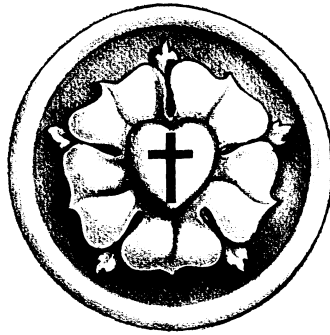


The LIFE
AND FAITH
OF
MARTIN LUTHER



ADOLPH FEHLAUER

Illustrations by
Steven D. MacLeod

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INTRODUCTION

The year is 1517. It is the day before All Saints Day, an important church festival for all devout Catholics. But something besides All Saints Day is on the minds of many people in Wittenberg, Germany. On the streets and in the shops townspeople and students are excitedly discussing something that interests and troubles them very much. As they talk, some of them point to papers they have in their hands. Let us listen in on one of the groups.

“Where did you get that letter of indulgence?”

“From a priest called John Tetzel. He is selling them in Jueterbock. Tetzel says that God will not punish anyone who buys an indulgence letter like this. He will not have to go to purgatory when he dies.”

“You better tell Dr. Luther about that paper and what John Tetzel is doing. I don’t think Dr. Luther will approve of it. And I’m sure that he will not like what you did. Don’t you remember that he preached a very strong sermon against the misuse of indulgences last February? Some students also told me that Luther knows what Tetzel is up to and that he is going to do something about it. Look, there is Luther now.”

They look up and see Luther walking down the steps of the Augustinian Cloister. In one hand he has a large sheet of paper, in the other a hammer. He walks resolutely down the path toward the Market Place. As he passes by the students and other groups of people, he greets them cordially but does not pause to visit with them as is his usual custom. His mind is occupied with what is written on the paper and with what he is about to do. His destination is the Castle Church. After a fifteen minute walk, he reaches the main door on the north side of the building. Without hesitation he holds

the sheet of paper up, and with a few hammer blows nails it to the Castle Church door.

There was really nothing that seemed unusual in what Martin Luther had done. The church door was often used as a bulletin board for notices and news items. Nor did Luther think that what he had written would arouse more than the usual interest. His message was a list of 95 theses, or statements. In them he expressed his opinion about the sale of indulgences and the forgiveness of sins. In the introduction, he invited his fellow professors and others to debate the theses with him.

Little did Luther realize that his actions on October 31, 1517, would mark the beginning of a great reformation of the church and of the return of the pure word of God to the people of the world.



The TIME IN WHICH LUTHER LIVED

Martin Luther lived at a time when many important changes were taking place in the world, especially in Europe. It was also a time of strife and confusion. All this influenced and affected Luther's life and work. Before we begin our study of Luther's life it is important that we become somewhat acquainted with conditions that existed in Luther's homeland, Germany, and with the changes that were taking place at that time.

A Divided Germany

At Luther's time Germany consisted of more than 300 separate territories and estates, some quite large, others very small. There was no central German government, no united Germany. Some of the areas were governed by princes, some by bishops of the Catholic Church, and many smaller parts, consisting of a few acres with a castle, were under the control of knights. All the states and areas in Germany were actually part of the Holy Roman Empire, but the emperor at Luther's time exercised little authority over most of them. In fact, German princes practically ruled their territories as they pleased. If a prince decided not to cooperate with the emperor, there was little the emperor could do about it.

The Authority of the Pope

For many years the most influential ruling organization was not the secular or state government but the Roman Catholic Church. Over a period of years it had become very wealthy and powerful. The individual churches and all the priests, bishops, and common people were under the leadership and control of the pope in Rome. He claimed that he was the vicar of Christ and God's representa-

tive on earth and that he was the supreme ruler in both the church and the state. Not only churches and their priests and bishops were to obey him but he also claimed authority over the political states and their princes and emperors. This resulted in almost constant strife between the pope and the political rulers.

Great pressure was often exerted upon those who did not obey the decrees of the pope and of the Catholic Church. For example, Emperor Henry IV insisted that the territory over which he was ruler belonged to him and not to the church and that he could do with his land as he wished. Pope Gregory VII then put the whole empire of Henry IV under the interdict. That meant that all churches in the empire would be closed and no one could receive the blessings of the church as long as the interdict was in force. This decree of the pope forced Henry IV to come to the castle where the pope was staying and beg him to cancel the interdict. But the pope refused even to see him when he first appeared. It was midwinter, and the emperor was forced to stand in the snow for three days before he was allowed to enter the castle. He then fell on his knees before the pope and asked for forgiveness. The interdict was cancelled, and the emperor was again in the good graces of the pope.

The popes felt that they were supreme in all spiritual matters and that they possessed the keys to heaven. Obedience to the pope was considered necessary for salvation. Anyone who did not obey the pope was excommunicated.

That meant that he could not partake of the sacraments of the church, and his property was taken away from him. Anyone who disagreed with the teachings of the church was branded a heretic and was in grave danger of being put under the ban, cruelly punished, and even put to death. Secret trials were often held where the accused were tortured in order to make them confess that they were in error.

