What If?...

Martin Luther had burned at the stake?

ABOUT FOUR O'CLOCK on the afternoon of April 17, 1521, the ushers led Martin Luther, looking drawn and pale, before Emperor Charles V and the German Diet, meeting in the city of Worms on the Rhine. On a table in the center of the episcopal hall, next to the great Romanesque cathedral, stood a pile of Luther's books and pamphlets. A spokesman asked him two questions: Would he acknowledge the authorship of these books? And, would he recant all or parts of them? Luther, realizing that he would have no chance to state his views, requested twenty-four hours for reflection. The next day at about six in the evening he again entered the crowded episcopal hall, now illuminated by hundreds of candles. Facing the emperor, the princes, and the prelates, Luther delivered in a high clear voice a ten-minute speech in German, which he later repeated in Latin. When he had finished, the spokesman objected that he had still not given a simple answer as to whether he would recant or not. Luther paused and then replied defiantly:

> Since then Your Serene Majesty and Your Lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, may God help me, amen.

Pandemonium now broke loose in the hall. The emperor, angry and excited, rose to his feet and declared that he had had enough of such talk. The meeting broke up in chaos.

For a moment, Luther's fate hung in the balance: some Catholic zealots

wanted to seize him and shouted "into the fire"—the traditional fate of heretics. Nevertheless, Charles V respected the safe conduct he had given Luther to attend the diet and even allowed him a few days of further discussion with theologians. Luther left Worms a free man on April 26. No sooner was he outside the city, however, than a group of masked men ambushed him and he abruptly disappeared. On hearing the news, the German artist Albrecht Dürer wrote in his diary: "O God, is Luther dead? Who will now explain the Gospel to us as clearly as he used to do?"

We now know (as Dürer did not) that the "kidnappers" were the soldiers of Luther's patron, Elector Frederick of Saxony, and that they took him in secret to one of Frederick's castles. There he grew a beard and spent one year disguised as a knight, "Sir George," while he worked on the greatest of his literary labors: a German translation of the New Testament. By the time Luther died in 1546, his vigorous, melodious version had appeared in 253 editions and formed the basis for several other vernacular translations. Thus William Tyndale's English Bible (and therefore the Authorized Version, into which much of it passed) stems directly from Luther's version. The reformer returned to Wittenberg in 1522 where, until his death twenty-four years later, his preaching, teaching, and writing shaped a Lutheran church with some five million members around the world today.

But what if, in April 1521, Charles V had listened to those who urged him to disregard Luther's safe conduct, on the grounds that "One does not keep faith with heretics"? A century before, another critic of the papacy, Jan Hus from Bohemia, had also received an Imperial promise of safety to come from Prague to Germany and defend his views, but it had been dishonored. The emperor who issued it watched him burn at the stake and then led a series of military campaigns to exterminate his followers in Bohemia.

Martin Luther, born in Saxony to a mining family, attended primary and grammar schools away from home. He took his bachelor's degree at the University of Erfurt in 1501 and his master's the following year, at age nineteen. In 1505, after a bolt of lightning almost killed him, he became an Au-

PORTRAIT OF A SURVIVOR

A rebel in middle age: Strong will and intelligence are captured on the face of Martin Luther in this contemporary etching.

(Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1472–1553, Martin Luther. SEF/Art Resource, NY)

gustinian monk, in gratitude for his survival. But he continued to stud
ology in his monk's cell and obtained his doctorate in 1512. The
moved to Wittenberg, where he began to lecture on the Bible to stu
at the new university, founded by Frederick of Saxony, and to delive
mons to the citizens as preacher in the town church.

Luther always saw teaching and preaching as crucial, and he cont
to do both throughout his life. He also wrote to be heard as well as

read, always addressing himself to "my readers and hearers." "The voice should be the soul of the word," he wrote. "Letters are dead words, speech is living words." He devoted great attention to finding the right words and, as he wrote, spoke the sentences aloud to himself until the stresses, pauses, cadences, and the sequence of vowels and consonants sounded just right. One of the mourners at the reformer's funeral paid tribute to his great linguistic gifts when he claimed that "Luther taught us to speak."

