Seven More Men

And the Secret of Their Greatness

Eric Metaxas

with Anne Morse

Zondervan Non-Fiction

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Chapter 1: Martin Luther

One

Martin Luther

1483–1546

Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

—Martin Luther

luther_9780310358893.jpg

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Saxony, on November 10, 1483. Actually, he was possibly born in 1482 or 1484. Scholars can't say for sure which year, nor did Luther or his mother—both of whom history records as present—seem to know.

Birthdays were rarely remembered in those days, but name days were something else. For this reason, we know that on the very next day—November 11 of one of those years—the one-day-old Reformer-to-be was trundled across the street to the magnificent Saints Peter and Paul Church to be baptized. This was to ensure that if he died young, as so many did in those days, he would escape the eternal flames of hell.

Luther was born at a time when the Church seemed far less interested in the happy idea of entering God's presence in heaven than in avoiding eternal punishment outside his presence in

hell. As most know, this was something of an obsession with the Church of the high medieval era, so much so that it would eventually lead to the incident that would make Luther world-famous. Because Luther was baptized on the feast day of Saint Martin of Tours, his parents named him Martin.

Soon after his birth, the family moved to Mansfeld, twelve miles north, where his father, Hans, would begin a thriving mining business. Hans borrowed a significant sum of money from his wife's family to purchase four refining operations, called "smelt works." Although Luther in later years often referred to himself as "the son of a poor miner," his father hardly labored with a pick or shovel. The Luthers worked hard and were not aristocrats, but we now know they were far from poor.

In fact, just twenty years ago, an archaeological dig discovered that the historic home in Mansfeld, to which visitors have been pointed for centuries, was only one-third of a much larger home in which Luther grew up. A second dig discovered the food, toys, and silverware from their time there, all of which indicated a family of considerable means. We also know the brilliant boy was sent to the very best schools of that time so he could learn Latin and prepare for university, for it was his father's ambition that he should one day study law and then come back to work in the family business.

While away at these boarding schools, young Martin encountered many people who were deeply serious about following God, and there can be no doubt that this affected him. Although his father's plan for him was clear, Luther sometimes wondered whether God might be leading him in another direction. After all, if the picture of hell that the Church so often and so vividly presented was real, what could be more important than doing everything to avoid that everlasting

nightmare? It was generally thought at that time that the only certain way to be assured of salvation was by devoting one's whole life to God by becoming a priest or a monk or a nun. But because his father had other plans for him—and because the Bible commands us to honor our father and mother unconditionally—Martin knew he must continue toward studying the law.

He entered the University of Erfurt in 1501 and in 1505 earned his master's degree, at which point he finally entered his legal studies. Martin appreciated his father's "bitter sweat and toil"[1] in making his education possible and dutifully continued along the path set out for him until a particular hot afternoon in early July 1505.

We don't know precisely what frame of mind Martin was in that day, but we have some clues. Two young lawyers whom he knew well had died that year, and on their deathbeds both expressed grave doubts about their eternal destinies, even saying they wished they had become monks and not lawyers. Young Martin didn't have the courage to bring up the subject with his father, but he must have been tortured to think of continuing this path toward becoming a lawyer, because he knew if he did, his eternal destiny would remain a horrifying and all-too-real question in his mind.

So one day, while riding back to law school after a visit to his parents' home, everything changed. He was just six miles from the university—just outside the village of Stotternheim—when a lightning storm of monstrous proportions descended on him. He was in a flat open area where a thunderbolt might at any moment have snatched him from this life and into the next, where for all he knew he would immediately be torn apart by the talons of hideous demons. The fear that overtook him was so dramatic that when one bolt struck very near, Luther was undone. The terrified young man fell to the wet ground trembling and abjectly shouted a prayer to Saint

Anne, the patron saint of miners. “Help! Saint Anna!” he shouted through the moaning wind and rain. “If you save me, I will become a monk!”[2]

As it happened, Luther survived this frightful episode and rode on to Erfurt. But a heavenward oath wasn’t something he could take lightly. He knew he must keep his word and immediately told his friends at Erfurt that in two weeks he would join the local Augustinian monastery—and disappear from them forever. They tried to dissuade him, but in vain. And so—without breathing a word of this news to his father—Martin one day knocked on the doors of the Augustinian monastery, offering his life to God’s service forever.

When word of this extraordinary deviation from his plans for his son reached Hans Luther, he was predictably furious. He couldn’t fathom that his brilliant son would openly disobey his father by throwing away the promising career toward which both of them had already devoted so much. But that’s precisely what Martin Luther had done.

However, the peace Luther expected to find in becoming a monk eluded him. His whole being was focused on prayer and worship every day, from the dark predawn hours until dusk. But the harder he worked to earn God’s approval, the further from heaven he felt. No matter what he did, he felt condemned. For example, he might pray for many hours—but then have a flicker of pride that he had prayed for so many hours. He knew this pride was sinful, and he would have to confess it, else it might damn him to hell forever. But he never felt that his confessions were sufficient. There almost always lingered another thing he thought he should confess. He never seemed to get closer to his goal of peace with God, so he simply tried harder. Luther later wrote that if ever a monk could have gotten to heaven through “sheer monkery,”[3] Luther would have done it. He prayed and confessed—and fasted so much that he became skin

and bones. But somehow he only felt more wretched. Eventually he became exasperated and resentful, convinced that it was "impossible to please God through monastic efforts."[4]

On April 4, 1507, Luther was ordained to the priesthood. By now his father's ire had cooled somewhat, and both of Luther's parents came to the service where Luther would celebrate his first Communion. But during the ceremony, Luther faltered noticeably. The idea of his unworthiness to handle the body and blood of Jesus himself was so terrifying that Luther froze. If the priest attending him at the time had not urged him on, he might still be standing there. His terror of a holy God who judged him made his existence nearly impossible.

