

I have selected Martin Luther as the important person relating to the history of Christianity in the Church, because one cannot speak of the Reformation without speaking of Luther. Although it was evident since the Middle Ages, that change was on the horizon, Martin Luther was the catalyst for the change in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, and ultimately in the history of Christianity. I will address the man, his doctrines and teachings and the impact that his actions, deliberately, or inadvertently had on the Catholic Church, its believers, and the ensuing impact on Europe and the New World, the Americas by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, although there has been some disagreement as to the year of his birth. He was born in a town called Eisenbach, which is in present Germany, at that time, in Prussia-Saxony. Martin was the eldest son of his parents, and one of eight children. By the time he was a year old, the family had moved to a small mining town called Mansfield, where his father was in the mining business. Much of Martin's early years were spent in Mansfield, between the ages of seven and fourteen, were spent in Mansfield, and he was schooled in the towns of Eisenbach and Magdeburg respectively.

While at Magdeburg, he was placed with the Nullbruder Brethren of the Common Life, who were not an official monastic order but who nonetheless had gathered together in a monastic-style community..."¹ "Martin's time at Magdeburg had a profound effect."²

¹ Eric Metaxas, *The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2017), 16.

² Metaxas, *The Man Who Rediscovered God*, 16.

The town of Eisenbach had three monasteries Carthusian, Dominican and Franciscan. Luther attended theSchool and lived with a wealthy family who may have taught and instilled in him the “that God must be at the center of life.”³

Another influence would have been at Erfurt where he was a resident in the Heaven’s Gate bursa or dormitory. There they prayed the book of Psalms, during early morning devotion, through every fifteen days. Luther was therefore familiar with the Psalms.

In 1501, Luther began his university studies at the University of Erfurt. By 1505, Luther was studying for a law degree, while there, he turned to theology and took monastic vows as an Augustinian monk. “He studied jurisprudence at the University of Erfurt, where he later lectured on physics and ethics. In 1505, he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt; two years later was ordained a priest; and in 1508 became professor of Philosophy at the University of Wittenberg.”⁴ Luther originally went to Wittenberg for a year, before returning in 1511, where he spent the rest of his time. Between the years 1510 and 1511, he had taken a pilgrimage to Rome, this was a walking pilgrimage for Luther and he was able to view the buildings in Rome, and the Catholic influences there.

Between the years 1513-17, Luther was a lecturer on the book of Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews, thus laying the exegetical foundation for his rebellion. As an assistant lecturer in the study of the New Testament books, Luther was led to question much of the doctrine of the Catholic Church, and its practices; which seemed to differ from the scriptures. As a result, Luther challenged the pope’s authority, these challenges and criticism became more intense.

On October 31, 1517 Luther nailed his Ninety Five Theses, also known as the Disputation on the Power of Indulgences, to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany. It is said that he posted it

³ Metaxas, *The Man Who Rediscovered God*, 19.

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*. (Musaicum Books, 2018), 5.

on that day because it was the Eve of all Hallows Day, today All Saints Day, and a day when intellectuals met to discuss doctrine. Luther's idea was that on entering the church, it would be seen by many. Luther wanted questions answered, and explanations given, regarding the church and its doctrine, rituals, rites, ceremonies, and the teachings of Jesus. "From the beginning of my Reformation I have asked God to send me neither dreams, nor visions, nor angels, but to give me the right understanding of his Word, and the Holy Scriptures. For as long as I have God's Word, I know that I am walking in His way and that I shall not fall into any error or delusion."⁵ Luther wanted to make no error where his faith was concerned, and along with him a movement developed that needed answers too.

One of Luther's major concerns was the sale of Indulgences to the masses for which, in return they were "guaranteed" salvation, forgiveness, and have a place in the kingdom of God, after being in purgatory. Luther rebuked and admonished the pope, the legate at Augsburg, and representatives of the pope. Luther was adamant that the sale of Indulgences, was a practice of the Church, of which the pope was fully aware but refused to put a stop to it. Luther noted the ignorance of people, who believed that their salvation was safe and secure once they paid for these Indulgences, purgatory was no longer everlasting. Luther saw the selling of Indulgences as a fraud that had been perpetrated upon the masses; and had left people in poverty, people who needed the money most.

He requested that the pope remedy this practice which was wrong, and that the pope had no power to institute this practice. "The pope had no power to remit any guilt, except by declaring and warranting it to have been remitted by God, or at most by remitting cases reserved for himself, in which case, if his power were despised, guilt will certainly remain."⁶ There was

⁵ Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 9.

⁶ Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 9.

no place in the Bible that referenced, indicated, or preached on Indulgences; this was part of a man made institution.

