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MARTIN LUTHER: INTERPRETER OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

This article examines in brief the life and achievements of Martin Luther and offers some assessment of his contribution to European Christianity. It presents Luther from the perspective of a gifted individual who attempted to address what he saw as wrongs and abuses in the church of his day.

Martin Luther was born of peasant stock in Eisleben on 10 November, 1483. His father, Hans Luder, moved the family to Mansfeld before Martin was a year old and took a job as a copper miner. He gained enough to start his own copper business and eventually became a town councillor. He was ambitious for his second son, Martin, and wanted him to study law.

Martin received the best foundation in his education at Eisenach where he lodged with relatives. He was influenced there by two inspiring teachers who urged him to go to university. He attended the university at Erfurt (1501) and began legal studies in 1505 after graduating Master of Arts. Martin was obviously thinking deeply about what he would do with his life and was apparently inclined to become a monk. On his way back to university from a holiday at home he was caught in a storm and a lightning bolt struck near him and in his fear he promised he would enter a monastery. He joined the Augustinians in 1505 and was ordained priest in 1507. Martin lived the monastic life to the best of his ability and was devoted to his calling.

In 1510 Luther was one of two monks who made a visit to the Augustinian General in Rome to negotiate on behalf of the Observant Augustinian monasteries in Germany that wanted to govern themselves independently. This visit opened the young Luther's eyes to the worldliness of the church in Rome and he came away quite unimpressed by the laxity of the Roman clergy.

Luther became a Doctor of Theology in 1512 and began teaching at the University of Wittenberg. His reflection on what he was teaching (Psalms and St Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians) gave rise to the theological ideas that formed the basis of his action in seeking church reformation. In particular he became convinced that salvation came to humans through the saving action of Jesus Christ and was a gift from God, not something that could be earned by human effort. As a consequence, he opposed the piety of outward form that so characterised late medieval Christianity and especially the selling of indulgences. This last practice meant that the Pope declared that sinners could be absolved from the temporal punishment[1] due to sin by buying indulgences. In 1517 Luther wrote to the archbishop of Mainz and to the bishop of Brandenburg protesting that the selling of indulgences was a "shameless blasphemy" (Spitz, 1960, vol 34). Luther later admitted that he was unaware at the time that half the money from the sale of indulgences went to the archbishop while the other half went to the pope. He then described how he was ignored.

> Despised, I published the *Theses* and at the same time a German *Sermon on Indulgences*, shortly thereafter also the *Explanations*, in which, to the pope's honour I developed the idea that indulgences should indeed not be condemned, but that good works of love should be preferred to them.

The Theses he refers to were the objections Luther raised to the practice of selling indulgences. His publication of the Theses was widely distributed and they caused considerable public discussion. Popular belief maintains that Luther nailed his Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg but scholars today doubt this since Luther never mentions this posting on the church door in any of his writings. It was Luther's vigorous defence of his Theses that led to his being investigated by the Roman Curia and finally to his excommunication in 1521.

After being condemned by Rome Luther began to realise that church leaders were blind to the abuses to which he was objecting. He had now embarked on a course of action that was motivated by a perceived need for church reform. His opposition was based on his conviction that the pope and hierarchy were not acting in accordance with the spirit of the Gospels.

The 95 Theses dealt with issues like forgiveness of sin, repentance, indulgences, letters of pardon. Luther opposed the selling of indulgences and pardons and insisted that the pope had no power to remit the penalty of sin for the living or for souls in purgatory. He deplored the situation where preachers focused on pardons rather than on the mercy of God as spelt out in the Scriptures. The Theses also contained criticism of the wealth of the

papacy and encouragement for people to focus more on the positive side of Christian behaviour such as doing works of mercy for their fellow human beings and practising the virtues spelt out in the Gospels and New Testament letters.

At a meeting of the Augustinian order at Heidelberg Luther presented a summary of his theological thought, which he called the 'theology of the cross.' He was later accused of heresy, inciting rebellion among the people and disturbing church order by the theologian John Eck. A debate between the two took place in Heidelberg in 1518. Luther won many admirers as a result and later wrote *Resolutions Concerning the 95 Theses* in which he declared the church needed reforming. He later argued that the pope and councils were capable of error. Luther was reported to Rome and then summoned to answer charges of heresy in 1518. Back in Wittenberg Luther worked to bring a scholar to the university to teach Hebrew and Greek so that others could be instructed in the biblical languages. The university engaged Philip Melanchthon, who became Luther's lifelong friend, ally and spiritual heir.

