AWESOME stories

Protestant Reformation and the Thirty Years War

It's 1517, and a monk named Martin Luther has just finished nailing a list of 95 objections (which he has to practices by the Catholic Church) to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Not intending to be a revolutionary, but merely using this opportunity to publicly state his adverse opinions, Luther actually unleashes what is known as "The Protestant Reformation."

A broadsheet, marking the 100th anniversary of Luther's actions, is published in 1617. It doesn't merely depict the event. It seems to show that Luther and his similar-believing followers are gearing-up for war.

One hundred years after Luther nails his paper to the door, individuals in Europe are fully embracing his ideas:

- People don't need priests to gain access to God's mercy;
- The Roman Catholic Church is corrupt;
- Luther's Reformation of the Catholic Church is essential to the salvation of individuals.

By the time Luther's actions reach their centenary, no particular moment is marked as the beginning of the Reformation. But Protestant leaders in Saxony (a German state) sense that with the 100th anniversary approaching, they could celebrate the moment when Luther first publicly challenged, among other things, the authority of the Pope.

The centenary broadsheet, depicted above—which was made from a wood-block print—depicts the day that Protestants, in 1617, are celebrating Luther's actions as the first step in throwing-off Rome's religious and theological authority.

How does the broadsheet square with reality? Did Luther really nail his religious manifesto to the door of the Castle Church? Did he actually challenge the Pope in public ways never-before undertaken by a monk?

Neil MacGregor—Director of the British Museum, where a copy of the broadsheet is maintained—tells us how the drawing matches-up with reality:

> *I've got the print in front of me now. It's a crowded composition, but the key message is quite clear. In a dream, God is revealing to the Elector of Saxony the historic role of Martin Luther.*
>
> *We see the Elector* [of Saxony] *asleep. Below him, Luther reads the Bible in a great shaft of light coming down from Heaven, where the Trinity is blessing him.*
>
> *As Luther looks up, light and blessings pour down on to the page in front of him. Scripture is literally the revealed word of God, and to read scripture is to encounter God, and this is not happening inside a church.*
>
> *You couldn't have a simpler statement that, for Protestants, Bible reading is the foundation of faith. A foundation which, thanks to the new technology of printing, was now available to all believers, in their own home.*

This broadsheet was made in Leipzig, Germany. At the time it was produced, that town was at the center of European printing.

Because of the printing press, Luther's words and ideas were more widely available for people to read and discuss. It is one reason why his "95 Theses" didn't remain just a list of problematic issues, expressed by a local monk, but rather led to a Reformation of thinking about what it means to worship God.

Even so, at the time of Luther, much of Europe was still illiterate. Images, like the one depicted in the broadsheet, were helpful communication aids which could be likened to today's political cartoons. Both methods use well-crafted images, coupled with a few words, to deliver biting messages.

One item, about which Luther was extremely upset, was the Church's sale of indulgences. The monk viewed the sale of such paperwork as a hoodwinking, money-making scheme which had absolutely no impact on one's salvation (or the time one spends in purgatory) but was an excellent tool for separating people from their money. The Church, for example, used some of the indulgence-sale proceeds to build St. Peter's Basilica (at the Vatican).

We see the phrase *vom ablas*, which means "about indulgence," in the broadsheet. That's the title of Luther's attack on the Catholic Church (for selling indulgences). We also see Luther's really huge pen which, far bigger than himself, reaches all the way to Rome (where the Catholic Church was headquartered).

Not only does Luther's quill pen go right through the head of a lion labeled Pope Leo X, it even knocks-off the Pope's crown.

What does that part of the illustration suggest about the power of Luther's pen? That it had a mighty impact, exerting a force strong-enough to start a societal revolution known today as the Protestant Reformation.

What did the power of that pen do to the power of the Pope? It greatly damaged (if not destroyed) it.

