# Luther and the Protestant Reformation: Crash Course World History #218

Crash Course: World History
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John Green; Hi, I'm John Green, this is CrashCourse World History, and today we're gonna talk about the Protestant Reformation.

Me from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, this is irrelevant for me, I'm an atheist.

John: Yeah, I know, Me from the Past, because I'm you, although, actually, you are now Episcopalian, a Protestant church started because a king wanted to get a divorce. But anyway, let me submit that religious history is important regardless of your personal religious beliefs, because it helps us to understand the lenses through which people have viewed their lives and communities and given that, the Protestant Reformation is what proper historians refer to as a big-ass deal. Which, I will remind you, is not cursing if you are referring to donkeys.

(Intro)

John: So before the Reformation, pretty much all Christians in Europe were Roman Catholic, yes, there were other types of Christians in Eastern Europe and Asia and Africa, but Roman Catholicism was the dominant form of Christianity and had been since, like, the 4th century. The Protestant Reformation broke so-called Western Christendom into two and then three and then four until finally there were uncountable denominations of Christianity, not just Lutherans, but Apostolic Lutherans and Reformed Lutherans and Free Lutherans and Lutherans for Just Going Back to Being Catholic Because This Has Become So Complicated. This was hugely important, it changed peoples' way of looking at themselves and the world, it led to wider European literacy, and eventually forced governments to grant religious freedoms while also at the same time maybe being more of a political revolution than a religious one.

So during the European Middle Ages, the Catholic church really dominated European civilization, it's almost impossible to imagine the scope of the church's power in the Middle Ages, but let's try. First off, the Catholic church was the caretaker of the most important thing the Christians had - their souls, which, unlike our temporal bodies, were eternal. And then there was the parish priest, who played a pivotal role throughout every person's life, baptizing them, marrying them, hearing their confessions, providing last rites. The church also provided all of the social services. It distributed alms to the poor and ran orphanages and provided what education was available, and most Europeans would, in their lives, meet exactly one person who could read the Bible, which was only available in Latin: their parish priest. And the church owned over 1/3 of all the land in Europe, which helped make it the most powerful economic and political force on the continent, and the Pope claimed authority over all the kings of Europe as the successor to the Roman emperor.

So this was a very powerful institution, and it was undone by one chronically constipated monk. Here at Crash Course, we don't like to get too into, like, great man history, but the Reformation really was initiated and shaped by one man, Martin Luther, no, Stan, the Martin Luther he was named for, no, Stan, the Martin Luther that he was named for, yes. Okay, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Luther studied law, and like most law students, he hated it. Then, one day, a sudden storm blew up, lightning struck him to the ground, and in a panic, he cried, "Help me, Saint Anne, I'll become a monk!" He survived and the next two weeks, he withdrew from University, entered an Augustinian monastery, took his vows, and sent a message to inform his family, who I'm sure were delighted to have spent all that money on education, because monking is so lucrative. In 1505, Luther was sent to Rome on a diplomatic mission, and he ignored all the awesome art and focused instead on Rome's corruption, with prostitutes openly soliciting on the filthy streets, priests who made light of their duties, hurrying through mass so fast that it seemed to mean nothing, and openly deriding church doctrine. Luther was obsessed with his own sinfulness, and he kept confessing incessantly, and finally, his confessor and teacher sent him to the University of Wittenberg, because, you know, they were a little bit annoyed with him, and they figured he'd be good at teaching scripture. These days, of course, incessant confessors are put on the Real Housewives of New Jersey, but back then, you sent them to the University of Wittenberg. Anyway, Luther finally found his answer in St. Paul's epistles, specifically, in one line that said, "The just shall live by faith." In other words, salvation comes through faith, not good works, not through prayer or fasting or vigils or pilgrimages or relics or giving to the poor, or the sacraments, or any action that a person can take, we can't ever be good enough through our actions to merit salvation, we can only have faith, in Latin, sola fide, only faith. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So Martin Luther's new interpretation of sola fide grew into a full scale conflict with the Catholic church, when a friar named Johann Tetzel came to Wittenberg selling indulgences. An indulgence was a donation to the church that came with a promise from the Pope to reduce a sinner's time in purgatory, like, to quote from an indulgence that Friar Tetzel sold, "I replace thee in the state of innocence and purity in which thou wert at the hour of thy baptism." Luther felt like that wasn't the sort of thing that, you know, should be for sale. The price of this whole-life-complete-forgiveness-of-any-horrible-sins certificate, by the way, was three marks, probably about half a year's wages for a laborer. So, Luther didn't like seeing his parishioners handing over money that they didn't have for a scrap of paper that he believed to be meaningless, so in response, he wrote 95 theses against indulgences and then dramatically nailed them to the church door for all to see on October 31st, 1517, or else he mailed them to the archbishop or possibly both, we don't actually know.