Cardinal Cajetan, general of the Dominicans, was in Augsburg for the Diet[2] and Luther was ordered to appear before him to explain himself but ultimately to recant. This meeting was a turning point in Luther's life since he was in danger of being abandoned by his friends and the Elector, Frederick of Saxony. This was the first time Luther had a chance to discuss his concerns with an outstanding theologian. Cajetan had little effect on Luther who refused to compromise his position. Their discussion came down to the authority of the pope versus the authority of Scripture or a church council. Luther presented his last word to Cajetan in a written document in which he stated:

- a church council was above the pope in matters of doctrine;
- faith was necessary before the sacraments could be effective;
- the Scriptures were finally authoritative in matters of doctrine because human agencies are capable of error.

Luther was urged by Frederick's advisers to appeal to Rome (Pope Leo X). Rome's reply was in the form of a new decree confirming the pope's authority to issue indulgences. Luther left Augsburg a fugitive and threw himself on the protection of the Elector. The prince was convinced by Luther that Cajetan and his Italian aides were not giving him a fair hearing and he chose to protect Luther rather than hand him over to Cajetan to be taken to Rome. Frederick wrote to Cajetan that he was not convinced that Luther was uttering heresy and would not hand him over until Luther was formally 'convicted of heresy.' In July 1519 Luther was drawn into a public debate in Leipzig against John Eck. The outcome was not a decisive victory for either side.

In 1520 a commission in Rome condemned the teachings of Luther and he was obliged by the Bull *Exurge Domine* to recant or face excommunication. Forty-one sentences from Luther's writings were condemned as "heretical, offensive, erroneous, scandalous for pious ears, corrupting for simple minds and contradictory to Catholic teaching."[3] He was given 60 days to recant. Luther responded by burning the Bull in a public demonstration on 10 December 1520. On 3 January 1521 he was excommunicated. He was told he could have a hearing before the Diet of Worms. Here again he refused to retract his statements and was condemned by the Diet in 1521. This meant he was a political outlaw and his teachings were suppressed. He went into exile and friends set him up in the Wartburg, Elector Frederick's castle. Here in hiding he wrote a dozen books and translated the New Testament into German. Luther came out of exile and resumed preaching in 1522.

In 1525 Luther became involved in controversies with Erasmus, the Dutch Catholic thinker who opposed Luther's approach to reform as well as some of his theology, and Thomas Müntzer, a self-proclaimed follower of Luther who advocated rebellion as an instrument of reform in contrast to Luther's non-violent approach. In the same year (1525), at 42 years of age, Luther married Katherine von Bora who had been a Cistercian nun. With a group of other nuns she left her convent in 1524 and joined Luther and his followers. The marriage was a good one characterised by an affectionate relationship. They had six children.

Meanwhile his teachings were influencing the movement of reform and reform groups began to spring up all over Germany. However other reform movements were under way in Switzerland under the influence of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531). Zwingli and his followers differed from Luther in their understanding of the Eucharist. The former maintained that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, symbols of the body and blood of Christ, while Luther insisted on the traditional Catholic teaching that the bread and wine were physically the body and blood of Christ. This issue was debated at a colloquy held in Marburg in 1529. Such a fundamental difference in theology ultimately gave rise to two reformation churches.

It is wrong for modern people to assume that the establishment of a completely separate Lutheran church was inevitable. For most people in the

1520s this would have been a horrifying prospect. It was argued that a church council was the only way to solve the differences between Rome and the reformers. At the Diet of Speyer in 1529 the Catholics attempted to have the terms of the Edict of Worms implemented. Representatives of the reformed states made a formal collective protest against a prior agreement that no enforcement of these terms would take place before a church council had met. These protesters became known as the Protestants, a term that applies to all Christian groups that have their origins in a break-away movement from the Catholic church.

The German Emperor Charles V tried to get Rome to call a council because he wanted to bring about a united Christian front in his campaign against the Muslim Turks. Rome delayed so Charles invited theologians from both sides to a meeting of the Diet of the empire in Augsburg (1530). Luther was still under ban so Philip Melanchthon led the reform group. They presented a summary of their theology and it became clear that they were willing to make compromises whereas the Roman theologians were not. This Augsburg Confession was Melanchthon's finest work and served as the basis for Protestant unity, which was notably lacking in the Marburg Colloquy a year earlier. John Eck wrote his Confutation of the Augsburg confession and Charles insisted that the protestants submit to it. They refused and the German princes who sided with Luther against Rome and the emperor Charles V met in the town of Schmalkalden. In 1531 they agreed to defend their faith with arms if necessary.

