

## L E S S O N 2

# Martin Luther and the Reformation

## THINKING FOCUS

*What was Luther's role in the Reformation?*

### Key Terms

- Protestant
- Reformation
- pamphlet

► *The entrance doors to All Saints Church are now inscribed with Luther's Ninety-Five Theses.*

**M**artin Luther, a priest and professor at the University of Wittenberg, approached All Saints Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Quickly he nailed some papers, handwritten in Latin, to the church door.

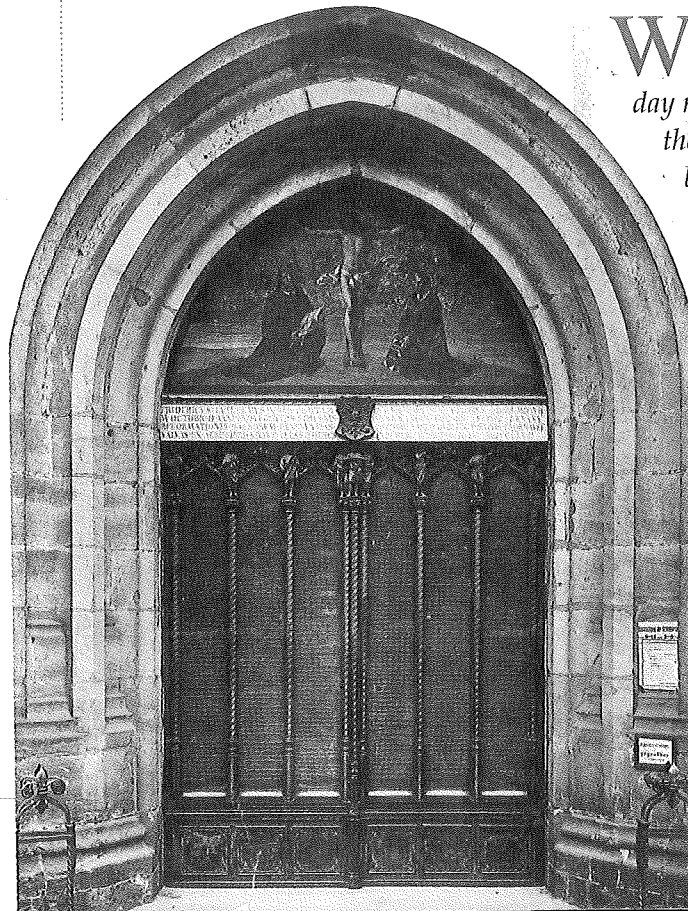
No crowd gathered to see what Luther was doing. However, on the outskirts of Wittenberg, people were gathering around Johann Tetzel, a Dominican monk. Tetzel

had been authorized by the pope to sell indulgences.

It was against such practices that Luther was protesting in the papers he nailed to the church door. In these papers, his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther explained his objections. He saw the practices as proof of how greedy and corrupt the Catholic church had become. Luther challenged the church to defend itself—if it could. He read over one of his theses:

**W**hy does not the Pope, whose riches are at this day more ample than those of the wealthiest of the wealthy, build the one Basilica of St. Peter's with his own money, rather than with that of poor believers?

Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* was really an invitation to scholars to debate certain church issues. He had no idea that his challenge to the church would light a fire of protest and change that would sweep across Europe.



## Luther Questions the Church



Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany. Luther's father, a hard-working miner, wanted his son to be a lawyer. So in 1501, Luther began studying law at the University of Erfurt.

### A Man of Faith

One day in 1505, Luther was caught in a thunderstorm and thrown to the ground when a bolt of lightning struck nearby. Like most men and women of his time, Luther believed that God could come to the aid of humans. In the

storm he cried out, "Help, St. Anne, and I'll become a monk." True to his word, that same year Luther ceased studying law and joined the monastery in Erfurt.

Luther was a model monk, and in 1507, he was ordained a priest. A year later, Luther was selected from among his peers to teach at the University of Wittenberg.

### A New Religion

As a monk Luther had struggled to understand the true nature of godliness. The church taught that the performance of religious ritual and good deeds was necessary to ensure the soul's salvation. Luther worked hard to satisfy the church and save his soul. But he worried that his actions might not satisfy God.

◀ At the University of Erfurt, Luther became known for his long and serious talks. His friends nicknamed him "the philosopher." This engraving depicts Luther as he looked at this time.

### Across Time & Space

Reform is not restricted to either the Middle Ages or the church. In the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., led a social reform movement in the United States seeking racial equality. Under the leadership of this Baptist minister named for Martin Luther, the movement for civil rights gained wide support from blacks and whites. His policy of nonviolent protest helped curb racial injustice in the South.



◀ Johann Tetzel sold so many indulgences that some people made fun of him in a popular rhyme: "As soon as money in the box rings, The soul from Hell's fire springs."

