

A brief life of Martin Luther (1493-1546)

Luther was born in Eisleben on 10 November 1483 and was baptized the following day. The following year the family moved to Mansfeld where his father was a leaseholder of copper mines and smelters and, consequently was one of four citizen representatives on the local council. Martin was sent for schooling at Magdeburg in 1497 and Eisenach in 1498, his father intending that he become a lawyer. In later life, Luther claimed that he detested this schooling and referred to it as 'purgatory'. He entered the University of Erfurt in 1501, later referring to it as a 'beerhouse' and a 'whorehouse', but he graduated Master of Arts in 1501, entering the law school in the same year. Even at this stage of his life, Luther clearly suffered from spiritual doubt and he attended classes in philosophy and theology in search of some assurance about God, but he found no satisfaction there.

In July 1505, Luther was caught in a thunder storm which so terrified him that he prayed to St Anne to save him, promising to become a monk in return. He entered a closed Augustinian monastery in Erfurt where he resolved to live the ascetic life, indulging in vigils, fasting and the renunciation of all things worldly. He later commented that 'If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I would indeed have been among them.'¹ But none of this activity helped him to gain the assurance that he was justified in God's sight. In this he was a victim of the Church's penitential system which saw individual penance as having effect only for individual sins. Luther was convinced that human beings were corrupt in their very nature and that thus there was no penance that could be done by which they could secure their own redemption. A trip to Rome in 1511 afforded the opportunity to visit numerous shrines and relics in the hope that he might appropriate the merits of the saints (Luther believed that the saints had somehow managed to achieve the life of redemption). Luther grew increasingly uneasy with the so-called sacrament of penance. He quickly came to conclude that he could not achieve satisfaction, but knew that absolution came after confession. Yet he was unsure that confession of all sins was possible, while he felt that he could not be sure either of the genuineness of his contrition. For Luther, the system simply did not work.

Alongside this, Luther's view of God was plunging him to the depths of despair. God is infinite majesty and one who predetermines the fate of human beings, favourably or otherwise. Thus there is nothing human beings can do to make any difference to their fate. This Luther felt was unfair and unjust, and he concluded that he could not love such a God but could only hate him. His confessor, Johan von Staupitz, advised that he should take his doctor's degree, become a preacher and assume the chair of Biblical studies, believing that academic work would take his mind off his morbid introspection. Though aghast at the work involved, this was the advice that would enable Luther to resolve his mental and spiritual angst. He was ordained priest in 1507 and in 1508 he graduated in Biblical Studies, followed a year later with a degree in Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. He

¹ James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1986), p. 53.

became a Doctor of Theology in 1512 and then took up the position of Doctor in Bible at the University.

Luther's first lectures were on the Psalms, given in 1513-15. When he read Psalm 22, he well understood the sense of forsaken-ness. But he knew that Christ had experienced this on the cross, and he began to conclude that the only way that human depravity could be dealt with was for the sinless one to become sin for others. This was not the result of reason, but was about trusting God. Thus Luther discovered that the scriptures were the final authority for the church and the Christian life and that salvation was by faith alone.

In 1516, Johan Tetzel, a Dominican Friar, entered Germany with a view to selling indulgences mainly in order to raise money for the rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther made his protest on 31 October 1517. Legend has it that his 95 Theses on Indulgences were nailed to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenburg, the story first being propounded by Melanchthon. However, there is some doubt about this and some scholars believe that he sent the 95 Theses in a letter to his bishop, Albrecht of Mainz. The Theses do not reveal the mind of someone intent on destabilizing the church, but someone genuinely questioning and searching for the truth. The Theses were translated into German in January 1518 and widely disseminated, becoming one of the first protests to benefit from the invention of the printing press.

