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Martin Luther and His Quest for Truth

During the sixteenth century, the world looked on as the church underwent a major reformation, initiated by Martin Luther. His unwavering quest for truth led him to uncover corruption that had stealthily crept into the Catholic Church. By upholding the Bible when it conflicted with papal authority, Luther hoped to purge the Church of false doctrine such as the pope's letters of indulgence. To understand how Luther viewed the world during his most influential years, it is helpful to study the situations he encountered as an adolescent and young adult.

Born in the early 1480s, Luther entered a world governed by Catholic authority. In his home region of Saxony, his family did not have the freedom to choose between a Catholic or Protestant church; there was only one Christian church in western Europe, the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic leaders held both religious and political power over the people. There was no government separate from the church's authority.

As a young boy, Luther attended various schools where he learned grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Although he later recounted his annoyance of his schooling at Eisenach (the final pre-graduate school he attended as a teenager), these skills proved invaluable for his future study and influential life. Since the Roman Catholic church dominated, these schools were Latin schools. As the language of the church, Latin was used by well-educated men, binding together the European upper class. This too benefited Luther by preparing him for his literary career.

In his early days, Luther's teachers doubled as his religious mentors. He forged a friendship with one of the priests at Eisenach, which perhaps initiated his later journey as a monk. It was here too that his teachers instilled fear of damnation deep into his soul. He realized none of his works could appease God's wrath against him — a sinner (Marty 2-3). He would face punishment after death for the wrongs he had done. In short, the fear of a wrathful and righteous God became real in his mind at a young age.

Youthful Luther, well prepared by his Latin schooling, ventured on to the University at Erfurt. Obeying his father's command, he studied law, continuing to extend his grammar, rhetoric, and logic skills. A large collection of humanists also lived in the town of Erfurt, many working at the university (Hendrix 30). These men read and edited classical works of literature in their original languages: Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. While previous generations favored allegorical translation, these humanists took a literal approach to the translation of these texts. They attempted to stay as close as possible to the original meaning of the texts, rather than imposing a larger storyline into the translation. Considering the impact of the humanist community on Luther, biographer Scott Hendrix wrote, "Luther became well enough acquainted with many classical works to cite or at least mention them in his writings" (22). By reading these classics he quickly learned Greek and Hebrew, in addition to Latin, which prepared him well for the Bible translation he would perform later in life.

To the disappointment of his father, Luther did not continue his studies as a lawyer; instead, he changed course and enrolled in the town's Augustin monastery. This was a very unusual choice as lawyers often derided theologians, calling them donkeys. Later in his Table Talks he reportedly remarked, "There is an eternal quarrel and struggle between lawyers and theologians. Just as law and grace are not compatible with each other, for they are opposed to

each other; so lawyers and theologians are also at odds, for one always wants to be higher than the other" (Cordatus and Lauterbach 1511). This major change in his life was not rooted in a hunger for influence or power. He was deeply convicted in his soul, likely seeking relief from his spiritual distress. What is known for sure is that he vowed to St. Anne that he would become a monk and followed through with his vow, entering the local cloister in 1505.

Over the next six years, Brother Martin sought God, living as a devoted monk and theologian. He performed rituals, chanted the Psalms, and attended the daily Mass. Aware of his sins, he strictly adhered to the practice of penance, where contrite sinners would confess their sins and perform actions to obtain atonement. He frequently performed exhaustive confessions, some of which dragged on for hours, pleading for God's mercy. His confessors began to insist that he was too conscientious; God's judgment would be moderated by his mercy (Hendrix 37). Neither his works nor his colleagues' words brought him assurance that God loved him and would not damn him to hell in an act of wrathful judgment. So, he continued to seek God, hoping that he would eventually reach the truth.

As he dove deep into the scriptures, Luther became an increasingly learned theologian. In 1512, he received his master's degree and was called to Wittenberg, where he was ordained as the director of theological studies. He lectured on the scriptures, leading discussions over the passages taught. In this role he also learned to listen to others' confessions. The confessions he heard troubled him. Hendrix summarized Luther's troubled realization in writing:

> Priests like himself were giving people an easy way out. Instead of taking their sins earnestly, being contrite, and then receiving forgiveness, people were ordered to perform routine rounds of penance (almsgiving, fasting, saying the rosary, [or] making pilgrimage). In some cases, they were allowed to forego penance. It was a mechanical

> system that did not encourage people to change their behavior or give them assurance. (Hendrix 37)

Luther at first assumed he was the one who was not understanding the *holy* system. Thus, he inquired from whence the church leaders derived their authority. The answer he received troubled him.

Pope Leo the Tenth, desperate to fund the construction of St. Peter's Basilica, sought sources of revenue. This led him to charge money for people who would make pilgrimages to Rome to venerate holy relics. In addition to this, he claimed the power that God had (allegedly) given St. Peter to condemn or show mercy to church members, loosing or binding their sin in the sight of God. Thus, Leo claimed, as God's ordained pope, to inherit the power granted to the first pope, St. Peter (Marty 30). Professor Luther considered his reasoning but ultimately found it unsatisfactory.