These communication skills would have made Luther a formidable authority on any subject, but gradually he focused on a particularly important issue for Christians: sin and salvation. How can the sinner be saved? His close reading of the Bible suggested that good works and insincere penance would not suffice: only complete faith in Christ could assure salvation. In 1517, Luther became concerned that a practice by some of his fellow priests, members of the Dominican Order, was leading Christians astray, offering them a false security. They toured Christendom distributing indulgences that promised the living and the dead, in the pope's name, remission of ecclesiastical penalties, and of time in purgatory, in return for a contribution toward the cost of rebuilding the basilica of St. Peter's in Rome. Although the local authorities forbade the Dominicans to offer indulgences in Wittenberg, they did so nearby, and members of Luther's congregation left town to acquire them.

When his sermons failed to halt the exodus, on October 31, 1517, Luther presented a set of ninety-five objections to the practice. His criticisms fell under three heads. Most attacked the Dominicans' failure to require any penance or inner contrition before issuing their indulgences; others argued that the Gospels provided everything a Christian needed to know for salvation; a few claimed that those who stifled the Word of God to make room for indulgences—even if granted by the pope—were the enemies of Christ. Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of a local church, the normal way of requesting a public debate at the time. He also sent them with a cover note to his ecclesiastical superior, who forwarded them to Rome, and he mailed copies to some friends, who published them all over Germany.

This provided Luther's first taste of widespread popularity, and he relished it—all the while professing that he had nothing to do with it. "It is a mystery to me," he noted (with a trace of smugness), "how my Theses, more so than my other writings—or indeed those of other professors—spread to so many places." The theses also provoked envy and enmity. The Dominicans who distributed the indulgences noted a fall in revenues and complained to the pope about Luther's criticisms; so in the summer of 1518 he received a summons to Rome to explain his objections.

Political calculations now rescued Luther, for the first but not the last time. When the papal summons arrived in Germany, its ruler, Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg, urgently desired to have his grandson Charles recognized as his successor. He therefore met at the city of Augsburg with those who would make the choice: seven Imperial Electors, including Frederick of Saxony, Luther's suzerain. Frederick, who had advanced large sums of money to the emperor in the past, asked Maximilian to allow Luther to address the pope's concerns in Augsburg instead of Rome. Grateful and anxious for Frederick's vote, Maximilian agreed.

Why did Frederick care? He met Luther face-to-face only once—at the Diet of Worms—and the two men never exchanged a spoken word. The elector, however, possessed unusual piety. In his youth he had undertaken a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and afterward began to collect relics. Some he purchased, others he exchanged for pictures by Lucas Cranach (his Court painter), and a few his agents stole. By 1520, his collection exceeded 19,000 items, ranging from some milk from the Virgin Mary's breast, some straw from the stable at Bethlehem, a piece of the burning bush, and some soot from the fiery furnace, to articles of merely local appeal like the beaker used by St. Elizabeth of Marburg, a medieval German saint. When the entire collection came out on display, the total time remitted from purgatory in return for pious prayers approached two million years. Frederick kept his collection, the largest in the world, in the castle church at Wittenberg—the very spot where Luther had posted his Ninety-five Theses—and he paid eighty-three resident priests to celebrate almost 10,000 masses annually on his behalf. These were precisely the sort of "false" religious practices that Luther abhorred and against which he would preach. In 1518, however, these differences lay in the future and Frederick sought to protect Luther,

apparently out of a sense of "fair play" and, perhaps, because he did not wish to see one of his own "star professors" disgraced. He therefore not only provided overt protection against those who sought Luther's destruction, but also gave him covert advice through his legal experts.

Unfortunately for Luther, the senior papal representative at Augsburg was Cardinal Cajetan, general of the Dominican Order—a man unlikely to give way on the issue of indulgences. For four days in October 1518 the two men debated. The cardinal pointed out that several popes had proclaimed the efficacy of indulgences, forcing Luther to reply that "the pope is not above, but under the word of God" and could therefore err. The following month, at Cajetan's direction, the pope issued a decree ordering that everyone should obey his teaching on indulgences. This pushed Luther one step further toward an open confrontation with Rome. He read the document and announced in January 1519 that, since it offered no biblical support for its assertions, "although I will not reject it, I will not bow down before it." That same month, Maximilian died and Germany lacked any secular authority capable of keeping the "monk's quarrel" (as many considered it) within bounds.