Luther's fears vanished, however, when he read St. Paul's letter to the Romans: "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (Romans 1:17). To Luther, Paul's message seemed clear: the path to God is through faith alone. Forgiveness was not something the church could grant, nor was it something individuals could achieve on their own. Instead, it was given by God to each person who accepted Him. This theory became known as justification by faith, meaning that a person could be made just, or good, by his or her faith in God.

Luther's belief in justification by faith led him to question the Catholic church's practice of selling indulgences. He objected not only to the church's greed but to the very idea of indulgences. He did not believe the Catholic church had the power to pardon people's sins. Rather, Luther taught that

salvation could be achieved only through God's mercy. No one needed to seek or buy salvation through the church.

By nailing his theses to the church door, Luther was not acting as a heretic. He was simply inviting other scholars to respond to his ideas in a debate, an ordinary method of learning at universities of his day.

At first, no one accepted Luther's invitation. Over the next few years, however, his *Ninety-Five Theses* sparked a religious movement to reform the Catholic church. Because the reformers were protesting against what they felt to be the abuses of the Catholic church, they came to be known as **Protestants**. And because they wanted to reform the Catholic church, that is, improve it by making changes, their movement is known as the **Reformation**. ■

■ *How did Martin Luther's beliefs conflict with church doctrine and practices?*

▼ *Luther claimed that his burning the bull was purely symbolic; in reality he thought it was the pope himself who should have been burned.*

## The Reformation Begins

Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* were soon translated from Latin into German. Within a year, his

ideas were known throughout Europe. As one historian put it, they spread "as if angels from heaven themselves had been their messengers." Encouraged by this success, Luther wrote hundreds of essays between 1517 and 1546, in which he stressed justification by faith and criticized church abuses.

Finally, in 1520, Pope Leo X issued a bull—a statement of the pope's authority—condemning Luther and banning his works. Defying the pope, Luther publicly burned the bull. The break with the church was then complete. In January 1521, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther.

However, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, decided to give



Luther one final chance. In 1521, at a meeting in Worms, Germany, the emperor demanded that Luther recant, or take back, his teachings. Facing church officials and an excited assembly of people, Luther refused. He said in part:

**I**do not accept the authority of popes and councils. . . . My conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything. . . . Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.

A near riot broke loose. Luther strode out, his hands raised high in triumph. Yet the emperor later declared him an outlaw whom anyone could kill without punishment.

## Protestantism Spreads

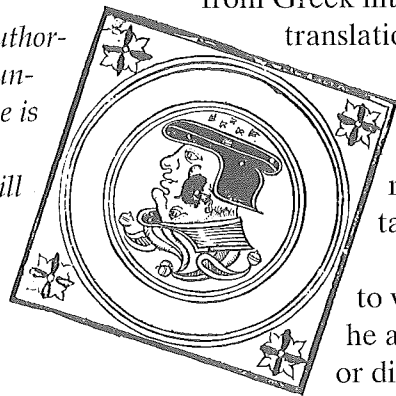
Why did Luther's ideas, which challenged the centuries-old Catholic church, succeed? First, many people recognized the widespread corruption within the church and were eager for reform. Second, Luther wrote and spoke with conviction. His words were immensely appealing to the people.

The printing press, developed in Europe about 1450, also contributed to Luther's success. Printed **pamphlets** containing unbound essays on current topics could spread new ideas quickly to many people. By 1523, about a million copies of Luther's pamphlets were in circulation. The printer in *A Moment in Time* on page 346 is typical of the craftsmen who worked the early printing presses and published Luther's pamphlets.

Fortunately for Luther he had a powerful friend in Frederick the Wise, Prince of Saxony. The prince arranged a pretend kidnapping of Luther and hid him away for about a year in the castle at Wartburg. Here, Luther translated the Bible from Greek into German. His

translation allowed the German people to read the word of God without having to rely on the interpretation by the priests.

Luther continued to write works in which he attacked the church or discussed books of the Bible. His teachings eventually inspired a new Protestant religion called Lutheranism. This new religion would continue to oppose the once all-powerful Catholic church. ■