“...the Renaissance style represents a profound shift from the forms and functions of the Middle Ages.”⁷ It retained some vestige, some trace of the Medieval Ages in many ways. It set the stage for Europe to receive and to accept the Reformation and Luther’s differing views with the church. “The mystics and reformers implicitly and explicitly rejected the pope as the chief lord connecting God and the Christian community ...the late medieval papacy did little to merit the awesome responsibility of mediating between heaven and earth.”⁸ “As the Medieval wealth of the papacy grew, its spiritual capital decline.”⁹ As early as the fifteenth century, there was schism in the church, with many councils being formed. Many formed alliances with the monarchs in Europe, in order to continue papal control, while splitting the church funds between themselves and the priests. After the death of Pius 11, Bishop Domenico de Domenichi wrote “laypeople were calling the Church ‘Babylon, the mother of all fornications and abominations of the church! ...the dignity of the Church must be reasserted, her authority revived, morals reformed, the Curia regulated, the course of justice secured, the faith propagated.”¹⁰ Despite this, even from a member of the clergy, little had changed by the time Martin Luther was born; “The world into which Luther was born was the world that had existed unchanged for many centuries. It was a world separated by ...and although the great schism of 1054 had separated Eastern Christianity from Western, the idea that the vast seamless universe of the Holy Catholic Church led by the pope might be challenge and then riven forever was perfectly nonexistent.”¹¹

⁷Warren C. Hollister, *Medieval Europe: a short history* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.,1974), 370.

⁸ Hollister, *Medieval Europe*, 329.

⁹ Hollister, *Medieval Europe*, 329.

¹⁰ Metaxas, *The Man Who Rediscovered God*, 22.

¹¹ Metaxas. *The Man Who Rediscovered God*, 8.

By 1500, “The papacy...had ceased to be an international spiritual power. Fourteen years after Alexander VI’s death, The Protestant Reformation began, and the tremendous popular response to Luther’s rebellion bespeaks the failure of the late medieval popes. Europeans were not prepared to abandon Christianity, but they were willing in large numbers, to desert tarnished Rome.”¹² The papacy had indeed been weakened, and its influence in Europe had ebbed. Therefore, when Luther pinned his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenburg Germany, Germany and the rest of Europe were ready to receive the word from him. In his Ninety Five Theses Martin address certain doctrines, rituals, and practices of the Catholic Church. He outlined reasons for church reform, and why Catholics should examine their relationship with the pope and the rest of the church authority. The schism that resulted was overpowering and decisive crossing the borders of European nations, from Germany to France, Spain, England, and the rest of Europe. Many in the movement were aristocrats, many were peasants, and many were women like Katarina Von Bora, a former nun, who in 1525, became Luther’s wife. Other women who were actively involved with reform were Anna Reinhard Zwingli, the wife of Ulrich Zwingli, the Reformation leader in Switzerland, and Elizabeth Tudor of England.

The movement crossed the Atlantic to the New World, the Americas. By 1620, the Pilgrims had arrived in Pilgrim Rock. Massachusetts, ten years later the Puritans arrived. By the eighteenth century, The First Great Awakening took place in the United States; by the nineteenth century, the Second Great Awakening had taken place. These Awakenings, especially the Second Awakening was led by evangelical Protestant ministers, and many new denominations developed. Keener notes that “Methodists and Holiness emerged in the 1800s, with the

¹² Hollister, *Medieval Europe*, 331.

Pentecostal and the Salvation Army emerging by the 1900s.”¹³ The movement in the United States became more than a religious movement: it became a women’s movement, a social movement, and later its influence on the Civil Rights movement. Luther’s Reformation had its imprint on the United States also.

In 1520, Luther wrote treatises: the *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, Concerning Christian Liberty* and the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. In them, Luther addresses and criticizes the corruption in the Catholic Church and the abuses propagated by the church’s authority; on the other hand, he defends the rights of the individual to spiritual independence. He discusses the clergy and the fact they have no conscience, and feel no obligation to the people. While he denounces Catholic doctrine, theory and practices, Luther promotes his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and that of the supreme authority of the scriptures. He stated “each and all of us are priests.”¹⁴ This denouncement of the papacy appeals to many who see it as a break from Rome and from the church. If the Reformation was to be successful and Protestantism was to spread beyond the borders of Germany, that it is important and necessary for a complete break from the Catholic Church.

In his *Address to the Christian Nobility*, Luther makes a humble appeal to the German nobility to examine the remedies the Council had put forth, regarding their concerns. He reminded them of their oppression and their experiences under papal rule for hundreds of years. Luther indulges the nobility to ensure that the three “Romanists” walls are broken down: 1. The First Wall: That the Temporal Power Has No Jurisdiction over the spirituality. 2. The Second Wall: That No One May Interpret The Scripture But the Pope. 3. The Third Wall: That No One, May Call a Council But the Pope.

