

The 500 Year Story of the Protestant Reformation



Luther's 95 Theses are inscribed in Latin on these bronze doors on the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The original doors were destroyed by fire.

On October 31, 1517, a priest and university professor posted an academic document at the Castle Church in Wittenberg, a city in the Holy Roman Empire. Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses Against Indulgences was not the first criticism leveled against the abuses in the Church. Luther's simple call for a debate looms large in retrospect because it formed an initial crucial link in the chain of events we now call the Protestant Reformation.

Originating in Central Europe, the Reformation spread throughout the continent and across the globe. Today, there are more than 800 million Protestants. The 500th anniversary of the Reformation gives us a reason to reflect on the historical, social, and spiritual legacy of Protestantism. As you begin your journey in time through this exhibit, consider the following questions:

What events and circumstances contributed to the adoption of Reformation teachings?

How did the Reformation influence wider social and cultural developments?

How do the ideas of the Reformation influence your faith tradition?



Tombstone of Martin Luther under the pulpit of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

The Call to Reform



Martin Luther

Martin Luther followed a long line of reformers in Christian history. Reformers hoped to recover a better, holier Christian past. Like his predecessors, Luther did not set out to create a new religion. Luther simply wanted to root out beliefs and practices that he thought distracted the Roman Catholic Church from its core values and spiritual mission. Luther nevertheless rode a wave of intellectual, technological, and political change that literally *re-formed* Christianity.



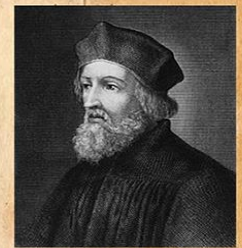
*Pope Gregory VII
(1015-1085)*

Pope Gregory VII introduced significant church reforms during the Middle Ages. He settled a centuries-old dispute by ruling that the papacy, not individual kings, appointed local bishops. Gregory VII also banned simony, the practice of selling church positions and services for money.



*Saint Francis of Assisi
(1181-1226)*

Saint Francis was an Italian friar who believed Jesus called Christians to abandon material concerns and minister to the poor. He founded the Little Friars (or "Franciscans"), whose members took a vow of poverty and served the needy.



*Jan Hus
(1369-1415)*

Jan Hus was a priest and professor of theology in Prague. Hus taught that Christ was the only head of the church and that salvation did not require obedience to the pope. Roman Catholic authorities condemned Hus as a heretic and burned him at the stake.

Luther's World

The political, technological, and intellectual context of the Holy Roman Empire (modern-day, German-speaking central Europe) formed the background of Martin Luther's life and work.

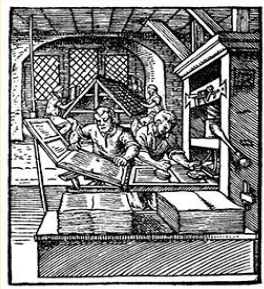


Holy Roman Empire

The Holy Roman Emperor supposedly reigned supreme over the region. In reality, control over local territories fell to a collection of rival princes, dukes, and counts. Luther's criticisms of the church would become a weapon in their competition for power within the empire.



A Revolutionary Invention!



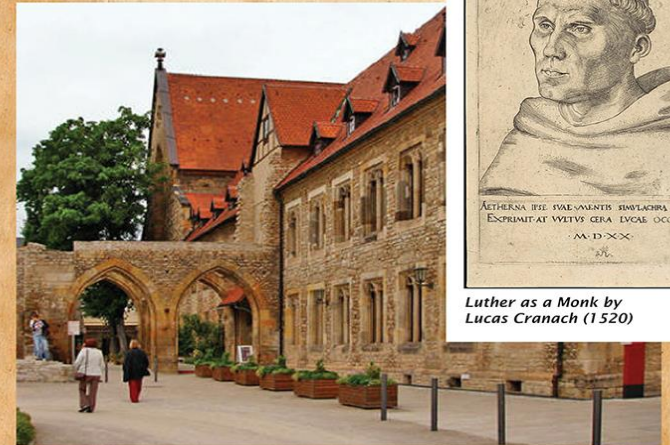
Printing Press in 1568

In the 1450s, the empire gave birth to the printing press. The invention rapidly spread ideas across Europe through books and pamphlets. Previously, most texts had been written in Latin for the educated. Newer texts often used vernacular, or everyday, language, which allowed ordinary people to read them.