The Spread of the Reform Movement

From 1521 onwards supporters of Luther made efforts to put his ideas into practice. They were often led by priests who had become convinced of Luther's demand for reform. The force of their preaching and enthusiasm would win over the ordinary people and in some cases people were intimidated by the reformers. Where local leaders had a difference of opinion about church practices they would often visit Luther or write to him for a decision. In response, Luther wrote a huge number of letters and published works on different theological issues in order to clarify his theology. In this way his influence grew to enormous proportions, but this process remained somewhat informal as Luther never set up a formal governing or decision-making body.

The movement spread more widely and gained strong footholds until a number of German rulers saw that they had large numbers of reformed communities in their regions. They concluded that it would promote good order and unity among their people if they required all their subjects to become Lutherans. The support of these dukes and counts virtually guaranteed the vitality of the reform movement. By 1530 so many towns and cities had opted in favour of the reform movement that it became clear that any attempt to stamp it out would result in a major civil war in Germany.

By this time Luther was an extremely influential public figure and during the 1530s his followers and students treated him as a prophet and source of all wisdom. They copied down what he said at sermons and even his table talk. He was convinced that ordinary folk needed education in the faith and so he wrote his famous *Large Catechism* (*Der Grosse Katechismus*), which was designed for use by families. To establish the reform church Luther undertook the education and training of pastors and left the practical side of church organisation to his younger colleagues such as Melanchthon and Bugenhagen.

In the last two decades of his life Luther endured a number of chronic illnesses. He suffered from insomnia, haemorrhoids, kidney stones (from which he nearly died in 1537) and periods of depression. His activities were less focussed on professional and academic issues and more on pastoral and church matters. His antagonism towards the papacy increased and he wrote against Rome's unwillingness to accept the primacy of Scripture.

Towards the end Luther had become a petulant old man but his faults and failings should not be allowed to obscure the greatness of his mind, the force of his personality and the extraordinary strength and intensity of his religious convictions. After all, it is through these great qualities that Luther was instrumental in changing the development of Christianity, which contributed to a change of course for modern European history.

Luther was consistent throughout his life. He tried to be loyal to Rome but in remaining true to his own religious convictions he was forced to condemn Rome insisting on the authority of Scripture above the authority of the pope. He was never prepared to compromise on matters of faith even if it meant defying pope and emperor.

Factors Influencing Luther

It should be emphasised that the church of the later Middle Ages was filled with contradictions, for example, gross spiritual decadence and corruption in all levels of church life existed side by side with a contradictory spirit of true piety and virtue. It is an oversimplification to focus on abuses within the church and ignore those people and institutions that genuinely tried to live according to Gospel values. The fifteenth century remains a classic time of contradictions.

History reveals that thinking Christians in Western Europe at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries were all too aware that the Christian church was badly in need of reform. This sorry situation may be considered under the following headings:

Church Hierarchy
Rome had established a system of taxes that proved to be very demanding on ordinary folk like peasants, traders and artisans. These taxes (which had penalties like excommunication attached to their non-payment) were financing the wheeling and dealing of the popes, Roman church bureaucracy, the building of St Peter's in Rome, not to mention the scandalous and outrageously extravagant lifestyles of many of the Italian bishops and cardinals. Men bought their way into the rank of cardinal and bishop by paying huge prices. Bribery was rampant and most official activities among the hierarchy had a price tag. The popes at this time not only lost the will to reform the church, they did not have the power or influence to bring about change.

Loss of Papal Power
The Later Middle Ages saw the rise of secular rulers. Centralised governments meant that Roman papal authority became less relevant to people's lives outside the spiritual sphere. Local European kings and princes were now far less ready to submit to the centralised Roman papacy and so the temporal influence of the papacy dwindled.

