Martin Luther Biography

Summary of Martin Luther’s Life

Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 – February 18, 1546) was a German monk who became the father of the Protestant reformation. He is most widely known for criticising aspects of the Roman Catholic Church. In particular he believed that it was the Bible and not the Roman Catholic Church which was the source of legitimacy for interpreting the word of Christ. Martin Luther also translated the bible into German, making it more accessible to the general public.

Short Biography of Martin Luther

Martin Luther became a student at the University of Erfurt in 1501. He studied Aristotle and was drawn to philosophy and theology. However, he was unsatisfied with just reason. Therefore, he decided to become a monk and devote his life to God. As a monk, he felt a spiritual dryness. This was because he became very critical of his own failings and felt his sin magnified rather than weakened. His spiritual director therefore gave him more work so he wouldn’t become so introspected.

In 1517, Martin Luther first protested to the Catholic church about the sale of indulgences. (the full or partial remission of temporal punishment due for sins which have already been forgiven). Martin Luther argued that is was faith alone that could provide the remission of sin and not monetary payments.

The church was slow to respond to the criticism of Martin Luther, and in this period Martin became a prolific writer and his writings were widely distributed throughout Europe.

95 Theses

On 31 October 1517, Luther posted ninety-five theses, criticising practises of the church, on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. He also posted a handwritten copy to the archbishop of Magdeburg, Albert of Mainz. The 95 theses of Martin Luther were critical of many practises relating to baptism and the sale of indulgences for the remittance of sin. He also indirectly challenged the Pope’s legitimacy, #86 included:

Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of Saint Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?” (95 Theses)
Within a few weeks, Martin Luther’s theses had spread throughout Germany becoming widely known.

The significance of this written challenge caused the church to respond. On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X issued a formal rebuttal to Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, a papal encyclical titled *Exsurge Domine* (“Arise, O Lord”)

However, by that time, the criticisms of Martin Luther were widely in circulation; and with the help of the new printing presses, the Reformation movement gained in strength and popularity. The Catholic Church would never maintain the same unchallenged authority in Europe again.

**Excommunication of Martin Luther**

Martin Luther was ex-communicated in 1520 for refusing to recant 41 sentences from his writings. In April 1521, the enforcement of banning Luther’s writings fell to the secular authorities. Luther acknowledged he was the author of the writings but again failed to recant them. Saying he would stand by them. Luther was condemned as an outlaw and thereafter he feared for his life. However, he managed to remain hidden for several months, before returning to Wittenberg to preach more of his anti-clerical speeches and doctrines. In this period he also translated the Bible from Greek to German

Martin Luther also married an ex-nun thereby giving the seal of approval for clerical marriages in the Protestant tradition. With his wife, Katharina von Bora they were to have five children.

From 1531–1546, Martin Luther’s health deteriorated as he sought to struggle with growing conflict in the reformation movement and the constant fear of arrest by the authorities. In this period, Martin Luther spent more time writing anti-Semitic tracts. At first he wished to see the Jewish people converted to Christianity. But, when they seemed uninterested in conversion, he called for the force-able removal of Jews from Germany. This strong anti-Semitic stance has coloured his reputation as a reformer. However, by setting the seeds of the Protestant reformation, Martin Luther had a huge influence on the development of Western Society.