¹³Craig C. Keener, *Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 244.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (e-artnow, 2018), 414.

In the treatise, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, Luther “expounded the doctrine of justification by faith and gave a complete presentation of his Theological position.”¹⁵ Salvation is a gift, a gift from God, to those who believe, those who have faith. He mentions Paul’s letter to the Hebrews in which he outlines faith. Luther declares “A Christian man is the most free lord of all and subject to none, a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone.”¹⁶

The *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, is the third and final treatise, “the Captivity marks Luther’s final and irreparable break with the Church of Rome...The Captivity unlike the *Address to the nobility* which was to the nation, was a Theological treatise...affecting the religious life of the individual, whether layman or theologian.”¹⁷ The treatise was published in both Latin and German, the language of the papacy and the language of the German people respectively. In the *Captivity*, Luther examines the seven sacraments as they pertained to his interpretation of the Bible. Inherent in the title are the words *Babylonian* and *captivity*; it is obvious that Luther is making a comparison to the *Babylonian* period. Luther addresses three of the seven sacraments: Baptism, The Lord Supper’s and Absolution (penance). Luther believed the Lord’s Supper is most important, however, the laity had been denied full participation by the Church, the People should have the choice, it should be the will of the people.

In 1520, after the publication of the treatises, Pope Leo X, gave Luther sixty days, in which to appear in Rome, to answer the charges of heresy, which had been brought against him. Luther remained recalcitrant and disobeyed the papal bull to appear in Rome to answer the charges. In 1521, after the sixty days had expired, and Luther had been condemned, outlawed. And officially excommunicated Luther stood before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms,

¹⁵ Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 5.

¹⁶ Martin Luther. *Christian Liberty* (Philadelphia, PA: Lutheran Publication Society, 1903), 6.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, trans. Albert T.W. Steinhäuser (Waterford: Cross Reach Publication, 2017), 9.

Luther was confident and erudite as he eloquently challenged the Church's authority. He again refused to recant his statements.

Attempts by the Church to kidnap Luther failed; with the support of German princes, like Frederick III, of Saxony, he was given safe haven in the Wartburg Castle. "Martin Luther, though excommunicated by the pope and threatened with execution for heresy, was sequestered by his protective friends and hid in the Wartburg Castle for eight months. Dressed as a knight, letting his hair and beard grow long and going by the alias of Junker Jorg (knight George), while suffering from loneliness, constipation, insomnia, and Satanic attacks, he wrote nearly a dozen books and, as if that accomplishment were not enough, translated the entire New Testament into German."¹⁸ In 1522, he completed the translation of the New Testament into German; this translation was published in 1523. In 1534, he published a completed translation of the Bible in German. Luther had returned to Wittenberg in 1522, there he preached his eight *invocavit* sermons, in which Luther instructed the people, how the Church should be reformed. Luther spent the rest of his life at Wittenberg, where he continued as leader of the Reformation movement. His last sermon was preached in February of 1546, the month in which he died. Luther is buried at Wittenberg.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, spoke about the corruption in the Catholic Church for hundreds of years. Although there was a Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church could not penetrate the impact that Luther had already had on the populace, and their thinking of the indignation that the Church had perpetuated for hundreds of years on them. Luther's impact was significant not only for the masses in Europe, but across the Atlantic to the New World, redefining The Church and influencing not only religious movements, but social movements, women's movements and Civil Rights movements. In essence, actions, treatises, and

¹⁸ Gregg R. Allison. *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 26.

opposition to the Church doctrine, inspired a change from one of doctrine to that of a social revolt, where peasants in Europe, recognizing the unfairness of taxes refused to pay and plundered church lands.

Luther inspired preachers in Europe like John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, The Reformation spread across the Atlantic to the New World influencing the First and Second Great Awakenings in the United States, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, a Black preacher so inspired with Martin Luther, changed his name from Michael King, to Martin Luther King. His son's imprint remains with us as the great Civil Right leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Although Luther faced criticism, even after his death, much of it in regards to his changed views and acceptance of the Jews his impact on the history of Christian Church has been memorialized. Without his posting of his Ninety Five Thesis, on that day in 1517, and the three treatises, in 1520, change would not have been so swift and sweeping. Sweeping changes began in Germany, spread across the Atlantic. Luther has left his mark, "Protestantism is not so much a Church as a movement. The deepest differences in Protestantism today are not denominations; they are emphasis that cut across denominations and often combine in the same person: fundamentalists, conservatives, evangelical, mainline, charismatic, and social activist."¹⁹

¹⁹ Huston Smith, *The World's Religion* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 357.

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