Critical Scholarship
A new kind of learning, that became known as humanism, began to emerge placing nature and humanity at the centre of intellectual endeavour. The development of the human personality was given prominence and this took over the early Medieval European culture which put God and religious values at the top of the list of human priorities. The humanists were critical scholars who opposed the climate in which clerics controlled the journey of the believer to salvation. The new learning harkened back to the days of the early church when the simple following of the Gospel was uncomplicated by such church trappings as indulgences, relics, prayer formulas with spiritual guarantees, statues, shrines, pilgrimages and so on. The Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536) was influential in promoting critical scholarship and he argued that learning should be freed from the stranglehold of medieval scholasticism. He fostered the study of the New Testament in Greek insisting that this was the only way to arrive at authentic interpretations of the original meaning of the text. Erasmus, along with others, paved the way for a true appreciation of the Scriptures without the adaptations and editorialising that characterised church documents.

Spiritual Life
The criticism coming from men like Luther was directed at purifying the church, not destroying it. Those who followed such men were conscious that the church was being badly led. They did not see themselves in opposition to the church but were loyal sons in search of a new spirituality that would abandon the emphasis given to the external and mechanical religious practices of the medieval church and return to the original spirit of Jesus Christ as expressed in the Scriptures.

The table on page 46 schematises some of the major differences between the religious and cultural climate of the Middle Ages and the time of Luther.

Luther's Spiritual Legacy
1. **Luther's Theocentric Theology**
At the heart of Luther's theology lies his conviction that God is the centre of the universe and all human activity. Medieval theology had emphasised the value of human effort in striving for righteousness and salvation. This attitude led to an emphasis on the performing of good works as a kind of ticket to heaven. Luther saw this approach as a human centred, or anthropocentric theology and perceived it to be selfish. He remained firm in his belief that God's grace and initiative were essential for human salvation. Luther argued that humans must seek God solely for God's own sake, not in the hope of some gain or reward. In this theology Luther criticised scholastic theologians for their emphasis on the performance of good works.

The foundation stone of Luther's theology was his deep experience of God becoming reconciled with humanity through the Gospel of Christ. For Luther this meant that one could live at peace with God not by virtue of one's own righteousness but by the sovereign grace of God reconciling the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This relationship with God meant that humans had a direct, personal and inescapable responsibility to God.

2. **Justification by Faith**
Faith was the key virtue in Luther's theology. The theology of the Reformation rests on Luther's concept of faith. He writes:

> Faith is the 'Yes' of the heart, a conviction on which one wagers one's life, but it does not arise in or from us, it is wholly the gift of God...On what does faith rest? On Christ, born of a woman, made under the law, who died etc. as the children pray. To this confession I say 'Yes!' with the full confidence of my heart...But this faith does not grow by our own powers. On the

contrary, the Holy Spirit is present and writes it on the heart (Luther, *Werke*, 49.9).

Luther's faith was essentially a deep trust in God that comes out of an experience of God in one's life. This faith is much deeper than an intellectual belief in God and the Gospel and is not something that can be gained by human effort. It is a free gift from God and the ability to live the Christian life derives from this position of faith.

This doctrine of Luther, that we are justified by faith alone, was misinterpreted by his opponents who thought he was claiming that salvation could be gained merely by believing in God and not worrying about how many sins one committed. In *Of the Liberty of the Christian Man* Luther made his position clear, namely, that he was not rejecting good works but that he denied that one could be saved by them. He argued strongly that the person of ***genuine*** faith will perform only good works and will live an authentic Christian life according to the principles contained in the Gospels.

Middle Ages	Later Middle Ages
1. Feudalism - society based on birthright and functional duties.	1. Society based on pattern of income and property. Rise of capitalism. Decline of feudal structure and dominance of medieval nobility.
2. Medieval church participated in feudal organisation as a result of struggle between church and state.	2. Accumulated church wealth became a source of scandal.
3. Church accumulated wealth and power. Church and church property were exempt from state taxes.	3. In Later M. Ages the church was divided between (a) capitalism in its higher ranks; (b) the call to renunciation and poverty among priests and monks,
4. Clergy renounced property but gained a higher social standing.	4. Best practices of clergy and laity led to religious reforms. Religious Orders boosted papal authority (Dominicans), asserted Christian ideal of renunciation (Franciscans).
5. Pope and clergy exercised great power over governments and people. Church sovereignty was temporal and spiritual.	5. Countries with centralised governments began to counter the power of pope and clergy. Germany, with smaller territorial governments was still open to influence from charismatic individuals.
6. Hierarchy and monks had virtual monopoly on information.	6. Hierarchy and monks had virtual monopoly on information.
7. Christians lived as though they could earn salvation by following external practices.	7. Christians lived as though they could earn salvation by following external practices.
8. Intellectual climate was under church control.	8. Rise of humanism and new ideas created a looser intellectual climate that was critical of church.