Luther's superior at the monastery was Vicar General Johannes von Staupitz—to whom Luther would grow especially close. Staupitz saw that Luther was especially brilliant, and uniquely troubled, and tried to help. So he invited Luther to leave Erfurt to join him at the newer University of Wittenberg. Staupitz had recently been named dean there, and recognizing Luther's great gifts, he wanted the twenty-five-year-old to join him and to go on to teach theology there. So Luther went, earning his bachelor's degree in biblical studies in 1508.

But he continued to be tortured by the question of his own salvation, still unable to feel God's love or approval. During his weekly confession with Staupitz, he would go over and over the tiniest details of the previous week, trying to be absolutely sure there wasn't anything he might have forgotten and left unconfessed. Staupitz himself almost lost hope that he could ever get Luther to see that God really loved him. To Staupitz, Luther behaved as though God hated him, and as though he secretly hated God. But who wouldn't hate a God who was a cruel judge and who put us through such endless misery?

In 1510 Staupitz needed someone to travel to Rome to settle a bitter dispute between two rival groups of Augustinian monks. Perhaps sending Luther would break the young man's cycle of obsessive spiritual navel-gazing. The trip had to be made on foot, and since it was eight hundred miles, it would take two months to get there and, of course, two months to walk back. Surely such a journey would provide Luther a different perspective on himself and on God. Yet, amazingly, it didn't. When Luther returned, he was quite the same as ever.

Nonetheless, what the young monk saw during his weeks in Rome was eye opening. Luther was horrified at "the chaos, the filth, and the practice of locals who urinated in public and openly patronized prostitutes."[5] This last activity even included members of the clergy. Luther also observed corrupt and incompetent priests racing carelessly through their Masses. Since Luther took his faith so seriously, this was all greatly depressing and dismaying. It is often said that Luther's time in Rome propelled him to think about reforming the Church, but this is simply not true. He was a deeply loyal son of the Church and had no idea in 1510 about the things he would say and do a decade in the future.

Staupitz felt that Luther's tremendous zeal to read the Bible would make him an ideal candidate to earn his doctorate and then teach the Scriptures at the university. He knew how Luther hated teaching Aristotle and how he loved teaching the Scriptures. So one day, under a pear tree in the cloister, Staupitz broached the subject. Luther was unable to accept the idea that he could be worthy of such a great honor, but Staupitz was relentless. He knew Luther better than Luther knew himself. And soon afterward, Luther began his studies. In October 1512 he officially became a doctor of theology and days later joined the theological faculty. He began intensely reading and meditating on the biblical letters of Paul. It was in these epistles that he

would eventually notice things he had never seen before and would at last find the God he had never believed existed, a God who was not only a Judge but also a loving Father and gracious Savior. It was as though Luther would one day see a thread and pull at it and pull at it until—to his own shock—he had unraveled the entire tapestry of medieval Christianity. The particular thread concerned the New Testament idea that we aren't saved by what we do but by believing in what Jesus did on the cross. When we cease trying to reach God by our own efforts and simply realize we can never reach him that way, we finally turn to him in earnest and are welcomed into his arms.

The famous verse in Paul's epistle to the Romans that became a key for Luther was Romans 1:17 (KJV), "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." By faith! Not by our own efforts! And in Paul's letter to the Galatians, Luther read: "We also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified" (2:16 ESV). When Luther finally saw what the Bible said—that it isn't what we do but our faith in what Christ did—everything changed. The scales fell from Luther's eyes, and at last he could see God as he really was. God is a God of infinite grace, who wants to reach every sinner, including the miserable monk named Martin Luther.

While this theological cataclysm was rumbling through Luther's soul and changing him from the inside out, something else was happening too, and this would affect Luther's thinking about grace in a more practical sense. It would also cause the historic controversy that catapulted him into the forefront of history. It had to do with the issue of so-called indulgences.

By way of background, the practice of indulgences began as a good idea. If one had sinned and wanted to repent—and do penance for one's sins—one had several options. One might pray certain prayers or make a pilgrimage or do a good work, such as donating a certain amount to the Church. Some of these donations took the form of "indulgences." But over time the use of indulgences grew twisted from its original intentions. Indulgences became such a significant source of income for the Church that it preached about indulgences more and more. After all, there were many important things that needed financing—such as the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—and what better way to raise funds than to preach indulgences all across Europe? But finally the practice had gotten so far out of hand that to Luther and a few others, it was a theological and moral horror that must be stopped. But how?

Luther saw the trouble with indulgences not just on a theological level but on a practical one. After all, he was not just a theologian; he was also a priest. Sometimes when the faithful came to him to confess, they would pull out an indulgence certificate they had purchased, expecting it to get them out of doing any further penance for the sins they were now confessing to Luther. These people had been told that they could pay in advance for sins they hadn't yet committed. He knew such beliefs were corrupting the souls of the faithful.

Staupitz had seen these problems for some time and often taught that "true repentance must begin with the love for justice and for God."[6] So now Luther too spoke out against indulgences, but nothing was done. Eventually it occurred to him that the best way to draw attention to this problem might be via an academic debate. Wasn't this what theologians were supposed to do? The problems would be confronted in the proper academic environment, and the results would be sent to the archbishop, who would surely see the situation and do what was necessary to change

it. So Luther took the initiative and wrote up ninety-five provocative debate theses—as was the custom—to advertise the upcoming debate.

Because these theses were in Latin, very few could read them, but, of course, they were intended to be read only by the theologians who might join the debate. The common people weren't supposed to know about the theological disagreements among their leaders. After all, that might well undermine the Church's authority, which is precisely what happened.

In the five centuries since these now-famous Ninety-Five Theses were written, there have been innumerable images showing Luther dramatically nailing the document to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. It appears as though he intends this act to be loud and public and provocative, especially to the pope and anyone else supporting the practice of indulgences. By daring to post the inflammatory document right on the door of the most important church in Wittenberg, he was essentially poking his finger in the eye of the ecclesiastical authorities. But this is all far from the truth.

