

Luther and the Reformation

Doctrine: The righteousness of God which is received by faith alone

Learning outcome: Be able to describe in broad strokes the beginning of the Reformation; be able to describe what Luther was arguing for and the doctrine he held dear (the *Solas*).

I. 95 Theses (October 31, 1517)

- A. **The defiant moment of the Reformation! Right?** Well, there's more to this story than we may think. With this act, Luther was not trying to start the Reformation or break away from the Roman Catholic Church.
- B. Instead, **he was doing something very normal and routine** for the professors of the University of Wittenberg. You see, professors would post their theses on this door for debate and then convene a meeting to discuss the various viewpoints about the topic at hand. In fact, the 95 theses were written in Latin, the academic language of the day, and not the language of the people.
- C. **What differed from normal** was that in Luther's case, someone saw what he wrote, copied it down, translated it into German, and sent it abroad without Luther knowing about it.
- D. **So, contrary to what I might think**, Luther's nailing the 95 these to the door of the All Saints' Church building in Wittenberg was not intended to spark the Reformation—but it sure did!

But how did Luther get here?

II. Early Days (1483)

- A. **Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Germany.** He grew up in Mansfield until he was sent to a preparatory school at the age of fourteen. His father was a successful miner and was able to send his second son, Martin, away to receive a good education.
- B. **Young scholar.** Luther's father sent him to Latin school and then to the University of Erfurt where he earned his master's degree in 1505. Education was easy for Luther, he earned both his undergraduate and graduate degrees in the shortest time allowable and was so adept in debate that he was dubbed, "the philosopher."¹
- C. **What was going on in the world at this time?** Christian Humanism became prevalent beginning in Italy around the 1350s. In the main, its proponents were skeptical of Scholasticism and became significantly more interested in studying old Latin and ancient Greek manuscripts. They started a retrieval movement where they went *ad fontes*, that is, back to the source. These Christian humanists

¹Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, "Martin Luther" in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 34.

traveled around to monasteries throughout Europe in hopes of discovering old manuscripts, copying them, and studying them.

D. The Bible in its original languages. Their interest eventually led to a desire to study the Bible in its original languages—Greek and Hebrew. Up to this point, the Latin vulgate, translated by Jerome in the 300s, was the standard text for the Roman Catholic Church and for Europe at large. The Christian humanists of this time undertook the monumental effort of learning Greek and Hebrew, they located copies of the New and Old testaments in their respective languages, and they gave themselves to studying the Bible anew without the jaded lens of Scholasticism. What they found was that the Vulgate erred in many places.

E. The printing press. In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg, a German goldsmith, invented the moveable-type printing press which started the Printing Revolution. Books, which used to have to be painstakingly copied by hand were now able to be mass produced for a fraction of the cost. Books as we know them began to be a thing and, as a result, information was able to be disseminated much more quickly and thoroughly than ever before.

III. **Brother Luther (1505)**

A. Law Career. After he earned his master's degree, Luther's father desired for him to study law and become a lawyer. Though he was a brilliant student, he was not intrigued by the law—his heart wasn't in it. However, he was fond of the study of philosophy and had a love-hate relationship with Aristotle. He enjoyed his emphasis upon reason but disliked how the philosopher—being a pagan as he was—kindled no love for God in the reader.²

1. Seeing the deficiencies of reason and its greatest pagan philosophers led Luther to more highly prize the Bible. It was the Bible alone that was a true source of the knowledge of God.

B. A stormy decision. In July of 1505, when Luther was 21, he set out on a journey from Erfurt and was set upon by a ferocious storm. A bolt of lightning struck so near to him that terror overtook his reason. He cried out, "Help me, St. Anne. I will become a monk!"³ St. Anne being the patron saint of travelers. Though it may seem ridiculous to us, this rash vow was strictly obeyed by Luther. He quit his study of law at the university and—much to the chagrin of his father—entered into the monastery.

²Martin E. Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York City: Viking Penguin, 2004), 5.

³Galli and Olsen, 34.

C. Luther entered into St. Augustine’s Monastery in Erfurt in July of 1505. Just like in his academic career,

1. Luther was extraordinarily successful as a monk. He plunged into prayer, fasting, and ascetic practices—going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself. As he later commented, "if anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."⁴

D. Grueling years. Unsurprisingly, the next years were extremely difficult for Luther. “Although he sought by these means to love God fully, he found no consolation. He was increasingly terrified of the wrath of God...”⁵ Thankfully, he came under the leadership of a kind, paternal monk named Johann Staupitz. This man, who also happened to be Luther’s confessor, urged Luther to contemplate God’s grace.⁶

E. Scholar-monk. Staupitz also recognized Luther’s academic gifts and—after Luther had been made a monk in 1507—he arranged for Luther to be appointed as an instructor in the newly created University of Wittenberg. He received his doctorate in 1512 and was made a Professor of Scripture. In this role, he lectured on books of the Bible in addition to his priestly responsibilities of preaching and shepherding his local church.⁷

F. Romans 1:17. Luther was particularly haunted by Romans 1:17.

1. During his early years, whenever Luther read what would become the famous “Reformation text”—Romans 1:17—his eyes were drawn not to the word faith, but to the word righteous. Who, after all, could “live by faith” but those who were already righteous? The text was clear on the matter: “the righteous shall live by faith.”

