

Martin Luther

It was October 31, 1517. In Wittenberg, Germany, a Catholic priest nailed his 95 theses to the door of a church. The noise, perhaps, disturbed a few. Its echoes woke the world. The priest was



Martin Luther. His paper was a public announcement – a challenge to scholars to debate what he felt were the unscriptural practices of the Catholic Church. In his day, this was the commonly-employed method to invite debates on vital issues.

Luther was brought to this by six (in our English Bible) words, six life-giving, darkness-chasing, emancipating words: ***“The just shall live by faith.”*** Prior to understanding these words, Luther had exhausted every means of saving himself. He wrote, *“If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, I would have gotten there.”* He fasted for days, prayed fervently, went for many nights without sleep, embarked on pilgrimages, punished himself mercilessly, and confessed his sins over and over again. Here are his words: *“My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him.”* Then he turned to the Word of God: *“Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection*

between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith ... as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’ ... Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul’s became to me a gate to heaven.”

However, this glorious truth of justification by faith alone had become buried under a mountain of corruption, greed, and false teaching. One of the more galling Church practices was the sale of indulgences: for a price, certificates could be purchased that supposedly shortened one’s stay in Purgatory. (“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”) The pope encouraged these sales, planning to use the money to help pay for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Once Luther realized the all-sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross, he “found such practices revolting. The more he studied the Scriptures, the more he saw the need of showing the church how it had strayed from the truth.”

Continuing to preach this truth, Luther was brought to trial. In 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, called for a council to be held at the city of Worms, (pronounced Vorms). When, fearing for his safety, Luther’s friends urged him not to attend, Luther answered, *“I shall enter Worms although as many devils set*

on me as there are tiles on the house tops." Late in the afternoon of April 18, Martin arose before the assembly -- an assembly which held the power of life or death. The atmosphere was electric. Asked if he would recant his beliefs and retract his statements, Luther answered, *"Unless I can be instructed*



and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience ... Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."

When the "trial" concluded, the emperor issued an edict against Luther, denouncing him and calling for the burning of all his works. The authorities honored the promise of safe passage, which allowed Luther to leave and gave him three weeks before he would be arrested. (The power of the German nobles, however, and the popular—and increasing—support of most of Germany, ensured that the imperial edict was not carried out.) When Luther left, Frederick the Wise arranged for him to be abducted and secretly brought to Wartburg castle, near Eisenach, for his protection.

For eleven months Luther remained there, very few being aware of his presence. During the last three months of his stay, he translated into German

the Greek Testament which Erasmus had given the world. Luther's translation remains the outstanding German edition of the New Testament. Had he done nothing else in life, this achievement alone would bring great blessing to millions.

The rest of Luther's life was spent in writing books, preaching the Gospel, and translating the Scriptures. He was also a prolific hymn-writer. He died on February 18, 1546, in his 63rd year. Three hundred years later, Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted: *"Martin Luther the Reformer is one of the most extraordinary persons in history and has left a deeper impression of his presence in the modern world than any other except Columbus."*

Luther was far from perfect and made many mistakes in his Christian life, but his conversion and actions ignited The Reformation. As a result, millions would hear that "the Scriptures alone, by faith alone, through Christ alone" was the only way to be saved and sure of Heaven. That is still the divinely-prescribed means by which a sinner comes from darkness into light.



Luther's tombstone in the Castle Church in Wittenberg.