For one thing, the large wooden door of the Castle Church was simply the bulletin board for the town. Anyone posting anything would have posted it there, so this was hardly a provocation. As far as Luther was concerned, he was simply and politely posting a Latin document advertising an academic debate. Further undermining the ideas we have about this captivating image is the fact that Luther may not have used a hammer and nails but a jar of paste. And he may well not even have posted the document himself but may have simply given it to the church sexton to post. Finally, it is almost certain that the date on which Luther is always said to have done this—October 31, 1517—is not the date he did it, if he did it himself at all. But what Luther did do on

that date—something far less memorable than noisily hammering something onto a door—is post a letter.

Luther felt it his sworn duty as a "doctor of the Church" to inform his archbishop—Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and Magdeburg—of the theological debate about to occur, so he wrote him a humble letter on the subject of indulgences and with it enclosed a copy of the Ninety-Five Theses, mailing it on the date now reckoned as the beginning of the Reformation.

In the letter, after extremely humbly referring to himself as "the dregs of humanity,"[7] Luther graciously suggests that the archbishop might not realize that these corrupting indulgences were being circulated in his name. He expresses his concern over "the wholly false impressions which the people have conceived from [the indulgences]."[8] These "unhappy souls believe that if they have purchased letters of indulgence they are sure of their salvation; again, that so soon as they cast their contributions into the money-box, souls fly out of purgatory. . . . Thus souls committed to your care, good Father, are taught to their death."[9]

Luther was a deeply devoted monk, and whatever his thoughts toward those in power would become, he was at this time still humble and deferential. He wanted to give the archbishop the benefit of the doubt regarding what was happening in his name and tried to help him see the difficult situation. Luther thought it likely that the busy archbishop didn't realize the extent of the problem and simply felt it was his duty to speak up.

In his letter, Luther went on to clarify the problem these indulgences had created. He pointed to the New Testament verses that spelled out the deeply serious nature of one's salvation, including Peter's words that "the righteous scarcely [shall] be saved" (1 Peter 4:18 KJV). Therefore, treating salvation as lightly as the indulgence preachers were doing was scandalous.

"Why, then, do these preachers of pardons," he asked, "by these false fables and promises, make the people careless and fearless? Whereas indulgences confer on us no good gift, either for salvation or for sanctity, but only take away the external penalty."[10]

Luther also said that to push the sale of indulgences, the Church ignored infinitely more important things, such as the preaching of the gospel itself. "How great then is the horror," he wrote, "how great the peril of a bishop, if he permits the Gospel to be kept quiet, and nothing but the noise of indulgences to be spread among his people!"[11] Finally, Luther asked the archbishop to look into the matter and take action.

But what Luther didn't know was that the man to whom he appealed for help was far from ignorant about what was happening, much less unbiased on this explosive issue. Indeed, Albrecht knew all about the indulgences being preached in his district and desperately needed every penny coming from them. And the corruption underlying the situation was even worse than that. Although almost no one knew, Albrecht had paid a vast sum of money to the pope so he would overlook a certain rule Albrecht had broken. To pay this money, Albrecht took out a gigantic loan—and to pay it back he got the pope to agree that he, Albrecht, could keep half the money from the indulgences sold in his district. The other half would, of course, go directly to the pope, who wanted to fund the building of the new St. Peter's.

So we can only imagine what Albrecht thought when he read Luther's letter. But whatever he thought, he surely thought even less of the enclosed Ninety-Five Theses because their tone was dramatically different from the humble tone of the letter. The theses were meant to provoke debate among Luther's fellow academics, and they hardly pulled punches on what their author really thought.

"Most people," the theses read, "are necessarily deceived by that indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of release from penalty. . . . They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory. . . ."[12] This last sentence was a clear and pointed reference to Johannes Tetzel, who preached indulgences under Albrecht's authority. Luther continued, turning the now-infamous epigram on its head: "It is certain that when money clinks into the chest, greed and avarice can be increased. . . . Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers. . . . Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters."

The phrase "together with their teachers" of course implied that Tetzel—and perhaps the archbishop too—would go to hell for what they were doing. Surely that caught the archbishop's attention. Even more shocking, Luther's criticism of the pope was explicit. "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love," Luther wrote, instead of doing so only "for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?" Luther then asked, "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Croesus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?"[13]

What was a deeply compromised archbishop to do? He did exactly what many do when handed a hot potato: pass the flustering tuber to someone else. And so Albrecht sent the whole kaboodle on to Rome, to the pope himself. If Albrecht was lucky, the pope might simply ignore it.

But something happened in Wittenberg that would ensure that this issue would be anything but ignored. Someone who understood Latin and had read the Ninety-Five Theses decided they

were so juicy and interesting that they must be translated into German. Of course Luther had never dreamed this would happen, but they were indeed translated—and then printed and distributed! Thus, in violation of all Luther thought possible, this private notice of an academic debate, with all its provocative language about the Church and the pope, was suddenly being read and discussed by everyone across Germany! For Luther, it was a waking nightmare, the medieval equivalent of mistakenly hitting "Reply All" when sending a vicious email.

What really began the trouble was when the Ninety-Five Theses fell under the eyes of the man so obviously referred to in them, the burly indulgence preacher named Johannes Tetzel. Tetzel became so outraged that he loudly declared that this archheretic Luther would be burned at the stake in no time. In Tetzel's view, Luther was far from someone humbly wanting to right a theological error. He was a self-aggrandizing troublemaker who brazenly had disrespected the Holy Church. And for good measure, Tetzel now wrote 106 provocative theses of his own, attacking Luther and all he had written.

To be clear, what made everything that followed possible—in the cacophonous back-and-forth between Luther and his innumerable critics—was the relatively recent invention of the printing press. The idea of printing was so new that there were no laws regarding copyrights, so any printer was free to print and sell anything they liked. And what could be better than anything written on this suddenly red-hot topic of the Church's selling of indulgences?

