

A Disillusioned Monk

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany. Although his father badly wanted Martin to study law, he was instead drawn to philosophy and theology. One night, badly frightened when he was thrown from his horse during a storm, he asked for help from St. Anna, promising that if she saved him, he would become a monk.

He entered a monastery in 1505. Then he traveled to Wittenberg to study at the university and continued his theological studies. He was becoming deeply disillusioned by certain practices of the Catholic Church. In particular, he objected to the sale of indulgences, which were supposed to absolve the buyer of a sin or misdeed. Apart from Luther's feeling that this practice preyed on the poor, he also firmly believed that it was not the Church's part to sell indulgences—forgiveness of sins came from the sinner's faith. No purchase was necessary, especially from a priest; God would forgive the sinner directly.

Ninety-Five Theses

Luther had further disagreements with the Church, and finally, in 1517, he itemized these in his "Ninety-five Theses." (It is popularly believed that he posted the theses on a church door, but there is no proof of this, and it is believed that he had to have been more discreet; it was several years before many of the Church's laypeople learned of his objections.) Eventually, as Luther was moving away from the Church, he was excommunicated.

One of Luther's main beliefs, and one that was emblematic of the Protestant Reformation, was that the common people did not need anyone to intercede with them and God, nor did they need someone to interpret everything for them. He hoped to help his fellow Germans find a direct connection to the Bible and its teachings by translating it from Latin to German. He completed the New Testament in 1522, and with assistance, the Old Testament in 1534. Luther also composed a number of hymns; probably the best known is "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Oddly, or perhaps because of his deep passion for the salvation promised by Jesus, Martin Luther also composed a number of anti-Semitic writings and was apparently responsible for strongly anti-Jewish feelings in Germany at different times. At the same time, he was responsible for the formation of the first Protestant church, the Lutheran Church.

Luther married Katharine von Bora, who had once been a nun, in 1525. Together they had six children.

At a Glance

A German monk, Luther objected to many practices of the Catholic Church. His protests led to the formation of the first protestant church.