

*Footprints*



CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

GREAT PREACHERS

THE LIFE OF  
MARTIN LUTHER



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Footprints into Africa

## LIST OF CONTENTS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

### 2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Nationalism

2.2. The Great Schism

2.3. The Crusades

2.4. Various Movements

2.5. The "Inquisition"

2.6. Wycliffe and Huss

2.7. The Three General Church Councils

2.8. The Renaissance

### 3. LUTHER THE MAN

3.1. His early Life

3.2. The Vow

3.3. The Monastery

3.4. His Visit to Rome

3.5. Wittenberg

3.6. His Conversion

### 4. LUTHER THE REFORMER

4.1. Indulgences

4.2. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses

### 4.3. Opposition

- 4.3.1. Luther's Summons to Rome
- 4.3.2. The Leipzig Debate
- 4.3.3. Excommunication
- 4.3.4. The Three Great Reformation Treatises
- 4.3.5. The Diet of Worms
- 4.3.6. The Wartburg Castle

### 4.4. The Translation of the Bible and other Writings

### 4.5. The Church is reformed in Germany

### 4.6. Luther's Helpers

- 4.6.1. His Friends
- 4.6.2. His Marriage

## 5. SUMMARY

## 6. EPILOGUE

## 7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

## APPENDIX

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1517, and the years that followed, a series of events occurred which ushered in a new era in world history. In that period the power of Rome over the Christian Church was challenged, men broke away from the tyranny and Christian liberty was restored.

The men who led the way in this great Reformation were men of strong faith and conviction, high intelligence and great moral and physical courage. They risked their lives and sacrificed all ordinary pleasures to work untiringly for the purity and freedom of the Church of Jesus Christ. The period of the Reformation was an exciting and heroic one – the people were no less courageous than their leaders. War and persecution did not turn them aside. It was a time of high thinking and perilous living. (Kuiper).

## 2. BACKGROUND

The Reformation came “in the fullness of time”. It was prepared over a long period of time and came into full flower when the conditions were ripe for its development. To understand the situation in which Luther found himself in +- 1517, a historical survey of the political, religious and social climate of the day will be mentioned.

### 2.1. Nationalism

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the conditions were characterized by decay and chaos. The epic struggle between papacy and empire was the great drama of the Middle Ages. Now the Holy Roman Empire was fading out, and a spirit of nationalism was arising in the various sections of Europe. The political structure was chaotic.

### 2.2. The Great Schism

In the struggle, the papacy also received serious wounds. The Medieval Church was a vast and mighty structure. It symbolized unity. But Pope Clement V (1305-1313) came so much under the control of Philip of France, that he had to march out of Italy i.e. Rome, and settle in Avignon where he remained till 1378 AD. The Italians were dissatisfied with this – they wanted Rome to become again the seat of the papacy. This resulted in an open rupture in 1378 between the Italians and the French, and each party elected a pope – one in Rome and one in Avignon. This was known as the Great Schism and lasted till 1417.

### 2.3. The Crusades

The Crusades (1096 – 1291) also did much to break down the feudal system and they stimulated the economic and intellectual life of the West. There came into existence

groups of people who began to hold and spread ideas which were in conflict with the doctrine and government of the Church.

#### 2.4. Various Movements

Not only was the outer framework of the Church being shaken, but the life of the Church was being stirred from within. Movements like the Cathari movement started who were ascetic and devoted to Scripture. The Albigenses were also hostile to Church structures. The Waldenses, followers of Peter Waldo, believed that the Bible and especially the New Testament should be the only rule of faith and life for the Christians, not the pope and the Roman Catholic Church. Together with the Albigenses, they became a real threat to the very existence of the Roman Catholic Church and they were therefore pronounced to be heretics.

#### 2.5. The "Inquisition"

In an attempt to oppose the preaching of the above movements, the Dominican and Franciscan Orders of Preaching Friars were organized, who later became the "armies" of the pope. The Church soon began to persecute these "heretics". The "Inquisition" was introduced, with the Dominicans in charge of it – this was the Roman Catholic court whose business it was to root out heresy and bring people to recant. A "war" ensued, in which "blood flowed like water" in France. Eventually the Albigenses were rooted out and the Waldenses sought refuge in the high valleys of the Alps, (Of the Christians who broke away from the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, they are only a group that has survived to the present time).

#### 2.6. Wycliffe and Huss

In the latter part of the Middle Ages, there arose many individuals who criticized the doctrine and government of the Roman Church – the two most important men were John Wycliffe and John Huss. Wycliffe translated the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into English, which was then spread far and wide. Amongst other things he said that wealth and political power had so corrupted the Church that radical reform was necessary. He called the pope the antichrist. His influence increased and his publications spread, and he finally died in 1384. He declared that the Bible rather than the Church should be the only rule of faith.

John Huss (+ 1360-1415) in Bohemia, accepted Wycliffe's teachings. He preached with boldness against the corruption of the clergy. He met with a hearty response from the common people as well as the nobility. He taught many ideas which later became the main teaching of the Reformers. He was eventually excommunicated (this all occurred at the time of the Great Schism), but in 1414 Emperor Sigismund invited him to attend the Council of Constance. He was promised safe conduct but was put into prison for heresy and later burnt at the stake for his beliefs.

### 2.7. The Three General Church Councils

These were held between 1409 and 1449 in Pisa, Constance and Basel. The purpose of these councils was:

- a) To heal the Great Schism
- b) To bring about reforms in the Church and,
- c) To suppress heresy (it must be remembered that at this time councils were considered infallible and were the final authority of the Church).

Although these councils failed to secure even a moderate reform, it was nevertheless good that they raised the question of the need for reform. But the “disease” was more serious than what they imagined. Although others before Luther “tinkered” with the matter of reform, only Martin Luther could bring it to pass – in the only way possible – by laying the axe at the very foot of the papal system.

### 2.8. The Renaissance

Trade and commerce had developed during the period following the Crusades and many towns sprang up in Europe. In the bustling life of these cities, there came into existence a class of people who were interested in learning and culture. Capitalists who had great wealth, sponsored the men of learning and many ancient documents were revived. Men were out to explore man’s new freedom from restraint and from ignorance. There was a revival of Greek and Latin literature together with art, geography, history, science and literature. A new spirit of adventure, enterprise, geographical discovery and intellectual quickening was abroad.

In 1453 Constantinople fell to the Turks and many great scholars fled to the West, bringing knowledge and the treasure of Greek literature. This renaissance learning was highly significant in furnishing the Reformation leaders with the historical background necessary to prove that the Church of their day had departed from the simple faith of the fathers, and had encumbered religious practice with innumerable forms, customs and rituals which had no significant place in the apostolic Church – but there was also now a revival of paganism.

The Renaissance was not a religious movement, but it prepared the way for the reformers by opening men’s minds and by breaking the shackles imposed by centuries, through the hierarchies. The devotees of all this new learning were called humanists, and they included godly men like Erasmus of Rotterdam (who produced the Greek New Testament). Although Erasmus never joined Luther in the great Reformation movement, it was said, “Erasmus laid the egg, and Luther hatched it”. (Kuiper).