Luther had intended his Ninety-five Theses to provoke a scholarly debate, and a prominent German theologian, John Eck, duly challenged him. In July 1519, the two met in an open forum at Leipzig in Saxony. Luther cited the teaching of the Greek Orthodox Church, which also condemned indulgences; Eck pointed out that Jan Hus had done the same. This horrified Luther, who had previously accepted that Hus died a heretic. Now he started to read the writings of the Bohemian reformer and was amazed at what he found. "Up to now I have held and espoused all the teachings of Jan Hus without knowing it," he told a friend. "We are all Hussites without realizing it." But Hus had criticized far more than indulgences: he had denied the power of the popes and exalted the authority of the Bible. Luther realized that he would have to do the same and wrote, early in 1520:

> I am in deep turmoil since I can hardly doubt that the pope is the true Antichrist whom everyone has been expecting. Everything fits

> together too well—his life, his deeds, what he says and what he demands.

This proved too much for some of Luther's supporters and they now abandoned him. For many Germans, "Hussite" was equivalent to "rebel" or "priest-hater." In England, one of the few countries outside Bohemia where Hussite views had gained a following, King Henry VIII wrote a tract condemning Luther and his Hussite leanings (which led the pope to confer on Henry the accolade "Defender of the Faith," a title still treasured by English monarchs). More ominous, John Eck sent a detailed list to Rome of heretical views uttered by Luther during the Leipzig debate.

Luther now published tracts that set out his beliefs in detail and, by the end of 1520, he had published over thirty of them, printed in 400 editions, with combined sales of 300,000 copies. One of them, *Address to the Christian Nobility of Germany Regarding the Improvement of Christendom*, which called on princes and magistrates to reform the Church (since the pope clearly did not intend to do so), sold 2,000 copies in five days. His style became instantly recognized—when he authored an anonymous tract he had no doubt that "anyone who reads it, if he has seen my pen and my thoughts, must say: 'This is Luther'"—and his books flooded the market. The other outstanding writer of the day, Erasmus of Rotterdam, complained huffily that one could hardly find a book in Germany that was not either written by Luther or about Luther.

The tone of the debate also became sharper. In his *Address*, Luther claimed that, whether Hus was a heretic or not, he had been unjustly executed because heretics should be refuted with arguments and not with fire. He also argued that "the prime concern" of Christians

> should be to live sincerely in faith and in accordance with Holy Scripture. For Christian faith and life can easily exist without the intolerable laws of the pope. In fact, faith cannot properly exist unless there are fewer of these Romanist laws, or unless they are abolished all together.

Luther's tracts stressed that the Bible could be read and understood by anyone without any need for a church hierarchy—or, in his memorable phrase, "Every man is his own priest." Eck, for his part, secured a papal decree in June 1520 that attributed forty-one separate doctrinal "errors" to Luther, ordered him to recant, and threatened him with excommunication if he did not. Six months later, Luther responded with a theatrical gesture: he ceremonially burnt a copy of the decree and, for good measure, threw a copy of the canon law into the flames as well. "As they would do to me, so I do to them," he wrote. The following month, the pope excommunicated Luther and called on Charles V, now emperor, to outlaw him.

Charles could not oblige. In July 1519, just as Luther and Eck began their debate, the electors met to choose a successor to Maximilian. They considered three candidates: Maximilian's grandson Charles of Habsburg, King Francis I of France, and Frederick of Saxony. Frederick refused to stand and threw his weight behind Charles, who was elected unanimously. In return, however, the new emperor promised not to outlaw anyone without a legal hearing. At Frederick's insistence, he therefore agreed to allow Luther to attend the Diet of Worms, scheduled to meet early in 1521, albeit in the expectation that the excommunicate would simply recant.