In the beginning, Luther did what he could to cool the situation. When he first realized his provocative theses were being read widely, he knew he should carefully and in a moderate tone clarify what he meant, hoping to nip the scandal in the bud. So Luther preached a theologically buttoned-up sermon on indulgences and quickly had it printed and distributed. But somehow this

effort only opened other theological cans of worms and caused more trouble. Before Luther knew it, people in England were talking about the controversy—and about the intemperate Saxon monk who had started it all. Some thought he was a villain, plain and simple, but many others thought him a hero, thrilled that someone was finally speaking against the corruption they had seen for years.

As the controversy rattled all of Europe, the attacks from Rome grew increasingly vicious. They were so vicious and unreasonable that eventually Luther himself wondered whether a spirit of antichrist had indeed taken hold of his beloved Church. If so, then the end times were at hand, and he had better speak the truth at any cost. At this point, figuring things couldn't get worse, he threw caution to the wind and replaced his humble tone with a bellicose one that gave no quarter to his opponents. As the attacks on him increased, Luther became less and less diplomatic in what he said and wrote. It was at this point that Luther had to reckon what he feared more—God's judgment or humans'. In the end there was no contest. Better to die a horrible death by burning at the stake for speaking the truth than to go to hell forever for staying silent.

Eventually, Luther even dared to question the pope's authority and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. What historical evidence existed, he wished to know, to warrant putting Rome's authority above that of the Eastern churches? Or to give the pope nearly dictatorial powers?

Staupitz would help Luther in many ways in the years ahead. Staupitz enjoyed a close friendship with Frederick the Wise, the elector of Saxony, and this relationship would prove very important as Luther continued the dangerous habit of criticizing the pope and church doctrine. In fact, now there were threats to Luther's life. Staupitz feared for Luther as he made the trip to

Heidelberg, so Staupitz persuaded Frederick to write a letter guaranteeing Luther's safe passage. Luther got to Heidelberg safely, and his talk there went very well, adding more converts to the cause.

When Pope Leo X initially heard about Luther's stand against indulgences, he dismissed him as a "drunken German monk." But in time, he realized Luther was bringing real trouble to him and to the Church. He eventually felt he must strangle this monster in the cradle before it was too late, so he put a Dominican friar named Sylvester Prierias on the job. It was Prierias's job to respond to Luther's attacks, and Prierias did, promptly labeling Luther a heretic and demanding that Luther carry his impertinent carcass to Rome to address the serious charges against him.

When Frederick learned of this, he was rightly concerned. A trip to Rome might well result in Luther's death. After all, heretics were frequently burned at the stake. A hundred years earlier that was precisely what happened to Jan Hus, who had said many of the things Luther was saying. So Frederick decided he would play a political card. He was one of the seven electors in the Holy Roman Empire, and his vote was extremely important in choosing the next emperor. Pope Leo had a certain candidate in mind for the job—and wanted Frederick's vote. So when Frederick asked the pope to consider moving the meeting with Luther to a location in Germany, the pope understood it was in his best interest to do so—and did.

If the meeting were in Germany, the odds of Luther's being killed were much less than they would be in Rome. But what would that German location be? It so happened that the next Imperial Diet, an annual gathering of all nobles and ecclesiastical dignitaries to discuss and vote on the issues of the empire, was to be held in Augsburg, Germany. So instead of requiring Luther

to travel the eight hundred miles south to Rome, the pope would send his legate, Cardinal Cajetan, up to Augsburg.

Staupitz never spoke publicly against the Church, but he supported Luther nonetheless, and now, before this historic confrontation, he took the dramatic step of freeing Luther from his Augustinian vows. Thus, Luther was able to travel and speak out publicly against the authority of the bishops, which a monk still under discipline was forbidden to do.

Shortly after arriving in Augsburg, Urban de Serralonga, on behalf of the cardinals, paid Luther a visit. He had some instructions for this meddlesome monk: Luther was ordered to meekly recant all he had said.

But Luther quickly dismissed this advice. "If I am convinced out of the Sacred Scriptures that I have erred," he said, "I shall be but too glad to retract."[14]

Naturally, Urban was infuriated. "The Pope could, by a single nod, change or suppress articles of faith," he said.[15] So Luther would do well to accept this prudent advice if he wished to stay alive.

But Luther was unmoved by the threat. "I shall still have heaven," he answered.[16] His fear of God was real, more real than his fear of what any man might do to him, and this is clearly what kept Luther from yielding on any of the points that seemed so clear to him.

On October 11, 1518, Luther appeared before Cajetan. After acknowledging that he had written the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther said, "I am ready to listen most obediently to my accusation, and if I have erred, to submit to the instructions in the truth."[17]

"Observe," Cajetan growled, "in the seventh proposition you deny that the Sacrament can profit one unless he has faith."

Luther responded, “That the man who receives the holy Sacrament must have faith in the grace offered him is a truth I never can and never will revoke.”

A furious Cajetan responded, “Whether you will or no, I must have your recantation this very day, or for this one error I shall condemn all your propositions.”

“But I demand proof from the Scriptures that I am wrong,” Luther said. “It is on Scripture that my views rest.”

“Do you not know that the Pope has authority and power over these things?” interrupted another papal representative.

“Save Scripture,” Luther replied.

“Scripture!” the cardinal sneered. “The Pope is above Scripture—and above Councils.”

Here, of course, was the rub of rubs. Where did the final authority rest? Was it in the Scriptures more than in the decisions of the Church? Luther said it was in the Scriptures, but Cajetan was saying it was the pope himself who had the final say.

Of course it was true that the Church had overseen which books became part of the canon of Holy Scripture. Had not God deputized the Church to do that, and had he not spoken to its leaders via his Holy Spirit at the Council of Nicaea? So if the pope was the head of the Church, did he not have authority that trumped that of Scripture? On this very unforgiving point was the Church broken in two.

Eventually, Cajetan, after making more threats of punishment if Luther didn’t recant, offered the monk safe conduct if he would travel to Rome for judgment. Luther, no fool, knew this “safe conduct” would likely deliver him directly to a dank Vatican dungeon. The offer was politely declined.

