

The 16th Century Reformation and Martin Luther

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INTRODUCTION

Before looking to history we might start by defining some terminology. When referring to the Reformation, it should be understood as something that occurred in the western sector of European Christianity. The eastern sector is called the Orthodox Church or Eastern Orthodox. Greek Orthodox refers only to that subgroup speaking Greek. The word orthodox comes from two Greek words (ορθός = orthos + δόγμα = dogma) meaning *straight doctrine*. For example, an orthodontist straightens teeth. The Eastern Orthodox Church traces its history directly back to Jesus and the twelve Apostles whereas the Western Church grew out of a church plant in the city of Rome. The word catholic originates from Greek (καθολικός = universal) meaning the universal Church of Jesus Christ at large. Differences arose between each sector over many centuries of power struggles and eventually resulted in a split in July 1054. More properly this article refers to the Reformation transpiring in the western sector of Christianity.

There were many factors in medieval Europe which provided rich soil for Martin Luther to plant his seeds of reform without which he might never have been heard. Abuse of various kinds within the Roman Catholic church were evident. John Hus raised questions only a century before and was then executed. Christian humanists were a group of scholars wanting to restore fundamental truths of Christianity, led by Desiderius Erasmus, the most renowned biblical scholar of that time. These scholars were challenging the Catholic church to live up to spiritual ideals which it claimed to observe but did not. Political interference in local matters was immense.

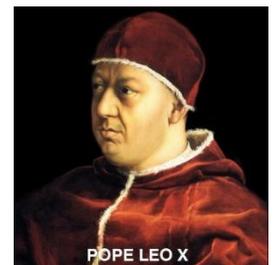
European rulers had been complaining for years because their administrative, legal, and financial matters were hampered by the Catholic church. Holdover feudal customs in Germany permitted a governing lord to protect churches on his estate which allowed him to also appoint officers and manage property. These princes gradually began assuming patronage for themselves to the extent they assumed full control over churches in their districts.

Voices of the poor lamented injustice. Widespread exploitation of class structures was common. Disparities in laws and income were prevalent. Riots were frequent. Abuse of selling indulgences was corrupting the church. Life in general was deteriorating. By the early 1500s demoralization and inequity was poised to erupt.

The first recorded use of indulgences was in the year 1095 when Pope Urban II granted remission of sins to all those who participated in the Crusades to free the Holy Land. Indulgences were also granted to those who were not able to go on the Crusades for health or personal reasons as long as they donated money for the cause. By the time of Martin Luther, payment for indulgences was a well-established system. Luther did not object to purchasing indulgences. He protested the *abuse* of the system by Johann Tetzel who was frivolously selling indulgences to raise money for the rebuilding of Saint Peter's basilica in Rome. Instead of restoration to penitent believers he was complicit in a massive building campaign. Tetzel was corrupting the system. Luther was so angered by this abuse of raising money for the basilica that it became the proverbial "*straw that broke the camel's back.*"

Thesis 82. "*Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love ... for after all, he does release countless souls for the sake of sordid money contributed for the building of a cathedral?*"

Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici was elected Pope on March 9, 1513 as Leo X and ordained as a priest on the 15th and as bishop on the 17th, the last non-priest to be elected Pope. Leo found Saint Peter's basilica in sad disrepair. He came from the prominent Medici banking family of Florence, Italy, and a staunch patron of the arts. Leo wanted to restore the buildings and beautify the interiors. This naturally requires money and a lot of it. Leo borrowed and spent huge sums of money with very little oversight. Raphael the painter lavished the rooms with the most exquisite decorations in oil. The painting of Leo to the right was also painted by Raphael. Leo finished construction of buildings and lesser structures begun under his predecessor Julius II. In the Stanza di Eliodoro, Leo



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is depicted on the white horse he rode in the battle of Ravenna. Many basilica walls resembled an art gallery. Leo also supported the works of many poets and scholars which included Francesco Guicciardini, Jacopo Sannazaro, Baldassare Castiglione, Pietro Bembo, Marco Girolamo Vida, and Giangiorgio Trissino.

