



**Thousands of visitors** stand around the statue of Christian reformer Martin Luther during the consecration of the Frauenkirche at the Neumarkt square in Dresden, Germany. The church was almost completely destroyed in World War II due to barbaric Allied bombing. In 1994 it was re-erected and consecrated. For many, Luther embodies the German spirit of reform and advancement.

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SCHOLARS TAKE A NEW LOOK AT THE LIFE OF A RELIGIOUS ICON

# Martin Luther

## *A Lightning Bolt May Have Changed the World—or Not*

BY JOHN TIFFANY

**T**HE PROTESTANT REFORMATION got rolling during the first half of the 16th century when Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German Catholic priest, attempted to reform the Roman Church most notably by declaring that Christians should focus upon faith as a means to salvation. He feared that through selling “indulgences,” the church came perilously close to selling salvation to the rich. Luther believed that the ultimate power of decision as to who would be saved was vested in God, not the church. . . .

**T**he church responded by excommunicating Luther, which only caused him to start up a new church, the Lutheran denomination, and to translate the Bible into the common speech of the German people so they could read it directly. The success of the Lutheran revolution led the Roman church to launch its own “Counterreformation,” much to the relief of those who remained Catholic.

With the Council of Trent, the church doctrine was modified and unified, many of the questionable practices of the church, such as the selling of indulgences, were abolished. The Council of Trent also demanded that all



**Above, a painting of Martin Luther as a young man, studying his Bible and writing one of his many scathing attacks on organized religion. Luther disapproved of the practice of selling “indulgences”—passes to heaven, shall we say—which the Catholic Church at the time offered to those who could afford them. The character of the recipient mattered little.**

Bible texts be taken literally insofar as possible. The intention was to make things as clear as possible to Catholics at a time when the Protestants were already separating into different branches amid much confusion.

Without Luther the genius of Goethe, Schiller, Bach, Kant and Hegel could not have found expression. Without Luther's spirit, there would have been no Bismarck, and the growth of science would have been stunted. Freedom of speech would be almost nonexistent. Thus Luther is a hero today to Protestants, Catholics and secularists alike.

And we owe it all, seemingly, to a lightning bolt. But how much of what we think we know about Luther is actually a myth?

In July 2, 1505, or maybe it was June (authorities differ), law student Martin Luther was returning from his hometown of Mansfeld, Germany, where he had been visiting his parents, on his way to Erfurt, where he studied and had just successfully passed the magistrate exam. According to legend, he encountered a terrible thunderstorm, and suddenly one or more lightning bolts hit nearby.

Some say he was himself struck by lightning and thrown to the ground, but survived. Others claim that a friend who was with him was actually killed by the lightning.

Frightened out of his wits, all versions of the story agree, Luther shouted a hasty vow: "Help! Dear Saint Anna! I want to become a monk!"<sup>1</sup> With this vow he changed course, career-wise, in spite of efforts by his friends and his angry father Hans to influence him to go back to the original plan of becoming a lawyer.

Or is the lightning story just a myth?  
According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*:

Cochlaeus, Luther's opponent, relates that "at one time he was so frightened in a field, at a thunderbolt as is commonly reported, or was in such anguish at the loss of a companion, who was killed in the storm, that in a short time, to the amazement of many persons, he sought admission to the Order of St. Augustine." Mathesius, his first biographer, attributes it to the fatal "stabbing of a friend and a terrible storm with a thunderclap." . . . Seckendorf, who made careful research, following Bavarus (Beyer), a pupil of Luther, goes a step further, calling this unknown friend Alexius, and ascribes his death to a thunderbolt (Seckendorf, *Ausführliche Historie des Lutherthums*, Leipzig, 1714, 51). D'Aubigné changes this Alexius

into Alexis and has him assassinated at Erfurt (D'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation*, New York, s.d., I, 166). Oerger (*Vom jungen Luther*, Erfurt, 1899, 27-41) has proved the existence of this friend, his name of Alexius or Alexis, his death by lightning or assassination, a mere legend, destitute of all historical verification.

In any case, on July 17 Luther entered Erfurt's Augustin-Eremiten Cloister as a novice and after a probation period, became a full lay monk. Two years later, he was promoted to priest. The following year, he became professor of holy literature at Wittenberg.

What he accomplished after that is historical.

He began translating the books of the Bible, and was increasingly upset by what he found out: Scripture seemed to differ considerably from the teachings of the church. And surely Scripture could not be wrong. Therefore, he began to wonder . . .

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Was his beloved Roman Church nothing more than "the devil's instrument to delude" (in the words of *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, by Richard Marius)?<sup>2</sup>

On October 31, 1517, it has been generally believed, Luther nailed his famous "95 Theses" (not all of which were actually theses) to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg with hammer strokes that echoed throughout all of Christendom. This bold act

of rebellion has been portrayed by artists numerous times down through the centuries, and until the 20th century it was accepted as fact. More than anything else, it became a symbol of the Protestant Reformation.

So it was a shocker when, in 1961, Catholic Luther researcher Erwin Iserloh asserted that the nailing of the theses to the door of the church belonged merely to the realm of legends.