Over the next years, God's word through the Scriptures became Luther's ultimate source of authority. This did not mean that he immediately discredited church authority. Whenever possible, he submitted to the Catholic system. Only when the Scriptures came in conflict with local authorities did he begin to question if church leaders had departed from fulfilling their roles as commanded.

The foremost example of Luther's frustration came in 1517 in the form of letters of indulgence, which were issued by the pope. Tetzel, a church leader and businessman, sold these letters on behalf of Archbishop Albrecht and the pope. Professor of Church History Eric Gritsch explained, "[indulgences] were meant to relax or commute the penitent sinner's work of satisfaction" (Gritsch 35). The pope's overextension of power through indulgences angered Luther, as shown in his later writing where he reported:

> [Tetzel] wrote and taught that the indulgence of the pope was the reconciliation between God and man. On the other hand, that the indulgence would nevertheless be strong and valid, since man would have neither newness nor sorrow, or would do penance. Yes, if one had impregnated the Virgin Mary, he could forgive him. He could also forgive the sin that one would be willing to commit in the future. (Cordatus and Lauterbach 909)

Thus, Luther recoiled as he saw people led astray by this church propaganda.

To Luther, the church's sale of indulgences was blatantly opposed to the teachings of Jesus Christ. In response, he drafted a letter to the archbishop of his region, Albrecht, humbly reporting the sale of indulgences. In it he explained, "the unhappy souls believe that if they have purchased letters of indulgence they are sure of their salvation" (Luther, "Disputation on Indulgences" 26). People were finding false assurance in the church-issued indulgences, instead of working out their faith with fear and trembling. This was an especially significant issue to Luther, who himself struggled with assurance before God. Appealing to Albrecht, Luther asked him to take his responsibility seriously, guarding the souls committed to his care. Attached to the letter was the *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, which later came to be known as the *Ninety-five Theses*.

Luther distributed the *Ninety-five Theses* "out of love for the truth," to "be discussed at Wittenberg" or responded to "by letter" (Luther, "Disputation on Indulgences" 29). He hoped that upon discussion of indulgences, the Church could be made clean from this detestable practice. In his twenty-first thesis, he stated, "Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved;" and in his thirty-second, "They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon" (Luther,

"Disputation on Indulgences" 32). He believed that the cross of Christ alone brought salvation. Thus, it was the job of the clergy to teach their subjects of the peace given by the cross, not to lead them to eternal damnation through false hope of a ticket to heaven (Hendrix 68). He was not trying to start a revolt. If he were, he could have written the document in the German script. Instead, he wrote in Latin, showing that he aimed to open a discussion among his fellow church officials.

To Luther's dismay, most church leaders who heard his request largely dismissed it, believing that he had gone too far by beginning to question church authority. His *Theses* did not have a great effect on the common man, but they did anger Tetzel, who made a living from selling indulgences. In response, Tetzel drafted 106 theses defending the pope's authority to issue indulgences. Luther countered with *A Sermon on Indulgence and Grace*. Although common people had taken little interest in his disputation on indulgences, this sermon turned the heads of many, increasing his popularity. This popularity also drew many critics who questioned his unorthodox view of the pope. Some, such as Tetzel, went so far as to declare Luther a heretic, stating that he was rebelling against papal authority (Hendrix 64-65). Soon this news spread to the church leaders in Rome (thanks to Albrecht and others), and by October 1518 he no longer retained his leadership role at Wittenberg.

By August 1520, countless pamphlets were dispersed from Wittenberg, thanks to the local printing press. In these short writings, the church heretic explained Christian sacraments according to his biblical worldview. These included writings instructing readers how to meditate on Christ's sufferings, be prepared for death, and even how to pray (Hendrix 81-82). He did not offer a religion of works, but one of faith and love. His audience greatly expanded, as he wrote

many of his pamphlets in German, with his intended audience now shifting to laypeople. Church leaders viewed his writings as threats because they discredited the supreme authority of the pope.

Pope Leo the Tenth sought to stamp out the rebellion by issuing *Exsurge Domine*, which ordered that Luther's schismatic books be burned. Convinced that Luther was a heretic, but unwilling to excommunicate him without a final warning, the Roman Catholic Church invited Luther to come before a committee that met at Worms. Here, at the Diet of Worms, on April 17, 1521, Luther was shown a pile of books, all of which he had authored. He was asked if he maintained the position he put forth in them. By the next day's session, Luther had formed his response and concluded with his famous oration:

> Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen. ("Luther at the Diet of Worms" 112)

His refusal ultimately led the council at Worms to release its edict excommunicating Luther from the church and declaring his followers outlaws.

Throughout his lifelong journey, Luther sought the truth, unwilling to conform to the assumptions of his generation. Helped by his humanist acquaintances in his early years, he gained crucial reading and interpreting skills. With these, he was able to clearly identify errors in the Roman Church, reporting them to his overseers. Despite living excommunicated from the church, he had at last found peace grounded in the Word of God, not in any human institution.

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