Another humanist was John of Wessel, of whom Luther later said, "If I had read the works of Wessel beforehand, it might well have seemed that I derived all my ideas from him".

Many changes and form of worship had been made in the Church since its birth at Pentecost – with regard to liturgy, etc., but essentially with regard to doctrine. Men had come to think of the Church as a hierarchy of officials, from parish priests to bishops to cardinals and to the pope – who assumed the right to change or make new doctrine. Therefore many teachings were not based on Scripture, but on what men called "tradition" e.g. the doctrines of purgatory, transubstantiation, indulgences and the doctrine of the pope as the direct apostolic successor of Peter.

Due to the Renaissance, men began to read the Scripture in the original languages and found that the Bible itself frequently contradicted teachings which the Church had proclaimed to be basic. So doubts arose in the minds of many leaders, especially university men. When the Reformation broke over Europe, it came as a climax to the voices of these reformers, and at a time when the social, political and intellectual climate were ready for change. At this crucial point, Luther entered the scene and led a movement that shook the Church to its foundation.

### 3. LUTHER THE MAN

#### 3.1. His Early Life

Martin Luther was born on 10 November 1483 at Eisleben, Germany. He came from the most religiously conservative element of the population, the peasants ("Bauern"). As his father Hans was without the inheritance of a farm, he and his wife Margareta moved from the farm they were living on to the mines (which helped Martin later to understand the struggles and outlook of the working classes). Both parents were pious and people of prayer. The children were brought up under a strong Christian influence. The entire training of home, school and university was designed to instill a fear of God and a reverence for the Church – at an early age they were trained to sing hymns and psalms. Luther himself was extraordinarily sensitive and subject to recurrent periods of exultation and depression of spirit. The oscillation of mood plagued him throughout his life – there was a constant tension between fear and hope.

He attended school at Eisleben until he was 14 years old. The family then moved to Eisenach till 1501. His father slaved and saved in order to make it possible for his promising son to have an education. He learnt Latin at school and loved it. After school he entered the University of Erfurt in 1501 to study law. He was a brilliant law student, was devoted to his studies and became highly proficient in his field. Luther was highly esteemed at home. His parents looked to him as a lad of brilliant parts who should become a jurist, make a prosperous marriage and support them in their old age.

He obtained his Master of Art degree in 1505, which made his father very happy. In accordance with the wishes of his father he now continued his studies at the same

university (it was here that he was influenced by humanist John of Wessel). He was fond of music (played the lute) and philosophy, and loved the beauty of the German landscape.

### 3.2. The Vow

It was only half a year later, however, on 17 July 1505, when he was 21, that he suddenly dropped his study of law. It was in the vicinity of Stotterheim, while he was returning to school after a visit with his parents, that he was struck by lightning during a terrific thunderstorm – he came face to face with death and wasn't ready for it. In terror he appealed to St. Anne. "St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk!" This experience really shook him, and like everyone else in the Middle Ages, he knew what to do about his plight. The Church taught that the only secure course was to lay hold of every help the Church had to offer – sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences and the intercession of the saints. Monasticism was the way par excellence to heaven. The monks believed this life is only a brief training period for the life to come, where the saved will enjoy an eternity of bliss and the damned will suffer everlasting torment. His depression over the prospect of death was acute – in other words, he became a monk in order to save his soul.

In 1505 he fulfilled this vow. He took the cowl and joined the reformed congregation of Augustinians. News was then sent to his father who was highly enraged. Luther was grievously disturbed over his parents' disapproval of his entry into the monastery as he had always shown an extraordinary devotion to his father, who remained utterly unreconciled until, much later, he saw in the deaths of two other sons a chastisement from God for his rebellion. (His father's death later hit Luther very hard.)

Luther's father was a man of strong will and fiery temper. To see his son a famous lawyer had been a great ambition of his life. Now his son, whom he dearly loved, had in gross ingratitude, as he thought, disappointed his fondest hopes and long-cherished expectations. He was not only disappointed, he was furious.

But Martin was equally strong-willed. He might have retraced his steps. But in spite of his father's terrible anger he persisted in his course. After a trial period of half a year, he took the vow. Luther was of a deeply religious nature and was taught by his Pelagian teachers that he could save himself through prayers, fasting and penance.

### 3.3. The Monastery

He went to the monastery in order to make peace with God. At the end of the first year of his novitiate he was permitted to make his profession. His days as a novice were occupied with religious exercises e.g. prayers seven times daily. Martins lasted three-quarters of an hour. He gave himself over with confidence to the life which the Church regarded as the surest way of salvation. He was content to spend his days in prayer, in song, in meditation and quiet companionship, in disciplined and moderate austerity.



Instead of law he now studied theology and in 1507 he was ordained as a priest. The saying of his first mass in 1507 was another “thunderstorm” in his life, this time of the spirit. This occasion was always an ordeal because the mass is the focal point of the Church’s means of grace. Here on the altar, bread and wine became the flesh and blood of God and the sacrifice of Calvary is re-enacted. Well might the young priest tremble to perform a rite by which God would appear in human form. Luther approached his first mass with dread. Yet at the same time it was a joyous occasion because his father was to be present. After his initial vehement opposition to Martin’s entry into the ministry, he now appeared to have overcome all resentment and was willing to come. (Bainton)

Luther was oppressed by his unworthiness on this occasion – “I am dust and ashes and full of sin”. Before God the high and God the holy, Luther was stupefied. Afterwards, at the reception held after this first mass, he craved some word of assurance from his father concerning his decision to become a monk, but his father flared up before all those present, and accused him of not obeying the biblical command to honour his father and his mother. He also put doubt into Martin’s mind as to whether the “voice from heaven out of the thundercloud” had been the voice of God at all, or rather, that of the Devil? This resulted in Luther being really troubled and unhappy about his soul.

The next year, 1508, he was sent from Erfurt to Wittenberg to become a tutor in the university. While he was there he obtained his first degree in theology, that of Bachelor of the Bible. After one year in Wittenberg Luther was transferred back to Erfurt. There he received his second degree in theology, that of Sententiarus.

But there was tremendous inner turmoil for Luther. The question kept recurring for him: “How could man abide God’s presence unless he were himself holy?” Luther set himself to the pursuit of holiness.

One of the privileges of the monastic life was that it emancipated the sinner from all distraction and freed him to save his soul by practicing the counsels of perfection – not simply charity, sobriety and love, but also chastity, poverty, obedience, fastings, vigils and mortifications of the flesh. Whatever good works a man might do to save himself, these Luther was resolved to perform. (Bainton). He fasted, sometimes three days on end without a crumb. He laid upon himself vigils and prayers in excess of those stipulated by the rule. He wasted away like a skeleton. His cell, even in the severest cold of winter, was unheated. He often spent the night in vigils and only occasionally slept on a mat. (Kuiper). He cast off the blankets permitted him and nearly froze to death.

At times he was proud of his sanctity, but then misgivings would arise as to whether what he was doing was enough. He believed in later life that his austerities had done permanent damage to his digestion. He said, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I...” But all such drastic methods gave no sense of inner tranquility – he simply had not the capacity to fulfill these conditions.