Of course, many Luther experts still hold to the belief that he did nail the theses to the church door.

But here is, in summary, Iserloh's evidence: The first written account of the alleged event appeared for the first time only after Luther's death. Luther himself never commented on nailing anything up in 1517. Surely he would have mentioned it if it had happened, one would think.

It is also very interesting that there was no open discussion of the theses in Wittenberg. No original version of the theses with nail marks in it can be found. This could, however, merely mean that no one at the time thought about preserving it. Although it would probably be worth millions

today, they might not have seen it as something that would have future value.

Announcements of upcoming disputes were said to have been regularly hung on the door of the Castle Church. But publicly hanging up the theses without waiting for a reaction from the bishops could have been seen as a clear provocation of his superiors. Luther would not have done that, because at this point, he only wanted to clear up some misunderstandings, as he perceived the situation to be.

One thing is certain: Luther wrote a letter to his superiors on October 31, 1517 in which he denounced the sale of indulgences and asked for repayment and removal of the misunderstandings. With the letter he included 95 “theses,” which were to be a basis for further discussion.

So, did he nail or did he mail?

Today, the majority of Luther researchers see it as fact that Luther did not nail his theses to the door of the Castle Church on that day. But the pictures of Luther nailing the theses to the door of the church still constitute the most common way in which most people visualize Luther and the Reformation. (See lower right illustration.)

### THE INKWELL AND THE DEVIL

Another legend about Luther has him throwing his inkwell at the devil. From his childhood, devils, demons and other evil spirits pestered Luther.

He reported such occurrences during his later life as well. His fears of demonic attack increased especially during his time of seclusion at the Wartburg. Luther ascribed his depressions and mood swings to these evil spirits. This terrible fear of Satan was not unusual for the Middle Ages and was rooted in the religious upbringing within the home and at school.

Luther, we are supposed to believe, defended himself against the devil’s hostility through prayer, cheerful song or, more dramatically, by throwing objects at his hellish enemies. It is said that Luther, awakened by Satan during one night, defended himself by hurling an inkwell at the devil. Luther’s statement that he had “driven the devil away with ink” could, however, be ascribed to his translation of the Bible rather than nocturnal battles involving physical inkwells.

The ink stain on the wall in Luther’s room at the Wartburg can be ruled out as evidence because of reports the stain is recent or has been “touched up.”

### EMPEROR KARL AT LUTHER’S GRAVE

After the defeat of the (mostly Saxon) Protestants in the Battle of Mühlberg during the Schmalkaldic War (1546-47), the imperial army (mostly Spaniards and mer-



**We refer to October 31, 1517** as Reformation day. On this day, in 1521, Luther stood before church and empire at the imperial meeting in Worms (above) and spoke a decisive “no” to the demand that he recant his teachings and writings. If Luther had recanted at this point, it is hard to see how the Reformation of the church could have come about. Luther was under enormous pressure to recant and it was an incredibly intimidating situation he faced when he appeared before Emperor Charles V. These events took place in the bishop’s palace attached to St. Peter’s cathedral in the city of Worms. **Below:** On Halloween, throughout America, knocking sounds will be heard as children will be dressed in costumes parading through neighborhoods looking for treats. A different knocking was supposedly heard 490 years ago on that very day, October 31, as a young monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 “theses” to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. But now scholars question whether he actually nailed them to the door. In any case it makes for a powerfully iconic picture, symbolic of the Protestant Reformation.



cenaries) stood before Wittenberg's city gates, and the elector was forced to sign the city's surrender. In doing so, he abandoned his rights as ruler of the city.

The emperor, Charles V, rode into the city on May 23, 1547 and visited the Castle Church grave of his old adversary Luther.

This occurrence has led to the emergence of numerous legends. One tale states that while the emperor was at Luther's grave, he was urged to belatedly give the heretic's remains to the funeral pyre.

The emperor is supposed to have answered: "He has met his judge. I only wage war with the living and not with the dead."

This makes a nice story, but it cannot be supported by facts. Johannes Bugenhagen, who wrote a detailed report of the emperor's visit, never mentioned anything about such an incident.

Another variant of the legend states that Luther's corpse was removed and reburied in a safe and little-known spot before the approaching imperial army got to town. Clarity was brought to this matter on February 14, 1892. On that day the grave in the Castle Church was opened, and it was determined that this grave is the great reformer's last resting place.

#### LUTHER AND THE TREES

Trees have always, in many religions, been mythological symbols. Druids worshiped them, and the Bible has its "Tree of Knowledge" and "Tree of Life" in Eden. In our own time, there are many legends about trees, like the apple tree under which Sir Isaac Newton sat, which supposedly inspired his theory of gravity.

Similarly, there are many tree legends associated with Luther, a man who enjoyed spending his free time in gardens among trees and flowers.

Everywhere you go in "Luther country," there are oaks, basswoods or beech trees tied to various legends about him. In particular, many stories are told about the "Luther oak" in Wittenberg.