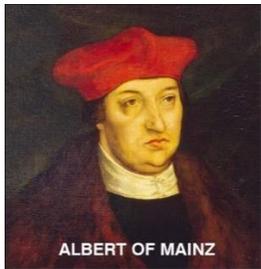


We might better understand the Reformation with a brief review of Catholic history and its many doctrines. During the latter years of the 4th Century, Saint Jerome was translating older manuscripts into Latin. He interpreted the words of Jesus, “*Repent and believe*” in Matthew 3:2 and 4:17 to be “*Do penance, and believe*” known today as the *Paenitentiam Agite* which has become the bedrock tenet of Catholicism. Penance has been defined as the “*voluntary self-punishment inflicted as an outward expression of repentance for having done wrong.*” Penance undergirds Roman Catholicism. During a believer’s confession, the priest would prescribe a work commensurate to the severity of the sin toward remission of that sin. After penance had been accomplished the believer would receive absolution (release from guilt). Works and salvation are both complimentary and necessary partners. Most translations based on Greek manuscripts prefer the word repent from (μετανοέω, James Strong Dictionary G4102, “*change of mind*”).

An indulgence is a distinctive feature of the penitential system which grants full or partial remission of the punishment for sins. They were being sold by Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and preacher who was appointed Inquisitor for Poland and Saxony, later becoming the Grand Commissioner for indulgences in Germany. However, the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church was a very well-established system by the time of Martin Luther. What he actually objected to was not the history of selling indulgences but the abuse of its ecclesiastical purpose by Tetzel. It is a complex issue replete with Catholic practices that eludes most Protestants.

Luther may have simply wanted to generate local discussion about these corruptions among students at the University of Wittenburg. This might explain his nailing Ninety-five theses (arguments) to the Wittenberg castle church door that served as a bulletin board for the student body. The Ninety-Five were more like dispositions but when news spread beyond the university generating misunderstandings, Luther needed to defend his intentions.

He translated his original Ninety-Five from Latin into German, hoping for greater clarity. He also sent a copy with an explanation to Albert of Brandenburg, Elector and Archbishop of Mainz, the head administrator for the sale of indulgences in Germany and Tetzel’s immediate supervisor. Luther assumed the archbishop would be on his side.



In other words, he wasn’t trying to “*poke the bear*” as one might phrase it. He didn’t want to cause serious trouble. However, instead of responding to Luther directly, Albert delegated the responsibility of interpretation to a subordinate because he was not a scholar or theologian. Albert had gained the position of archbishop through money and political connections. Before long the Ninety-Five found their way into the hands of the Pope in Rome. The initial reaction from Leo was sort of a “*ho-hum*” disregard. There was no immediate decision to censure Luther. Papal strategy at this time was not to react too suddenly for fear of inconsistencies but rather delegate to someone of a lesser authority. Cardinal Sylvester Prierias was the first to explicitly brand Luther as a heretic and pretty much told him to “*just shut up,*” which accomplished very little. Leo then sent Cardinal Thomas Cajetan to hold a series of discussions with Luther but these meetings soon descended into shouting matches, primarily over the issue of papal authority. Challenging the pope’s authority changed everything.

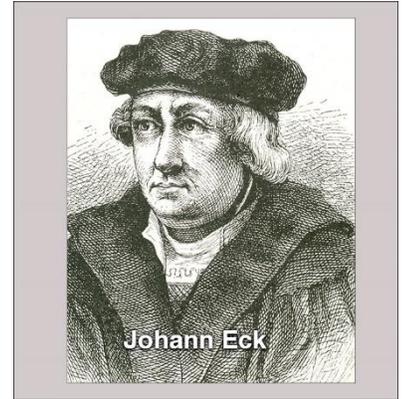
Still viewing Luther as just an annoyance, Leo initiated a stop-gap measure in February 1518 by imposing silence on Augustinian monks of which Luther was a member. On May 24, 1518, Luther sent a full explanation of his arguments to Leo who was then embroiled in more pressing matters and slow to grasp the true enormity of the situation. When reality finally *sunk-in*, he summoned Luther to Rome on August 7. Fearing death, he refused to go.

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Leo then issued the papal proclamation, *Cum Postquam*, on November 9, 1518, which curtailed and ended the more egregious abuses of indulgencies but also firmly reasserted papal authority. Cajetan arranged for another meeting but Luther discovered that he was to be arrested for heresy, so he quietly eluded capture. For the next several months Luther felt compelled to make further declarations concerning the authority of the Bible over the pope. Throughout the next year the verbal skirmishes transitioned into quarreling between the university of Wittenberg defending Luther and the university of Leipzig, a bastion of Catholic conservatism. Johann Maier von Eck of Ingolstadt became Luther's chief opponent, a brilliant theologian and skilled orator. Eck arranges a summit between the faculty members of each university in July of 1519, known as the Leipzig Disputation. He wants to have a real showdown that will ultimately nail Luther to the wall and affectively but an end to his papal challenges. Perhaps then normal life for the Catholic Church could resume. But rule changes for the debate put Luther at an immediate disadvantage. Since he was not the senior faculty member at Wittenberg, he was not allowed to have the preminent chair. Luther had to serve as backup. Eck stacked the deck. Andreas Karlstadt who was a friend of Luther sat in the first chair. Nonetheless, Luther and Eck became the center of attention, casting volley after volley at each other. There were four sessions lasting eighteen days. Discussions covered many pertinent issues but primarily focused on these four: biblical interpretation, abuse of indulgences, free will, and papal authority.