The Christian life for him seemed always to involve a “warfare”. He said, “From childhood on, I knew I had to turn pale and be terror-stricken when I heard the name of Christ; for I was taught only to see Him as a strict and wrathful judge”. His aim was solely to please God, not man – if there was anything in asceticism, then he must go all the way with it (Skevington-Wood). Luther once said, “The more I tried to remedy an uncertain weak and afflicted conscience with the traditions of men, the more each day I found it more uncertain, weaker and more troubled”. So he stepped up the frequency and intensity of his self-discipline, yet still without achieving ease. In his own words, “Though I lived as a monk beyond reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God, with an extremely disturbed conscience...”

He was oppressed with a terrible sense of his utter sinfulness and lost condition and this cast him into the deepest gloom of black despair. In a letter he wrote to the pope after his conversion, he said, “I often endured an agony so hellish in violence, that if those spells had lasted a minute longer, I must have died then and there”. (Kuiper).

#### 3.4. His Visit to Rome

Luther felt himself to be highly privileged when an opportunity presented itself to make a trip to the Eternal city, Rome. A dispute had arisen in 1510 in the Augustinian order calling for settlement by the pope, and Luther was one of the brothers who were sent to represent the Chapter in Erfurt. He regarded himself as a pilgrim and would seek to appropriate for himself and his relatives all the enormous spiritual benefits available only there (or so he believed!) (Bainton)

But religious and moral conditions were very bad in Rome at that time. Much of what Luther saw and heard there, shocked his moral sense. He was devastated and totally disillusioned by the irreverence and flippancy of the priests. He heard also of the immorality of the Roman clergy. While he was climbing Pilate’s stairs on hands and knees, repeating the “Pater Noster” for each one and kissing each step for good measure in the hope of delivering a soul from purgatory, he was filled with doubt – “Does this really help a soul in purgatory?” And if crawling up the very stairs on which Christ stood, and repeating all the prescribed prayers would be of no avail, then another of the great grounds of hope had proved to be illusory. He saw that neither his own good works nor the pope could save him. Years later in his memories of his visit to Rome did much to stiffen him in his opposition to the hierarchy – yet at this time, his faith in the Roman Church remained unshaken. He remained a loyal Catholic.

#### 3.5. Wittenberg

After his return from Rome, Luther was transferred From Erfurt to Wittenberg and came under new influences. Compared with Erfurt, Wittenberg was but a village with a population of between 2000 – 2500. The chief glory of the village was the university, the “darling” of the elector, Frederick the Wise. But this newly founded academy didn’t flourish and Frederick tried to secure better teachers by inviting the Augustinians and

Franciscans to supply 3 new professors – one of whom was Luther. He became Professor of Philosophy in 1511.

Through this move he came to know well the vicar of the Augustinian order, Johan Staupitz. Staupitz exercised a determinative influence on his development and was Luther's spiritual guide. It was he who held the chair of biblical exegesis at Wittenberg before Luther was appointed to it. Staupitz took a kindly interest in Luther from his first meeting with him. Luther reciprocated the friendship and cherished a high regard for Staupitz. Luther's tribute to Staupitz is crisp but touching: "He bore me to Christ". That is the most any man can do for another. Staupitz encouraged him to read the Bible and pointed him to Jesus Christ, who alone takes away sin and gives us fellowship with God. (Renwick)

But Luther's difficulties persisted. He had probed every resource of contemporary Catholicism for assuaging the anguish of a spirit alienated from God. He had tried the way of good works and discovered that he could never do enough to save himself. He had tried to avail himself of the merits of the saints and ended with a doubt – sufficient to destroy his assurance. (Skevington-Wood)

After much soul searching he came to the conclusion that something was more drastically wrong with man than any particular list of offences which can be enumerated, confessed and forgiven. The very nature of man is corrupt. The penitential system fails because it is directed to particular lapses. He came to perceive that the entire man is in need of forgiveness. As he was seeking these answers, he became emotionally disturbed and lacked objectivity. Panic pervaded his spirit. Staupitz at this point offered real help by seeking to divert his attention from individual sins to the nature of man. The whole nature of man needs to be changed.

But Staupitz was a mystic. Mystics believed that since man is weak, he must cease to strive; he must surrender himself to the being and the love of God. The new life, they said, consists in overcoming all the assertiveness of the ego, all arrogance, pride, self-seeking, everything connected with the I, the me, and the my. Luther's very effort to achieve merit was a form of assertiveness. Instead of striving, he must yield and sink himself in God. Although he tried this, the sense of alienation would return.

Staupitz suggested that he was making religion too difficult and said only one thing was needful – to love God. But Luther couldn't grasp this – he saw God as angry, judging and damning. He even started questioning God's justness. He at one stage even said, "I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated Him!" Luther was too obsessed with the picture of Christ the avenger to be consoled with the thought of Christ the Redeemer.

Staupitz recognized Luther as a man of moral earnestness, religious sensitivity and unusual gifts and suggested that Luther should study for his doctor's degree, that he should undertake preaching and assume the chair of the Bible at university. He was

practically saying to Luther, “Physician, cure thyself by curing others”. He also knew that Luther would be helped by the subject matter of his teaching, namely the Bible.

So Lutzenberg became Luther’s permanent residence and for the rest of his life he lectured on the Bible in the university. He also began to preach and the degree of Doctor of Theology was conferred upon him in 1512 – this was the pinnacle of academic success. So from 1512 to 1517 he did what every professor does, he studied and lectured. And from here, he launched the Reformation. (Skevington-Wood)

During these years, what Luther really cared about was not the reform of the church, but rather Luther, the soul of Luther and the salvation of Luther – nothing more. It was intensely personal. He was under tremendous conviction of sin but could find no peace. How could he find a gracious God and find assurance of forgiveness of his sins?

From time to time the rays of light fell into the darkness of his soul. He found some comfort in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux who stressed the free grace of Christ for salvation (Kuiper). Another influence was that there had been a revival of interest in the writing of Augustine. Luther read his works, including “The Confessions of Augustine”, “The City of God”, “True Religion and Christian Doctrine”, as well as his writings on “Psalms” and “Romans”. Slowly he began to understand and believe Augustine’s teaching of justification by faith (Lloyd-Jones). “So familiar did he eventually become with Augustine’s writings that Malancton could report that he held most of their contents in his memory”. (Skevington-Wood)

So he came back to the Bible, and it was in his very preparation of his lectures for his students and his sermons for the people, that really brought him to see the truth. On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1513 he began lecturing on Psalms, in late 1515 on Romans, and from 1516-1517 on Galatians. These studies were Luther’s “Damascus Road”.

While studying Psalm 22, Christ’s words, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?” struck him. He initially could not understand how Christ could feel so forsaken, abandoned and deserted by God (just as Luther himself did) – Christ was not weak, impure and impious as he, Luther, was – he began to understand that Christ took to himself the iniquity of us all. He who was without sin, for our sakes, became sin, and so identified Himself with us as to participate in our alienation. He who was truly man, so sensed His solidarity was humanity as to feel Himself along with mankind estranged from the All Holy. What a new picture this was of Christ! He now saw Him not only as the condemning Judge, but a Judge who suffers with those He must condemn. His view of God also changed – He was not the All Terrible, but the All Merciful too. He, who gave His Son unto death, also raised Him up and will raise us with Him, if with Him we die to sin that we may rise to newness of life. To Luther it was amazing that God in Christ should do all this. One problem still needed to be clarified for him and this was concerning the justice of God. Wrath can melt away into mercy, and God will be all the more the Christian God; but if justice be dissolved in leniency, how can He be the just God who scripture describes?

