARTIN LUTHER lived an eventful life; consequently, the question of what to leave out becomes every Luther biographer's major challenge. With only two chapters specifically devoted to biography, we especially face that challenge. Nevertheless, I have attempted to address the crucial events in Luther's life. These incidents, explored in chapter 1, include such pivotal moments as the vow made during the thunderstorm that sent him to the monastery, the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* that catapulted him to the very center of everyone's attention in 1517, and the Reformation discovery of *justification by faith* that "opened the very gates of paradise" for him and that became the fundamental message of all he preached. This chapter ends with Luther's bold stand before the Diet of Worms and then describes his "kidnapping."

In the next chapter, we pick up the story as Luther returns from his exile at the Wartburg Castle. The events unfolding during these later years include the marriage of this former monk to a former nun, the establishment of the first parsonage in the modern age, the decisive meeting with theologian Ulrich Zwingli at Marburg, and the tireless commitment to

establishing the newly formed church. Through studying the events of both his early and later years, we begin to understand why Luther figures so prominently in the pages of history, and why he continues to fascinate readers five centuries after his death.

1

THE EARLY YEARS

1483–1521

“If there is any sense remaining of Christian civilization in the West, this man Luther in no small measure deserves the credit.”

Roland Bainton

“Martin Luther the Reformer is one of the most extraordinary persons in history and has left a deeper impression of his presence in the modern world than any other except Columbus.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

IN 1529 JOHANNES COCHLÆUS authored a tract vilifying Martin Luther. Entitled the “Seven-Headed Luther,” the piece featured a woodcut on the title page caricaturing Luther as a dangerously conflicted individual who, according to the writer, threatened great harm to the church through his varied and contradictory personalities. One portrayal depicts Luther as a madman with bees encircling his head. The final woodcut depicts him as Barabbas, implying no less than the charge that he was the very enemy of Christ.

Pope Leo X, who originally viewed Luther's antics as nothing more than the ravings of a drunken German, portrayed Luther as the archenemy of the church, and he succeeded in rallying both church and empire against the German monk. Even at Luther's death many wondered about his true legacy. Was he an instrument of God? Or, was he a tool in the hands of the devil?

One thing on which scholars agree is that the world "Martin Luder" was born into on November 10, 1483, was quite different from the one he left on February 18, 1546. The decades of his life contained unprecedented change

Fig. 1.1 Timeline: Early Years

1483	Born on November 10 in Eisleben
1492-98	Attends school at Mansfield, Magdeburg, and Eisenach
1501-05	Attends University of Erfurt; receives B.A. (1502), M.A. (1505)
1505	Makes vow during thunderstorm, July 2. Enters monastery
1507	Is ordained
1509	Receives B.A. in Bible. Begins lecturing at Erfurt on the arts
1510	Makes pilgrimage to Rome
1511	Enters Black Cloister, Augustinian Monastery at Wittenberg
1512	Receives doctorate in theology. Appointed to faculty of theology at Wittenberg
1513-17	Lectures on Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews
1517	Posts <i>Ninety-Five Theses</i> on church door on October 31
1518	Debates Cajetan at Augsburg
1518-19	Possible date for Reformation breakthrough (or 1515-16)
1519	Debates Eck at Leipzig
1520	Writes <i>Three Treatises</i>
1520	Receives Papal Bull
1521	Appears at Diet of Worms on April 16-18
1521	Is placed under the Imperial Ban and condemned as a heretic and outlaw in May
1521	Goes into "exile" at Wartburg Castle

and upheaval, and Martin Luther was at the center of it all. Luther, however, experienced quite modest beginnings for such an enduringly prominent figure in Western history. As he wrote in his old age, “I come from a family of peasants.” In fact, he continued:

Who would have divined that I would receive a Bachelor’s and then a Master’s of Arts, then lay aside my brown student’s cap and leave it to others in order to become monk, thereby of course earning for myself such shame so that my father was bitterly displeased; and that despite all I would get in the Pope’s hair—and he in mine—and take a runaway nun for my wife? Who would have predicted this for me?