False Teachings of the Church

Since there was no strong central government in Germany, the pope was able to tax the people as he pleased. Many kinds of taxes and fees were collected by the priests and bishops to fill the trea-

sury of the church. The people had to pay for almost everything the church had to offer, even the sacraments. As the church grew greedier, wealthier, and more powerful, it became more and more interested in the things and honors of this world. As a result, it did little to help the people with their spiritual needs. The church had actually lost and forgotten its true purpose. The bishops and priests woefully neglected the teaching and preaching of God's Word. False teachings and practices, even superstition, had taken the place of the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The pope decided what the bishops, priests, and monks were to teach and preach, and the people usually accepted without question what they were told. For example, they were told that Jesus was a stern, angry judge, and not the merciful Savior from sin as we know him from the Bible. People who were troubled about their sins were told to make amends and gain favor with God by doing good works, praying to the saints, and making pilgrimages to shrines that supposedly contained relics and bodies of saints. The people were told to pray to various saints instead of to Jesus. St. Lupus protected against wolves; St. Clarus cured toothaches; St. Agatha prevented earthquakes. The Virgin Mary was the most popular saint. The people called upon her to pray before the throne of God to relieve them from their sins and troubles.

The Catholic Church taught that the traditions of the church, the teachings of the church fathers, and the pronouncements of the pope were supreme, not the Scriptures. A decree of the church in 1223 stated that lay people dare not own a Bible. Only priests could have Latin copies of the Bible. Those who owned translations of the Bible were to give them to their bishop, who was to burn them. The people and priests were told that only the Catholic Church, in particular the pope, could explain the Scriptures correctly. The people believed that by doing what the church asked them to do and by living pious lives they could obtain favor with God and eternal salvation. To escape from the temptations of the wicked world, men and women often entered monasteries and cloisters. There they would spend their time in fasting, praying, studying, and working. In that way they thought they could make themselves acceptable to God.

Corruption in the Church

The most important activity of the priest was to administer the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. The sacraments of the Mass and penance were of special significance. The church taught that by the reading of the Mass the priest was able to change the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It also taught that the sacrifice of Jesus was repeated all over again at every Mass. According to the sacrament of penance, the people were to confess their sins to the priest and to show evidence that they truly were sorry for their sins. They had to prove their sorrow by carrying out certain penalties that were ordered by the priest, such as making pilgrimages, doing some humble services, praying, or paying a certain amount of money to the church. The pardon the priest then issued was called an indulgence. In the minds of the people the indulgence meant payment to God for the forgiveness of their sins and for the time they would otherwise have to spend in purgatory. In Roman Catholic teaching, purgatory is a place of suffering between heaven and hell.

The corruptness of the church could also be seen in the way the priests, bishops and popes lived and carried out their work. The priests often were uneducated. Some were not even able to read the liturgy in the church services. Many became so negligent and lazy that they didn't even bother to hear confessions or to read the Mass. There were exceptions. A few priests were conscientious and led pious lives, but many of them were greedy, lazy, and immoral. They devoted most of their time to collecting money for the treasury of the pope in Rome.

The Troubled Christians

When we realize the greed, worldliness, false teachings, and unscriptural practices of the church, we can understand why the common people and sincere churchmen became very much concerned and troubled. More and more of them began to ask: How long can this continue? But changes were taking place, especially in Germany. There general education was increasing. Universities were being established in many major cities. In Germany alone nine universities were started between 1450 and 1517. Mining and

trades were increasing. New and better means of communication and travel were developing. Living conditions of the common people improved as salaries increased. Princes likewise became wealthier and more powerful. The princes made known their resentment over the fact that the church owned and controlled large estates. They were also greatly disturbed by the heavy taxes the church imposed on them and by its methods of getting money from the people. The common people were becoming disturbed and disgruntled. They had to work hard and pay endless taxes to the church. But they received very few spiritual benefits from the church, while the priests, bishops, and pope lived in luxury. They did not find true spiritual satisfaction by making pilgrimages and attending Latin church services that they could not understand. They wanted help and comfort for their souls and spiritual guidance for their lives, but the church was not giving that to them. Many longed for the return of God's Word. They hoped and prayed for a reformer.

Luther's Forerunners

Several brave and consecrated men attempted to bring about reforms in the church. Two of them were John Wycliffe (1325-1384) in England and John Huss (1369-1415) in Bohemia.

Wycliffe criticized the church for letting the priests neglect their work and live a life of ease and luxury. He tried very hard to get the church to permit the people to read the Bible, but he did not succeed. The church declared Wycliffe a heretic. In spite of great opposition, he succeeded in translating the Bible into the English language. Forty-one years after his death they dug up his remains and burned them as well as copies of all his books.

John Huss believed and taught that the Scriptures are superior to the pronouncements of the pope. He also attacked the church for permitting the negligent and immoral priests to continue as servants of the church. He was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake. As he came to the place where he was to die, he prayed, "Lord Jesus Christ, I will bear patiently and humbly this horrible, shameful, and cruel death for the sake of the gospel and the preaching of the Word."

Wycliffe and Huss failed in their attempts to reform a corrupt church and to restore the gospel. But perhaps their words, works, and examples would help someone else in another time.