Cajetan had been ordered to arrest "this beast,"[18] as he called Luther, if he refused to recant, but he simply didn't act quickly enough, and Luther, sensing the noose tightening, secretly slipped out of Augsburg under cover of night.

Luther's next encounter with Rome was instigated by Duke George of Saxony, who organized another disputation with the monk in 1519 in a city he considered hostile to Luther: Leipzig. Here, Johannes Eck, a skilled debater with access to power, would debate Luther's ally Andreas Karlstadt. Luther himself would also be given an opportunity to speak.

As Luther prepared for the confrontation, he and his allies remained on the offensive, making increasingly bold charges against the pope. Luther's incendiary statements, with which more and more people were agreeing, threatened to destabilize not merely the church authorities but the civil authorities too. What he was unleashing could easily boil over, with harmful and unintended consequences far beyond his control.

The debate took place at Pleissenburg Castle. In a strong, clear voice, Luther began by quoting Matthew 16:18 to back up his assertion that popes didn't have the exclusive right to interpret Scripture and that, therefore, neither popes nor church councils were infallible. Eck countered by trying to link Luther to the heresies preached by Jan Hus a century before. If Eck's strategy succeeded, Luther likely would have followed in Hus's footsteps and been immolated at the stake. The debate ended with partisans on both sides claiming victory. But Eck wasn't through. Once he returned to Rome, he worked diligently to convince Church officials to aggressively pursue this man who had even dared to call the pope "antichrist."

By June 15, 1520, Pope Leo had had enough. He wrote a papal bull titled *Exsurge Domine*, in which he warned Luther that unless he promptly recanted forty-one sentences from his various

writings—including the Ninety-Five Theses—he would be excommunicated, which to anyone who believed in the pope's authority meant an eternity in hell. But by this time, Luther was convinced that those attacking him were animated by the spirit of antichrist rather than by God, so he didn't take the threat of excommunication as the pope had hoped he would. Luther responded to this threat by publicly setting fire to the papal document at the Wittenberg city dump. For good measure, he also incinerated some books of canon law. "Since they have burned my books," Luther now declared, "I shall burn theirs!"[19] University students got into the act too, gleefully hurling writings attacking their favorite professor into the roaring bonfire.

Soon after this, Luther kicked out every theological trace by penning three works that would inflame his critics further still: *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*. In the first, he laid out the shocking idea of a "priesthood of all believers," declaring that the baptized were equally worthy to stand before God and that they could forgive others and pray for others themselves, not requiring any official priestly mediation.

Seeing that Luther had publicly mocked the pope's threat of excommunication, the pope made good on the threat and excommunicated him from the Roman Catholic Church. The papal bull that announced Luther's excommunication called on Emperor Charles V to carry out the excommunication. This meant Luther would be put on trial and perhaps executed. But when the bull arrived in Wittenberg, Luther read it and immediately wrote a peppery response, saying that the bull "condemns Christ himself."[20]

Once again, Frederick of Saxony was sympathetic to Luther, but papal nuncio Girolamo Aleandro insisted that secular authorities must keep their noses out of Church business. The

Church had found Luther guilty of heresy; the state must now hand him over. Luther appealed to Emperor Charles V himself, whose first reaction was to tear up Luther's letter and stomp on the pieces. But later, in a more pensive mood, Charles considered how the German people might react if they learned that Luther had been condemned without a hearing. After all, most of them were now his enthusiastic supporters. So Charles—not merely ruler but politician too—invited Luther to travel to the city of Worms to "answer with regard to your books and your teaching."[21]

Luther's friends, fearful Luther would not survive the journey, beseeched him to stay put. But Luther had set his face toward Worms. This is not to say he wasn't frightened. History records that he traveled to Worms in a simple wagon, "physically fearful and trembling."[22] But along the journey, his spirits were lifted again and again: he was cheered in town after town by enthusiastic followers. Unbeknownst to him, his writings had circulated so thoroughly around Germany that he was greeted everywhere as a hero, a voice of the people, whose cause he had taken up.

The diet to which he was traveling convened in early 1521 at the Imperial Palace. The pope had directed his representatives in Worms to force "the wild boar" to play defense and under no circumstances to allow the shrewd monk to turn the somber occasion into a colorful debate. There were to be no tricks or shenanigans! Luther must either recant or not recant.

The scene greeting observers on the day Luther was brought to the palace is described (very probably by Luther himself) as follows:

> At four in the afternoon, the imperial chamberlain, and the herald who had accompanied him from Wittenberg, came to him at his inn, The Court of Germany,

> and conducted him to the town hall, along bye-ways, in order to avoid the crowds which had assembled in the leading streets. . . . Many persons had got upon the roofs of houses to see Dr. Martin. As he proceeded . . . several noblemen successively addressed to him words of encouragement. "Be bold," said they, "and fear not those who can kill the body, but are powerless against the soul."[23]

At last Luther, dressed in the habit of a humble monk, entered the candlelit room filled with scores of the most powerful men in Christendom wearing bejeweled robes and furs and ornate gold crosses. Above them, on a magnificently decorated dais, sat the emperor himself.

Luther stood before a table piled high with all his writings. Johannes von der Ecken—who was secretary to the archbishop of Trier and is not to be confused with Luther's earlier interlocutor, Johannes Eck—sprang immediately to the business at hand. "Are these books yours?" he asked.[24]

"Yes," Luther replied. "The books are mine."

Now Ecken would ask the question of questions. He wasn't interested in philosophical meanderings but demanded a simple yea or nay. "Do you wish to defend the books which are recognized as your work?" he asked. "Or to retract anything contained in them?"

Luther was flummoxed. The books contained many things that even leaders in the Church had commended. It would, he said, "be rash and dangerous to reply to such a question until I had meditated thereupon in silence and retreat, lest I incur the anger of our Lord." This reply was certainly unexpected. But it was clever too. The annoyed Ecken knew he had no choice and told

Luther he could have precisely twenty-four hours; and so the assembled spectacle of people had to scatter until the next day.

When they gathered again, Ecken repeated his question and pushed harder. “Explain yourself now!” he said. “Will you defend all your writings, or disavow some of them?” This time, Luther was ready.