When these adversaries had verbally pummeled each other enough, Eck was able to do something that no one else had done until this point. He brilliantly succeeded in backing Luther into a corner over the primary question of papal authority. Luther was forced to publicly admit for the first time, that the pope can be wrong, church councils can be wrong, and both can be corporately in the wrong if interpretation of the Bible is to be preferred. This put Luther center in the crosshairs of the Roman Catholic Magisterium. Now, there was no retreating into previous safe havens. Official opinions were out in the open. Battle lines were being drawn. Early seeds of Lutheranism were being sown into fields that would soon blossom and yield the harvest of an entirely new Church movement.

Leo then issues papal proclamation, *Exurge Domin*, on June 15, 1520 which demands that Luther respond to each point of contention or face excommunication. After this moment Luther begins to record more and more of his thoughts with pen and paper. Up to now he had not spent much time writing down his beliefs. In his written response to the pope he called him the antichrist six times, and on December 10, 1521, ceremoniously burns the proclamation at the Wittenberg city gate. Leo then issues papal proclamation, *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, on January 3, an ironclad excommunication of Luther. Now he was officially branded as a heretic with a civil trial to follow.

Some might question the need for a trial if Luther had already been excommunicated. Why not prison and then execution? In the medieval world it is the church which does the condemning and then the case is remanded over to a civil government. Not to say that the Catholic Church had never preemptively burned a few at the stake without sanction, but technically the former is expected. He is summoned to appear before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the city of Worms for an imperial congress referred to as a Diet (*Latin: Dieta Imperii*). Europe was a patchwork of about 300 principalities ruled by princes who were responsible to the emperor then Charles V. Periodically they would meet and discuss a wide range of matters. It was not a legislative body in the modern sense but more of a national forum to negotiate and resolve common problems.



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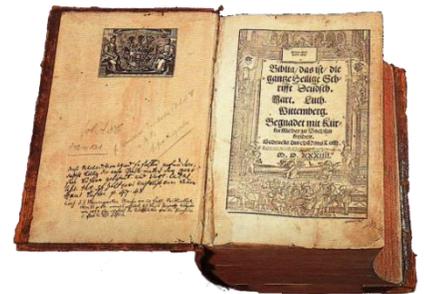
“Safe-Passage” to the court was secured for Luther by Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony who wanted to protect one of his citizens. This was a hot issue because a century before, Czech reformer John Hus was guaranteed safe-passage to the Council of Konstanz to plead his cause for church reform. It did not take long for him to be arrested, imprisoned, and executed. This haste for the Church to rid themselves of an undesirable who had come to the Council in good faith remained a thorn in their side for quite some time. Frederick the Wise wanted to prevent it from happening again. Charles V was in agreement and faithfully promised for Luther’s safety to and from.

Luther made his entrance on April 18, 1521, to once again face Johann Eck, his nemesis at Leipzig who now becomes his prosecutor. Eck places books and pamphlets on a table in front of Luther and requests that he look at them and state clearly whether he is the author. Luther already knows how cunning and effective Eck can be, and that his writings had already been condemned by the Church. Instead of saying yes or no, he asks to think about it overnight and respond the next day. Luther referred to this as the Night of Doubts. He spends time in prayer, reading the Bible, and then asking himself, “*Am I the only one who believes in the authority of Scripture above the opinions of the papacy?*” He returns the next morning to hear Eck question him again of his authorship. Tradition has Luther saying these words: “*Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I cannot and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. ‘Here I stand. I can do no other.’ God help me.*” This bold statement is a sincere appeal to the heart of each person in the room. He was also presenting a direct challenge to Eck. “*Show me where I am wrong!*” Eck would not reply.

Charles V has been judged as one of the more respected of all Holy Roman Emperors. He suspends the meeting. Spends a considerable amount of time in reflection and then on May 21 renders his verdict that Luther is a heretic and to be executed. This immediately satisfies the Church. But students of history might ask, why then wasn’t he executed? Charles is shrewd. He doesn’t want to be accused of breaking his promise of safe-passage as was the former case with Hus years before. So he permits Luther to leave. There is dispute but some contend that Charles was marginally sympathetic to Luther and wanted to prevent the Church from walking away with a sterling victory.

