

2005

# Martin Luther Stands in History as a Leader of the Protestant Reformation

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## Recommended Citation

Kranz, Nickie (2005) "Martin Luther Stands in History as a Leader of the Protestant Reformation," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 5, Article 13.

Available at: <http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol5/iss1/13>

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## **MARTIN LUTHER STANDS IN HISTORY AS A LEADER OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION**

Nickie Kranz (English)

*Mary Susan Johnston, Faculty Mentor (English)*

Martin Luther, often called the father of Protestantism, fundamentally changed the Christian world through his force of will and new ideas. He tried passionately to reform the Catholic Church. His desire was to return Christianity to its roots, putting more focus on the reading of scripture and less focus on Catholic dominance. His personal theology inclined him to write works including *The Sermon on Good Works* and the *95 Theses*. Once these works were distributed, the Roman Emperor placed him under an imperial ban. Martin Luther escaped and hid in a castle to avoid imprisonment and/or death. During his hiding, he began developing a new church, independent from the Catholics. My undergraduate research focuses on the Protestant movement that began with an Augustinian Monk, and quickly spread throughout the Western world.

## MARTIN LUTHER STANDS IN HISTORY AS A LEADER OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Religion is a very important component of one's culture. As a student and as an open-minded Christian, I enjoy studying all types of religions, and the elements that encompass them. My interest in Martin Luther was sparked during a British Literature class discussion that focused on the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation period. The Reformation was very controversial then, and, from a historical viewpoint, it still is today. Luther played a large part in that movement, and I was interested in doing research to uncover what was at the heart of this controversy. My goal with this project was to discover if the myths were true that he had nailed his *95 Theses* to the Castle Church door, and if he had indeed given the orders for the German military to attack and kill German peasants in the Peasant's War.

I began my research in the campus library. I read extensive biographical information on Luther, as well as documented information from historians. The bulk of my research was done while visiting a traveling Martin Luther exhibit sponsored by the Concordia Institute. The exhibit was put together in Germany, and began its tour in Canada in September of 2004. It had destinations in many U.S. cities throughout the winter, and concluded in Africa in April of 2005. I was fortunate enough to be able to travel to Houston, Texas, in December of 2004 to attend the exhibit. It contained replicas of Luther's writings, his death mask, and many paintings depicting his life. Most of the exhibit came from the Luther House in Wittenberg, Germany, where the originals can be seen. This exhibit served as an incredible learning tool because it portrayed Luther in an unbiased light, highlighting both the good and the bad of his character, as well as addressing the controversies surrounding his actions.

In early 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, there was a single religion, Catholicism, whose acknowledged head was the pope in Rome. The Catholic Church was the central institution in the lives of the English people. It was a universal, infallible guide to human existence from cradle to grave and the life to come. The vast system of confession, pardons, absolution, indulgences, sacred relics, and ceremonies gave the male clerical hierarchy immense power over its largely illiterate flock. Several of these key doctrines and practices were challenged by a young man named Martin Luther, who was an Augustinian monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. After intense study of the Bible, Luther felt compelled to "liberate people from false beliefs, false religion, and from Catholic authority" (Hooker 3). What began in November 1517 as an academic dispute grew with amazing speed into a bitter, far-reaching, bloody revolt that forever ruptured the unity of Western Christianity (Treu 17).

Luther's main question, which served as a base for his actions, was this: "How can I be certain of the grace of God?" His answer, which he chose to share with the world, was: "A personal reading of the Scriptures, and the faith of the individual, *not* the religious rituals, can effect a Christian's salvation." (Treu 23). Luther openly charged that the Pope and his hierarchy were the servants of Satan, and that the church had degenerated into a corrupt institute designed only to milk the common people of their money. This was a very strong statement. Along with this candid, controversial remark, Luther published his *95 Theses* on October 31, 1517. This work focused on the abuse of

indulgences that Luther fervently believed needed to come to a halt. He sent this theses to his superior, Cardinal Albert. The Cardinal chose not to get involved, and sent the theses

on to Rome. The Cardinal asked that Luther neither distribute any copies of the theses nor post a public copy until Rome made a public statement, and Luther agreed (Spaeth 29). The myth that Luther nailed the theses to the Castle Church door is speculative and cannot be proven. Though it was common practice to post a literary work on a door to invite responses, research showed that Luther was true to his word, and that his nailing the theses to the door was a myth created after his death. A factor that instigated this myth was that Elector Frederick of Saxony, a good friend of Luther's, said that he had once had a dream that Luther wrote criticisms against Catholicism with a pen on the Castle Church door, and that the feather from that pen was so long that it reached all the way to Rome and pricked the Pope in the ear (Treu 44). The tale of this dream instigated the myth that Luther nailed his theses to the door, against the Cardinal's request.