Albrecht had much to gain from the selling of indulgences as he received a portion of the profits through which he was able to pay the Pope for his tenure of more than one bishopric. He forwarded the theses to Rome where they were deliberated. Luther was called to the Diet of Augsburg in October 1518 to give an account of his ideas, but there he renounced the papacy as unbiblical. On 3 January 1521, he was formally excommunicated. On 18 April, he found himself at the Diet of Worms, called by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, whose task it now was to ensure that the 95 Theses were banned. Johann Eck laid Luther's books before him and asked him whether they were his and whether he still stood by their content. Luther answered the first question in the affirmative but asked for time to consider the second. He delivered his answer the following day:

Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. [Here I stand. I can do no other.] God help me. Amen.

There is some doubt that he uttered the bracketed words. On 25 May, Charles issued his 'Edict' saying:

For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, where upon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against

the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.

For his safety, Frederick III had Luther kidnapped and placed in Wartburg Castle, Eisenach, which he later referred to as 'my Patmos'. He translated the New Testament into German while there. He also wrote other tracts, condemning the private mass, compulsory confession and stated that every Christian is a confessor. Wittenburg was in disarray as the result of the arrival of radical preachers, known as the Zwickau prophets, and, at the request of the town council, Luther returned there and worked with the authorities in order to restore order. This was the time of the Peasants' War of 1524-25. Some of the Peasants' leaders (which included some nobles) had been convinced that Luther would support them, given his denunciation of the hierarchy in the church. However, Luther wrote his tract *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants* in which he encouraged the brutal repression of the revolutionaries:

Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel ... For baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who, of their own free will, do what the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4 [:32-37]. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others—of Pilate and Herod—should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, want to make the goods of other men common, and keep their own for themselves. Fine Christians they are! I think there is not a devil left in hell; they have all gone into the peasants. Their raving has gone beyond all measure.²

Luther argued that the submission to the legal authorities was biblical, that violence, rebellion and plundering were crimes which the legal authorities should duly punish, and that the peasants had blasphemed by claiming to act under the gospel.

On 14 June 1525, Luther married Katharina von Bora, a former nun, and they had six children together, not all of whom survived into adulthood. From that time Luther found himself designing a church order, which was effectively a compromise between his belief that the church comprised those who possessed personal faith and experience and the need to work territorially. He worked with John the Steadfast, Elector of Saxony, and this, unintentionally, enabled the justification of a church order under the authority of the secular power.

In 1526, Luther composed his German Mass which removed all references to sacrifice and enabled the people to receive both elements of the Eucharist. In 1529 he composed the Large Catechism aimed at pastors and teachers and the

² Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald (eds), *Luther's Works*, 55 vols (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 46, pp. 50-51.

Small Catechism aimed at lay people. He wrote many hymns – the best known in English translation being ‘A mighty stronghold is our God’ – and was involved in the writing of the Augsburg Confession which remains a standard of faith among Lutherans. He was never far from controversy, such as at the Marburg Colloquy of October 1529, where Reformers gathered to discuss the nature of Christ’s presence at the Lord’s Supper. Though disagreement prevailed, it did pave the way for agreement later, though agreement with the Swiss cities proved elusive. His writings on the Jews became increasingly anti-Semitic, with tragic consequences for Europe over the following four centuries.

Luther remained active until his death as the result of a stroke on the morning of 18 February 1546, despite increasing ill health. His ill health tended to make him impatient and bad tempered and this can be seen also in his writings. His final sermon, preached at Eisleben on 15 February, had included an attack on the Jews who, he declared, should be expelled because of their obduracy and usury unless they were willing to convert to Christianity. Luther’s anti-Semitism casts a shadow over his life, work and contribution.

Luther was only slowly drawn towards the need for reformation of the church and consistently sought to prevent the movement from descending into anarchy and sectarianism. His protest was not against the abuses which had arisen in the medieval church, whether economic or moral, but against Catholicism itself as a perverted interpretation of the gospel. In Roland Bainton’s words: ‘The Catholic Church had in his judgment too low an opinion of the majesty and holiness of God and too high an estimate of the worth and potentiality of man. And this was true not of the worst Catholics, but of the best.’³

³ Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), p. 24.