Luther’s Early Education

Few would have predicted the outcome of Luther’s life, especially his parents. Hans and Margeret Luder moved from Eisleben, Germany, the place of Luther’s birth and baptism, to Mansfield in Luther’s first year. At Mansfield, Hans continued his work as a miner, overseeing two smelting furnaces, painstakingly providing for young Martin’s education. Instead of working as a young boy, the lot of most peasant youth, Luther attended school where he studied Latin, elementary grammar, and the essentials of a religious education—the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the children’s creeds. Here he opted for the Latinized version of his name, Luther, instead of the German, Luder. When Luther turned fourteen, his parents sent him to continue his education at the monastery in Magdeburg. This monastery fell under the jurisdiction of the Brethren of the Common Life order, known for its piety, and counting among its members Thomas á Kempis, the author of the devotional classic

The Imitation of Christ. Magdeburg was a highly respected school and, consequently, very expensive. The Luther family's modest income barely funded Martin's first year, so, like the other peasant students, he took to begging in the street for his bread. "Panem propter Deum," bread for God's sake, rolled off Luther's tongue often as he begged along the streets of Magdeburg.

The next year Luther continued his studies at Eisenach. Presumably, Eisenach appealed to Luther for both academic and financial reasons. Luther's mother had relatives nearby who undoubtedly offered some relief, as well as occasional meals. It was, however, an elderly town lady who, admiring Luther's abilities and resolve, took special care of him. Even with this help, Luther's time at Eisenach was a struggle. Despite these challenges, he excelled in his studies, rising to the head of the class. His achievements allowed him to move on to Erfurt where he could study law to fulfill his parents' dream for their son's life. Through entering a noble profession, his parents hoped he would escape the peasant class and bring honor and status to the family name. At Erfurt, he received his Bachelor's degree in 1502, and his Master's in 1505. Both were to prepare him for further study of the law and a doctorate in jurisprudence.

I Will Become a Monk

Studying at Erfurt was a turning point in Luther's life on many levels. On his daily walk, he encountered a sculpture that often captured his thoughts. The image depicts Christ as judge with a sword clenched between his teeth and a piercing stare. This image, not only in medieval renderings of Christ, haunted Luther for years as he contemplated his guilt before God. A particular German word helps us understand the true impact of this image on Luther's life: *anfechtung*. Translated

as “crisis” or “struggle,” in Luther’s case it is best described as an intense spiritual struggle and a crisis. In fact, it is better to use the word in the plural, *anfechtungen*, for in reality a series of spiritual crises marked Luther’s early life of study.

After completing his M.A. in January 1505, Luther remained at Erfurt to receive specialized training in law. He excelled in the legal field and was well on his way to fulfilling



Courtesy of the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology

1.2 Not all responses to Luther were favorable. This depiction of Luther as a seven-headed monster graces the title page of Johannes Cochlaeus’s 1529 book criticizing Luther.

his father's wish. In June of that year, he made a trip home to Mansfield. On his return to Erfurt Luther was caught in a violent thunderstorm. He was paralyzed by the storm and attached great spiritual significance to it, and in utter fear he believed God had unleashed the very thunder of heaven to judge his soul. In total desperation he cried out to St. Anne, the patron saint of miners: "Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk." The date was July 2, 1505. Exactly two weeks later, Luther threw a party for his classmates, giving them his law books and his master's cap and withdrawing from his doctoral studies. Then he told them that on the following day he would enter the monastery.

Luther desired his father's blessing for exchanging the master's cap for the monk's tunic; the blessing, however, did not come. As Luther records, "When I became a monk, my father almost went out of his mind. He was all upset and refused to give me his permission." Later, in 1521, Luther apologized for disobeying his parents in his dedicatory letter to *On Monastic Vows*, addressed to his father. Fifteen years before the book, and despite his parents' refusal, Luther entered the monastery. All candidates were accepted on probation for one year's time. During this time, as a "novice," Luther threw himself into the rigors of monastic life and completed his year of probation. He took the monk's habit in 1506 during a ceremony which culminated in Luther's prostrating himself before the abbot. Ironically this was over the very slab that covered the grave of a principal accuser of reformer John Hus. And on the slab was that haunting image of Christ as judge. His parents did not respond to the invitation to attend the ceremony. Luther hoped that by entering the monastery he would resolve his spiritual crises. In reality, however, it only fueled them. One year after his vow to St. Anne, Luther was abandoned by his family, and he also acutely felt abandoned by God.