“Most Serene Lord Emperor, Most Illustrious Princes, Most Gracious Lords,” Luther began, in that conciliatory and humble tone that must have rankled his foes as much as anything he would say. “To this day I have thought and written in simplicity of heart, solely with a view to the glory of God and the pure instruction of Christ’s faithful people.”

Then Luther asked his audience to observe that his books “are not all of the same kind.” Some dealt with piety in faith and morals, “with such simplicity and so agreeably with the gospels that my adversaries themselves are compelled to admit them useful, harmless, and clearly worth reading by a Christian. . . . If I should begin to recant here, what, I beseech you, would I be doing but condemning . . . that truth which is admitted by friends and foes alike?”

Others of his books dealt with “writings leveled against the papacy and the doctrine of the papists,” Luther explained, “as against those who by their wicked doctrines and precedents have laid waste Christendom by doing harm to the souls and the bodies of men . . . and are to this day being devoured without end in shameful fashion.” Were he to recant the writing of these books, Luther observed, “the only effect will be to add strength to such tyranny, to open not the windows but the main doors to such blasphemy.”

He wasn’t through. A third category of books, he declared, were written against private individuals “who have exerted themselves in defense of the Roman tyranny and to the overthrow

of that piety which I have taught. . . . But it is not in my power to recant them, because that recantation would give that tyranny and blasphemy an occasion to lord it over those whom I defend and to rage against God's people more violently than ever."

Luther concluded, "I shall be most ready . . . to recant any error, and I shall be the first in casting my writings into the fire" if—and of course this was the condition on which all hung—if he, Martin Luther, could be convinced of any scriptural errors.

This wasn't the answer for which Ecken was angling. He sternly demanded a plain reply to the following question: Was he, or was he not, prepared to recant? These were the sole options before him, and he must choose one without further delay.

Luther's response, offered up without notes, is recorded as follows: "Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning, I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us." He concluded with the famous words for which he is most well-known. "Here I stand," he said. "I can do no other. God help me. Amen."[25]

After the people heard these words, the hall exploded in chaotic confusion. To Emperor Charles it was plainly hopeless to continue. The day's proceedings were at an end, and all now made their exits. Luther returned to his lodgings and gulped down an Einbecker beer brought to him by a thoughtful supporter.

Most accounts of Luther's life seem to imply that this is essentially where things ended, but that is far from the case. After Luther's historic stand, there was still much haggling to be done. In the days after his appearance before the diet, a committee met privately with Luther and tried to find a compromise. They acknowledged that Luther was correct on some counts and asked him to revoke some of his other points. But Luther had come too far and was unable to concede anything they asked.

Afterward Luther was allowed to make his way home from Worms, enjoying the same warm outpouring of support on the return journey as he had experienced in the other direction. Wherever he stopped, boisterous crowds assembled to hear the extraordinary preachings of this outlaw monk. Luther had been journeying for one week when he received a surprise. Actually, he had some idea it would happen, but he didn't know when it would happen, nor the details. Suddenly, two men on horseback, armed with deadly crossbows, appeared. They galloped up to Luther in his wagon, halting him and his companion dead in their tracks. They then blindfolded Luther, put him on the back of one of their horses, and galloped away into the woods.

Luther knew his own Duke Frederick had orchestrated this "kidnapping" for Luther's own safety and the preservation of Luther's cause. Frederick thought it best to pretend to kidnap Luther before anyone else could do so in earnest, and murder him—so he was now spirited to the eleventh-century Wartburg Castle, high on a crest in the endless woods of Thuringia, which bordered Luther's own province of Saxony. Here, in relative solitude and safety, Luther would wait until the trouble blew over, if it would blow over. He would grow out his tonsure and would grow a beard to be disguised as a knight so that even the others in the castle would not know who he was. The only one at the castle who knew his real identity was the castellan, Berlepsch, who

was entrusted with feeding Luther and seeing that no one else knew anything about him. To any souls expressing curiosity about this mysterious castlemate, he was simply called "Junker [Knight] George."

While Luther was sequestered at the Wartburg, Emperor Charles V put forth the ominous Edict of Worms, which decreed, "We forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favor the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves. . . . Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously."[26] In other words, Charles had accepted the negative verdict at Worms against Luther, who was now officially not merely a heretic but a criminal too.

Of course, this was precisely why Frederick had "kidnapped" Luther in advance. His whereabouts were secret, except to a tiny group of friends in Wittenberg. In fact, many now believed him to be dead. But Luther, very much alive, put this time to what became historic use. He read and wrote voraciously. That spring—in the shockingly brief time of eleven weeks—Luther translated the entire New Testament into German. There had been other translations into German before, but never one that could be read by most Germans, and never one that was so well done. Five centuries later, it is still used.

While Luther labored at this monumental task, he also struggled with a host of maladies that would multiply and plague him for the rest of his life, including depression, constipation, and hemorrhoids. And during this time too, while Luther was in hiding, the revolution he had unleashed continued, albeit unfortunately without his wise oversight. For example, on one occasion, student demonstrators, under the "leadership" of Luther's overzealous colleague

Andreas Karlstadt, hurled rocks through stained-glass windows of churches, smashed religious statuaries, broke pipe organs, and otherwise ran riot through Wittenberg. And they did it all in the name of their hero, Martin Luther. They wanted to eliminate every one of the church practices Luther had objected to, but when Luther himself learned of their violent activities, he was outraged. These intemperate radicals were threatening the success of everything Luther had worked for.

The news he kept hearing was so bad that less than a year after his involuntary confinement, he knew he must return home to "lead a more orderly process of change."[27] Returning was of course very dangerous. Still, despite even the stern disapproval of Frederick himself, who felt it reckless to leave the safety of the Wartburg, Luther made his way back to Wittenberg. It was one thing to have overseen a revolution, to have shown people what was wrong with what had become of the Roman Catholic Church; but it was another thing entirely to figure out how to govern a new church in an orderly and respectful way. In many ways, this would prove more difficult.