Luther remarked, “I hated that word, ‘the righteousness of God,’ by which I had been taught according to the custom and use of all teachers ... [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.” The young Luther could not live by faith because he was not righteous—and he knew it.⁸

G. Transformation.

1. As Luther continued to lecture on the Bible, his conception of God’s righteousness underwent a profound transformation. His early education had taught him to think of God’s righteousness as an ‘active righteousness’ that demands that humans in their own strength measure up to God’s righteous standards. Luther, however, came to the conviction that human effort is utterly unable to achieve this standard of righteousness unless God grants it graciously without regard to merit.⁹

⁴Galli and Olsen, 34.

⁵Galli and Olsen, 34.

⁶John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), 109

⁷Woodbridge and James, 109.

⁸Galli and Olsen, 34.

⁹Woodbridge and James, 110.

2. During lectures on the Psalms (in 1513 and 1514) and a study of the Book of Romans, he began to see a way through his dilemma. “At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.”¹⁰
 - a) “The ‘righteousness of God’ in this text is not as he had been taught, referring to a divine attribute, but to the divine activity of clothing sinners in the righteousness of Christ through the gift of faith.”¹¹
 - b) “The crucial distinction between Roman Catholics and protestants was that the latter saw the exclusive ground of justification as the imputed righteousness of Christ.”¹²

H. Indulgence controversy. In 1507, Pope Julius II permitted the sale of indulgence to help fund the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. An indulgence is a piece of paper with a papal insignia on it that grants a remission of temporal punishment for sin.¹³

That is, the sins that one commits after one receives baptism. These sins must be purged from oneself before one can be admitted to heaven. Therefore, souls are sent to purgatory. However, one can reduce the amount of time spent in purgatory or eliminate it entirely by purchasing an indulgence. You could do this for yourself or someone else—even if they were already dead.

In 1517, Johan Tetzel, a Dominican friar and professor, had arrived in the electorate of Saxony—in Luther’s very own backyard—to sell indulgences. Tetzel’s infamous catchphrase was, “Once a coin in the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory springs.” Frederick the wise, the prince and ruler of this region of Saxony, refused to let Tetzel into his territory. In response, Tetzel set up shop just across the border and sold indulgences to Frederick’s subjects.¹⁴

Luther, having written against indulgences as early as 1514, was enraged by the presence of Tetzel in the area and his insidious sale of indulgences. After all, one was made right with God—given his very righteousness as their own—by faith alone, not by the purchase of an indulgence. In Johann Tetzel, Luther and Frederick had a common enemy.

I. Nailed it. Luther, agitated as he was about Tetzel’s sale of indulgences, drafted the 95 these to discuss the legitimacy of indulgences with the faculty of the university. He was not aiming at Reformation. In fact, he was being a faithful Catholic and doing the duty of calling out suspected error. In fact, there was

¹⁰Galli and Olsen, 34-35.

¹¹Woodbridge and James, 110.

¹²Woodbridge and James, 111.

¹³Woodbridge and James, 112.

¹⁴Woodbridge and James, 112.

nothing in the 95 theses that contradicted traditional Roman Catholic doctrine.¹⁵ He walked to the All Saints' chapel, placed the nail through the paper, and hammered it to the door.

IV. Unforeseen Consequences (1517)

A. Luther in lights. Luther's 95 theses spread abroad quickly and were soon in the Vatican being read by Pope Leo X. Even though the theses were clearly intended to generate discussion not division, the Pope saw them as a threat to his authority.

Leo X found out about the stir that Luther was causing as a result of his teaching, debates, and disputations. Leo thought Luther was only a "drunken monk" who would soon sober up. However, after three months had passed and Luther's zeal had not abated, he sent one of his most trusted officials, Prierias, to investigate. Prierias wrote a dialogue against Luther, thinking this would extinguish his enthusiasm. Well, Leo and Prierias didn't know who they were getting involved with... Luther wrote back to Prierias with an unexpected tenacity.¹⁶

B. Heidelberg Disputation (1518). Luther was invited to elaborate upon his views in 1518 where he clarified his position and sharpened it by focusing upon his deepest convictions: "original sin, free will, law-gospel distinction, and grace."¹⁷

At this point already, many who heard Luther at this disputation "decided they could not coexist with Luther. His old friend Jodocus Truttvetter placed a *Theta* (Greek abbreviation for *thanatos*, which means "death") by each thesis."¹⁸