In later years, Luther reflected back on his life as a monk: “I myself was a monk for twenty years. I tortured myself with praying, fasting, keeping vigils, and freezing—the cold alone was enough to kill me—and I inflicted upon myself such pain as I would never inflict again, even if I could.” In fact, Luther carried out his duties with such rigor that he exclaimed, “If any monk ever got to heaven by monkery, then I should have made it. All my monastery companions who knew me can testify to that.” He concludes his reminiscing by noting that “if it had lasted much longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, praying, reading, and the other labors.” But, there was still no resolution to his spiritual crises.

As the first decade of the sixteenth century came to a close, two occurrences profoundly impacted the young monk and set him on a course that would revolutionize the church. His prior, or superior, at Erfurt often expressed to the abbot, Johann von Staupitz, his exasperation with young Martin Luther. Staupitz, though confounded by Luther’s spiritual struggles, recognized the young man’s intellectual abilities and promise. He ordered Luther transferred to the monastery at Wittenberg. Just a few years earlier, Staupitz and others founded the University at Wittenberg. Frederick the Wise spared no expense in making his new university rival the already established universities covering German lands and beyond. He wanted the best and brightest faculty, and he wholeheartedly approved of the choice of Luther. Luther’s training, however, was not in Bible and theology; consequently, before he began his career as a lecturer in Bible and theology, he once again became a student. While studying at Wittenberg, he lectured on both the arts and Aristotle. Staupitz hoped that the mental occupations of academia would crowd out Luther’s many internal struggles. He was wrong.

Luther began his second set of degrees, taking another B.A. in Bible in 1509. He was then sent back to Erfurt to be

a lecturer. While there, the monastery at Erfurt needed to send some documents to Rome. Staupitz viewed this request as an opportunity for Luther to make his peace with God, believing the Holy City would do his soul much good. Luther and another monk embarked on their pilgrimage to Rome in 1510, traveling the same route as thousands of monks over the centuries of the medieval era. Anticipating a spiritual paradise, Luther instead discovered something much more akin to John Bunyan's "Vanity Fair" in *Pilgrim's Progress*. "When I first saw Rome," he recalls, "I fell to the ground, lifted my hands, and said, Hail to thee, O Holy Rome." That impression quickly dissolved, however. He continues, "No one can imagine the knavery, the horrible sinfulness and debauchery that are rampant in Rome." As he climbed up and down the stairs of Pontius Pilate, reciting the Lord's Prayer on each step, his disillusionment only increased. By the time he reached the top, he exclaimed, "Who knows if this is true?"

The trip to Rome failed to quell the storms of Luther's soul. On one occasion, after his return, Luther met up with Staupitz in the garden at the Wittenberg cloister. Staupitz did not understand why Luther could not comprehend God's love for him. "Love God?" Luther retorted, "I can't love God, I hate him." Staupitz had no solution for the young man, other than to order him to pursue a doctorate in theology. Again, he argued that studying the church fathers and the medieval tradition would end his fight with God. In 1512, Luther received his doctorate, not in his originally intended course of law, but in theology, and joined the faculty in that subject at Wittenberg.

Scholar at Wittenberg

While Luther did not know it at the time, this prescription of more education precisely fit the bill, though it did

not serve to dispel the dark spiritual clouds immediately. In fact, life was going to get worse before it got better. Luther plunged into his lectures and doctoral work, beginning with Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences* (1158). This systematic and logical treatment of doctrine served as the textbook in theology from 1200 until Luther's day and beyond. This work was so influential it needed to be mastered to qualify for a doctoral degree in medieval universities. Something in Luther's reading of Lombard turned his attention to Augustine. In the margin notes of his copy of the *Sentences*, Luther scribbled numerous references to the great ancient church father. And as he turned to focus on Augustine, he was immediately led by Augustine to Paul. Luther's marginal notes also show that this aspiring theologian encountered difficulties reconciling what he read in Paul and Augustine with Lombard and some of the church's teaching in the high and later Middle Ages. Specifically, the issues of the human will and of sin perplexed Luther. The notes also show that he, nevertheless, affirmed medieval Catholic conceptions of faith and salvation. But as early as 1512, Luther was beginning to part ways with Rome on these latter two issues.