### 3.6. His Conversion

The third great religious crisis which eventually resolved his turmoil was like a still small voice compared to the “earthquake” of the first upheaval in the thunderstorm of Stotterheim. The place was the study in the tower of the Augustinian monastery. The solution of his problem came in the midst of the performance of his daily task, namely while studying Romans 1: 17. Here Luther sat before an open Bible and met God face to face. This was the divine human encounter which preceded the movement for reform and from which it sprang. This was the climax of Luther’s quest for theological clarification and the issue of his struggle for faith.

In his own words, “I laboured diligently and anxiously as to how to understand Paul’s word in Romans 1: 17 where he says, ‘The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel’. I sought long and knocked anxiously, for the expression ‘the righteousness of God’ blocked the way” (Lloyd-Jones). Skevington-Wood quotes Luther as saying, “I greatly longed to understand Paul’s epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God’, because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant”.

He continued “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith’. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...”

“If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at one you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon His fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger or ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face”.

Everything is summed up in Luther’s triumph song, which he wrote after his conversion:

“In devil’s dungeon chained I lay  
The pangs of death swept o’re me,  
  
My sin devoured me night and day  
In which my mother bore me.  
My anguish ever grew more rife,

I took no pleasure in my life  
And sin had made me crazy.

Then the Father troubled sore  
To see me ever languish,

The everlasting Pity swore  
To save me from my anguish.

He turned to me His father heart  
And chose himself a bitter part,  
His Dearest did it cost Him.

Thus spoke the Son, Hold thou to me,  
From now on thou wilt make it.  
I gave my very life for thee  
And for thee I will stake it.  
For I am thine and thou art mine,  
And where I am our lives entwine,  
The Old Friend cannot shake it".

(Bainton)

What had he seen? Well, that the "righteousness of God" in Romans 1: 17 is not a righteousness that you and I have to create, and attain unto, or buy by means of indulgences; it is a righteousness that God gives us, it is a righteousness that He "clothes" us with, it is a free gift of God by grace through faith, the righteousness of God by faith (Lloyd-Jones).

He had come to see this vital central truth. This is the way of forgiveness, and yet he knew so well, the people believed that they could buy it, that it was the gift of the pope, and from him the gift of the priests. He now knew that this was entirely wrong.

#### 4. LUTHER THE REFORMER

Luther did not react immediately against the abuses in the Church, but continued his lecturing etc. The affixing of his "Ninety-Five Theses" to the door of the "Schlosskirche" is usually regarded as the first salvo in the battle, although Luther's intention wasn't so dramatic. Indeed, he may well be described as a somewhat "reluctant reformer" – he didn't have an appetite for controversy, but he was compelled to do so by the Word of God. He said, "At first I was alone and certainly very inept and unskilled in conducting such great affairs. For I got into these turmoils by accident and not by will or intention. I call upon God himself as witness". It was inevitable, therefore, that however much he himself shrank from it, he should be led to speak out against the apostasy of his day, from the viewpoint of his new-found faith. Thus it was the Bible that made him a reformer.

It was only a matter of time before he spoke out, bringing him into conflict with the leaders of the Church. His indignation centred around the issue of indulgences, and this will be explained at length.

#### 4.1. Indulgences

In Luther's day the sacrament of penance occupied a central place in Catholic religious practice. After witnessing an expression of contrition for mortal sins committed and hearing a confession of these sins, the priest would grant absolution. This word of absolution declared to the penitent sinner the forgiveness of his sins, his release from eternal punishment, and his restoration to the state of grace.

The priest would then decide what satisfaction the sinner should make. Satisfaction usually consisted in something the penitent should do. It took a great variety of forms, but it was always in the nature of a penalty for sins committed. Most often satisfaction was made by the saying of a prescribed number of prayers, by fasting, by giving alms, by going on a pilgrimage to some shrine, or by taking part in a crusade. Frequently it also involved pain.

In the process of time, a certain development took place in this system of penance. The Church permitted the penitent to substitute the payment of a sum of money for other forms of penalty or satisfaction. The Church would issue to the penitent an official statement that he had received release from other penalties through payment of money. Such a document or papal ticket was called an indulgence.

Money thus paid in place of other penalties amounted to what we would call a fine. Not only could one buy indulgences for oneself, one could also buy indulgences for relatives and friends who had died and passed into purgatory, and in this way shorten the time they would otherwise have to spend in the place of purification.

The practice of granting indulgences was based on the Catholic doctrine of "works of supererogation". Works of supererogation were works done beyond the demand of God's law. These works earned a reward. Christ by His life of perfect holiness had done more than was necessary for the salvation of man. In that way Christ had earned what amounted to a rich treasury of merits laid up in heaven. The saints then added much to this fund of merits. The Church had thus accumulated a great reserve of grace which was in the charge of the pope and he could give of that to anybody he chose. Much as we draw a cheque against our account in the bank, so the pope, for the benefit of sinners who were short of merits, could grant indulgences by drawing upon this fund of merits in heaven. This system worked out to the great satisfaction of all concerned. (a) It pleased the people. They found it easier to buy an indulgence than to undergo other penalties. In addition, they preferred paying a sum of money for the soul of a dear one in purgatory, to saying many prayers for that soul; and (b) the system also pleased the Church. The sale of indulgences was a source of huge income. It kept money flowing in the Pope's coffers.

As the years passed, this practice became more and more of a scandal, and in 1507 it became acute when Pope Julius II issued a great mass of indulgences for given amounts, in order to defray the cost of rebuilding the famous church of St. Peter's in Rome. In 1517 Luther discovered that Albert of Brandenburg, at 23, was aspiring to the archbishopric of Mainz which would make him the primate of Germany. For this he needed to pay a high fee. At the same time the pope had undertaken the rebuilding of St. Peter's. The negotiations of Albert with the pope were conducted through the mediation of the German banking house of Fugger, which had a monopoly on papal finances in Germany. Albert had to pay the money down before he could secure his appointment, so he borrowed the sum from Fuggers. Then the pope, to enable Albert to reimburse himself, granted the privilege of collecting this money via indulgences – half of which would go to the pope for St. Peter's and the other half would go to reimburse the Fuggers.

It all came to a crisis in the following way. Frederick the Wise would not grant permission in his lands for these indulgences to be sold. But the vendors came within 20 miles of Wittenberg, close enough for Luther's parishioners to go over the border of Saxony and return with the most amazing concessions. Albert didn't mention at all the repayment of his debt to the Fuggers, but in his instructions he stressed that the money was to be used for the rebuilding of St. Peter's. All walks of life, from kings and queens right down to the poor folk, were told they were expected to pay.