3. Luther's Theology of the Cross

As a result of his reflection and lectures on Romans, Galatians, Hebrews and the Psalms Luther arrived at the deep conviction that humans are incapable of saving themselves by their own efforts. This led to a firm reliance on the grace of God and an acknowledgement that a righteous person is also a sinner who can only hope in the goodness of God. He argued that it would not have been necessary for Christ to die on the cross if humans could gain righteousness on their own.

This theological insight set Luther in opposition to the church practice of selling indulgences and pardons and led to his posting of the 95 Theses. It was the start of his public movement towards reform.

4. **The Priesthood of All Believers**

Luther maintained that God was accessible to all believers and that a priesthood which acted as a middle agent between God and humans was not necessary. He insisted on the priesthood of all believers maintaining that there was no difference between priest and lay person – " ... we are all consecrated as priests by baptism ... " (Rupp & Drewery, 1996, p. 43). He pointed out, though, that not all are called to minister in identical ways, and not all are called to preach and take care of souls. This particular ministry required theological knowledge, specialised training and appropriate personal qualifications. He also believed that the clergy were to be approved by the communities they were to serve. Using the backing of Scripture (1 Peter 2:9) Luther argued that a person was a priest by virtue of baptism, not by election or by ordination. Luther also opposed priestly celibacy and monastic vows.

5. **The Authority of the Bible**

Luther's insistence on the primacy of Scripture is one major area in which he differed from the hierarchy of the Catholic church of his day. The medieval church put so much emphasis on the authority of the pope as the repository of all theological wisdom that the role of Scripture was virtually pushed into the background. Moreover, the Scriptures were not readily accessible to ordinary people so their knowledge of its contents was gained from popular catechesis and storytelling that was often slight and superficial.

Luther held fast to the traditional Christian teaching that the Bible was the Word of God and following from this he regarded the authority of the Bible to be above the authority of popes and councils. He insisted that the teaching office of the church served sacred Scripture and that if it were not subject to the norm of Scripture then it ran the risk of falling into error. Luther also maintained that clear reason (*ratio evidens*) was an essential accompaniment to an authentic interpretation of Scripture. This clear reason was not understood by Luther to be a philosophical notion but rather reason grounded in the knowledge and commonsense that come from human experience. While arguing for the value of conscience Luther insisted that one could rely only on a conscience that was informed by Scripture and the kind of clear reason that can stand the test of everyday human experience. Luther made these point clear in his confession to the Diet of Worms on 18 April 1521.

Rome rejected this position of Luther and regarded the Bible as dangerous in the hands of ordinary people. It is not as if the church was opposed to the Bible but it opposed the idea that ordinary people could base their lives on their own private interpretation of Scripture. Rome insisted that the faithful needed the church to interpret Scripture for them. The modern Catholic position is that a proper interpretation arises out of an interplay between the biblical message and the church.

6. **The Sacraments**

Luther did not accept that there were seven sacraments. His argument was that a sacrament could only be recognised as such if it were uniquely Christian and there was clear evidence in the New Testament that Christ had established it. He believed that only baptism and eucharist fitted these criteria. The serious implication of this is that he denied penance and holy orders as sacraments. Luther taught that forgiveness was a private matter between God and the individual and that no earthly power could forgive sins. The priest's role was only to confirm that forgiveness had taken place. This meant that Luther saw no place for the priests' customary practice of dispensing pardon and charging money for it. His reaction to the abuses that were common in the name of confession and forgiveness added fuel to Luther's rejection of penance as a sacrament.

As a result of his doctrine of 'the priesthood of all believers' Luther claimed that priests were no different from other people with the exception that they had been authorised by the community to perform certain ministerial functions. He deplored the practice of treating priests as an elite group in society who were not subject to civil law and who were given special rights and exemptions. In fact this elite status of priests was the cause of much of the hatred of churchmen that was prevalent in Germany at the time.