These questions slowly boiled until 1517 and the aftermath experienced after Luther posted the *Ninety-Five Theses* on the Wittenberg door. In the intervening years, he continued his work at Wittenberg, teaching, preaching, praying, and yet all the while doubting, probing, and questioning. In addition to his lectures on theology from Lombard's *Sentences*, he prepared lectures on the Psalms (1513–1515), and then on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews (1515–1518). In these lectures, Luther reflected the humanism of the sixteenth century. This new approach is not to be confused with the secular humanism of our day. Humanism expressed the Renaissance spirit emphasizing a return to Greek and Roman cultures. It was, in many ways, a reactionary

movement against the medieval traditions. That approach, called scholasticism, underscored the later Latin fathers and Aristotle's thought. Scholasticism emphasized the medieval commentaries on Aristotle—and even the commentaries on the commentaries—rather than Aristotle's writings primarily. Like scaffolding around a building, these commentaries blocked a direct line to the sources themselves. Humanism proposed moving beyond the scaffolding with the battlecry, "*Ad Fontes*," "to the fount," or "to the source." And in this spirit, Luther went beyond the scaffolding that obstructed the Bible and went straight to the biblical text.

Once Luther went to the text, he continued encountering difficulties reconciling Scripture with the church's teaching. In his work on the Psalms, like the other medieval exegetes, or interpreters, he applied much of the text, especially the kingly elements, to Christ. Unlike the others, however, he also applied the suffering and servile elements to Christ. For Luther, Christ was seen in both his majesty and humility, as high and low, as king and beggar. Only the majestic side of Christ appealed to the medieval Roman Church leaders. A few years later, this difference between Luther and the church widened even further as Luther articulated his theology as a "theology of the cross" over against a "theology of glory." Not only was he thinking about Christ differently than his contemporaries, but he also began thinking differently about sin and salvation as evidenced in his work on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews.

His thoughts on sin and salvation will be explored more in later chapters, but for now a brief mention of his key ideas will help us see the progression of his thought. The first concept involves an understanding of sin that moves beyond individual sins one may commit. As Luther understands Paul, our sin is like the root of a plant; just as the root is at the very core of the plant and permeates it, so is sin in

our lives. Luther even uses the Latin word for root, *radix*, as a vivid word picture of our true nature as sinners at the root. The upshot of his understanding is that forgiveness and redemption will have to move beyond the mere individual sins that we commit and address our very nature as sinners. This realization stands in stark conflict with the medieval penitential and confessional system based on individual sins.

As for salvation, the key idea that Luther begins to explore concerns “alien righteousness.” This term simply means that the righteousness that God requires as our righteous judge cannot be produced by us because we are sinners at the root. This righteousness must come from outside of us; consequently, it is alien to us and not inherent within us. It would be a few years until these ideas reached a full crescendo for Luther, but even as early as 1516 his thinking was headed toward the Reformation’s great principle of *sola fide*, or justification by faith alone. And with this understanding, Luther was headed in a direction far from Rome.

The *Ninety-Five Theses*

During these years, Luther is center stage at one of the most significant events in Western history: the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. In his preface to this document, Luther explained his motives: “Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the oversight of the Reverend Father Martin Luther . . . [who] requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter.” Luther never got his debate; the *Ninety-Five Theses*, originally written in Latin, were quickly translated and distributed around Germany and beyond. A copy reached Pope Leo X, who dismissed the document as nothing more than

the ramblings of a drunken German who, he believed, would think differently when sober. The issue of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, a series of short propositions presented for an argument, concerns indulgences and the specific sale of indulgences by the monk, Tetzel.

Tetzel was on a mission for Albert of Mainz. Albert already had exceeded the boundaries of canon law by holding two bishoprics as he sought to become Archbishop of Mainz. Leo X, the pope at the time, granted the necessary papal dispensation, but it also came at a cost. Leo X, of the Medici family of Florence, was a passionate patron of the arts. Determined that his legacy, the great Sistine Chapel of St. Paul's Basilica, be unparalleled, he enlisted the assistance of artists such as Raphael, Durer, and Michelangelo. This commitment, of course, cost a great deal and drained the church treasuries. Consequently, Albert could have his Archbishopric if he provided the funds first. Albert's great wealth consisted largely of land holdings rather than currency, but Tetzel devised a scheme to raise the necessary funds.