A notorious Dominican monk and a high-pressure salesman, Tetzel, were entrusted with the proclamation of this indulgence. He would enter the market place and begin preaching and tell the people of the wonderful bargains they could have. I quote the text of one of his sermons:

"Listen now, God and St. Peter call you. Consider the salvation of your souls and those of your loved ones departed. You priest, you noble, you merchant, you virgin, you matron, you youth, you old man, enter now into your church, which is the Church of St. Peter. Visit the most holy cross erected before you and ever imploring you. Have you considered that you are lashed in a furious tempest amid the temptations and dangers of the world, and that you do not know whether you can reach the haven, not of your mortal body, but of your immortal soul? Consider that all who are contrite and have confessed and made contributions will receive complete remission of all their sins. Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends, beseeching you and saying, 'Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance'. Do you not wish to? Open your ears. Hear the father saying to his son, the mother to her daughter, 'We bore you, nourished you, brought you up, left you our fortunes, and you are so cruel and hard that now you are not willing for so little to set us free. Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory? Remember that you are able to release them, for

As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,



### The soul from purgatory springs.

Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and mortal soul into the fatherland of paradise?"

Tetzel claimed that he saved more souls through indulgences than St. Peter had through the preaching of the gospel. He regarded himself as an evangelist of sorts.

It was this prostitution of the gospel which stung Luther into action. He consequently drew up a long list of items he wanted to debate and, according to custom, advertised them on the door of the "Schlosskirche". He took this step "out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light". From now onwards he was destined to be a reformer. He primarily wanted to call attention to, and to correct, this terrible abuse. As a Roman Catholic he believed in indulgences, as long as they were administered in the right way. But now he saw that the people were being deceived for eternity.

When he attacked indulgences, he involuntarily touched the pope's crown and forced the hierarchy to engage with him in a struggle which was to be the signal for half the world to revolt against Rome. At each point of challenge – from the stormy years from 1517 when he published his Theses, to 1521 when he was hauled before the Diet of Worms, Luther rested his defence exclusively on Scripture. (Bainton)

#### 4.2. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses

When Luther nailed his theses to the door of the Castle Church, he did nothing unusual. The door of the Church in those days was used as we now use notice-boards. At any university or college if one wanted to call attention to something, one put up a notice on the notice board. Luther did this in order that it might lead to public disputation concerning these matters. He was primarily addressing his fellow members of the faculty of the university, as well as anybody else who had the ability to understand. They were written in Latin. In the Theses he emphatically laid down, among other things, that

- (a) An indulgence can never remit guilt; God had kept that in His own hand;
- (b) It cannot remit divine punishment for sin;
- (c) It has no efficacy for souls in purgatory; and
- (d) The Christian who has true repentance has already received pardon from God and needs no indulgence.

A few of the interesting theses will be mentioned, for the reader's interest:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent, He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. (No. 1)

Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers. (No. 32)

Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters. (No. 36)

Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the Church, and this is granted him by God even without indulgence letters. (No. 37)

Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but he buys God's wrath. (No. 45)

Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences. (No. 45)

The true treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God (not the pope). (No. 62)

The day after Luther nailed his theses to the Church door was All Saints Day. On that day, as was customary, the relics from all over Christendom were displayed. From far and near people came to see them, and to be benefitted by the graces attached to them. They naturally saw the large sheet of paper tacked to the door, and they stopped to read it. When they came home they told their neighbours what they had read. These told others. In this way the news spread like wildfire.

Printing had recently been invented. His friends surreptitiously translated the theses into German and gave them to the press. They were also translated into many other languages, printed and carried with unbelievable speed to every country of Western Europe. Within 2 weeks the theses of Luther became known throughout Germany – they became “the talk of the town”. Four weeks after their publication, they were read all over Western Europe. They had tremendous and immediate effect. They almost stopped the sale of indulgences.

#### 4.3. Opposition

The archbishop of Mainz, who was to receive a share of the proceeds from the sale of indulgences by Tetzel, naturally did not like this. He sent a copy of the theses to Pope Leo X in Rome. The pope at first did not think it was a serious matter. He simply asked the general of Luther's monastic order to advise that monk in Wittenberg to keep quiet.

During the next four years Luther preoccupied himself little with the public dispute, but was engrossed with his duties as professor and parish priest. Meantime men like Tetzel, Mazzolini and John Eck published various theses, books and pamphlets defending the

sale of indulgences. At the annual meeting of the monasteries connected with the Augustinian Order in April 1518 Luther appeared in Heidelberg. He found the opposition much stronger than he had expected – he had had reason to fear the occasion and was warned against the possibility of assassination on the road, yet he was determined to go, (although he travelled incognito). The discussion however was frank and friendly – the older men did no more than shake their heads and the younger were enthusiastic (among the young men were several who were prominent leaders in the Lutheran movement e.g. John Brenz and Martin Bucer). On the whole, Luther felt he was returning to Wittenberg from a triumph.

But Luther had laid his finger on the most sensitive spot in the whole Catholic system of his day. It was from the sale of indulgences that the Church and its head, the pope, received an immense income, and furthermore, the Catholic system had declined to the point where it placed all importance on the sacraments of the priests. The Roman Catholic Church held that only the priest could administer the sacraments of penance, without absolution and indulgences, there was no salvation. Man's salvation, his eternal weal or woe, lay in the hands of the priest. And so the Church, through the priests, had a strange hold on the people.

That is why, by raising the question of indulgences, Luther shook the Church. What he said in his theses had the tendency to loosen the priests' hold on the people. Now the Church was not merely stirred. It was shaken to its very foundations.

#### 4.3.1 Luther's Summons to Rome

From this time on Luther lived in a glass house. Everything he did or said was watched with eagle eyes by friend and foe. Realising that the General of the Augustinian Order had completely failed to silence Luther, the pope decided to take matters into his own hands. In July, 1518 he issued a summons to Luther to appear before him in Rome. If Luther had gone to Rome it would have meant his certain death. (Heresy was taken very seriously in those times). Luther had a faithful, wise and powerful friend in Elector Frederick, who brought all his influence to bear in Rome to have the papal summons cancelled.

At this time a legate, or delegate, of the pope, Cajetan, was in Germany to attend a diet in Augsburg (a diet was a national meeting of all the princes and prelates and other leading men in Germany). The pope sent Cajetan a letter empowering him to order Luther to appear before him in Augsburg. Cajetan was to hear him and demand that he recant. If Luther would not recant he should be sent bound to Rome. If Cajetan should fail to arrest Luther, he should put him and his followers under the ban. Up to this time the pope had said only that Luther was suspected of heresy. Now he declared him to be a notorious heretic.

To go to Augsburg would therefore be very dangerous for Luther. But again his prince came to his aid. Although only with the greatest difficulty, he obtained from the aged emperor Maximilian a safe-conduct for Luther.

Luther had three interviews with Cajetan in Augsburg in October, 1518. The discussion became hot and furious at times. Close friends of Luther tried to persuade him to settle things peaceably by giving in. But Luther refused to recant. He left Augsburg secretly by night.

The pope now settled the dispute once and for all by issuing a bull in which he declared (without mentioning names) that certain statements made by certain monks about indulgences were heretical. (Kuiper) The pope sent a special representative, Von Miltitz, into Germany for the purpose of arresting Luther. As a result of a private interview with Luther, Luther promised not to speak about indulgences any more, if his opponents would agree not to do so. He also promised to write a submissive letter to the pope, with which the pope was very pleased and his attitude changed somewhat to Luther.