There is another more compelling reason why Luther was not executed. Not far from the city he is kidnapped by several men riding on horseback. He soon realizes that this was privately arranged by Frederick the Wise for reasons still debated. Nonetheless, Frederick had ordered these men to put Luther in hiding but not tell him where they had taken him. Why? Because he correctly anticipated that Charles and the Church would demand that Luther be surrendered. They did just that for months and each time Frederick would truthfully reply, I don’t know.

Luther had been taken to the castle fortress in Wartburg, Germany, and for the next several years he remained in hiding. During this time he did a number of things. He let his hair grow back from the tonsure of his youth and grew a beard. He plans how to create a following of like-minded supporters. Most important of all he strategically translates the Bible into German so that anyone may know the Scriptures thus denying the Church the exclusive privilege of sole interpretation. People may judge for themselves what God means. It was hoped that two things would develop. Scripture would stand in opposition to the authority of the pope, and Luther’s beliefs and witness for Christ would be validated. History exonerated him from reproach and his legacy continues to inspire the faithful. Scripture alone or *Sola Scriptura* became the slogan of the Reformation although misunderstood by many. For the Reformers, it meant that the Bible alone should be held as a higher authority than the Church. It did not mean that the Bible alone should be the only authority for spiritual matters.



Reformers such as Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, and Theodore Beza appealed to other truths gained through logic and reason. Each of these men strove to reform their beloved Church.

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Improve biblical understanding. Challenge believers to love and appreciate the majesty of God. Rejoice in the hope of salvation that ultimately means living with God in heaven for eternity.

Within a few months after Luther had posted his arguments, Tetzl fired back with his own set of arguments including this principal quote. *“Christians should be taught that the Pope, by authority of his jurisdiction, is superior to the entire Catholic Church and its councils, and that they should humbly obey his statutes.”*

The next memorable event was the Augsburg Confession, a document consisting of a twenty-eight articles of faith and reform that was presented to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. It continues to be not only the primary confession of Lutheran faith today but also one of the most important documents of the Reformation for all Protestants. Many of the articles have universal appeal.

What were the circumstances surrounding this imperial Diet by Charles? Martin Luther had been condemned as a heretic. Sentenced to death. What more should be needed? For the past two hundred years, Ottoman Turkish armies had been gradually conquering much of southeastern Europe. The city of Vienna was besieged the previous year. And most important of all, growing tensions between Roman Catholics and Lutheran princes had weakened the military strength of the Holy Roman Empire. Europe was socially fracturing. If the advancing threat of Turkish forces was to be stopped then Charles needed to unify the Empire or there may not be an Empire. Thus it was both political and religious. Was it even possible to get Catholics and Protestants to join forces when they had been quarreling with each other for so long? This would prove to be a formidable endeavor.

Philipp Melancthon headed the team of theologians from Saxony who attended the Diet. Martin Luther was still an outlaw and dare not attend. Of little surprise, Johann Eck headed the opposition. Melancthon was a gifted youth, nearly a savant. He was brilliant with languages and one of the youngest writers of the Reformation. Of special mention is the publishing of *Loci Communes* in 1521. Luther said, *“Next to Holy Scripture, there is no better book.”* Melancthon crafted a document containing twenty-one issues of faith and seven calling for reform which became the foundation of the Augsburg Confession. Weeks of negotiating with Catholics, Protestants, bishops, princes, and two municipal governments resulted in the final draft submitted on June 25, 1530 to Charles and representatives from two imperial cities. Christian Beyer read the Confession loud enough to be heard outside in the street. The original version was published the next year. Melancthon felt obliged to keep improving it because the Confession was becoming a well-accepted mission statement for the broader evangelical movement. The original 1531 version can still be found online when referred to as the *“unaltered”* version.

Let us review some of the more significant of Luther’s Ninety-Five Arguments that would be of interest to all Christians today. Remember that selling indulgences had been authorized by Pope Urban II over five hundred years before the time of Luther. It was the abuse of its purpose by Johann Tetzl that corrupted the system.

1. *Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said Poenitentiam agite, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.*

Luther affirms the *Poenitentiam agite* translation of Matthew 3:2 and supports the underlying principle of the Roman Catholic Church that believers should do penance for sinful acts, but strengthens the matter by advocating that it should also characterize the entire lifestyle of believers. This is not an objection but more properly a disposition. Luther is actually emphasizing the need for a much deeper commitment to holiness and purity. That being true, a sincere life of repentance would have no need for penance.

