

Martin Luther and the Birth of the Protestant Reformation

1. The Making of a Monk

- Background: Born 1483; father Hans was an ambitious copper miner turned mine owner
- Sensitive disposition + stern father → deepened spiritual insecurity and hunger for assurance
- Worldview shaped by vivid supernatural: storms as demonic, dark powers in mountains and lakes
- University of Erfurt (1501): studying law, graduated 2nd in class — promising legal career ahead
- The thunderstorm (July 1505): lightning nearly kills him; vows to Saint Anne, "I will become a monk!"
- A vow to a patron saint was binding — his father had no recourse
- Joins the Augustinian Hermits at Erfurt at age 22; plunges into theology

2. Staupitz, Tetzel, and the 95 Theses

The Spiritual Crisis

- Dominant theology at Erfurt: neo-Pelagianism — do your best and God will not deny grace
- Effect on Luther: endless confession (sometimes 6 hrs), never sure enough — spiritual torment
- Johannes von Staupitz (vicar-general of Augustinians) intervenes:
 - "God is not angry with you, you are angry with God! Do you not know that God commands you to hope?"
 - Turned Luther's eyes from his own record of wrongs to the wounds of Christ
- Luther: "He was my first father in this teaching, and he gave birth to me in Christ"

Career Turning Points

- Staupitz sends Luther to Rome (1511) — cynicism and greed of the holy city disillusioned him
- Staupitz hands Luther his own chair of biblical studies at Wittenberg (1512)
- First breakthrough (1513): Romans 1:17 — "righteousness of God" is not God's punishing righteousness but righteousness he graciously gives

The Indulgence Controversy

- Pope Leo X needed cash for St. Peter's basilica — authorized a plenary indulgence in Germany
- Johann Tetzel (Dominican friar): crude, manipulative salesmanship
 - "As soon as the coin in the money-box rings, the soul from purgatory springs"
 - Promised indulgences washed away any sin — contrary to official theology, which required repentance
- Luther's parishioners crossing into neighboring territory to buy pardons
- October 31, 1517: Luther posts 95 Theses on the Wittenberg castle church door
 - Written in Latin; called for a university disputation
 - Not yet recognizably Protestant — attacked Tetzel's abuses, not indulgences in principle
 - Humanists translated and printed thousands of copies; spread across Germany within weeks
- Three audiences rallied to Luther: humanists, German nationalists, and ordinary Christians longing for reform

3. Scripture Alone and Justification by Faith

The Road to Sola Scriptura

- 1518, Augsburg: Cardinal demands Luther submit to papal authority — Luther refuses; first denies papal infallibility
- June 1519, Debate with Johann Eck: Eck corners Luther into admitting his views resembled Jan Hus
 - Forced Luther to concede that even general councils can err
 - Luther now appeals to canonical Scripture as the sole infallible authority
- Philip Melancthon (arrived Wittenberg 1518, age 21 — Greek prodigy): articulated sola Scriptura
 - Read the church fathers in the light of Scripture, not the reverse
 - Scripture alone possesses infallible authority; creeds and fathers are valuable but subordinate
- Luther on the partnership: "I am rough, rowdy, and stormy... Then along comes Master Philip, gently and softly, sowing and watering"

The Breakthrough on Justification

- Melancthon's Greek showed that justification is a forensic act — a legal declaration, not a process of moral transformation
- Medieval church (via Latin Vulgate): justification = the whole process of being made inwardly holy, accumulating merit
- Luther and Melancthon's conclusion: the believer's acceptance with God is a present reality, not a far-off goal
 - Grounded in the imputation of Christ's righteousness: our sins to him, his righteousness to us
 - Received by faith alone — not mere assent to doctrine, but personal trust in Christ
 - Grace redefined — not a substance infused into the soul, but God's own favor in Christ
- Luther: "I felt that I had been born again, and that I had entered paradise itself through open gates"
- Greatest Reformation hallmark: the clear distinction between **justification** (God's legal declaration) and **sanctification** (Spirit's ongoing transformation)

4. The Break with Rome

- June 15, 1520: Pope Leo issues papal bull — "Rise up, O Lord, a wild boar has invaded your vineyard"
 - 60 days to submit or be excommunicated
 - Notably: the bull did not list justification by faith among Luther's errors — Rome was more concerned with his denial of papal authority
- Crowds tore the bull to pieces at Erfurt; Luther publicly burned it at Wittenberg

Three Reforming Treatises

- Treatise 1 — The Three Walls: called on secular rulers to act where popes had failed
 - Wall 1: clergy are not spiritually superior to laity → priesthood of all believers
 - Wall 2: only the pope can interpret Scripture → rejected (popes self-serving and errant)
 - Wall 3: only the pope can summon a council → rejected by historical precedent
- Treatise 2 — The Sacraments: reduced 7 sacraments to 2 (baptism and communion)
 - Rejected transubstantiation and the mass as a meritorious sacrifice
 - "Communion is not our gift to God but God's gift to us"
 - Erasmus: "The breach is beyond repair"

- Treatise 3 — Christian Freedom: "The Christian is subject to none... yet a perfectly dutiful servant of all"
 - Faith unites the believer to Christ; freedom is used to love the neighbor as Christ has loved us
 - "The Christian must be a sort of Christ to his neighbor"

5. Here I Stand

- Diet of Worms (January 1521): Emperor Charles V grants Luther safe conduct for a hearing
- Friends warned him — Hus had gone to Constance on safe conduct and been burned
- Luther's overnight struggle: not whether his arguments were sound, but — "Am I alone wise?"
- April 17, 1521 — Luther's reply: "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of Scripture or by clear reason... I cannot and will not withdraw anything. Here I stand. God help me. Amen."
- Charles V refused to break his promise — but the diet condemned Luther as a heretic under the ban of the Empire
- Frederick the Wise staged a faked abduction — Luther hidden at Wartburg Castle for 11 months as "Sir George"

The Wartburg Year

- Most creative year of Luther's life
- Translated the entire New Testament into popular German prose — shaped the German language itself
- Melancthon published Loci Communes (1521) — first Lutheran systematic theology

6. The Bondage of the Will

- 1524: Erasmus publishes Diatribe on Free Will — grace begins and completes salvation, but there must be "at least a little room for human freedom"
- 1525: Luther responds with The Bondage of the Will — considered by Luther his most important theological work
- Luther's argument: Either we have freedom to cooperate with grace and have some credit in our salvation, or we do not. There is no middle position.
- Conclusion: we are in bondage to sin; we cannot save ourselves
- Salvation is God's work from first to last — grace alone, with no human contribution of any kind