Immediately upon his return, Luther got to work, giving a series of sermons meant to offer the proper way forward—in the process rebuking some of those who had acted so rashly in his absence. He also published a book outlining how his followers, who despite Luther's protestations were now called "Lutherans," should best reform the church. Luther was quite clear that the vandalism and rioting didn't serve God's purposes. Instead, his followers must ever "act with fear and humiliation. . . . For here we battle not against pope or bishop, but against the devil. . . . And do you imagine he is asleep?"[28]

He continued, “Therefore all those have erred who have helped and consented to abolish the mass—not that it was not a good thing, but that it was not done in an orderly way. You say it was right according to the Scriptures. I agree, but what becomes of order? For it was done in wantonness, with no regard for proper order and with offense to your neighbor.”[29]

It was now also necessary for Luther to define authority in the church, especially since he had repudiated the authority of the pope and other church officials. What was left, Luther wrote, was the Holy Scriptures themselves—the only inspired and authoritative Word of God. According to Luther, the Word of God was the single source of doctrine and the only infallible guide to salvation. The Latin term he used, *sola scriptura*, has served to express this theological position ever since.

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And so Luther lived in Wittenberg, unable to go beyond the borders of Saxony, wherein Frederick would protect him. In October 1524, Luther made a bold and highly symbolic change, giving up his monastic garb for ordinary clothing, signaling his refusal to make distinctions between pastors and parishioners. As he had said before, all baptized Christians were part of “the priesthood of believers.”

As many have pointed out, Luther was a man with great virtues and great faults both, a man who made mistakes, some of which he acknowledged and others he didn’t. Most biographers, in summing up his life, note that some of Luther’s most dismaying actions had to do with what became known as the Peasants’ War.

Luther famously cited Romans chapter 13, in which Saint Paul speaks of obeying the earthly authorities, urging all citizens to obey the government. But as a result of the social chaos that in part had grown out of Luther's own statements and actions, many peasants took matters into their own hands regarding the injustices they felt, both from the church and from the secular authorities.

Luther, the man who challenged church authorities and who proudly told everyone that his own ancestors were peasants, might well have been expected to be on the peasants' side in this grievance. He did speak out against the injustices of the ruling classes against the peasants, but when Luther saw how the peasants were behaving, often cruelly murdering everyone in their way, Luther took a harsh stand against them.

In a typically bluntly titled pamphlet, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, Luther charged that the peasants had murdered their enemies and had "committed their crimes under the cover of Christ's name, thereby shamefully blaspheming God."[30] He believed it was the role of the government to keep order and declared that like mad dogs, the peasants had to be put down. But these were words he would soon regret. When it was all over, a hundred thousand peasants had been massacred, and Luther was horrified. Now he thundered against the mercilessness of the ruling classes, but it was too little too late, and on this score, Luther's reputation would be permanently stained.

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Luther had often attacked the Roman teachings on priestly celibacy, which had been mandated only since 1123 and only in the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox

churches never mandated it, except in the cases of those priests who wished eventually to become bishops. The Vatican had instituted the doctrine for three main reasons. First, Church authorities at that time held the view that all sexuality, including within marriage, was sinful; second, it was thought that an unmarried priest could better serve God; and third, married priests who became wealthy would want to pass their wealth on to their children instead of to the Church. By Luther's time, Church teaching on celibacy had become so entrenched "that to question it and then to promote clerical marriage struck very close to the social foundations of the church and government."[31] But Luther spoke out strongly in favor of both the good of human sexual expression within marriage as well as the benefits of matrimony itself for religious leaders.

Then in June 1525, at the age of forty-two, Luther decided to do more than speak and write on the subject. He married a runaway nun named Katherine von Bora, one of a dozen he helped rescue from their convent in Nimmschen. Luther had learned that as a result of his teachings, these nuns had tried to leave the convent but were prevented by force. Feeling responsible, he hatched a plan to free them. A man Luther knew named Leonhard Kopp would secretly carry the nuns away while they hid in his delivery wagon. Most accounts of this escape colorfully maintain that they hid in smelly herring barrels, but we now know this a fanciful and false addition.

Luther and his wife apparently had a genuinely happy marriage. "Katie," as her husband called her, bore him six children. "There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage," Luther wrote a friend. "One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtails on the pillow which were not there before."[32] But marriage and family life seem to have suited Luther

extremely well. He seemed to love and respect and esteem his Katie tremendously. In his will, Luther broke with tradition once more when he left his whole estate to Katherine instead of to his children. He didn't want her to "have to look to the children for a handout, but rather the children should be obligated to her, honor her, and be subject to her as God has commanded."[33]

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By 1526, when Emperor Charles V was more able to focus on the troubles emanating from the monk in Wittenberg, it was essentially too late to do anything. Luther's ideas had spread so far and wide in the previous years, and had been embraced by so many leaders in so many areas of Europe, that rolling things back was no longer possible. And so, conceding defeat—at least in part—the imperial diet held at Speyer in 1526 only reaffirmed the Edict of Worms for Catholic territories. In other words, where Lutheranism couldn't be squashed, it would be officially tolerated. But the notion that another church besides the Roman Catholic Church could be legal in Europe was an epochal victory, and not just for Luther but for the future of religious liberty, which would spread slowly but surely until, after the United States' founding, it would be thought of as a right for all citizens.

Luther continued to think about church reforms and to write prodigiously. He developed a new definition of vocation—or of serving God. It was no longer merely about living in a monastery but could also be ordinary family life: feeding children, growing crops, and washing diapers. Everything could—and should—be done to the glory of God.

And just as everything should be done to the glory of God, so every man, woman, and child must take their own faith seriously—as seriously as any monk or nun or priest. So Luther used

every means available to help the common people understand their faith and live it out. Music was one of the most effective. He declared that church music must no longer be considered the domain of chanting monks and nuns and taught his congregants to sing loudly and joyously. Luther knew that singing lyrics was one way to learn the basics of the faith, and he himself wrote many hymns, the most famous of which is "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Luther was also a proponent of public education for children and of the idea of compelling parents to send their children to schools where they would learn about God and his gift of salvation, if their parents themselves didn't inform them. He wrote a small catechism, intended for teaching children, and a large catechism, meant for pastors and teachers.