Neil MacGregor tells us more about this wood-block-produced illustration:

> *Woodblocks like this are the first mass media, with print-runs of up to tens of thousands, so that each single copy cost just a few 'pfennigs'* [a small-denomination German-penny coin]*, the price of a pair of sausages or a couple of pints of ale. Satirical prints like this one would be pinned up in inns and market places, and then widely discussed. This is in every sense popular art, the equivalent of the tabloid press or a satirical magazine...*

With the backing of German princes, Luther's revolution continued in the early 17th century. Not long after this broadsheet was published, war broke out in Europe. Religious differences were at the core of this fight, which is known as the Thirty Years War. Beginning in 1618, the seemingly endless conflict devastated Central Europe for decades.

The war was never really winnable by either side, so it came to a close thirty years on—after many, many lives had been lost. Tolerance between Catholics and Protestants was the only real resolution to the theological conflict. Equality for both sides was the only legal conclusion.

In the 1680s, John Locke (a British philosopher whose words guided America's Founding Fathers) sensed that Christian Europe had really foundered in war. Religious differences between Christians had led to monstrous results.

Locke, in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, realizes that happiness in life can exist even between people with differing religious opinions:

> *The toleration of those who hold different opinions on matters of religion is so agreeable to the Gospel and to reason, that it seems monstrous for men to be blind in so clear a light.*

In other words ... religious differences, between people, ought not to cause them to kill each other. Even the Bible, through its Gospels, allows for differing interpretations on the path to truth. So ... why are we engaging in the "monstrous" act of killing each other over differing opinions about what should (or shouldn't) happen along that path?

Once Europeans began to understand (and internalize) the sense of Locke's approach, on tolerance versus intolerance, they stopped warring over Catholic/Protestation interpretations. Instead, they turned their attention to a different type of revolution: The Enlightenment.

Credits:

Broadsheet, produced in 1617, depicting the early Reformation of the Christian Church as a dream of Friedrich III, also called "Frederick the Wise," the Elector of Saxony. Image online via Wikimedia Commons.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
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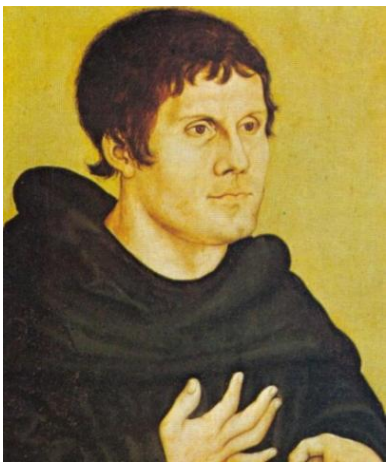
Media Stream



Martin Luther

Image of young Martin Luther, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons. Unknown artist.
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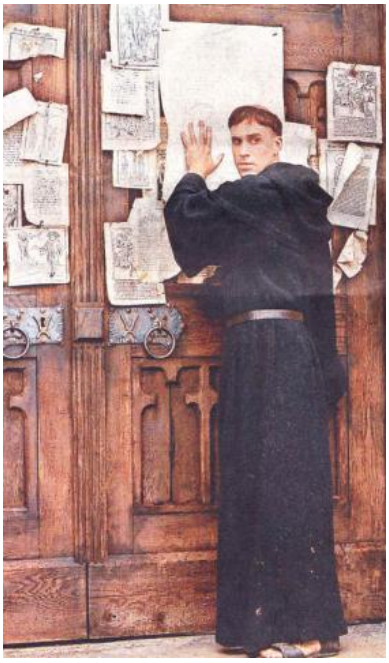

Castle Church in Wittenberg

Image online, via St. Paul's College (in Dublin, Ireland).
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Castle Church Doors at Wittenberg

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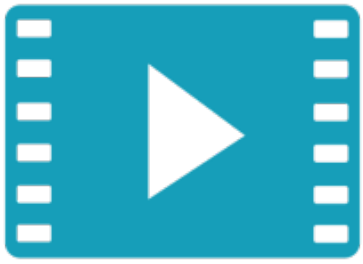

Protestant Reformation - History and Impact

"Reluctant Revolutionary," a PBS documentary about Martin Luther embedded above, is online via PBS' Channel at YouTube. Copyright, PBS, all rights reserved. Video provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the documentary. The documentary is narrated by Liam Neeson.

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