

History of Dr. Martin Luther and the Religious Reformation



Dr. Martin Luther

was the district Vicar of ten Thuringian monasteries from 1515-1518, including the one at Neustadt where our ancestors lived. In the performance of this function he would have visited Neustadt many times. On at least one occasion, August 23, 1524, he was known to have preached within the family church which

was for purposes of counteracting a nearby minister who was causing unrest. Luther was born on November 11, 1483 in Eisleben, Germany. He did not set out to divide the church or destroy its supposed unity. Well schooled, in days when few got any schooling at all, he learned Latin at an early age. He attended one of Germany's oldest and most famous universities at Erfurt where he received his Masters at the age of 21. In 1505 he entered the Augustine monastery in Erfurt, considered to have the highest of academic and ascetic standards and was ordained at priest at age of 27. He reached the pinnacle of academic distinction at Wittenburg University where he became a doctor of theology.

Commoners were disgusted at abuses and oppression by Catholic clergy who fleeced rather than fed their sheep and were pinched by the drain of German gold into the bottomless coffers of Rome. Papal doctrine declared that at the Pope's discretion he could award redemption "credits" to sinners, in the form of Letters of Indulgences, in exchange for good work such as donations and even procure indulgences for the dead. Churches routinely sold such indulgence letters to parents in search of safety for their children in purgatory. Angered by what he considered the peddling of pardons, Luther published his 95 thesis in October 1517, the posting of which is today noted as Reformation Day. In it he attacked church doctrine and struck at the very root of the sacramental system. He urged abolition or curtailing of such things as festival days and proposed personal prayer rather than elaborate rituals. He proposed congregational singing and moved that the papacy was simply a human invention with no power to establish new articles of faith.

The result was that Luther was excommunicated by the church but the implied death notice was never carried out because of protection from Frederick The Wise of Saxony. Reformers were pushing ahead at a reckless pace but Luther urged moderation and condemned riot and rebellion. It was during one of his trips to instill calm that Luther visited the family church at Neustadt. In 1524, believing there was no scriptural basis for celibacy, Luther married Katherine von Bora. The style of alter in the family Lutheran church in Neustadt was named after Katherine by its craftsman, Lucas Cranach. In 1529 the term Protestant was coined when evangelical rulers protested a prohibition of reformed faith. Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546, almost on the eve of the German revolution which contributed to the emigration of our ancestors. The Catholic Reformation would, itself, conclude two decades later. The Church of Rome of today incorporates many of Luther's reforms. Catholic parishioners can, for example, sing and speak in their own language and participate in communion once restricted to the clergy.