To understand indulgences, we need to become acquainted with the system of penance for the Roman church. Penance involved four steps: contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution. Tetzel's indulgence, which came with Leo X's seal of approval, short-circuited the process by reducing the first three steps down to one quite simple one: the purchase of an indulgence slip. With the indulgence, Tetzel assured his purchasers, comes full absolution or "complete forgiveness of all sins." Tetzel offered indulgences for oneself and also for one's dead relatives suffering in purgatory. His indulgences found a ready market and also one very irate monk. When Luther heard of the indulgences and of how parishioners from Wittenberg were making the short trek to Mainz to purchase them, as well, he feverishly penned the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Luther clearly had Tetzel in

view as he referred to the “hawkers of indulgences” and the “lust and license of the indulgence preachers.” He was also well aware of Tetzel’s ulterior motive and sought to expose it: “Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that St. Peter’s church should go to the ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep.”

Thesis 53 further explains why this stance caused such problems for Luther: “They are the enemies of Christ and the pope, who bid the Word of God to be silent in some churches, in order that pardons be preached in others.” The indulgence sale tied Luther’s hands. How could he preach about doing good works and following Scripture if his parishioners had simply to pull out their indulgence slips? Luther argued primarily against indulgences based on the church’s understanding of penance. He later wrote, “I certainly thought in this case I should have a protector in the pope, on whose trustworthiness I then leaned strongly, for in his decrees he most clearly damned the immoderation of the indulgence preachers.” Sadly, Luther never received Leo X’s support; instead, this action started Luther down a path that would lead him far from Rome. At this point, and even for the next two years, Luther desired to reform the church within, as he had no intention of breaking with it altogether. As Luther’s theological understanding developed, however, he soon realized the impossibility of that approach.

The Reformation Discovery

Luther scholars disagree on the exact date of the reformer’s conversion. Suggestions range from 1513 to 1520. Most likely Luther was converted in either 1515–1516 or 1518. The evidence in favor of the earlier date consists largely of some of his comments in his Romans lectures. Evidence in favor

of a 1518 date includes some of his comments in the *Ninety-Five Theses* that are not consistent with an understanding of justification by faith. This holds more weight when we consider how Luther, in his later years, regretted these writings for their content. Secondly, Luther's own testimony of the Reformation discovery, given in 1545 in the preface to the Latin edition of his collected works, dates the discovery to 1518. Luther recalls that it was after he had given his lectures on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews and was giving his second series of lectures on the Psalms, which occurred in 1518.



1.3 Johann von Staupitz, Luther's mentor, published his work on predestination in 1517.

While Luther's conversion date is debated, the nature of his conversion itself remains remarkable. For Luther, real faith meant coming to grips with the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17, where Paul exclaims that in the gospel "a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'" As Luther reflected on the righteousness of God, he did not embrace it; rather, he states, "I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. . . . Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience." He hated the righteousness of God because he understood it to mean that which he had to achieve. His breakthrough, the resolution to his long-endured spiritual struggles, came when, "by the mercy of God," he finally realized that the righteousness that Paul refers to and that God requires is not something that we have to earn, but is something that Christ accomplished for us. So he explains:

There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: The righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

As a result, Luther exchanged his anger toward God for love. He wrote, "I extolled that sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.'" Luther moved from viewing righteousness as active, as something he had to achieve, to viewing it as passive, something Christ achieved on his behalf, apprehended not by our merits but by faith alone. The Reformation plank of *sola fide*, faith alone, was born, and Luther was born again.