7. **The Eucharist**

Luther rejected the medieval concept of transubstantiation, whereby the priest turns the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, because it made the priest, rather than Christ, the central figure. He also denied that grace flows as a result of the priest's action, regardless of personal disposition and the presence of faith. Here again Luther was alluding to abuses that had crept into the church where the Mass was seen by many as a kind of automatic vehicle for grace that could guarantee God's favour. This, Luther maintained, denied that grace was a free gift directly from God. He also insisted that Communion should be given to the faithful under both kinds. Church practice was to distribute Communion only in the form of bread and people were not permitted to drink from the chalice.

Luther was opposed to the elaborate vestments and ceremonial surrounding the celebration of Mass

and he initiated reforms to reduce the ostentation that had developed by the sixteenth century. He also argued that the Mass should be in the language of the people and not in Latin.

Judegments on Luther

From the time of Luther's circulation of the 95 Theses right up to the Second World War of 1939-1945 Catholic scholars and commentators have generally been negative and even quite acerbic in their evaluation of Martin Luther. In many cases this devaluation has been due to gross misunderstandings of Luther's teaching and point of view. The first formal critic was the brilliant John Eck who engaged Luther in public debate at Leipzig in 1519. Eck wrote eight major works against Lutheran teachings. After Eck it is probably the German priest John Cochlaeus (1479-1552) who was Luther's most influential opponent. He saw Luther as a revolutionary rather than a reformer and his biography and commentary on Luther's writings (*Commentaria de actis et scriptis Martini Lutheri*) set the negative tone for Catholic scholars for the next four centuries. Not until the Luther Jubilee of 1883, when the definitive edition of Luther's works was published, did scholars begin a more honest search for the historical Luther through original source material.

A significant body of Catholic scholarship of the twentieth century has reassessed Luther and his work with more respect and less bias. These scholars have come to appreciate that Luther's protest against church practices of his day can only be thoroughly understood when theological concerns are taken into account. Side by side with these scholars are others who still made the mistake of not giving due weight to the theological issues Luther wrestled with. Judgement based on a failure to understand Luther's teachings is not worth taking seriously.[4]

Since his death Luther has been dubbed nearly everything from a psychologically disturbed, individualistic buffoon who was theologically ignorant to a deeply spiritual and erudite churchman who was honestly and courageously seeking the reform of the church from within. For instance Joseph Clayton (1937) fails to give due weight to the theological issues that drove Luther's protest and attempts at reform. He maintained that Luther was mentally unbalanced and it was his psychological disorders that led to his life's activity. Clayton completely misunderstands Luther's teaching of justification by faith and does not appreciate the importance of theological issues in Luther's life.

Luther's Influence on the Christian Tradition

It should be noted that Luther did not initially set out on a mission to damage the church. He began with the conviction that the official church had departed from the spirit of the Scriptures and had allowed a number of theologically dubious practices to creep into its tradition. He never imagined at the outset that the church would be shattered. In fact it was only toward the late 1520s that a split in the church became inevitable, mainly because, as Luther saw it, the church did not want to reform itself. In spite of this he has been criticised for being instrumental in the split of Western Christianity.

Three major churches emerged from the Reformation movement: Lutheran, Calvinist or 'Reform' and the post-Tridentine or reformed Roman Catholic church following the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The three churches developed their own culture and a siege mentality by which they saw themselves as defending the truth against opposition. The Lutherans and Calvinists stood by the inspired Scriptures as the authority for Christian living, while the Catholics maintained their reliance on church tradition, that is the teachings of popes and councils which had always been regarded as authentic instruments for interpreting and applying the message of Christ to life in the Christian community. In this context Protestants have also come to recognise the value of their particular church tradition and its role in interpreting and applying Scripture in a changing world.

Luther's campaign of reform flowed from his personal convictions and he came to show how the power of one could exercise enormous influence. Luther, along with the other leading reformers, led the way for future generations to realise the force of individualism. The bottom line for Luther was that one's personal faith was the way to salvation. God's will, he maintained, was transmitted through the Scriptures and not through popes. Consequently, Luther set about translating the Bible into German to enable the ordinary people to have access to the Scriptures. His German New Testament appeared in 1522 and became a best seller with more than 100,000 copies being sold in his own lifetime. It was not long before the average Lutheran church-goer had a better knowledge of the Bible than the priests of pre-Reformation days.

Luther's catechisms also made significant contributions to the religious knowledge of his followers and these works became templates for future catechisms that were designed to inform the common folk.