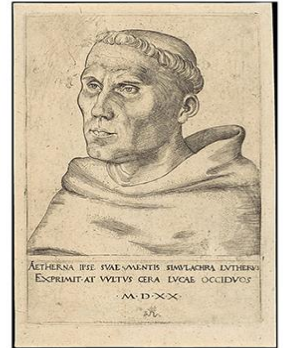
The printing press advanced new intellectual currents. The most important new idea was Christian humanism, which combined the classical virtues of reason and broad-mindedness with the Church's emphasis on love and faith. Christian humanists supported schools and printed new editions of the Bible in the language of the people.

Luther's Early Life

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in the city of Eisleben in the Holy Roman Empire. His father, Hans, a successful mine owner, hoped Luther would become a lawyer. The young boy received a scholastic education in logic and rhetoric. Luther's early education was influenced by humanism, a movement that emphasized a return to classical Greek and Roman texts. Luther began his university studies in 1501. At that point, he showed no sign of diverging from church teachings.



Contemporary picture of the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt, where Martin Luther was ordained a priest in 1507



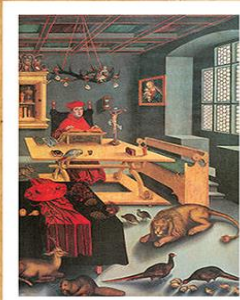
Luther as a Monk by Lucas Cranach (1520)

A harrowing personal experience altered his views and career ambitions. In 1505, Luther found himself stuck in a powerful thunderstorm. The terrified law student vowed to become a monk if he survived. True to his word, Luther joined the Augustinian Order. Two years later he was ordained as a priest. Luther earned a doctorate in theology from the University of Wittenberg in 1512. He became a professor at the university, lecturing on the Bible.

Indulgences

Luther's dissatisfaction with the Church emerged gradually as he observed its spiritual failings. A visit to Rome in 1510 left the young monk scandalized by the materialism and immorality that surrounded the Vatican. Closer to home, Luther saw church leaders engage in simony, the widespread practice of selling church offices and charging the laity for baptisms and funerals.

Meanwhile, the pope raised money throughout Europe for grand churches in Rome by selling indulgences, certificates that reduced the amount of time a deceased Christian spent in purgatory.



Cardinal Albert, Archbishop of Mainz, by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1526

Bishops in Saxony and across the Empire failed to visit their own dioceses, showing serious neglect of the Church's flock. In particular, Luther was infuriated by the appointment of Albert of Brandenburg (1490-1545) who borrowed 21,000 ducats (worth \$550,000 in current dollars) to become archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg in Luther's diocese at age 23.



Letter of Indulgence signed by Johann Tetzel



Johann Tetzel



The abuse of indulgences especially concerned Luther. Johannes Tetzel, a Dominican friar influential in Luther's region of Saxony, taught that "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Luther feared that Tetzel gave ordinary Christians the false idea that they could purchase salvation. In protest, Luther drafted 95 Theses Against Indulgences. Following the custom of the time, he posted the document at the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Printing press operators quickly translated Luther's Latin text into German and spread the controversial document throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

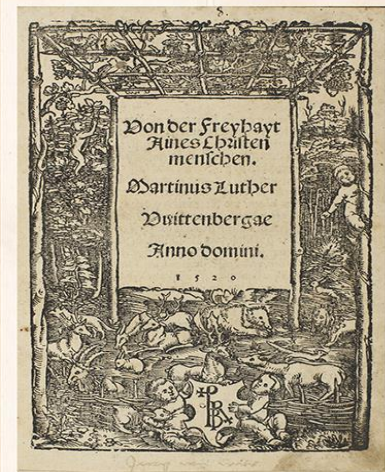
Justification by Faith

"For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"

Romans 1:17, the Bible verse that helped Luther refine his idea of justification by faith.

When Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, he did not plan to break with the Roman Catholic Church. Luther remained devoted priest and friar. But over the next three years he crafted the theological positions that gave birth to Protestant Christianity.