By then, however, the execution of Luther could no longer have silenced the growing chorus of open critics of the Catholic Church. Luther's prolific writings and his dramatic personal appearances all over Germany to defend his views had won numerous followers and, by 1521, Albrecht Dürer was not alone in regarding Luther as the most gifted exponent of a new kind of Christianity. But he was no longer the only one. Wittenberg experienced a religious revolution even without Luther. Under the leadership of another university professor and priest, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, radical preachers dispensed communion in both kinds, bread and wine, to the laity (the Roman Church allowed only bread), crowds smashed church images, monks left their monasteries, and priests began to marry. Radical prophets warned that the end of the world approached and called for social justice. Far to the south, the chief preacher of the city of Zurich in Switzerland, Huldrych Zwingli, noted with approval in his diary Luther's defiance of Rome and, in 1519, persuaded the city magistrates to ban in-

dulgences. The next year, he received permission to preach "the gospel" as he wished, and all other clergy in Zurich followed his lead. While Luther hid in Frederick's castle, others advanced his cause.

What, then, if Charles V had tried to burn *all* these critics of the Roman Church? Once again, by 1521 it was probably too late for effective persecution. On the one hand, Luther's ideas had become too popular to suppress. Even Hus's teachings—spread only by word of mouth and in manuscripts until the invention of printing with movable type in the 1450s—survived his martyrdom. Repeated attempts to invade his native Bohemia and eradicate his followers failed ignominiously: The Hussites fought back and won. Printing, which Luther regarded as "God's highest and ultimate gift of grace, by which He would have his gospel carried forward," made it impossible for any German government to destroy all copies of all of Luther's works. Moreover, they had by then spread beyond Germany. By 1530, some thirty Lutheran tracts had appeared in Dutch translation, and three in English. On the other hand, experience would show that killing Protestants did not eradicate their beliefs. In 1523, Charles ordered two Netherlands monks to be burnt because they upheld Luther's teaching and refused to abjure—the first Lutheran martyrs anywhere—and in the course of his reign at least 2,000 more Netherlanders perished for their beliefs.

Nevertheless, Lutheranism (as well as the other persecuted Protestant creeds) continued to thrive in the Low Countries. In Switzerland, an armed attack on Zurich by her Catholic neighbors in 1531 resulted in the death of Zwingli in battle, but his faith lived on and even spread to other cantons. Finally, in Germany, the relentless persecution of the Anabaptists, groups of believers who separated from both the Lutheran and Zwinglian camps in 1522–23, failed to extinguish them. Their faith survived and their descendants (Mennonites and others) today number more than one million members in some sixty countries worldwide. There is no reason to suppose that even intense and protracted persecution would have extinguished Lutheranism either.

In any case, three political considerations precluded effective enforcement of Charles's decree of outlawry. First, the king of France, rankled by his failure to secure the Imperial title, concluded a series of alliances with

Charles's enemies and prepared to declare war. Rumors of a hostile coalition reached the emperor in Worms, and he begged the Imperial Diet to vote him funds with which to organize a coherent defense. It made no sense to antagonize Frederick of Saxony, one of the richest rulers, by outlawing Luther before approval of the taxes. Charles therefore issued his edict of outlawry in May 1521—a month after Luther's defiance—only when Frederick had left Worms. Second, on the empire's eastern flank, a new Ottoman sultan, Suleiman, advanced up the Danube and captured Belgrade after only three weeks' siege. This opened the plain of Hungary and, beyond, the Habsburgs' patrimonial lands, to Turkish raids. In 1529, Suleiman and his army laid siege to Vienna. Time after time, a Turkish offensive up the Danube (or the fear of one) led Charles to agree to tolerate Lutheranism in the Empire in return for Lutheran taxes and troops to defend Austria. In 1529, Luther composed his most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," for the Saxon troops who marched to save Vienna after Charles had granted a further period of toleration. Third, and finally, the emperor spent little of his reign in Germany. After the Diet of Worms, he decided to go to Spain in order to supervise the suppression of a major popular rebellion (the *comuneros*), and the enmity of France kept him there for the next seven years. He was in no position to enforce his decree of outlawry (or any other measure) in Germany.

Would Luther's death in 1521 have changed anything? Undoubtedly. To begin with, we would lack his powerful translation of the Bible, as well as most of his 3,100 other publications, which take up over 60,000 printed pages in the standard edition of his works. This would have weakened the Reformation in two distinct ways. First, the very popularity of Luther's works helped to harmonize the different dialects spoken in Germany. The first Basel edition of his German New Testament included a glossary of unusual Saxon terms for the benefit of southern German readers. Without later works to popularize Luther's style, the need for such aids might have continued, complicating the spread of anti-Catholic ideas. Second, and more obviously, without Luther's commanding authority, the various centers of anti-Catholic sentiment would have developed in isolation. Instead of a relatively unified Lutheran bloc in northern Germany and Scandinavia, there would have been a patchwork of states, each with their own creed. Perhaps a divided (or, rather, a more divided) Reformation would have proved unable to withstand a Catholic counteroffensive once Charles eventually made peace with the French and the Turks.