Debates with Rome

In the aftermath of writing the *Ninety-Five Theses* and his conversion, Luther was summoned to Rome to account for his antics. But by using Frederick the Wise's influence, he avoided going to Rome. Had he gone, he may never have returned; instead, he was summoned to Augsburg in the middle of October 1518 to debate Cardinal Cajetan. More an inquisition than a debate, the meeting met with little success. Both parties talked past each other. Luther stressed the authority of Scripture and salvation by faith. Neither of these points were understood, much less persuasive, for Cajetan. Cajetan's goal was to force Luther to recant his writings and ideas or acquire evidence to have him condemned as a heretic. While it was clear to Cajetan that Luther was a radical, he was unable to extract any clear comments from the reformer that would condemn him as a heretic. Luther left the meeting unsure of what moves the church would make next; Cajetan left without a recantation or a heretic.

Luther met a much more formidable opponent in his Leipzig debate in 1519 with Johann Eck, a trained theologian who taught at the prestigious University of Ingolstadt. Eck began writing against Luther as soon as the first copies of the *Ninety-Five Theses* rolled off the press. Officially, the debate was between Eck and Luther's senior colleague in theology from Wittenberg, Andreas Karlstadt. In reality, the debate was between Eck and Luther. Eck used an effective strategy: he aligned Luther with Wycliffe and Hus, both condemned as heretics. Luther, consequently, became guilty simply by association. For Luther, however, the debate provided a platform to expound his doctrine of the authority of Scripture, known as *sola Scriptura*, or Scripture alone. Luther's commitment to the Scripture's authority over the church fathers,

councils, and even the Pope resounded throughout the debate. At one point, Luther went so far as to claim that even a simple schoolboy armed with the text is better equipped than the Pope himself.

This debate, unlike the one with Cajetan, left little ambiguity as to the outcome; Martin Luther was outside of conformity with the church. But he was not declared a heretic yet. Eck, however, diligently worked to that end and in 1520 obtained the papal bull that officially declared Luther the enemy of the church, the enemy of the apostles, and the very enemy of Christ. Entitled "*Exsurge, Domine*," "Arise, O Lord," Leo X's bull issued on June 15, 1520, called for the immediate restraint of the "wild boar in God's vineyard." It gave Luther, the wild boar, no alternative: he had but sixty days after receiving the bull to recant. If he did not, "his memory [was to be] completely obliterated from the fellowship of Christian believers." His books were to be burned, and he and his supporters and followers were to be seized and sent to Rome.

The papal bull came at a busy time for Luther. That fall he wrote what were popularly called the *Three Treatises*. These works, discussed at length in chapter 4, widened the breach between Luther and the church. He, nevertheless, found time to respond to the papal bull in his writing, *On the Detestable Bull of the Antichrist*. At first, Luther liked Leo X. At one point in a letter to the Pope in 1518, Luther expressed his regret that Leo X was the head of the church, noting, "You are worthy of being pope in better days." By 1520 this sentiment changed and Luther was referring to Leo X as the Antichrist. As for the papal bull, when the sixty days transpired, Luther burned it publicly in Wittenberg. When the Pope heard the report of Luther, he excommunicated him and called for his immediate delivery to Rome.

The Diet of Worms

The stage was now set for Luther's showdown with the church. Frederick the Wise again intervened and kept Luther from being sent to Rome. Instead, he was to appear before the Imperial Diet, or congress, at Worms in April 1521. Next to the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, this is the most well-known event in Luther's life. His appearance at Worms has grown to almost mythic proportions. Charles V, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, oversaw the Diet. As many historians have noted, the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor much of an empire. It was instead a loose confederacy whose future hung precariously. This was Charles V's debut meeting with the princes and rulers of Germany, and he could not have designed a more difficult challenge. On the one hand, he was staunchly Roman Catholic and heavily indebted to the Roman curia. The papal nuncio, Aleander, was there to ensure that Rome's interests were protected. On the other hand, Charles V ascended to the throne largely through the influence of Frederick the Wise, Luther's protector.

Charles V was in an extremely tenuous position, and so was Luther. Luther arrived to a hero's welcome at Worms, armed for—and anticipating—a debate. He had Scripture on his side, he had Augustine on his side, and he had arguments that would appeal to his fellow Germans on his side. Why, Luther reasoned, abdicate our local, German authority to rule our lands and practice our religion to the Pope in Rome? Instead of engaging in debate, however, Luther underwent an inquisition. When it came time for him to appear before the Diet, he was simply asked two questions: Are these your writings? Do you recant? Luther stood stunned before the assembly. How could they expect him to recant? His writings contained the words of Scripture, the words of the

councils, and even the words of the popes. He could not simply dismiss these words. Further, Luther wondered what exactly it was about his writings that troubled Charles V. Luther was more than willing to admit that he was wrong if that could be proven. Rome, however, was beyond wanting to prove Luther wrong; the leaders simply wanted him to go away. Luther requested one day to think things over, and Charles V granted this request.