The concept of justification by faith was central to Luther's spiritual and intellectual transformation. The medieval church taught that faith in Christ allowed a person to gain eternal salvation by performing good works. Through his reading of the Bible, Luther developed the principle that faith in Christ was sufficient for the forgiveness of sins and entry into heaven. Luther argued that faith flowed not from human effort but from grace, an unearned gift from God. Good works, he came to believe, followed naturally from knowing one was saved. Luther's evolving views led him to criticize the church hierarchy and the papacy more directly than in the Ninety-Five Theses. Official church teaching, he contended, made it more difficult for Christians to live by faith.



On The Freedom of a Christian by Martin Luther, attacking Pope Leo X as the Anti-Christ, 1520

"...[As] the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works."

(Martin Luther, On the Freedom of a Christian, p. 7)



Our churches, moreover, teach that people cannot be justified in the sight of God by their own merits or works, but that they are freely justified on account of Christ through faith, if they believe that they are received in grace and that their sins are forgiven because of Christ, who by his death paid fully for our sins. Such faith does God impute as justice, cf. Romans 3 and 4.

(Augsburg Confession, Article IV)

Luther's Evolving Theology

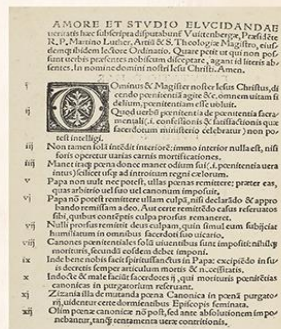
Luther developed and explained his views in a series of sharply worded, widely read, pamphlets.



The Crucifixion by Lucas Cranach, 1538
The influence of Luther is reflected in the presence of the common people and the apparent belief of the Roman soldier on the horse looking up to Jesus.

Sola scriptura held that the Bible provided the highest authority for Christian belief and practice, as opposed to church tradition or papal decisions. Luther wrote that individuals guided by conscience, not church officials, possessed the ultimate authority to interpret scripture. He translated the New Testament into German so that ordinary people could read the word of God.

Luther's emphasis on scripture led him to elevate the importance of two sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church that Jesus explicitly performed in the Bible: Baptism and the Eucharist.



Title page from The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520, where Luther explained his position on the two sacraments.

The **priesthood of all believers** defined everyone in the Christian community as equal before God. In contrast, medieval Christianity distinguished between the clergy and laity. Luther taught that God placed the same value on all vocations.

Breaking with the Church

As Luther's evolving views gained a following his relationship with religious and political authorities crumbled. The Augustinian order removed Luther from its membership in 1518. Two years later, the Vatican published a papal bull (an official church document) that described him as a "wild boar from the forest." The bull condemned Luther as a heretic and demanded he recant.



Luther refused and publicly burned the bull. In response, Pope Leo X excommunicated him on January 3, 1521. In the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther no longer belonged to the body of Christian believers.



Luther Burns the Papal Bull by Karl Aspelin



Martin Luther before the Diet of Worms by Anton von Werner

Then in April 1521, Emperor Charles V summoned Luther to an assembly of imperial officials in the German city of Worms. Despite facing the possibility of execution, Luther refused to disavow his beliefs.

He supposedly responded, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." The emperor then issued the Edit of Worms, which banned Luther from the empire. Luther had lost his monastic order, his church, and his citizenship.

The Spread of Luther's Ideas

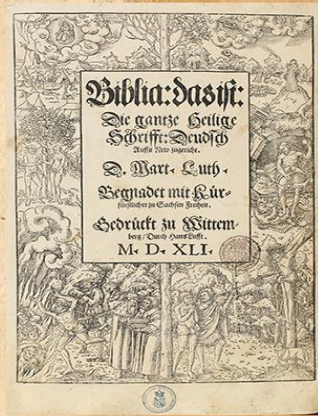
The Edict of Worms placed Luther in grave danger. The emperor offered a reward for his capture. Luther fled Worms with help from a powerful supporter, Elector Frederick of Saxony. He hid Luther in the Wartburg castle, 100 miles southwest of Wittenberg. Disguised as a layman, Luther spent his ten months in hiding writing the first German edition of the New Testament. Published in September 1522, the "September Testament" circulated widely throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

Luther's colleagues and students helped spread his ideas. John Bugenhagen, a fellow professor at the University of Wittenberg, established Lutheran churches in northern Germany and Denmark. Denmark's King Christian III introduced Lutheran teachings in 1528 and it became the official religion of Denmark and Norway in 1536.