When Rome received the *95 Theses*, it was considered to be a matter of academic concern, and no more. Rome set up a disputation between Luther and Duke George. The climax of this dispute came when Luther questioned the divine appointment of the papacy (Treu 29). This placed him beyond the bounds of the Roman Church; Luther had admitted his heresy. A papal bull was issued in Rome condemning Luther as a heretic, giving him 60 days to recant, and demanding the burning of his writings. Instead of burning his writings, Luther publicly burned the papal bull, while stating that the church needed no estates and worldly wealth, that religious orders should be dissolved, that pastors should be chosen by their parishes, and that schools needed to be created so that the common people could learn to read and study the Bible themselves. This proved to be his conclusive break from the Roman Church.

According to this time, excommunication from the church was to be followed by an imperial ban, which branded that person as an outlaw. Elector Frederick of Saxony made a plea that Luther have a hearing first, and this request was granted. In April of 1521, Luther was summoned to the Imperial Diet of Worms by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The Diet was made up of a panel of "wise men of integrity who were above suspicion" (Marius 179) who would judge the accused and then pass sentencing. Luther was called upon to recant in front of the Diet, and Luther stated "I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." (Treu 39) His sentence was to be passed after the Diet deliberated, and it was sure to be either imprisonment or death by burning at the stake. During deliberation, Elector Frederick arranged for Luther to be kidnapped. He was hidden in Wartburg Castle. Many believed him to be dead either by murder or by suicide. But on the contrary, he stayed hidden in the castle for one year, writing sermons for pastors. These writings are considered to be his best works. During this time he also translated the New Testament, and made many plans to found schools. He still passionately believed that literacy, along with the ability to read and study the Bible, was vital to an individual's Christian life. When he came out of hiding a year later, he no longer feared for his life because King Henry VIII himself was now pulling away from Catholicism.

Luther chose to remain in Germany, which at this time was divided into territories; each territory having its own prince. Luther, with the support of the German military, began organizing Evangelical churches in the German territories whose princes

supported him. But there was one territory that was completely against the Reformation. This territory was in the Black Forest area, occupied by Thuringian peasants whose leader was Thomas Muntzer. They formed an uprising, which involved burning castles and pillaging. Luther wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Gangs of Peasants* which stated that, because the peasants rose in rebellion, “they deserve punishment of death in body and soul... For when we can establish that someone is a rebellious man, he becomes an outlaw before both God and emperor, and who ever can first kill that person does so legally and well” (Marius 431). The military attacked and killed 5,000 of the 8,000 peasants, and Muntzer was captured and beheaded. Marius writes that, though the nobles did not require Luther to urge them to massacre, for many people, the timing of his diatribe against the peasants made him seem a cause of the slaughter that followed (431-432).

The Peasants’ War is, yet today, considered to be very controversial. Research led to contradicting information. Some research states that Luther did not know of the attack: “Luther can never be considered the cause of this outburst of the oppressed” (Plass 68), and that he was very distraught that it could not have ended peacefully. Yet other research, like the work of Richard Marius, suggests that Luther’s influence in the Peasants’ War has to be taken into account because he wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Gangs of Peasants* at a time when both the public and the military considered him a figure of authority. Leonard Cowie notes that, either way, Luther pulled away from his connections with the military immediately after the Peasants’ War was over, because it resulted in his losing popular public support (101). He made the decision to remain at home and focus only on writing sermons and founding schools. He married a nun named Catherine von Bora, and they had six children. Marriage and family became the center of Luther’s life. This stance overturned a thousand years of Christian tradition that held that a monk’s celibacy was the state of greater perfection.

Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546, at the age of 63. He is buried at the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

According to Richard Hooker, Luther was not a person you would want to have dinner with; he was temperamental, peevish, egomaniacal, and argumentative. But this single-mindedness, this enormous self-confidence and strident belief in the rightness of his arguments, allowed him to stand against opposition even in the face of death. He stands in history as a unique individual whose ideas, by force of will, fundamentally changed the world.

Culture is made up of many components, and religion is one of them. One’s religion states what moral values are held. To study not only the history of your own religion, but also the aspects of other religious beliefs, is vital to understanding your own culture. Knowledge is power, and this type of research is important because it allows you to look at both sides of an issue, and in turn gives you a greater understanding of your own beliefs.

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