This led to a series of debates with other men of the cloth, during which Luther's positions became increasingly radical, starting from the statement that Christians were saved only through faith and the grace of God, for instance, Luther then upped the ante, saying that the church's rituals didn't have the power to save souls, and then he argued that far from being infallible, the church and the Pope made errors all the time. That was a pretty bold thing to say, and then it got even more dramatic, when Luther ultimately denied that the church and the officers of it had any spiritual powers. He said that the priesthood was a human invention and that individual Christians didn't even need priests to receive the grace of God, instead, Luther described a "Priesthood of all believers." So, this had gone from a call for reforming indulgences to a revolution.

So in 1521, Luther was called to defend his ideas before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the imperial diet of worms, or, in German, "vorms" (worms). Also, let me say retroactively now that everyone has commented on my poor German pronunciation, "vittenburg" (Wittenberg). Emperor Charles famously said a single friar who goes countered to all Christianity for a thousand years must be wrong. To which Luther was like, "Stop flapping that hideous Hapsburg jaw of yours". But there was something to what Charles was saying, right, because plenty of radical friars had criticized the church's abuses and hypocrisies over the years, why would Luther prove influential? Well, one reason was the printing press. Now, most people in Europe at the time couldn't read, but a lot of people could, including of course a lot priests, and over two thousand editions of Luther's writings appeared between 1517 and 1526, and his ideas also appeared in pamphlets, and posters, and cartoons that were seen and read aloud, reaching millions of readers and listeners. In short, Luther's ideas were all over like the Tumblr of the day, which was a town crier and broadsides nailed to doors.

And it caused quite a stir, especially the stuff about like the pope being the Antichrist sent by the devil. Like I said, it got pretty radical. But, maybe the most revolutionary of Luther's publications was his new translation of the Bible into German. For the first time ever, non-priests could read the Bible for themselves because Luther used the German that people actually spoke, instead of Latin, and his work quickly caught on among common people. Hundreds of thousands of copies of Luther's Bible were printed. People carried it in their pockets and memorized it. Now, everyone could quote scripture and discuss its meaning.

Now, Luther's theory was that if everyone just returned directly to the scriptures, they would see the one single truth, and the church would be restored to its original simplicity. Yeah, no. I have a message to the restorers of history. There is no original simplicity! The thing is, once you start making scripture accessible to everyone and tell them that their opinions are just as good as those of the clergy, what happens is that people start, you know, having different interpretations of what religious truth is. So, Luther's protests started creating spin-offs: the Zwinglians, and the Calvinists, and the Anabaptists. And then the spin-offs had their own spin-offs. It's like how first there was Iron Man, and then there was The Avengers, and then, you know, like an Avengers TV show, pretty soon we're gonna have Ant Man get his own movie. The protestant reformation is pretty much just the exact same thing as the comic universe, but no Thor, because he's pagan. Anyway, many of these new denominations will be familiar to you: the Anglicans, the Puritans, the Quakers, the Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Baptists. Each of these new Protestant churches thought that it new the one true way to worship God, and that, you know, everyone else was going to Hell, and this led to some fighting. And also some disemboweling.

Oh, it's time for the open letter. But, first, let's see what's in the globe today. Oh, that's nice. I thought it would be disemboweled people but it's Anabaptists, not baptizing their infants.

Hi there, so you don't believe in infant baptism, you believe that, like, people should come of age so that they can make their own decision about salvation. Other people (Catholics, many Protestants) believe that it's okay to baptize infants, or even that it's good. I don't feel like this disagreement should lead to disembowelment, and yet it did. The fascinating thing to me, Anabaptists, is that you never had a state, you never had, like, widespread political say in any community. And, yet, your brand of evangelical Christianity managed to become incredibly important in world history. In short, the bad news is that many of you are going to be executed. The good news is that your message will prove surprisingly resilient. Stan, who did I even make that open letter for? The Anabaptists are Amish now, they're not watching this. I guess some of them are Mennonites. I made it for you, Mennonites.

