

A Man Named Martin

- From A Man Named Martin part 2: the Moment
- Over the 15 centuries before Martin Luther's day, the Christian church in the West developed a system of doctrine and practice that drifted widely from Old and New Testament teachings. Influences came from ideas put forth by religious thinkers, faulty translation choices from the Greek into the Latin Bible, and questionable content pulled from extra-biblical writings like the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, This system was solidified in the late Medieval Church through internal church councils and papal rulings.

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- The Roman Catholic doctrines that Luther and others came to question included prayers for the dead, purgatory, penance, infused grace, transubstantiation, celibacy, devotion to Mary and the rosary, mandatory confession to a priest to obtain forgiveness, the treasury of merits of Christ, the Mass as a bloodless sacrifice, Mary and the saints, Masses for the dead, the seven sacraments, the institution of the Papacy, and the one that many people tie intrinsically to the Reformation: indulgences.

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- It was Luther's contention that over the centuries the church had veered perilously away from the New Testament teachings of Christ and the apostles and become something other than a Christ-centered fellowship of believers. What Luther and others sought to restore was the teaching of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Luther's intent, however, was not to insult the Roman Catholic Church and its institutions. His hoped-for outcome was to enlighten the Pope on the church's manifold errors so as to prompt a reformation from within, with the charge led by the Papacy to correct the divergent teachings that had hardened into doctrine over time and which, in turn, caused it to veer widely from the original teachings of Christ and His apostles.

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- We date the Reformation from October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. But at that time Luther's outlook was more Roman Catholic than Lutheran. He prayed to the Virgin Mary, believed in the intercession of saints in heaven, in transubstantiation, and a bloodless repetition of the sacrifice on the cross with each Mass. It was the excesses connected with indulgences that got Luther to start looking beneath the surface and realizing just how deep the errors of the Church really went.
- Just like Luther it takes time for us to recognize the worldview in which we were raised. How did your parents' understanding of the world affect your worldview.

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- As you reached adulthood, on which issues did you continue to side with your parents? On which did you differ?
- How has God's Word influenced how you view the world and the values our culture promotes?
- It wasn't big doctrinal changes that shifted the Church's course over the centuries; instead, it was small deviations along the way. Over time it ended up looking almost nothing like the early church of the apostles. The video presented many of those small shifts. We will look at one here now. It was an important and pressing question in the early Catholic Church.

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- One of the issues that contributed to the system of penance developed in response to the persecution the church suffered before Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. It had to do with those who lapsed in their confession of Christ under torture or threat but later wanted to return to the church.
- During the Roman persecutions, Christians were given the opportunity to renounce Jesus Christ. They could then make sacrifices to the gods or the emperor and be saved. While many believers were martyred, some saved themselves by lapsing from the faith. Afterwards, many of those who lapsed regretted their decision and sought to be forgiven and reinstated.

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- Restoration between God and the sinner looks quite different from the restoration between a sinner and his fellow Christians. God sees genuine repentance in the heart of the sinner and for Jesus' sake completely and immediately forgives and restores him/her. But we cannot read each other's heart, so how can we know if a lapsed sinner really feels repentant? Penance gave lapsed sinners a way out. It offered them time (years) and specific deeds (fasting, wearing sackcloth, etc.) by which they could prove the sincerity of their remorse and change of heart.
- How did this process of penance show sensitivity to the grieving families of martyrs better than if the Church took the lapsed at their word and instantly accepted and reinstated them?

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- How did it also serve to elevate and honor the sacrifice of the noble martyrs?
- Conversely, how could this form of penance give the false impression that God also requires time and proof of our regret—that He will not forgive our sins unless we first do penance?
- The issue of Christians who lapsed under persecution brought up another topic. Why do Christians keep on sinning? The Scriptures describe justification as God accounting the sinner righteous for Christ's sake—without any works required on the part of the sinner—only the faith worked in him/her by the Holy Spirit. But while God makes us new creatures in the image of His Son through His Word and Baptism, the sinful nature remains in us, causing us to sin.

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- Now Augustine described justification as a gradual process of the Holy Spirit, which enabled us to do more good things and fewer bad things. He gave the impression that justification was only complete when we completely stopped sinning. This gave young Martin Luther fits when he went into the monastery and tried to drive away and curb his sinful desires.
- What kind of pressure does it put on a person to think they will not be justified with God until they can stop sinning?
- Why is it pointless and even dangerous to make the sinner part of his/her own salvation?

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- Knowing we are justified through Jesus, how can we avoid the temptation to go too far on the other side and thus cheapen God's grace by thinking we don't need to actively resist sin?
- Very early in the history of the Christian church, disputes and controversies arose among Christian leaders. To settle these issues, Christian bishops and pastors gathered in ecumenical councils to address matters that were disturbing the church. The first such church council was the Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15.
- Read Acts 15:1-2, 6-14, 19-20.

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- Which church leaders made up this Council?
- What controversy caused the apostles to hold this Council?
- What do you think might have happened to the church if believers had not met to answer this question?
- What decision did the Council reach?
- What advantages does a council have over one or two church leaders (like Peter and John, or a pope) reaching a decision for the whole church?

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- In 325 A.D. the Council of Nicaea was instrumental in settling controversies regarding the Trinity and how Jesus' divine and human natures were to be understood.
- What is the value in bringing together leaders of the church to discuss controversial matters?
- Why was it important to have an authoritative voice like this to refer back to when these controversies resurfaced later?
- Why was it essential for these councils to submit themselves to the authority of the Holy Scriptures?
- What abuse could happen if they sat as judges reinterpreting Scripture to say what they wanted it to mean?

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- Early on, Martin Luther hoped an ecumenical council would be convened to answer his questions about papal abuses. But as time went by he realized Rome would never permit a council to be truly ecumenical. In the mid to late 1520s Emperor Charles V held off any further actions against Luther because he was waiting for the Pope to summon another general council to settle the questions Luther raised.
- When the popes dragged their feet into the mid 1530s, Charles V proposed a general council be held at Mantua, Italy, beginning in May 1537. In preparation for the council, Luther wrote The Smalcald Articles (part of the Lutheran Book of Concord) to show which articles of faith the Lutheran contingent could and could not compromise. But this council failed to convene when war broke out between Francis I of France and Charles V.

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- Finally, in 1545 the general council met in Trent, Italy. The Council of Trent met in three sessions between 1545-1563 (1545-47; 1551-52; 1562-63). It was dominated by papal legates. During the second session, the Protestants were invited to be present, were given a letter of safe conduct, and offered the right to discuss, but they were denied a vote. Phillip Melanchthon began to travel there with the Lutheran party, but made it no further than Nuremberg
- Unfortunately, without a Protestant vote on the matter, this could not be considered an ecumenical or general council. Perhaps a true ecumenical council in a similar spirit as the earlier councils, which let the Scriptures have ultimate authority, could have addressed the charges, removed the errors, and reunited the Western Christian Church. But Rome would not allow it; the iceberg of papal power ran too deep