The spot in Wittenberg where the current Luther oak stands is where Luther supposedly burned the papal bull of excommunication and books by his opponents on December 10, 1520.

The original "Luther oak" in Wittenberg was chopped down during the Napoleonic wars because there was a shortage of fuel. It is not known when that tree was actually planted, nor by whom.

The current "Luther oak" was planted in 1830. In 1904

an unknown person tried to cut it down, but it survived. Today the tree suffers from air pollution.

Many other legends about Luther and trees are circulated. One of the best known is the famous saying: "If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today," attributed to Luther. One must bear in mind, however, that the first written "evidence" of this saying dates from 1944.

One related legend goes like this: A Wittenberg student, who was an enthusiastic follower of Luther, was in love with a girl whose grandmother was equally devoted to the old church.

On the day of the book burning, the woman supposedly wandered to that spot with her granddaughter, out of curiosity. There they ran into students who were excitedly talking about what Luther had done. The grandmother was overcome with anger and rammed her walking stick into the ground, while swearing the student would not be allowed to marry her granddaughter until the stick had turned green.

This student secretly pulled out the dead stick and planted an oak sapling on that very spot. The following spring, the student reported this "miracle" to the grandmother. No doubt the boy and girl lived happily ever after, and the sapling became the original "Luther oak." This could even be true. We'd like to think so, but probably it is one of those stories that is "too good to be true."

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#### LUTHER SPLITS WITH THE PAPACY

In 1520 (some sources say it was during the years 1520-21) Luther wrote three great pamphlets: *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom of a Christian Man*—thereby cutting himself off from Rome.

The inquisition against Luther was taken up again in 1520, partly because of these works. On June 15, 1520 came the first papal bull warning of potential excommunication.<sup>3</sup>

Legend has Luther burning the aforementioned bull ("*Exsurge Domine*") along with a book of church law and many other books by his enemies on December 10, 1520 in Wittenberg where the aforementioned "Luther oak" stands today. He is said to have yelled: "Because you, godless book, have grieved or shamed the holiness of the Father, be saddened and consumed by the eternal flames of hell."

This behavior caused a conclusive and irrevocable break with Rome.

The emperor, however, felt forced to be somewhat tol-



**JOHANNES COCHLAEUS**  
Promulgated lightning story.



**CHARLES V**  
Powerful critic of Luther.



**POPE LEO X**  
Target of Luther's complaints.



**KATHARINA VON BORA**  
Married Luther in 1525.

erant of Luther because of the pro-Luther mood in the empire and because of the influence of various princes who were hoping to weaken the pope's political influence through Luther. As a result, the rebel was guaranteed safe escort on his trip to the Imperial Diet of Worms. (Of course, Jan Huss was guaranteed safe conduct, and we all know what happened to him. But Luther, for whatever reason, accepted the arrangement.)

### LUTHER IN WORMS

Luther arrived in Worms as part of a triumphal procession: The emperor and church officials expected him to recant his theses while at the diet.

Luther's books were placed on a table. He was then asked if they were indeed his works and whether he wanted to recant any of the writings. Luther requested time to think over his reply, and the next day he answered with the well-known speech:

"Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason (I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other), my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. "God help me. Amen."

Legend has it that Luther said: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." However, these words were probably only added to make the speech a little more interesting.

Although he was then condemned by the emperor as a heretic, Luther was permitted to leave for home, in accordance with the "safe passage." But near Eisenach, a band of masked horsemen seized Luther and took him to the Castle of Wartburg. Sinister as this development sounds, it was actually ordered by Luther's friend Frederick, the elector of

Saxony, because he feared for Luther's safety but dared not protect him openly. Luther spent 10 months in the castle, using the time to translate the New Testament from Greek into German (incidentally thereby introducing the "High German" language of modern times).

In March 1522 Luther returned to Wittenberg to begin organizing his new church. Perhaps unfortunately, Luther's growing stubbornness resulted in the loss of large regions to rival reform movements, splintering the Protestant movement.

In 1525 he married a former nun, Katharina von Bora (1499-1552), and they developed a happy household with six children of their own as well as several orphaned nephews and nieces, plus student boarders and a number of poor students whom Luther supported. ♦

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Iserloh, Erwin, *The Theses Were Not Posted: Luther Between Reform and Reformation*, Beacon Press, 1968.

Marius, Richard, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

### ENDNOTES:

1 According to tradition, Saint Anne (also Ann or Anna) was the mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus. The name is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew name Hannah. She is the patroness of women in labor and miners, which may be relevant, because Luther's father was a copper miner.

2 *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* is available (softcover, 300+pp) from TBR BOOK CLUB, \$20 (minus 10% for TBR subscribers). Add \$5 S&H per book inside the U.S. Outside the U.S. email TBRca@aol.com for foreign S&H. Send payment to TBR BOOK CLUB, PO Box 15877, Washington, D.C. 20003 or call 1-877-773-9077 toll free to charge to Visa or MasterCard.

3 A final bull of excommunication (*Decet Romanum Pontificem*) followed on January 3, 1521.

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