#### 4.3.2. The Leipzig Debate

For 14 months the pope's intention was distracted from his difference with Luther. He had become deeply absorbed in the election of another Emperor after January 1519 when Emperor Maximilian died. Luther in the meantime caused an immense sensation by declaring that the supremacy of the pope was unknown in the Scriptures, that it had grown up only in the previous 400 years and that General Councils had erred in giving support to it. By doing this, Luther freed himself forever from the authority of the popes, fathers and councils and henceforth took the Word of God as the only rule of faith. He stood before the world as a free Christian man, no longer subject to papal usurpation. The younger humanists now rallied around him and the German people realized that true religion as well as the freedom of their country, depended on his campaign. Now he poured forth a constant stream of sermons and pamphlets through the printing presses. (Renwick)

Eck could not possibly ignore these statements of Luther. He challenged Luther to debate with him on the question of the supremacy of the pope, in Leipzig. The supremacy of the pope had been one of Luther's earliest and most cherished beliefs. His mother had taught him as a little boy that the Church is the pope's house, in which the pope is the house-father. The nine months until the debate with Eck in July 1519, Luther spent in hard study. He had to find arguments against many things he had always held to be true, and which he had only recently found to be false. He plunged into the study of church history and canon law (which consists of the decretals or decisions of popes and general councils). Luther was dismayed to find that many decretals were forgeries. Thus he saw another pillar of the Roman Catholic system cracking before his eyes. (Kuiper) He said, "I do not know whether the pope is Antichrist or his apostle, so does he in his decretals corrupt and crucify Christ; that is, the truth". Luther held that every pope

was Antichrist even though personally exemplary, because Antichrist is collective – an institution, the papacy, a system which corrupts the truth of Christ.

The debate was held in July and both parties were well-supplied with armed bodyguards. The interest in the debate was so great that the venue was changed from the university hall to the auditorium of the castle. An eye-witness described the contestants as follows:

“Martin is of middle height, emaciated from care and study, so that you can almost count his bones through his skin. He is in the vigor of manhood and has a clear, penetrating voice. He is learned and has the Scripture at his fingers’ ends. He knows Greek and Hebrew sufficiently to judge of the interpretations. A perfect forest of words and ideas stand at his command. He is affable and friendly, in no sense dour or arrogant. He is equal to anything. In company he is vivacious, jocose, always cheerful and gay no matter how hard his adversaries press him. Everyone chides him for the fault of being a little too insolent in his reproaches and more caustic than prudent for an innovator in religion, or becoming to a theologian. Much the same can be said of Carlstadt, though in a lesser degree. He is smaller than Luther, with a complexion of smoked herring. His voice is thick and unpleasant. He is slower in memory and quicker in anger. Eck is a heavy, square-set fellow with a full German voice supported by a hefty chest. He would make a tragedian or town crier, but his voice is rather rough than clear. His eyes and mouth and his whole face remind one more of a butcher than a theologian”. (Bainton)

Carlstadt and Eck wrestled for a week before Luther entered the debate. Eck out-maneuvered Luther. He drove him into a corner, and finally got him to say that some of the teachings of Huss had been unjustly condemned by the Council of Constance. As soon as Luther made this statement, Eck had achieved his purpose. He had made Luther take his stand openly on the side of a man officially condemned by the Church as a heretic. When Luther admitted that he did not think Huss wrong in all respects, a wave of excitement swept over the audience. (Kuiper) Luther had nailed his colours to the mast. He was ready now to pay the price for reform. (Bainton)

Many issues were debated, and Eck kept pressing Luther with the query, “Are you the only one that knows anything? Except for you, is all the Church in error?” Luther replied by saying, “I answer that God once spoke through the mouth of an ass. I will tell you straight what I think. I am a Christian theologian; and I am bound, not only to assert, but to defend the truth with my blood and death. I want to believe freely and be a slave to the authority of no one, whether council, university or pope. I will confidently confess what appears to me to be true, whether it has been asserted by a Catholic or a heretic, whether it has been approved or reproved by a council”.

The debate lasted 18 days and continued thereafter in the form of a pamphlet war. After the debate, Luther’s prominence in Germany grew – a cartoon portrayed him as

“the German Hercules”. By February 1520, Luther was ready to say, “We are all Hussites, without knowing it”. The debate had done much to clarify Luther’s ideas for himself. This was undoubtedly the most important result.

#### 4.3.3. Excommunication

Luther had rejected the supremacy of the pope and the infallibility of councils. His break with the Roman hierarchical system was now complete. Luther was now in the thick of the battle. From now on it was to be a life-and-death struggle between him and the Roman Church. Soon after the Leipzig debate, Eck went to Rome to ask the pope to issue a bull excommunicating Luther. The pope was more than willing.

The first Luther did was to publish an account of the Leipzig debate. Soon pamphlets and letters followed in great abundance. In May 1520 he published a pamphlet with the title “On Good Works”. This was only a little book, but it had a far-reaching effect. In it he applied to practical, everyday life in his newly won conviction that “man is saved by faith alone”. “The noblest of all good works”, he said, “is to believe in Jesus Christ. We must serve God in the midst of the world by faithfully performing the tasks of our daily occupation. Shoemakers, housekeepers, farmers and businessmen, if they do their work to the glory of God, are more pleasing to Him than monks and nuns”.

This was one of Luther’s most important and fundamental teachings. It was also the widest possible departure from ancient and medieval asceticism, and it became one of the most distinctive traits of Protestant Christianity.

The period between the Leipzig Debate in July 1519 and the Diet of Worms in April 1521, was a hectic time for Luther. He read one of the works of Huss as well as a work by the brilliant Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla – these two works influenced him powerfully.

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo ratified and signed the bull excommunicating Luther. The bull called upon all faithful people to burn Luther’s books. It forbade Luther to preach. He and all who followed him were ordered to recant publicly within 60 days. If they did not, they were to be treated as heretics. The bull ordered the government to seize and imprison Luther and everyone who followed him. All towns or districts that sheltered them would be placed under the interdict. The publication of the bull in Germany was entrusted to Eck. But in Erfurt, the students seized all the copies of the bull they could lay their hands on and threw them into the river.

#### 4.3.4. The Three Great Reformation Treatises

To cushion the shock of the papal bull and to rally the German nation around the standard of revolt against the Roman hierarchy, Luther published three works in the latter part of 1520. The first, “To the Christian Nobility of Germany”, was a trumpet call to do away with the abuses fostered by Rome. In the second, “The Babylon Captivity”, Luther exposed the falsity of the Church’s claim that men could be saved only through

the priest and the Roman system of sacraments. The third, "The Liberty of a Christian Man", contains the whole sum of the Christian life.

But writings against Rome did not satisfy Luther. He decided to do something more. If the pope ordered his writings to be burned, he would burn the pope's writings. On December 10, 1520, a large crowd of students, professors and citizens assembled outside the walls of the city of Wittenberg. One of the professors kindled the pile and Luther placed the books of canon law (church law) on the burning wood.

