By Faith Alone—Luther’s Legacy

Read the narrative and then answer the questions according to your teacher’s instructions.

Of all the characters who are associated with the Reformation, Martin Luther is the one most closely identified with the turmoil of the time.

He probably can be considered one of the most important links among nationalism, humanism, and the Reformation. It was his translation of the Bible into a national language, German, that offered the beginning of education in that country. If a man’s salvation was truly by faith alone, as Luther came to believe, then each individual would have to read and study the Bible himself.

The other great humanist, Erasmus, was a man who depended more on logic than emotion, and he was willing to admit the possibility of error in his philosophy. Luther, on the other hand, was highly emotional and quite obstinate. Once he came to a conclusion, it was impossible for him to perceive it as possessing any error. He clung to his conclusion with such tenacity that he could see no others’ points of view.

In 1511, after years of searching for a meaning or purpose to his life as an Augustinian monk, he chanced upon a passage in the Book of Romans that read: “The just shall live by faith.” Luther’s interpretation became the basis of his new theology: salvation by faith alone. For most of his life he had been tormented and unable to find peace. Some believe that Luther’s search for peace began after an accident in his early youth. One day, when he was riding with a companion, a severe storm came up, and both he and his friend were thrown from their horses by a bolt of lightning. Luther survived, but the other man was killed. Whenever his search began, however, it surely ended when he chanced upon the biblical passage, for, from that time on, no one could dissuade him from preaching his interpretation.

Even then, Luther was not in conflict with his Church. Indeed, he was invited to become a professor of theology at the new University of Wittenberg in Saxony. His unusual viewpoint and emotional, impassioned presentations made him popular with students. He was an important figure in the Wittenberg religious/educational community when a monk named Tetzel began his sale of indulgences.

Luther saw Tetzel’s sale of indulgences as simply a way to raise money, and he was shocked by claims the monk made, especially in light of his own view that individuals needed only faith to bring them to salvation, and that faith itself was a gift from God. Luther drew together ninety-five objections to the sales and nailed the list to the door of the Wittenberg All Saints’ Church on October 31, 1517. The sound of that hammering was to reverberate throughout Europe in the years that would follow, for Luther challenged not only the commercialism that was behind Tetzel’s act, but some of the basic teachings of the Church concerning the Sacrament of Penance and the existence of purgatory.

In 1518 Luther was called to account by the Church and asked to withdraw some of his opinions. Had they known how unlikely that was, those in authority in the Church might have taken other action. By 1519 Luther was openly challenging the final authority of the papacy. In 1520 the pope condemned the teachings of Luther, who swiftly retaliated by burning the letter of condemnation. Luther now openly denied that a priest had the power to remit the punishment due to sin, and preached that, while clergy were helpful, they were

not necessary for salvation. By 1521 the Lutheran Church was born. It grew rapidly among the German states, supported by German princes, who had been less than happy about paying high taxes to the Roman Church.

At the direction of the Church, Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had called Luther before a council called the diet of Worms, where Luther denied the authority of the Church. Charles could not act against Luther because of the support from powerful German princes, who called themselves “Protestants.” For about thirty years these two groups fought, finally calling a truce which we know as the Peace of Augsburg, where Lutheranism was officially recognized, and princes were given the right to decide which religion would be mandatory for their subjects. The truce was shaky, and fighting continued off and on for another hundred years.

Luther’s Church was dramatically different from the one from which it was severed. Lutheran pastors could follow the example of Luther and marry. They were encouraged to guide and teach the people but were not thought to have the supernaturally spiritual powers that had been attributed to Catholic priests. Sculptured and painted images in the churches were rejected, as was belief in the Virgin Mary. Only two sacraments were retained—Baptism and Communion. The expression of faith was thought to be essential. Church services were comprised of sermons, instruction, and hymn singing. Luther himself wrote several hundred hymns, many of which are popular today. All church services were conducted in the local language rather than in Latin.

But Luther did not permit free thought on scriptural interpretation. He recognized no conclusions other than his own, and so ultimately he replaced the authority of the Catholic Church with that of his own doctrine. When the peasants revolted in the Black Forest and Thuringian areas in 1524 and 1525, Luther’s proclamations resulted in a blood bath that ended the uprisings.

Soon, across Europe, others found interpretations which differed from Luther’s. Imposition of individual interpretations by such men as John Calvin brought discord and hostility and cruel punishment to those who held different beliefs. While the Catholic Church began to reform and grow stronger from within, the Protestants divided again and again on points of interpretation. Intolerance sparked religious wars. Voices of reason, such as that of Erasmus, must have foreseen such events for he often called for tolerance and understanding of other points of view. Martin Luther and John Calvin, with their passion and tenacity for their own points of view, were perhaps blinded to the future such philosophy would inevitably inspire.

1. Why was the invention of the printing press important to the Reformation?
2. Why did Erasmus' Greek version of the New Testament, in contrast to the official Church version, the Latin Vulgate, cause controversy within the Church?

3. When Luther pronounced that “man could be saved by faith alone,” what did he challenge?

4. When Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the church, what practice of the Church was he challenging?

5. Why do you believe so many German princes accepted the teachings of Luther, and why did that strengthen their political positions?
# Chart of the Beginning of the Reformation

As you discuss the importance of the events and people in this outline of the Reformation, jot down notes that may be needed for later reference.

**Weakening of the Papacy:**
- the "Babylonian Captivity"
- the Great Schism

**Growth of Heresy:**
- John Wycliffe
- John Huss
- Erasmus

- Gutenberg’s invention of movable type for the printing press (approximately 1440)

- Birth of Martin Luther (1483)

- Luther becomes an Augustinian monk (1505)

- Luther is awarded his doctorate at Wittenberg (1512)

- Luther posts his 95 Theses (1517)

- The Papal Bull, an official decree by the pope, condemns Luther: Emperor Charles V declares Luther an outlaw at the diet of Worms (1521)

- Luther condemns the heretical Peasants’ Revolt and supports the authority of the German princes (1524–1525).

- Princes, supporting Luther, protest the Edict of Worms at the diet of Speyer, become known as “Protestants” (1529)

- The Lutheran doctrine is set forth at the diet of Augsburg (1530)

- Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn and is excommunicated by the pope (1533)

- Henry VIII becomes the head of the Church of England; has Sir Thomas More beheaded for opposing Henry’s break with Rome (1535)

- John Calvin sets up theocratic government in Geneva (1559)

- Council of Trent undertakes reform of the Catholic Church under Jesuit guidance (1563)