As a boy Luther sang in his village choir and later achieved considerable skill with the lute and recorder. He was a great supporter of congregational singing and set about altering the

liturgy to allow for more participation from the congregation. In 1526 he published the *Deutsche Messe und ordnung Gottis dientis* (German Mass and Order of Divine Service) with the help of two composer musicians, Conrad Rupff and Johann Walther. Luther's most enduring musical contribution lies in his encouragement of the singing of chorales. With his collaborators he adapted and composed a number of these chorales that have become the mainstay of Lutheran choir and congregational singing. For Luther, music had the power to ward off evil while it gave praise to God. His adaptations and compositions were derived from traditional church music but his musical reforms were motivated by a new concept to involve all the believers in the act of worship.

Not least among the effects of Luther's reform movement was the prod it gave to the Catholic church to get its house in order. The efforts of those sincere Catholic thinkers and activists who had been advocating reform from before the time of Luther[4] finally bore fruit when Pope Paul III set up a commission to examine church reform. The outcome was the summoning of a church council in 1542. The council was held in the Austrian Tyrolean town of Trent and the first session opened on 3 December 1545.

This council was just what the church needed and produced a series of reforms that led to the eradication of the abuses of earlier ages. Many of its measures were reactions against the Protestant Reformers and in this vein they represent a conservatism that was safe and somewhat close-minded. One unfortunate result of Trent was suspicion of new ideas and of science. Many of the popes after Trent continued the process of reform in the Catholic church and in time the central role of church councils (conciliarism)[5] disappeared and papal monarchy was reinforced. Trent produced a precise and clear formulation of the church's essential dogmas and established the benchmark of church teachings and practice until the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965.

Hindsight reveals that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Western Europe was ready for the changes in economic, social and religious structures that brought on the Reformation. While Luther was a key figure in this process he was not the only one and while he was a catalyst for reform he was not its sole father and founder. He was certainly the most influential figure in the German Reformation as a result of what became his Protestant revolution. Time has canonised Luther in the eyes of the German people as the defender of individualism against absolutism, the hero of German nationalism against Roman imperialism. His doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has made him the champion of the common folk and the enemy of elitism. This doctrine, in particular, presented a new vision of the dignity of the human person regardless of its limitations and emphasised Luther's spiritual conviction that all humans have a direct and personal access to God.

Finally, it should be noted that Luther's efforts to reform the church were based on his theological stance and not merely on his desire to see the church rid itself of scandals and abuses. In his own words he wrote: "Others who have lived before me, have attacked the pope's evil and scandalous life; but I have attacked his doctrine." (Atkinson, 1996, p. 13). Luther's main concern was for a return to the theology that is based on the gospels and all his efforts were dedicated to this cause. Luther remains a source of inspiration for those who appreciate the importance of the Scriptures in the life of the Christian. He did not destroy the spiritual heritage of Christianity but rather spearheaded a renewal of Christian spirituality.

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Endnotes

[1] The church has always insisted that people do some penitential act to pay the penalty of sin. In Luther's day people were able to avoid doing penitential acts or saying prayers by buying indulgences as a substitute. At the same time the granting of indulgences was becoming separated from the sacrament of penance.

[2] A diet is a formal assembly of representatives, similar to a parliament, which has the function of

discussing and enacting public affairs and matters of state.

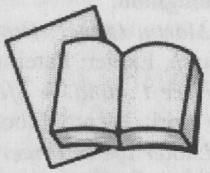
[3] Papal Encyclicals online, accessed 28 August 2002, http://www.papalencyclicals.net/

[4] For instance, misunderstandings of Luther's teachings are found in Joseph Clayton, *Luther and His Work*, Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1937; Philip Hughes, *A History of the Church, vol III The Revolt Against the Church–Aquinas to Luther*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1947.

[5] Renewal of some religious orders and the foundation of new ones was a sign of reform, e.g. the Franciscans established a branch order that was following a strict observance, the Carthusians exercised influence over Catholic laymen, the activity of the mystics like Catherine of Siena, St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. Men of the stature of Dante and Petrarch could see that the papacy was corrupt and in need of reform.

[6] The Council of Constance (1414) was called to address the problem of three popes in the Church. Two of these popes: Gregory XII of Rome and Benedict XIII of Avignon were declared heretics and a third was elected, Alexander V. The cardinals at Constance elected Martin V thus putting an end to the strife. An important decree of the Council of Constance was *Haec Sancta* (1415) which declared the supremacy of a general council and the collegiality of the bishops. This was a major step in the movement towards conciliarism.

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