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Martin Luther: King of the Protestant Reformation

Roman Catholicism had been the dominant form of Christianity since the 4th C.E. Before that there was basically just one church in Western Europe known as the Roman Catholic Church now, so to distinguish it from other forms of Christianity for instance, Lutheranism, Methodism, etc. but for the most part, Christianity with a Pope presiding was the most widespread throughout Europe ("Christianity, An Introduction For The Study Of Art History" 2019). The "Protestant Reformation" as it was called was led by a man named Martin Luther, and his actions would end up splitting Christianity into not just two, but into many different denominations that we end up with today (Green 2019). The long-lasting effects of the Reformation caused ripples through all European nations. Its outcome “forced governments to grant more religious freedoms," as well as other eventual concessions that would not have been thought possible with only Roman Catholicism as the sole belief. One could even argue that Luther's reformation was more of a political reformation than a religious one (Green 2019).

During medieval times in Europe, the Catholic Church was the most powerful entity ever. Not only did the church provide social services and feed the poor, but they were also the ones who oversaw one's soul. If you wanted to go to heaven most believed that the only way to ensure salvation was jumping through one of the many hoops of the Roman Catholic Church, they also owned one-third of the entire land in all of Europe; making the church an economic powerhouse as well. It can be seen that the church was by no means a small player in the daily lives of people at the time. Back then the church was at the forefront and center of literally everyone's lives.

In 1483 a man named Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany (Martin Luther and the 95 Theses, 2019). As a student, Luther ended up studying law, and coincidentally enough he didn't care for it at all. As the tale goes, he was walking home one stormy evening and was almost struck by lightning. He then promised to God that if he survived, he would devote his life to the church and become a monk. Shortly after, not dying, he “withdrew from the university” and became a monk ("Martin Luther and the 95 Theses" 2019). “In 1510 Luther was sent to Rome on a diplomatic mission from his monastery”. When he visited, he took great note of the corruption in the Holy City. Prostitution, corruption, and even priests taking “light of their duties” did not slip Luther’s Gaze during his visit (Martin Luther and the 95 Theses, 2019).

Eventually, Luther was sent to the University of Wittenberg where he then interpreted his own doctrine of how Christianity should be. He deduced that salvation could only be granted by faith as his own interpretation of the Bible would seem to affirm this notion. Thing started to heat up “when a friar named Johann Tetzel came to Wittenberg” to sell indulgences. An indulgence was technically a donation to the church, but as a service, the church would then grant pardons for past sins. This is basically a tax under another name, but the dangerous part is that it was a tax on someone's soul. As mentioned before medieval Europe did not mess around when it came to eternal damnation. The price in Germany at the time for an indulgence “was about half a year's wages” ("Luther and the Protestant Reformation: Crash Course World History #218" 2019) and Martin Luther didn't think this was very just as mentioned prior he didn't believe anyone action or combination of actions could save one's soul.

In response to the sale of indulgences, Martin Luther came up with a list of 95 complaints against the church including the sale of indulgences. This became Martin Luther's famous "95 Theses” that he famously nailed to the door of the church on October 31st, 1517 ("Martin Luther" 2019). This eventually led to even more of his “Radical ideas," even going as far as to say that the church didn't even have the power to save someone's soul. This was such a big deal because keep in mind, this has been the norm and what everyone else knew to be true for the previous 1200 years. He then went on to say the church wasn't just imperfect, but the pope and the Church made regular “errors all the time." Eventually, the most damning thing he claimed was that the church and the pope didn’t even have “spiritual powers” to even control, to begin with, “that priesthood was a human invention," and the regular church goer did not even need it to believe in Jesus and be saved (Green 2019).

This shortly went from a grievance against indulgences to a full-on revolution. The reason for Luther’s success was not just the fact that he was calling out the church on their less than satisfactory policies as many others had done so in the past. What made his campaign successful was the advent of the printing press ("Martin Luther" 2019). The printing press allowed for massive amounts of paper and literature to be printed. While at the time not a lot could read and write some still could. Martin Luther used the printing press to create many pamphlets and anti-church propaganda to get his ideas out there to the general public. He eventually created a German version of the Bible translated from Latin so that anyone could read the Bible, not just the priests or bishops. (Green 2019)

This got people thinking, and soon Protestantism was born. Eventually evolving and empowering even the King of England to disregard the Catholic Church. People were simply fed up with the Catholic Church and were willing to be rid of them as long as they could still Seek salvation and ensure they were not all damned to Hell. Eventually, Protestantism was used by Kings to take the church’s power for their own. However, during Martin Luther’s lifetime, he was a single person looking to change corruption, and his action had long-lasting effects that are still with us today.

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