The impact of the Peasants' War of 1524–25, the greatest popular uprising in Europe between the rebellions of the 1350s and the French revolution, would certainly have been different. As it was, the peasants of southern Germany took many of their grievances straight from the teachings of Luther and Zwingli, and several of their leaders had been (and a few still were) his followers. Luther used his enormous authority both to distance the Reformation cause from the rebellion and to legitimize the brutal repression of the peasants. His most influential tract on the subject, with the bloodthirsty title *Against the Murdering and Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, commanded "everyone who can, to smite, slay and stab them, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish than a rebel." Without his firm, shrill voice, the peasant movement would have become more radical—and perhaps more popular—discrediting the cause of reform irreparably.

Predicting the impact of Luther's martyrdom at Worms beyond the 1520s becomes more hazardous. Let us consider, for example, the impact of a weaker Reformation camp on the Catholic Church. Perhaps burning Luther, and intimidating (though not eliminating) his supporters, would have lulled the papacy back into complacency, leading it to write off the few isolated Protestant enclaves just as it had written off Hussite Bohemia. Probably, then, later reformers (such as John Calvin) would still have divided Europe with new calls for reform. Conversely, however, a weaker and less abrasive Reformed movement might have proved easier for the Catholic Church to accommodate. Many sincere Christians, including Charles V, wished to end the schism and compelled Catholic and Protestant leaders to attend several meetings to resolve their differences. All of them failed, in part because of Luther's intransigence. Without him, per-

haps papal negotiators could have reached an agreement with at least some of the Protestant leaders, healing the schism and reuniting all Western Christians under papal authority.

Without the great divide between Protestant and Catholic, certainly the history of sixteenth-century Western Europe would have been very different: no religious wars, no Dutch Revolt, no Thirty Years' War. The forces of a united Christendom might have held back the Turks at Belgrade or Budapest; the united forces of Charles V's subjects might have established Habsburg hegemony in Europe, precluding all settlements in the Americas by other Europeans. So just possibly: No Luther, no United States as we know it.

Luther might well have relished that extreme connection. As with the thunderbolt that narrowly missed him, he believed that the fate of his cause as well as his personal future rested solely in God's hands. In April 1521, he jauntily told the Diet of Worms, quoting the Acts of the Apostles:

> "If this is the counsel of men, this work will be overthrown; if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it." The emperor and the imperial estates are welcome to write that to the pope in Rome! I know that if my work is not from God, within three years, or even two, it will perish of its own accord.

A year later, as he rode back to Wittenberg to resume his duties as teacher and preacher, he felt vindicated and empowered. At Worms, Elector Frederick had found Luther "much too bold," but he had seen nothing yet. In 1522, his persistent carping persuaded Frederick to pack up his collection of relics, and later that year the elector and his entourage appeared at the Imperial Diet wearing a Lutheran slogan ("The word of God endures forever") on their clothes. In 1524, the emperor's sister Isabel went to Wittenberg to hear Luther preach and publicly took communion in both kinds. Before he died in 1525, Frederick also received both wine and bread at communion, a clear sign of his personal break with Rome.

That same year, Luther abandoned his monastic habit and married a

nun, and shortly afterward he began to celebrate October 31, the day he had published his Ninety-five Theses, with a special toast. In his last years, he drank the toast out of one of the few surviving relics from Elector Frederick's collection—the beaker of St. Elizabeth of Marburg—symbolizing his victory not only over the pope but also over the emperor, the princes, and the prelates who had once sat in judgment upon him at the Diet of Worms. In 1546, he died serenely in his bed in the town where he was born sixty-two years before. His career offers one of the best defenses of the "Great Man" theory of history: that a single individual can decisively influence the course of human affairs. There might still have been a Reformation without Luther, but it would have taken a totally different form.