As one of the "prince-electors" who chose the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick of Saxony (1463-1525) was Luther's most influential ally. Frederick elevated the intellectual reputation of Upper Saxony. He founded the University of Wittenberg, which Luther made famous as a professor. Luther's theology also legitimized Frederick's power by arguing that political authorities should guide religious reform.



As an artist and politician, Lucas Cranach (1472-1553) nurtured the Reformation in Saxony and beyond. He provided 120 woodcut illustrations for Luther's full German translation of the Bible. Cranach's portraits of Luther helped fashion his changing public identity. In 1520, Cranach portrayed Luther as a pious Augustinian monk, but by 1532 he painted a married Luther in layman's clothes, signifying a new Protestant aesthetic.



Title Page of Luther's New Testament. The Scheide Library



Impact on Ordinary People

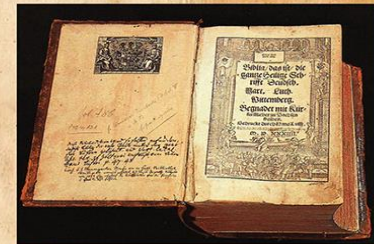
Luther's ideas impacted ordinary people in numerous ways. Protestant churches developed a new style of liturgy (or worship). Whereas the Roman Catholic Church celebrated mass in Latin, Protestants used the German vernacular in their sermons and hymns. For the first time, ordinary people understood what took place during services. Reflecting Luther's concept of sola scriptura, biblical teaching gained a renewed importance during Protestant services. Finally, Protestant pastors blessed the Eucharist during communion while facing the congregation, rather than keeping their backs to the church in the Roman Catholic fashion.

Each of these changes rendered Christian liturgy more accessible to ordinary people and encouraged greater lay participation in worship. For the same reason, Luther stressed the importance of educating the laity—not just men but women and children as well. His German translation of the Bible greatly increased the number of Christians who could study scripture.

The Small Catechism and Large Catechism Luther wrote in 1529 became widely read guides to Christian doctrine for laypeople.



Luther's Hymnal



Luther's Bible



Luther's Catechism

Return to Wittenberg



Lumina caelestem nobis peperere Lutherum,
Nostra diu matris facula videre nihil.
Quem si Pontificum crudelis deprimit error,
Non feret iratus impia terra Deosa.

Image of Martin Luther, 1520



Portrait of Katharina von Bora
by Lucas Cranach, 1528

Against the backdrop of the religious and political tumult he helped create, Luther continued preaching, writing, and lecturing. He returned to Wittenberg in 1522 and taught at the university for the rest of his life. Luther continued to shape Protestant theology and mentor new pastors. He worked closely with secular authorities to ensure that they instituted religious reforms that conformed to what was written in the Bible.

Alongside Luther's theological contributions to Protestantism, his private life also reflected the changing contours of Christian practice. In June 1525, Luther married Katharina von Bora, a former nun. The controversial decision helped establish the precedent for other Protestant clergy to marry. The couple had six children, but only four survived to adulthood. Luther's letters reveal that the deaths of his two daughters left Katharina and him with a deep sadness. Luther also suffered from physical ailments that contributed to his dark moods and occasionally bitter writing. He died at the age of sixty-two on February 18, 1546.

The Peasants' War



Peasants' War

In 1524 ordinary people in several German territories of the empire revolted against local authorities. A series of crop failures, rent and tax increases, and seizures of common land by the nobility spurred the "Peasants' War." Many of the leaders were Protestant, and they drew inspiration from Luther's teachings about individual freedom. Convinced that secular authorities were the only proper custodians of reform, Luther condemned the rebellion. The nobility crushed the revolt within a year, killing more than 75,000 peasants.

Also, in his pamphlet published in 1525, *Against the Thieving Murderous Hordes*, Luther opposed the violence of the rebellion.

"Therefore, whosoever can, should smite, strangle, and stab, secretly or publicly, and should remember that there is nothing more poisonous, pernicious, and devilish than a rebellious man."



Title Page of *Against the Thieving Murderous Hordes*



Title Page of *The Twelve Articles of the Peasants*

Examples from the Twelve Articles of the Peasants

1. The right to choose and depose their own pastors.
2. Release from serfdom, inasmuch as men are free as Christians.
3. Communal ownership of forests so that poor people may gather firewood and have access to lumber.
4. Redress of excessive rents so that peasants may reap a return from their labors.
5. The right in the future to present or withdraw demands in accordance with the Scriptures.