Pope Leo, being at the end of his tether after this, turned for help to the highest secular authority, the emperor Charles V, to bring Luther either to obedience or to the stake. Charles V was a devout Catholic and Leo prevailed upon him to summon Luther before the Diet – the council of German rulers – which was to be held the next year in the city of Worms.

All we have learnt and seen thus far, helps us to see Luther's historic stance at the Diet of Worms in perspective. It was no sudden unpremeditated inspiration. It represented the crystallization of convictions which had been maturing over several years. He had long been captive to the Word. Now he said so in the presence of the Emperor and to the world.

#### 4.3.5. The Diet of Worms

Protected by the safe-conduct of the emperor, Luther started for Worms on April 2, 1521. He believed that he was going to his death, yet was determined to go "in spite of hell and the powers in the air". (Bainton) To Melanchton, one of his colleagues at the university, he said at parting, "My dear brother, if I do not come back, if my enemies put me to death, you will go on teaching and standing fast in the truth; if you live, my death will matter little".

His journey was like a victory parade. Everywhere he went, crowds lined the roads and streets to see the man who had dared to stand up for Germany against the pope, and who, so they thought, was going to his death for his faith. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon of Wednesday April 17, Luther appeared before the Diet. In the midst of a scene of pomp and splendor, before the throne of an emperor who was the most powerful to appear in many centuries, stood a poor and powerless priest, offspring of peasant parents. Charles V and Martin Luther saw each other for the first time. Pointing to the books on a little table, an official asked Luther, "Are those your writings; and do you wish to retract them, or do you adhere to them and continue to assert them?" Luther answered the first question in the affirmative, but before answering the second question, he begged the emperor graciously to allow him time to think it over, in order that he might answer the question without injury to the Word of God and without peril to his soul. The hearing was adjourned till 4 pm on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1521, the following day.

It was then that Luther spoke firstly in Latin. Then he was asked to repeat in German. (We have not a single complete account of his address). But when he had finished, the

official told him that he had not spoken to the point. The question was whether he would recant or not. The emperor demanded a plain answer. Then it was that Luther uttered his most famous words, as he stood for the truth on the ground of the Scriptures: "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 a clear reason (for I do not trust either the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scripture I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise". (Bainton)

This stunned the tribunal. Luther had come through with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, as his weapon. Kierkegaard called him "the knight of faith", and such he proved to be.

Luther was ordered to leave Worms and return to Wittenberg. He was forbidden to preach. It was planned that after the safe-conduct expired, he would be seized and put to death as a pestilent heretic.

#### 4.3.6. The Wartburg Castle

But Luther left the town through a small gate in the wall of Worms on the night of the 26<sup>th</sup> April. In the heart of the forest, five masked riders suddenly swept down upon him, lifted him out of the cart, and rode off with him. This was done by order of Elector Frederick the Wise. The riders were to take him to the safe hiding place of Frederick's castle, the Wartburg, whose wooded rocky heights overlooked the pretty little town of Eisenach. Here Luther stayed for 10 months while the storm quieted. Writing occupied most of his time.

#### 4.4. The Translation of the Bible and other Writings

It was here at Wartburg, that Luther translated the Bible into German. "The translation of the Bible into German is Luther's greatest single work. It is both a literary and a religious achievement of the first order". (Heinz Bluhm) It is his most enduring monument. Nothing he ever did, had more significant repercussions than when he put the Scriptures into the tongue of the common people in his land – this was the single greatest factor in spreading the message of reform.

He was driven by an irresistible compulsion. He could not rest content until the project was complete. Coming as he did from peasant stock, Luther was essentially a man of the plebs. He knew his own German speech down to the grass roots. He had a unique gift of expression. In him the hour and the task met as he went into enforced retreat in the castle at the Wartburg – he retired as a fugitive from persecution for the sake of the truth. He emerged with a weapon which would continue to fight the battles of the Lord long after he had been laid to rest. Why was he so keen to translate the Bible? He says,



“Since we abandoned the Scriptures, it is not surprising the He (i.e. God) has abandoned us to the teaching of the pope and to the lies of men. Instead of Holy Scripture, we have had to learn the “Decretales” of a deceitful fool and an evil rogue. O, would to God that among Christians the pure gospel was known... O, that God would let my interpretation and that of all other teachers vanish altogether, so that every Christian might consider nothing but the simple Scripture itself and the pure Word of God... Therefore, to the Scriptures, dear Christians!...”

Luther finished off the assignment in the astonishingly short space of 11 weeks. When we consider that this was a time of year when the days were dark, that the lighting in the castle was minimal, that Luther’s health was none too good and that all the while he was in hiding from his enemies, we can only agree that this was “an almost unbelievable feat”.

Within 2 months no less than 5 000 copies of the New Testament were sold. Within 12 years nearly a quarter of a million were distributed amongst the German people. But before the first issue was off the press in September 1522, Luther started on the Old Testament. He had now left the Wartburg and resumed his duties at Wittenberg. But this took him 12 years to complete.

A chain reaction was set up, which resulted in translations into the vernacular all over Europe and beyond – the Word of God was not bound, nor could it be.

He published many attacks on the Roman mass – he rejected it as a “bloodless repetition of the sacrifice made at Calvary”, and said it was not to be made into a good work from which merit may be obtained. He laid the foundation too, for the distinctively Protestant doctrine of the believers’ priesthood. Since “faith alone is the true priestly office” it follows that, “all Christian men are priests, all woman priestesses, be young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, learned or unlearned. Here there is no difference, unless faith be unequal” – all Christians are one in the need to offer themselves to God through Christ, which is the only sacrifice now required since the Saviour died once for all on the cross. He said, “The Romanists want to be the only Masters of Holy Scripture, although they never learn a thing from the Bible all their life long.

Later, in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, he answered the question “Why do you publicly attack the pope and others, instead of keeping the peace?” He answered, “A person must advise and support peace while he can and keep quiet as long as possible. But when the sin is evident and become too widespread or does public damage, as the pope’s teaching has, then there is no longer time to be quiet but only to defend the attack, especially for me and others in public office, whose task it is to teach and warn everyone. I have a commission and charge, as a preacher and a doctor, to see to it that no one is misled, so I may give account of it at the Last Judgement...”.

He also wrote many commentaries. But first and foremost he was a preacher – not an itinerant preacher but a pastoral preacher at the parish church of Wittenberg. From 1510 till his death in 1546 he was associated with his local church. He only permitted himself to be drawn away from Wittenberg on exceptional occasions e.g. the Leipzig Debate and the Diet of Worms, or to seek refuge in the Wartburg when the seas of opposition were running high.

Luther's sermons would never have been preserved for posterity if the matter had been left in his own hands. We are indebted to a little band of scribes who devoted themselves to the tedious task of noting Luther's discourses and then preparing them for publication – this was a labour of love, from 1522 onwards.

The people in his congregation were ordinary folk who needed the ministry of men who took their preaching and pastoral responsibilities seriously. Luther showed himself to be a true shepherd of souls who fed and tended his flock.