The next day, April 18, 1521, Luther once again stood before the Diet of Worms. Again he requested a debate, and again he was denied. He then delivered his famous and succinct speech. In full, it reads:

Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, not embellished: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradict themselves, I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand. May God help me, Amen.

Some debate exists over whether Luther actually recited the famous three words, “Here I stand.” The first printed version of the speech contains the words, with the last part “I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, God help me,” in German, while the previous material is in Latin. The three words do not appear in the transcription of the speech. There is no debate, however, concerning the outcome of Luther’s address. Refusing to recant, he admitted his guilt, sealing his doom as a heretic. German nobles quickly

surrounded him and led him safely from the hall. Charles V released a letter the next day affirming his intention to see that “the notorious heretic” be dealt with immediately. He had, however, to turn his attention to other business matters first. Finally, in May, when it became clear that the German nobles would not hand Luther over to the papal authorities, Charles V placed him under the imperial ban. Luther could be hunted down and killed by anyone—a ruling that he lived under for the rest of his life. Further, anyone harboring Luther would also fall under the same condemnation. Frederick the Wise fully predicted the outcome at Worms. He arranged for Luther to be kidnapped and taken to one of his castles. Frederick also made sure that he did not know where Luther would be taken. For almost a year, Luther assumed a new identity, Junker Jorg. He disguised himself, at one point even dressing as a woman to avoid detection, and hid in Frederick’s castle on the high ridge at Wartburg. This one monk stood against the entire church and empire. Luther’s activities, once considered by Leo X as the mere ravings of a drunken German, now threatened the church’s ascendancy in Germany and across Europe.

The “exile to Patmos,” as Luther referred to his seclusion at Frederick’s castle, was not without its difficulties. In fact, during these days, Luther faced some of his most intense spiritual struggles, the *anfechtungen* that so characterized his early life. His actions had been unprecedented; he had challenged the church and now stood condemned as her enemy, the enemy of the gospel, and the enemy of Christ himself. During intense spiritual battle at Wartburg, legend has it, Luther hurled an ink well at the wall as the devil appeared to torment him. Though this may likely be myth, undoubtedly Luther was under attack. Writing to a friend, he said, “In this leisurely solitude I am exposed to a thousand devils. It is much easier to fight the devil incarnate—that is,

people—than the spirits of iniquity under the heavens.” He also added, “Often I fall, but the right hand of the Most High raises me again.”

The months at the Wartburg Castle, from May 1521 to March 1522, were actually not very leisurely. During this time, Luther produced an immense literary output, including his translation of the Greek New Testament into German in merely four months. In addition, Luther wrote numerous sermons for the churches of Germany. His theological ideas revolutionized the church service, and the priests needed guidance in their new task: preaching. He also maintained extensive correspondence. In Luther’s absence, the church and the university at Wittenberg were threatened by overzealous supporters. At one point, Luther risked personal harm by returning to Wittenberg for just over a week’s time, but retreated quickly to his hiding place.

A few months passed and Luther continued to receive troubling news from Wittenberg. “Junker Jorg’s” exiled life came to an end, and Luther returned to Wittenberg. During his absence the political climate had changed drastically. The German princes and Charles V were too busy contending with the approaching Turks to devote resources to tracking down a wayward monk. And Luther still had the support of Frederick the Wise. Luther was still under the ban, as he would be for the remainder of his life, but he was safe in Wittenberg.

By 1521, Luther had accomplished more than most do in many a lifetime. Little doubt that most of the well-known events of his life come from these early years. These years, however full, nevertheless meet their match in the events that fill his later years.

Does your knowledge of Martin Luther's writings start and end with the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"?

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STEPHEN J. NICHOLS (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is president of Reformation Bible College and chief academic officer of Ligonier Ministries. He hosts the weekly podcast *5 Minutes in Church History*.

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