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While there is so much to admire about Luther—most notably his courage in the face of church authorities and his adherence to what he perceived as truth, whatever the cost—there is sadly enough to grieve us and infuriate us too. But how to explain this great contradiction? For one thing, it seems that the titanic force of will and passion Luther brought to everything also led him to think and say many greatly regrettable things, especially in his later years, as his health and circumstances changed. The very attributes in him that were good and helpful in battling his theological opponents were also sometimes very harmful.

Luther's attitude, for example, toward Jews, Muslims, and Anabaptists (who teach the so-called believer's baptism) is rightly shocking to modern Christians. As one biographer explains it, "In the case of volatile personalities, disappointment, frustration, and a sense of lost power can lead to rage, and Luther vented plenty of it in his senior years. His anger was never so evident as

in his late attacks on three enemies beyond the protestant circle: the pope as Antichrist, the menacing Muslim or Turk, and the Jews, especially the rabbis."[34]

Toward the end of his life, Luther was convinced that everything happening in the world meant the second coming was imminent, which only exacerbated his already great impatience and cranky attitude toward everything and everyone. For example, in 1545, the year before his death, Luther grew irritated by the pope's attempt to scotch efforts by the emperor to create a church council. His response was to publish a rant titled *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, in which he labeled the pope the Antichrist. If his vicious words weren't enough, Luther's friend, the artist Lucas Cranach, was enlisted to illustrate the book with obscene drawings.

Luther also worried about the violent encroachments of Muslim armies into Christian Europe. Was the world about to end? The advancing Muslim armies strongly indicated this, as did his view that the pope and the Roman Catholic Church were apostate.

Luther's attitude toward Jews became grotesque, although it bears saying that not many years before, he sang a dramatically different tune toward them. In 1523 he authored a tract titled *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, which was very sympathetic. At that time he sincerely hoped that by reforming the church as he was doing, these brothers and sisters might be converted and drawn toward Jesus as their Messiah.

But in 1536 Luther allied himself with some provocative proponents of active anti-Semitism, including Elector John Frederick, who issued a decree banishing Jews from Saxony. Jews who had read Luther's earlier works naturally believed Luther would help them. Instead, in 1543 Luther wrote a screed titled *The Jews and Their Lies*. This book rehearsed monstrous calumnies

about the Jews: that they ritually killed Christian children, poisoned wells, and profaned the Lord's Supper, all of which Luther sincerely believed. Most of all, Luther was angry that the rabbis had not accepted his earlier overtures to see the Old Testament as pointing toward Jesus. Their stubborn refusal to do so, in Luther's eyes, was the worst kind of blasphemy.

Luther attacked the Jews in still other tracts. Convinced that Christ would return soon, Luther called on civil rulers to chase the Jews out of Saxony to keep it "pure." So much for religious freedom, the very freedom Luther had in effect spent decades demanding from Rome.

What had happened, suggests biographer Martin Marty, was that Luther "had become so comfortable with his certitude that it took on the character of the very self-centered security, the intellectual and moral self-assurance, against which he had always warned. It served as his license to threaten others. The apostle of Christian freedom was not here free of his own theological prejudices," and his attitude toward the Jews, among others with whom he disagreed, "showed that he had not conquered his own worst self."[35]

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Martin Luther died in 1546, at age sixty-two, in Eisleben, five hundred yards from the very place where he was born. His body was carried in a three-day funeral cortege back to Wittenberg, where he was buried in Castle Church, appropriately just beneath the pulpit where he had delivered himself of innumerable sermons through the decades, and where he lies to this day.

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The year 2017 marked five hundred years since Luther wrote his Ninety-Five Theses, and 2021 marks five hundred years since his historic stand at Worms. There can be little question that we in the West live in the world to which Luther opened the door, although, of course, he would say it wasn't he but God who did the opening.

So what shall we make of his life, influence, and legacy? It's not too much to say that the life of this brash and fiery German monk served as the midwife not just to Protestantism but to the modern world itself. And just as his fiercest critics warned, by opening the door to a second church in the world, he opened a door to thousands, and to every kind of heresy Luther himself would have hated. But that was the inevitable price of freedom. And in the mostly free world we live in, one has the freedom to choose one's church—or to reject all churches—which is part and parcel of what it means to be free. So Luther's actions have had impossibly far-reaching consequences, both for good and for ill.

Luther is an example of extraordinary courage, of someone willing to die rather than sacrifice what he was sure God was saying in the Bible. In a nutshell, he looked to God for approval, and all else was immaterial.

Eight hundred million people today call themselves Protestants, most of whom trace their spiritual lineage to Martin Luther. But even those in the Roman Catholic Church today can trace some of their practices to Luther. Congregational singing has become a normal part of worship services, often with "Protestant" hymns. And the Church leadership has over the centuries and decades made a number of adjustments to their official teachings that can't fail to be traced back to the teachings of the intemperate maniac and "wild boar" who once raged against them.

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The story of Martin Luther is both breathtakingly inspiring and humbling. It can't help but remind us that even the most courageous soul, who nobly and bravely stands up for truth—and thereby looses incalculable good on the world—is also himself a sinner, capable of terrible thoughts and actions. Anyone familiar with basic Christian teaching will know this already, but to be reminded of it in the outsized life of this towering historical figure drives home the point all the more.

It was Luther himself who coined the Latin aphorism *simul justus et peccator*, which perfectly sums up this idea: those who trust in Jesus by faith are "just" (meaning "justified and righteous") and yet are "sinners" at the same time. We—all of us who believe—are both things simultaneously. All things considered, this concept is perhaps the most important thing anyone can ever remember—and it seems fitting that not just Luther's theology but his life too, should help us see that.