The Reformation & Political Authority

The Reformation raised the spiritual status of ordinary people. Luther's views on political authority shaped the reception of Reformation ideas in the empire. He held that reform should flow through existing political channels. Many political figures embraced Protestantism out of genuine conviction, but others (like Frederick of Saxony) seized on the Reformation as an opportunity to enhance their power and step out from the pope's shadow.



Das Heilig Römisch Reich Mit Sampt Seinen Gliedern, Hans Burgkmair the Elder in 1511. The wood cut symbolizes the Holy Roman Empire through the imperial double-headed eagle. Gathered beneath its wings are fifty-six shields representing different imperial estates. The halo around the eagle's two heads and the crucifix in the middle emphasize the centrality of Christian holiness in the empire's vision of itself.



The signing the Peace of Augsburg

In 1531, a number of princes and imperial cities formed a defensive league to protect Protestant interests. Armed confrontation with the Catholic emperor broke out in 1546. After several years of unrest, the princes and the emperor's representative, his brother Ferdinand, negotiated a settlement.

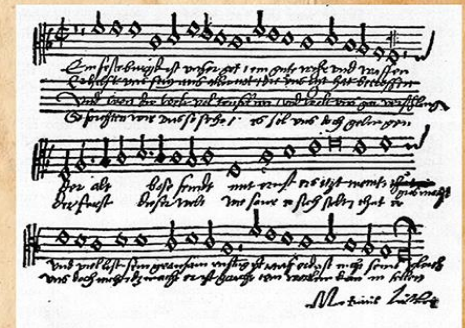
Under the Peace of Augsburg (1555), princes gained the right to choose Catholicism or Lutheranism as the religion of their principalities. For the first time, the empire extended legal protection to Lutherans— but only within Lutheran territories. Even this limited religious diversity had significant consequences for ordinary people. Many Catholic and Lutheran subjects faced a stark choice to adopt the religion of their prince, or emigrate to another territory within the empire.

The Reformation & The Church Today

Luther's theology remains at the center of Christian practice. His catechisms continue to circulate widely. *Justification by faith* serves as an interpretive key to the Bible for many Protestants. The *priesthood of all believers* echoes in today's churches when lay members assume leadership roles. Worship in many Protestant denominations reflects Luther's liturgical innovations. His hymns are still widely sung.



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1532



Luther's Ein Feste Burg

Despite retaining strong links to its Reformation roots, contemporary Protestantism also reflects the many adaptations fashioned by generations of believers across the world. Luther encouraged such adaptation to the needs of ordinary people.



The church door of Wittenberg opened people to discovering how worship had personal meaning to their lives. How will people 500 years from now look at our church doors? Will they find the doors open or closed?

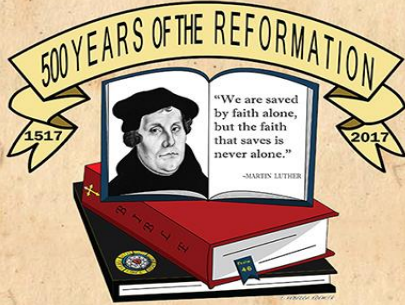


Exhibit Credits

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Thank you to the New Jersey District of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Paul Needham and AnnaLee Pauls at The Scheide Library at Princeton University for their support and assistance with the development of "The 500 Year Story of the Protestant Reformation" Exhibit.

We would appreciate your comments in completing our short survey on the exhibit at: <http://fluidsurveys.com/s/reformation>

Visit us at www.reverendluther.org for more information about Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation and Reformation 500th Anniversary events.

Contact schleifere@njdistrict.org to schedule "The 500 Year Story of the Protestant Reformation" Exhibit.



To order this free traveling exhibit of 15 panels call the NJ District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod at **908 233-8111**. You need to make arrangements to pick up the exhibit at our location in central New Jersey. The exhibit takes less than 30 minutes to setup. Speakers are available for a nominal fee.

Comments or Questions can be emailed to hbitten@reverendluther.org

To participate in our short survey, click on the link below:

<https://fluidsurveys.com/s/reformation>

Visit our website, www.reverendluther.org for educational, historical, and spiritual resources.