

Luther

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Throughout the history of the church many people have had the opportunity to assist in molding and shaping the things we know today. One such person who arguably bore the most influence in the history of the church is Martin Luther.

Luther was born in 1483 and had always thought he would be a lawyer once he came of age. Through a miraculous experience with a lightning bolt he was converted to the path of Monasticism. In the year 1505 he became an Augustinian Monk. If one were to grade Luther's time at the monastery I think it would be best done by his own words, "if ever a monk got to heaven by his sheer monkery, it was I. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other works."¹ Yet, no matter how hard Luther pushed himself in his acts of service and penance he never found the love that he so rigorously sought after – at least not within God. He did however; find it within Scripture.

It was during his many hours of personal study of the Scriptures that he came upon the truth that had eluded him for so long. It was a revelation that would shape the rest of his life. "Man is saved only by faith in the merit of Christ's sacrifice. The cross alone can remove man's sin and save him from the grasp of the devil."² This was the birth of Luther's famous doctrine of Justification by faith alone. This information brought with it great implications for the Catholic Church. If salvation came through faith alone than there would be no need for Priests, Bishops, the Pope, the sacraments, masses, or prayers to the saints. Basically, the Church of Rome, its practices, and all of its leaders would become insignificant.

This being the case, a lot of people were going to be out of a job and would quickly lose a lifestyle that they had grown quite fond of. After all, being a Bishop had become a very lucrative job. The doctrine of indulgences introduced by the Catholic leaders had progressed into some sort of magic. Salvation had become accessible through an exchange of goods and services. If one were to do a good deed, or especially donate money, than they automatically received their reward - regardless, of the state of

¹ Shelley pp. 238

² Shelley pp. 239

that individual's soul. In other words, the sacrifice of Christ and the sinful state of man were completely taken out of the equation. Sorrow for sin was not a requirement; therefore true repentance could not be attained. Without repentance the salvation of Christ cannot truly be received.

Upon this realization, coupled with an ongoing observation of the dealings of the Catholic Church, Luther prepared 95 propositions for theological debate, which he posted to the Castle Church door at Wittenberg. This was the beginning of many years of pain and trouble for Martin Luther.

Throughout his lifetime Luther was able to make at least four transformational contributions to the Church in regards to how people worshipped and viewed their relationship with God. First and foremost was his doctrine of Justification by faith alone. Next, he tackled the question as to where religious authority comes from. He concluded that it was not found within the institution of the Roman Church but solely in the Word of God. Another of his contributions was his redefinition of the church itself. It was no longer to be seen as a building or a select few who had the power to let you in or through you out. The church was now to be seen as the whole community of Christian believers since we are all called to be Priests before God. Finally, he answered the age-old question of what the essence of Christian living is. He concluded that it was not a ritual of sacrifice and penance, or something that is levied by the Priesthood of man – no, it is serving the one and true living God in whatever capacity He has called you to do it.³ Aside from these four abstract contributions of theology Luther also brought one major concrete addition to the people of faith – the Scriptures themselves. He was instrumental in the translation of Scripture into the tongue of the common man, something the Catholic leaders were adamantly against.

Unfortunately, as many before him, Luther did not finish strong. He declined in his latter years to a man of compromise, with a bitter heart, and a biting tongue. His anti-Semitic beliefs could be compared to that of Hitler's. His words would result in the death of over 100, 000 commoners as he advised the upper class to quench their uprising with merciless violence. He was by no means a "saint" but his contributions to history will echo through all time. He not only single-handedly transformed Christianity, but all of Western civilization as well.

³ Shelley pp. 246