

BreakThru

From Catechism to Christ

MARTIN LUTHER

LEARNING EVENT MAKE-UP

MARTIN LUTHER'S LIFE & LEGACY

A single voice protested and spoke up for God and truth, and a world was shaken. A man who desperately wanted to find peace with God searched the Scriptures and discovered it was faith in Christ—not his own perfection—that brings peace with God. Does this mean anything for a teenager? **We—YOU—are called to seek and proclaim truth against falsehood, grace against works, and Christ's call to risky, radical discipleship against a dull, noncommittal religion masquerading as Christianity.**

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the son of a middle class family in Germany. He attended college and then law school, as his father wished. Upon finding himself in a terrible thunderstorm when returning to law school, Luther promised God that if he were spared, he would become a monk.

Keeping his promise, Luther entered a religious monastery. A troubled man, Luther was constantly fearful of God's wrath and reportedly made his confession as often as twenty times a day. His superior encouraged him to work toward a doctorate degree to focus his mind on other things. In his biblical studies, Luther came to the realization that others had suffered the same anxiety and despair that he felt about being unworthy before God. Luther found his solace and calm in scripture. Romans 1:17, "The one who is righteous will live by faith," became his inspiration. He completed his studies and became a professor at Wittenberg College.

In Luther's time, the powerful Roman Catholic church was the only representation of Christianity in the Western world, an institution in which religion, politics, and civic matters were tightly intertwined. This blurring of lines led to many abuses, both political and religious. Many decisions that should have been spiritual were influenced by church leaders' desires to maintain or expand power and influence in civic matters.

For example, while Luther was making his discoveries in scripture, Pope Leo X was busy raising money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—a large, ornate, and expensive church. Building projects required capital, and human sin was a convenient and limitless source of income.



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At that time the church taught that people required a number of merits to pardon their sin before they could be allowed into heaven after death. Merits could be earned by prayer, fasting, worship, going on trips to see relics in Rome, and so on. If individuals didn't acquire enough merits, purgatory awaited them after death. Average people didn't have the resources or time to acquire the merits needed to bypass purgatory, but monks did. Monks even earned extra merits, which the Church decided to sell as indulgences for the forgiveness of sins. The money earned from selling indulgences could be used to fund the Pope's very large Basilica!

The church sent priests from town to town extracting money from peasants concerned about the fate of their souls and the souls of their dead loved ones. Professor Luther learned of this practice when Father John Tetzel arrived in Wittenberg and began alarming Luther's parishioners. This abuse and other disagreements with the church prompted Luther to write his 95 Theses (or statements of condemnation) and post them on the door of the college church (the 16th century version of a bulletin board). Luther hoped that the Pope would read the grievances and clean house in the church. This was not the case, and Luther spent the remainder of his life fighting for and defending his understanding of the Gospel and our justification by God's mercy through our faith and not by any merit of our own. Luther referred to the Pope as an anti-Christ because he believed that term appropriate for anyone blocking people from Christ or working against scripture's teachings.

How would you react to someone twisting faith in God into something harmful?

How is faith in God different from faith in the church or religious leaders?

What have you publicly protested? How did it feel?

What's cool about knowing the Lutheran tradition was kick-started by a rock-the-boat, rabble-rousing protestor trying to reform the existing church?

WHAT MAKES US LUTHERAN?

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran Pastor serving at a church called House for all Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado. Click this link (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5N6jEesDIY>) and watch a video from when she spoke at the 2012 ELCA National Youth Gathering in New Orleans. In this video, Nadia Bolz-Weber spends about 90 seconds laying out what she believes to be the core distinctive beliefs of Lutheran Christians.

1. God's Grace is a gift that is freely given.

2. Nobody is climbing the spiritual ladder. God always comes to us first.

3. We are all simultaneously sinner and saint.

In addition to and including the highlights from Nadia's talk, here are five keys to Luther's basic biblical theology—things that set us apart as Luther-an Christians!

1. Two Sacraments: In the Bible, Luther could only find two true sacraments commanded with physical elements attached—baptism and communion. Confirmation, ordination, marriage, last rites and even penance were worthwhile additions to the Christian life, but not essential for salvation. Faith in God's promise of grace is what matters, not participation in rites.

2. Priesthood of All Believers: All people are equal in God's sight. A priest or pastor is no different than anyone, except that he or she has been set aside for certain duties. Everyone comes out of the waters of baptism a priest. There is no biblical basis for priests to remain unmarried, for monasteries to exist or for churches to take orders from Rome.

3. Sinners & Saints: Every believer justified by faith is simul justis et peccator—at the same time saint and sinner. We are sinners, but trusting in Jesus' blood, we are saints in God's sight.

4. The Universal Church: The church had taught a person was damned apart from its blessings and sacraments. If you were kicked out of the visible Christian kingdom, there was no salvation for you. In the Bible, Luther saw the church as much larger than a particular earthly organization. The church was a spiritual community of souls united in faith—all believers—whether connected with Rome or not.

5. Grace, God's Word, Faith: Luther began to draw on three central themes that would become his motto. From these, the Reformation motto became "Sola Gratia, Solum Verbum, Sola Fide" or "Grace Alone, Word Alone, Faith Alone."

GRACE ALONE: With indulgences, the church was selling what couldn't be sold. God's grace is a free gift, bought for the undeserving by the blood of Christ.

GOD'S WORD ALONE: The church had made up many rules, laws and traditions that had no scriptural base. Luther would rely on God's Word alone—not the pope, the church or any other voice to tell him what to do.

FAITH ALONE: It is not the merits of the saints that save. It was not one's own good works that save. It is only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ that one could come to God.

Using a separate sheet of paper, choose two of the Five Keys listed above (or of the three points from Nadia Bolz-Weber's talk) that are most important to you and for each explain in 4-5 sentences what they mean for you personally and for your family.