6. *The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring that it has been remitted by God and by assenting to God's remission; though, to be sure, he may grant remission in cases reserved to his judgment. If his right to grant remission in such cases were despised, the guilt would remain entirely unforgiven.*

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Luther affirms that a pope may indeed remit sins in those cases where judgement is reserved for the pope. This is not a complaint but a recognition that sins can be remitted within a designated realm. Ultimately God is the chief forgiver but if the Canons defer remittance to the pope, then it is his to actuate. However, if a person objects to the pope's authority within his realm then sins within that realm shall remain unforgiven.

Luther is maintaining that God is the ultimate grantor of forgiveness. The pope cannot overstep his boundaries. This is a restriction on papal intervention and would invite swift reaction from those who believe the pope can overstep assumed boundaries.

This is a firm difference of opinion between the pope's interpretation of Canon law and Luther's understand of Scripture. Luther affirms the pope's authority to remit sins within his own boundaries which is immensely different from Protestant belief.



21. *Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgence, a man is freed from every penalty and saved.*

Notice that Luther is not objecting to indulgences, only how they are applied. He sees the abuse in that some preachers were contending that an indulgence will free a person from all penalties without action from God. This is the error. An indulgence is not a rubber stamp to avoid all penalties and assure salvation. Everyone will ultimately give an accounting of themselves before God. What these preachers should be preaching is the original purpose of an indulgence according to Canon law, not their own private interpretations.

26. *The pope does well when he grants remission to souls in purgatory, not by the power of the Keys of the Kingdom which he does not possess, but by way of intercession.*

This disposition comes very close to curtaining the power of the pope but only as the pope might view it. Jesus said the Keys of the Kingdom were granted to Peter (Matthew 16:19) yet the pope was wielding his Keys as something of an occultic appliance. Luther argues that souls in purgatory may be remitted only by means of personal intercession. Take special note of two particulars. First, the doctrine of purgatory is assumed as fact by Luther. Second, he upholds the pope's authority to grant remission to souls in purgatory. So what is the point? The pope is relying solely on his assumed possession of the Keys for his authority. Protestants tend to disagree on the interpretation of Jesus' words in Matthew 16:19.

32. *They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.*

Luther is biblically correct and ecclesiastically sound. Indulgences deserve their purposed realm as defined by the Canons. However, grace is now becoming more evident in Luther's dispositions possibly due to his personal awakening to faith that he discovered in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Salvation is a gift from God alone. Not from a pope who considers himself to possess the authority to issue frivolous dispensations for any reason and at any time. For the benefit of those who are not Catholic, a dispensation is the reserved right of the pope or a priest to allow an individual to be exempted from any statute of Canon law.

36. *Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.*

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Luther is appealing to sincere repentance not a writ on paper. He may have in mind John 5:24, *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life,”* or perhaps Romans 1:17, *“For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”*

Luther is setting the record straight according to his understanding of the Bible. Each believer has the “right” to full remission without the pope or an indulgence. All through the Reformation, Luther had been effectually saying, *“Let us live by the Scriptures and the authority of God.”*

44. *Because love grows by works of love, and man becomes better; but by pardons man does not grow better, only more free from penalty.*

Love is the ultimate inhibitor of sinful practices. Love assures the comfort of peace and harmony between all individuals. It is Christ’s love that inspires us to become better. God is the supreme example of love.

51. *Christians are to be taught that it would be the pope's wish, as it is his duty, to give of his own money to very many of those from whom certain hawkers of pardons cajole money, even though the church of St. Peter might have to be sold.*

54. *Injury is done the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or a longer time is spent on pardons than on this Word.*

62. *The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.*

79. *To say that the cross, emblazoned with the papal arms, which is set up by the preachers of indulgences, is of equal worth with the Cross of Christ, is blasphemy.*

82. *Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love ... for after all, he does release countless souls for the sake of sordid money contributed for the building of a cathedral?*

86. *Why does not the pope, whose wealth is to-day greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?"*

90. *To repress these arguments and scruples of the laity by force alone, and not to resolve them by giving reasons, is to expose the Church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies, and to make Christians unhappy.*

COFFER OF JOHANN TETZEL INTO WHICH PEOPLE TOSSED THEIR COINS



JOHANN TETZEL



TAPESTRIES BY RAPHAEL