#### 4.5. The Church is Reformed in Germany

The events centering around Luther's life were not the Reformation. They were the things that led up to and paved the way for the Reformation. What then, was the Reformation? It was firstly the reformation of the Church, changes made for the better in the Church concerning certain doctrines, forms of government, worship and life in general. The Reformation leaders went back to the Apostolic Church, as described in the New Testament, to find there the spirit and practice of the Church as they believed it should operate. The republishing of the works of the early Church Fathers – Jerome, Cyprian, Origen and Athanasius – was a great aid to them. Augustine was a favourite of most reformers. From these men they learned the simple character of the early church and found it widely different from the adorned service of their own day. They therefore sought to eliminate the forms, customs and traditions in the formal keeping of which men had come to trust for salvation, and to stress the preaching of the Word as the Gospel of salvation by grace alone.

But the Reformation was not only a change in the Church. It also wrought changes in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the nations which accepted its principles. The result had been that right down to our own day there is a vast difference in almost every way between Catholic and Protestant nations.

Luther's character was made up of strangely contradictory traits – he was at the same time very radical and very conservative; he was to bring about tremendous change in the Church, but he was very slow in discarding the old and substituting the new. At first he made only a few changes. In this he showed great wisdom and tact. Luther's followers were not always as wise as he was. While he was in hiding in the Wartburg Castle, some of his followers in Wittenberg were trying to make many and radical changes. This led to confusion, conflict and disorder. As a result, Luther left his hiding place against the advice of Elector Frederick the Wise; and in spite of the fact that he

was under the sentence of death, he returned to Wittenberg. For eight successive days he preached, and thereby restored order.

Step by step certain changes were introduced. The papacy was rejected. The distinction between clergy and laity was discarded. Praying to the saints and to Mary was done away with, as were also the worship of images, the veneration of relics, pilgrimages, religious processions, holy water, outward asceticism, monasticism, prayers for the dead, and belief in purgatory.

Luther denied the sacrificial character of the Lord's Supper. He denied that every time the Supper is celebrated Christ is offered anew as a sacrifice. He taught that Christ was offered once for all as a sacrifice upon the cross. There was therefore no place in the Church for priests. Since Luther's day Protestant churches have had ministers of the Word, rather than priests; and at the Lord's Supper all members partake of both the bread and the wine.

He also introduced a system of church visitors. When these visitors inspected the various churches, they discovered how shamefully the clergy had neglected their duties. Most of the priests were totally unable to preach. They could only mumble masses. As a result of church inspection by the visitors, a set of "Regulations" was drawn up for the guidance of church life.

He also did a great deal for education. To relieve the dense ignorance of the people he laboured tirelessly for the establishment of schools everywhere.

In order that children might become thoroughly grounded in evangelical doctrine, Luther wrote his "Shorter Catechism". It was only a very small book; yet it was one of the great Reformer's most important works. It was the doctrinal dish on which generation after generation of Lutheran children were reared.

One of the most remarkable things about this very extraordinary man Luther is that in the midst of his terrific combat with Rome and when he was already forty years old, he blossomed forth as a poet and wrote many of the hymns for the new hymnbook, the greatest of which was "ein' feste Burg is unser Gott" known to us as "A Mighty Fortress is our God".

A statement was drawn up, presenting to the world an official statement in which the Lutheran Church declared its faith. This "Augsburg Confession" was handed in to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. It was the first confession or creed to be formulated since the ancient Church formulated the Christian faith in the creeds of the Ecumenical Councils.

The Augsburg Confession did not replace the creeds of the ancient Church but believed wholeheartedly in the doctrines of the ancient Church as formulated in the Apostles' Creed, and in the creeds of the Nicea and Chalcedon. The Augsburg Confession was based upon and included them, but at the same time it enlarged upon and expanded them.

#### 4.6. Luther's Helpers

##### 4.6.1. His friends

Luther had many helpers. His closest friend and most helpful co-worker was Philipp Melanchthon, who was a professor of Greek at Wittenberg University. He was one of the most learned men of his day, and was called the Preceptor of Germany. The Quiet Reformer, as he was called, exercised a moderating influence on late Lutheranism.

Another friend and valuable assistant was Spalatin, the private secretary of the Elector of Saxony. Surprisingly, in spite of Prince Frederick's high regard and friendship for Luther, the prince and Luther never met. Spalatin acted intermediary between the two.

##### 4.6.2. His Marriage

On June 13, 1525, Luther received a very special helper, for on that day he married Catherine von Bora. She had been a nun. Luther had been a monk-priest. On becoming a monk or nun, a person must take a vow not to marry. For more than 300 years it had been one of the greatest laws in the Roman Church that a priest must not marry. This was known as celibacy. When Luther married, many priests, monks and nuns followed his example; thus another step was taken in the Reformation movement away from Rome.

#### 5. SUMMARY

Luther is often spoken of as being only a simple and obscure monk. This is by no means true. Yes, Luther was only 34 years old at this time. But he was experienced and accomplished far beyond young men of his age. He had lived in Magdeburg, Eisenach and Erfurt. He had been to Cologne and to Leipzig, and had crossed the Alps and travelled to Rome. He had met a great number and a great variety of people. In Rome he had seen Pope Julius II. He had read and studied the writings of many great men.

He was prior of his monastery and district vicar over eleven other monasteries. He had to appoint and remove priors; he had to instruct, counsel and comfort brother monks beset with temptations, and discipline those who misbehaved. He had to attend to the repair of buildings and the auditing of the accounts. He had to take care of legal matters pertaining to these monasteries.

He was a Master of Arts and a Doctor of Theology. He was one of the great preachers of all times. He had gained a high reputation as a teacher. He was one of the first theological professors in Germany to base his lectures in the Old and New Testaments on the original Hebrew and Greek texts. He was also one of the first professors in Germany to lecture in the German language instead of in Latin.

Luther was favourably known to his prince, The Elector Frederick the Wise, and he carried on correspondence with some of the most prominent men of his day. No, Luther at this time was not a simple or obscure monk!

## 6. EPILOGUE

The first step on nailing the Ninety-Five Theses on the Church door, which led eventually to the Protestant Reformation, is not something to be hidden. It was not done in a corner, and it has made itself known in the history of the world ever since. It is something to glory in, it is something to boast of. If we are true followers of Martin Luther and the Reformation, we must thank God for His exceeding grace to His people at the time.

Luther's action in 1517 had changed the entire course of history – you cannot understand what is generally called modern history, apart from the Reformation. It has also profoundly affected the modern view of politics and law. Prior to the Reformation, the Church generally governed politics; she controlled emperors and kings and potentates, and governed laws of the lands. All that had been changed. It has also changed literature. In a sense, Luther created the German language as it has been known to us, and you cannot understand literature in general, particularly German literature, apart from him. Even in the realm of science, there was a pronounced change – prior to the Reformation scientific investigation and endeavour was controlled by the Church, but now there was a new found liberty.

Most importantly, it has brought to the forefront the sovereignty of the individual conscience. Luther's fundamental teaching laid down the right of the individual to his conscience and to follow the dictates of his conscience.

In spite of all opposition from the Catholic Church, the Reformation spread through Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Norway and Sweden. The fetters that had bound the people to a religion of superstition and fear, had at last been broken, and the Church was once more free to worship God "in spirit and in truth". (Lloyd-Jones)

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