**"Where did Lutheranism start?"**

## A brief history of Martin Luther and the birth of the Lutheran Church

For the first five centuries after Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, the Christian Church grew and spread in spite of government persecution. The devil – seeming to realize that attacking the church from the outside only caused it to grow stronger – then began to instead attack from the inside, attacking truths of the Word. Sometimes those attacks were met and turned back, other times they made inroads. Unfortunately towards the end of the first millennium, quite a number of false teachings had intruded into the church's creed.

Just one example: for hundreds of years, the clergy had – correctly – been free to marry; around the year 1000 the church decreed that clergy would have to remain single. It was contrary to Scripture, and was one of many errors which had intruded themselves into the official teachings of the church. At one point the church even decreed that it was sinful for any person, other than a clergy person, to even read the Bible!

Of those errors in teaching, the most damaging was the false teaching that Jesus HADN’T done everything necessary for salvation, that instead people needed to do good works to earn salvation. The Church taught that only those who held to the Church’s rigidly prescribed teachings could have a chance. If you were part of the Church, but hadn’t done enough good works, the Church said that you would first go to a place called “purgatory,” where you’d suffer for your lack of good deeds. The Church even went so far as to claim that you could pay money to the church, and in exchange you would be “sold” forgiveness of sins! How sad! No one could be sure of salvation, because no one could be sure that they’d done enough good works! It was a time of spiritual darkness.

It was into this religious climate of fear and uncertainty that Martin Luther was born, November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Germany. A bright boy, Luther began training to become a lawyer, but he was preoccupied with spiritual concerns. He recognized his sinful short-comings, and he agonized over the awful gap that he saw between himself and God. Luther was troubled, filled with uncertainty.

While a college student, a fateful journey would turn Luther’s life. Luther was caught in a terrific thunderstorm. When a bolt of lightning struck a tree near him, he cried out in fear, “Saint Anne, save me! I will become a monk!”

Having survived the storm, he took the vow seriously, and against the wishes of his parents, he entered the monastery, hoping there to find the peace he so craved. Luther proved himself to be an exemplary monk. He prayed continuously, worked diligently at any tasks given to him, and spent much of his day in earnest confession. And yet, the troubled Luther knew that his piety was insufficient to please a perfect, holy God. He could not escape his terror. At one point, feeling so overwhelmed with guilt, he even whipped his own body, thinking that thereby his conscience could find rest. None of it worked.

His superior, a man named Staupitz, saw both Luther’s talents and his troubled heart. He gave Martin one word of advice: “Martin, don’t look so much at yourself. Instead look at Jesus.” But what could Luther do? The official position of the Church was that you had to look to yourself, to your own good works! But Staupitz’ advice was good, and perhaps it planted a seed which would later sprout.

Staupitz attempted to help Luther by keeping him so busy that he’d have little time to consider his shortcomings. So in 1508 Luther - by that time an ordained priest, but only 25 years old - was appointed to a teaching position at a new University in Wittenburg, Germany, where Luther would be instructing his pupils in Bible.

While preparing for a class on the book of Romans, Luther's conscience was captured by this passage: "the just shall live by faith." Luther caught the point: the church had taught him that salvation was something you earned by what you did. But God’s Word was saying something completely different. God’s Word was saying that salvation was something that God gave to you freely, through faith. What a contrast! Luther later commented that it was like the doors of heaven being thrown open! Where formerly he had feared God, thought God was unreasonable and angry, now Luther began to view God correctly, as a loving Father, eagerly desiring our salvation. Good news!

What do you do with good news? You share it! And Luther did so. He excitedly began to teach, "Forgiveness of sins is not something which we earn for ourselves by our own good deeds. Rather, it is a free gift which God gives to us as a result of all that Jesus did for us." Many were struck by this “new teaching.” In reality it wasn’t new at all. Instead, it was a return to what the Bible had always taught, and what the church had therefore originally taught! So now Luther’s desire was that the entire church would reform itself, would return to what it had originally, and correctly, taught.

As Luther continued his studies of the Word, he slowly began to unlearn many of the falsehoods which the church had taught him, and in turn shared those truths with his classes and with the people at the church in Wittenburg. (Luther was so popular that in addition to his professor’s duties, he was appointed to be preacher at the town church.) Things came to a head on October 31, 1517, when Luther posted the 95 theses (“sentences”) on the Wittenburg church door, protesting the abuse of indulgences.

Indulgences were sold by the church - the pope claimed the authority to grant forgiveness of sins when the indulgence was purchased. And of course the claim was that the more money you paid, the more sins were forgiven, either your own sins or someone else’s. The pope even claimed that he could grant forgiveness to those who had died, who were now suffering in purgatory! Luther protested this practice and he offered an open challenge to a debate on the subject. Soon all of Europe was in a stir! Because the printing press had been recently invented, soon the 95 theses had been re-printed and distributed all over the continent!

How would the church respond? Unfortunately they demanded that Luther come to Rome and give answer to the charge of false teaching! Luther’s political ruler, the elector of Saxony, used his influence to insist that Luther’s case be heard in Germany instead. Several meeting were held, in which Luther continually went back to the truths of the Bible, while the church’s representatives instead used the traditions of the church as their basis for argument. So, no agreement could be reached. As these years passed, Luther studied the Word more and more, more truths became clear to him, and his desire to take people into the Word become even more keen.

Events culminated four years after later, in a meeting at Worms (pronounced “warmz”), Germany in 1521, when Luther was called before THE political ruler of the day, the Emperor Charles. The Turks were attacking the empire, and Charles needed the German princes to help fight the invasion. So, he sought an expedient end to this “religious matter.” Very simply, Emperor Charles called Luther before him and had copies of Luther’s writings there. He told Luther that he had no interest in hearing a debate on the truths of the Bible; rather, Luther was simply to admit that all he had written was false. If Luther refused to do so, he would be declared an outlaw, and anyone could kill him after 20 days. Luther asked for one day to consider it.

The following day, Luther responded, *“Unless you can prove from the Bible that I have made wrong statements, I cannot and will not take back anything. My conscience is bound by the Word of God. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”*

The results? A) Luther was declared an outlaw, but his local ruler protected him from harm. B) The church had made clear that it had no interest in returning to the Biblical truths on which it had once stood, so many years ago. C) Those who stood with Luther on the truths of the Word were no longer welcome in the church, and so a “new” church was born.

In reality, that “new church” wasn’t really “new” at all. Instead, it was a church which had returned to the original truths of the Word of God, the truths which the early church had joyously proclaimed. The enemies of Luther immediately branded the people who had returned to the Word with the derisive name, “Lutheran!” It stuck. And Emperor Charles would be kept so busy with the Turks that more than 20 years would pass before he could again give this “religious problem” any attention. By that time, the truths of the Word were well-rooted in many, many hearts, assuring that the clear words of God would continue to be proclaimed for all to hear!

Today, Living Word Lutheran Church – and the church body to which we belong – continues in the same tradition. We believe and teach that the Bible is the Word of God. We do not “follow” Luther or claim that he is the Church's foundation. Luther was important only as an instrument through whom God brought His truths back to light. Only Jesus Christ is our shepherd, and only Jesus is the true foundation of the Christian Church. We retain the name “Lutheran” because hopefully it reminds us that we stand on the same truths on which Luther stood. We take our stand on Scripture alone, as the only authoritative message from God. We take our stand on God’s grace alone, not looking for any merit or worthiness in ourselves. And we’re sure that we will spend eternity in heaven as a free gift, a gift given to us by God, a gift given to us by faith alone.

It’s a gift meant for you, too!