Okay, so with all these new denominations there were years of religious mayhem. Clergy preached radical new ideas, and then other people interpreted them in even more radical ways. People, especially young people, smashed up churches because the Bible says 'no graven images'. What started as a doctrinal dispute turned into a social revolt, and in 1525 German peasants took up Luther's ideas to give voice to long standing grievances against landlords and clergymen. In their most famous revolutionary proclamation, The Twelve Articles, the peasants echoed Luther's language, proclaiming that serfdom was invented by men, with no basis in scripture. The peasants rebelled, refused to pay taxes, pillaged church lands, and raised an army estimated at 300,000 people. And Luther was like "Yes, free souls sovereign at last!" No, just kidding, he wasn't. Luther chose the elite, and said that Christian liberty was a spiritual concept, not meant to promote equality or freedom in, like, the physical world. He then urged the faithful to smite, slay, and stab rebels, and kill them like mad dogs. He also gave up his idea that congregations should elect it's own ministers, and argued that Kings and Princes were put in place by God as caretakers of the church, and that turned out to be the winning side (for a few hundred years, anyway).

The German peasants revolt, the biggest revolutionary uprising in Europe before the French Revolution, was suppressed, with crushing brutality. An estimated 100,000 people were killed. So Luther chose the princes in the name of stability and success, but why would princes choose Lutheranism, when the Holy Roman Emperor had forbidden it? Let's look at one example, the first actual ruler who broke with the Pope, the heroic, frequently divorced, founder of Anglicanism, King Henry VIII of England. What's that Stan? Apparently it was not King Henry VIII. It was Grand Master Albert of the Teutonic order of monks, crusaders who'd come to rule parts of what is now Poland. So, many Teutonic knights individually left the order for Lutheranism, because they liked the theology. Albert started by reading Lutheran tracts and he became a fan, allowed Lutheran preachers into his cities and even traveling to meet with Luther in person. On Luther's advice Grand Master Albert dissolved the Teutonic state and founded, instead, the Dougie of Prussia (I guess that's where they all danced the Dougie?). Oh, it's the Douchy of Prussia. Stan informs me that it is neither the Dougie nor the Douchy of Prussia but the Duchy of Prussia.

Anyway, Albert established a Lutheran church there, the first Lutheran state church. But it's unlikely that Albert was really motivated by a desire to purge the church of corruption. I mean, at the time of his decision, the Grand Master had been in trouble: he was losing territorial battles against the rest of Poland and he was running out of money. By breaking with the church, Albert was able to seize the church assets within his territory, which bolstered his military might, and then allowed him to settle his war favorably. In another major plus, now that he was a Duke instead of a Grand Master Monk he could get married, and produce heirs, which he did, founding the House of Hohenzollern, destined to unify and rule the German empire a few centuries later. And this points to a huge incentive for princes and kings to break with the Pope. What if, instead of the church having all that money and power, I could have it. Those are like, the two favorite things of monarchs, and Protestantism allowed them to confiscate church land and other wealth, collect church taxes, and use church land for themselves. Why is the Queen the largest land owner in England? Because the Protestant Reformation.

That said, we shouldn't minimize the extent to which the reformation really was about belief. I mean, Catholics truly believed that Protestants were heretics, and Protestants truly believed that the Pope and his hierarchy were imposters. If it were only about land and influence, how could we explain the case of Saxon elector John Frederick, for instance. When defeated and imprisoned by his Catholic emperor, Frederick was given the choice between his lands and his faith. He chose his faith. And then there were Catholics like Sir Thomas Moore, who would not sanction Henry VIII's break with the Pope, and chose execution over sacrilege.

So, in the end, the reformation was both a religious movement and a political one. Now many argue that the reformation led to more religious toleration in Europe, because people just had to learn to live with each other once they had a bunch of wars and figured out that they were going to be just Catholic and Protestants moving forward. There were many other effects of the Protestant Reformation, Max Weber famously called it "the foundation of European capitalism". But for me the most crucial aspect of the Protestant reformation is contained inside the words protest and reform. These have become two of the central political ideas in recent centuries. And while religion has justifiably been blamed for much violence and intolerance, we should also remember that many of the leaders of the American Civil Rights movement, for

instance, were Protestant clergy. And they saw history of protest that could fuel real and lasting reform, that included people like Gandhi and Thoreau, but also people like Martin Luther. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

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