

Introducing Martin Luther



Martin Luther & John Calvin are probably the two best-known Protestant Reformers (pastors who worked to “clean up” the church). Both were well educated with training in law, and both had deep roots in the Catholic Church of their day. However, while they had much in common, they moved the Reformation along in different ways.

Martin Luther was born in Germany in 1483 and spent his childhood and early adulthood gripped by fear. Luther feared the judgment and disapproval he received from his father and teachers anytime he fell short. This fear became the driving force behind Luther’s decisions and views of the gospel. Martin’s father wanted his son to study and practice law, but he became a monk and studied theology instead – all in an attempt to please God and justify himself. Luther only thought of God’s righteousness as his judgment of sinners. And so, knowing that he was a sinner, Luther expected nothing from God but anger and judgment.

The Righteousness of God

As he grew older, Luther realized that his fear of God had become dread, and he viewed God as an unforgiving tyrant. Rather than loving the Lord with all his heart, he resented and hated God. In his early thirties, Luther was teaching Scripture at the University of Wittenberg, and he was confused by the book of Romans. If God’s righteousness was only his judgment, how could the gospel be good news if it revealed the righteousness of God (Rom 1.17)? This problem forced Luther to question his understanding of what Scripture means by “the righteousness of God.”

As he taught through the book of Romans at the University, he realized that there was more to God’s righteousness than just his wrath. The good news of God’s righteousness meant that God gives his righteousness to people who need it, but do not deserve it and cannot earn it. Luther knew that he needed it and was overjoyed to find that God gives it freely.



The Doors of Wittenberg Castle Church, where, on October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 Theses

Gospel of Freedom

Luther emphasized grace as something given freely and something that frees the Christian. This free gift and the freedom it brings became the focus of his thinking. Luther's emphasis on the joy of gospel freedom is evident in his writing:

“I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture had gained a new meaning. And from that point on the phrase ‘the justice of God’ no longer filled me with hatred, but rather became unspeakably sweet by virtue of a great love.”

—Luther's Preface to *The Latin Writings*

“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God's grace and knowledge of it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all His creatures; and this is the work of the Holy Ghost in faith. Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, in love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace; and thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light fires.”

—Luther's Preface to *A Commentary on Romans*

Questions for Young Listeners

Listen to Dr. Trueman discuss Martin Luther and see if you can answer these questions:

What did Luther want to do for the church?

What did Luther think needed to be changed?

How does Luther's work (almost 500 years ago) still help us as a church?

*Listen to Dr. Trueman discuss Calvin tonight, and see if you can remember enough to answer questions about him on the handout tomorrow.