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# Martin Luther

1483-1546

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Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic priest who devoutly believed in and practiced his religion. That devotion led to dismay because of the disconnect between the righteous ideals of Christianity and the institutional corruption of his church. When he publicly proclaimed his criticisms, the Catholic clergy reaction ranged from thinking him demonic to thinking him the only correct teacher in the church. 500 years later he is less controversial, and even Catholics respect his contribution to the course of Christian history.

Luther's devotion included prolonged prayer, fasting, depriving himself of sleep and inflicting physical discomfort to subject the body to the spirit, and even abusing himself with a whip to attain mastery over the flesh. His personal zeal resulted in a growing chasm between his self-discipline and the institutional indulgence of sin. It is fitting that the great breach between him and the Roman Catholic hierarchy came over the issue of selling Indulgences to profit the church.

Indulgences were believed to come from an available storehouse of merited blessings earned by the saints, over which the Roman Catholic Church held discretionary authority because of the keys given to St. Peter. The original practice of conferring an Indulgence required acts of devotion or penitence to merit the grant from the Pope. It was later changed to allow for purchase, independent of any penitence or devoted service. By the time Luther confronted the practice it had grown into a wealth-producing market of selling these rights for the living and their dead ancestors, allowing the wealthy to escape accountability for sinful misconduct by purchasing relief.

Luther's revulsion at the sale of Indulgences provoked his written list of 95 charges against the practice. The 95 Theses were made public on Sunday, October 31, 1517. This event, in hindsight, became the milestone from

which the Protestant Reformation is dated. We are now in the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of that event.

Despite the attention given to the 95 Theses, Martin Luther's greatest contribution to the Protestant Reformation was another project: the translation of the Bible into the common German language, making it possible for laymen to learn the content of scripture. The New Testament was published in 1522 and the complete Bible (including the Apocrypha) in 1534. This was the event that made permanent the fracture between Protestants and Roman Catholicism. Once the language of the Bible could be read by the common man, the false traditions, hypocrisy and violation of Jesus' teachings were exposed to view. Those who were most religious were unable to reconcile Catholic conduct with the Biblical canon, and soon the Bible was being translated into the commonly spoken languages of Dutch (1526), French (1530), Polish (1563), Spanish (1569), Czech (1549), and English (1526). Like a stone cut out of the mountain without hands, gathering energy and strength as it rolled forward, Martin Luther set events in motion that forever changed the history of Western Civilization.

Religious societies multiplied as different bodies placed greater emphasis on different facets of the Bible. Unfortunately, the example of persecution learned over a millennium and a half of Roman Catholic intolerance was not abandoned by the different Christian societies. Most of these daughters of Rome opposed, sanctioned and even violently persecuted those holding different religious views from the locally organized majority faith—thus the Protestants followed the unfortunate example of the church in Rome.

The early American colonialists fled to a new continent to escape persecution, but likewise proved to be intolerant of minority religious practices in their new land. By the time of the American Revolution the revolutionary political leaders had centuries of history to draw upon to deal with the question of how to address freedom of religion. The American Constitution, including the First Amendment, is the product of events set in motion by Martin Luther 500 years ago this year.

The influence of Luther's life on the world cannot be overstated. He began a revolution that a half-millennium later still affects the world culturally, politically, religiously and educationally. He was far more than merely a religious figure. He is one of the few people who have literally changed the world.