After this, Pope Leo demanded that Luther appear in Rome to recant of his heresies; Leo also ordered Frederick to arrest him. Neither of these things happened. At one point a papal messenger thundered to Luther, "The pope is above the council and also above the Holy Scripture. Recant!"¹⁹

C. Leipzig Disputation (June and July 1519).

1. Invited to debate Johann Von Eck, one of the brightest minds in Europe at the time.
2. Accused of being a follower of Jan Hus:
 - a) The exchange between Luther and Eck was explosive. On July 5 Eck accused Luther of being dangerously close to the "Bohemian heresy" (of Jan Hus). Initially Luther rejected the association, but later reversed himself, declaring, "Among the articles of Jan Hus, I find many that are plainly Christian and evangelical." In the eyes of Duke George of Saxony, this was tantamount to sympathy for the

¹⁵Woodbridge and James, 115.

¹⁶Woodbridge and James, 116.

¹⁷Woodbridge and James, 116.

¹⁸Woodbridge and James, 116.

¹⁹Woodbridge and James, 117.

Devil. In the hearing of all, the duke shouted, "The plague is upon us!"²⁰

3. Officially loses but gains popularity with the people. "The more Luther was provoked, the more defiant he became."²¹

D. Providential Princes. God providentially guided the tumultuous political situation in Europe at the time to benefit Luther and the budding Reformation.

1. Charles V, King of Spain, and Francis I, King of France, were both vying for the throne of the Holy Roman Emperor. Both had much to gain; namely, larger territories, riches, and power from the annexation of new lands and peoples.
 - a) Briefly Frederick the Wise was in the running for the spot of the Holy Roman Emperor. Though he was eventually passed on, the courting of Frederick the Wise by the papacy bought Luther, Frederick's favorite theologian, time as well.
2. Suleiman the Magnificent on the East.

V. A Wild Boar in the Vineyard (1520)

A. Writing in 1520 that amounted to four highly influential books:

1. *On the Papacy of Rome*
 - a) The true church is not necessarily the Roman Catholic Church. According to Luther, the true church is composed of people who listen to the Word of God.²² And the pope is the antichrist.
2. *The Address to the German Nobility*
 - a) Popes, bishops, monks, and priests are not spiritually superior to laity.
 - b) The laypeople have the right to read and interpret the Scripture for themselves.
 - c) Church councils can be called by others than the pope.
3. *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*
 - a) Railed against the practices of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to communion and the mass.
4. *The Freedom of the Christian*
 - a) Luther lays out his understanding of how one is saved. Not by works but through faith alone. The Christian is therefore free from all authority by faith and subject to none; but through love he is subject to all and servant to everyone.

B. Exsurge Domine (June 15, 1520). Luther is given 60 days to recant or he will be excommunicated.

²⁰Woodbridge and James, 118.

²¹Woodbridge and James, 118.

²²Woodbridge and James, 120.

1. The Papal bull was entitled *Exsurge Domine* after the opening sentence of Psalm 74:22, “Rise up, Oh Lord, and judge thy cause. A wild boar has invaded thy vineyard.” The boar, referring to Luther.²³
2. On December 10, 1520, Luther kindled a bonfire in a square in Wittenberg and publicly burned the papal bull of excommunication.

C. Excommunication. Luther was officially excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church on January 3, 1521. The pope in so doing, according to his theology, had cut off Luther from knowing God and having eternal life.

Rome had rendered its verdict and now it was time for the civil authorities—the Holy Roman Emperor—to act. In the case of Jan Hus, that meant killing the heretic. The new Holy Roman Emperor was young at just 21. Frederick was banking on the fact that this young and impressionable emperor might be willing to side with Luther and not with the pope. Therefore, Frederick had been pressing the emperor to allow Luther to appear at the next imperial diet—a formal assembly of all the princes in the Holy Roman Empire.²⁴

The Emperor agreed and gave Luther the promise of safe passage from his home in Wittenberg to Worms...

VI. **Application**

- Luther was tempted to think that we as humans must meet the demands of God’s righteousness in our own strength before he will accept us, do you sympathize with this perspective? Why is it wrong?
- How can we remind ourselves that all our righteousness—that which makes the whole man safe—is found only in Jesus Christ and not in ourselves?
- Know: The word of God is supreme. We trust our own instincts when we think that we must make ourselves righteous instead of trusting what God has provided. In so doing, we push aside the Word of God and put ourselves in its place. Let us value the Word of God as Luther did and allow it to reform our thoughts about God and ourselves.
- Believe: We are made righteous by another—by God alone!
- Let us: rejoice that we are saved! We are forgiven! Hallelujah!

²³Woodbridge and James, 124.

²⁴Woodbridge and James, 124.