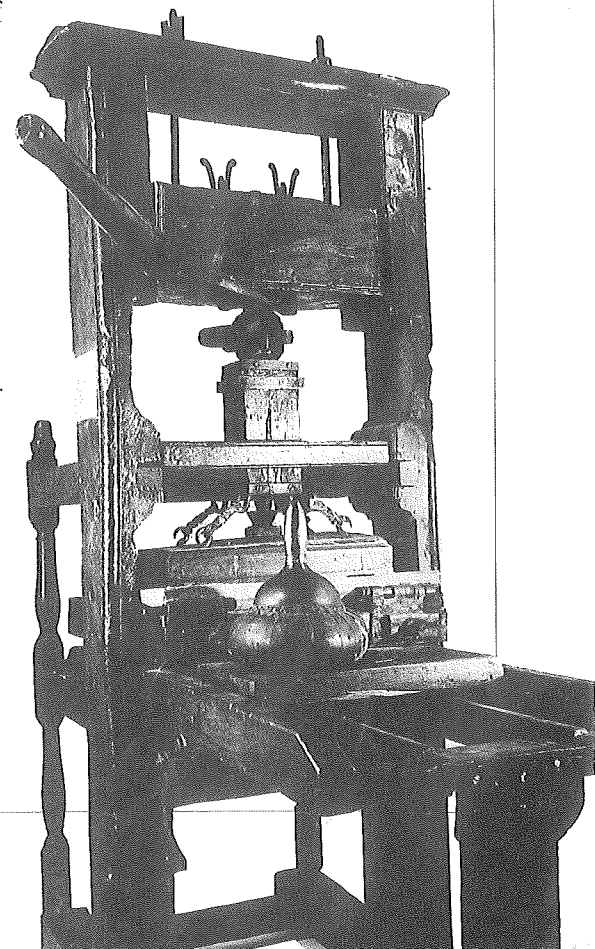
◀ Turn this woodcut portrait of Luther upside down to see what his opponents thought of him.

■ How effective were the church's responses to Luther's teachings?

▼ Many people feared that the art of printing, new to Europeans, came from the devil. But by 1500, there were more than 1,000 print shops in Europe.

As the Reformation spread, it gained the support of European peasants. In 1524 and 1525, arguing that everyone was equal under God, a group of poor German peasants took up arms against their wealthy landowners. Known as the Peasants' War, this revolt was badly organized and lacked strong leadership. Government armies quickly crushed the uprising.

The peasants were surprised and disappointed to discover that Martin Luther did not support them in the Peasants' War.



# A Printer

4:29 P.M., August 24, 1620  
Great Hall, Northumberland House, London

## Arms

The printer's arms ache from lifting the heavy iron plate of the press hundreds of times since 7:00 this morning.

## Woodcut

Pages with pictures, like the one he just took off the press, are still carved in one piece. Most pages are made with movable type that will be taken apart as soon as all the books are printed.

## Paper

This sheet was thrown away because a young apprentice mixed up a *p* and a *q*. On this page Bacon says printing, gunpowder, and the magnet have changed the world.

## Eyes

He can read both English and Latin backward and forward. When he started working for the king's printer at age 14, it was hard for him to read the backwards-facing metal type.

## Beard

He keeps his London-style beard neatly trimmed. After a country childhood, he enjoys city entertainments like seeing plays by Shakespeare.

## Title Page

The book's title, *Novum Organum*, and its author's name, Francis Bacon, are surrounded by fancy pictures.

## Apron

He tries to keep his clothes free of ink, but our printer is called the "dirty-hands" apprentice. His friend, the "clean-hands" apprentice, gets to handle the paper.

In the pamphlet *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, Luther criticized the rebels for seeking economic gain in the name of God. As a result, Luther lost the support of many social reformers.

However, Luther's ideas became popular with the German princes. Luther did not believe that the church should own property. He also thought that rulers should appoint clergy members. Thus, Luther favored a more powerful role for rulers and a weaker church authority.

Many German princes who wanted freedom from the pope's authority favored Protestantism. Others remained Catholic because they depended on the support of the pope. Eventually, the differences between these German princes erupted in war. From 1546 to 1555, war raged between the Catholic and Protestant princes.

Finally, in 1555, a compromise, called the Peace of Augsburg, was reached. This compromise permitted each German prince to decide which religion would be allowed in his state. Most rulers of northern Germany chose Protestantism, and most in southern Germany remained Catholic. Many people had to move to states that allowed them to practice their own religion.

### Lutheranism in Central Europe



By 1560, the Reformation was established in Germany and, as you can see on the map above, in much of the rest of Europe. Compare this map with that on page 529 of the Atlas showing the distribution of religions in the world today. What other countries can trace their religious roots to the ideas of the Reformation? ■

▲ In what countries did Lutheranism become established by 1555?

■ Why did Protestantism spread throughout Germany between 1517 and 1560?

## REVIEW

- FOCUS** What was Luther's role in the Reformation?
- CONNECT** What similar task did John Wycliffe and Martin Luther undertake? What was the purpose of their work?
- HISTORY** How did Gutenberg's invention help spread Protestantism?
- POLITICAL SYSTEMS** How did Luther's reforms affect political events in Germany?
- CRITICAL THINKING** How do you think Martin Luther would have advised the European peasants to handle their problems with their landowners?
- ACTIVITY** Think of a topic you would like to debate. Then write out your position on the topic and post it on your class bulletin board. As in Martin Luther's time, invite other students to debate your viewpoint and exchange ideas.