

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

Luther Leads The Way

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes,...for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

Romans 1:16 – 17

By the beginning of the 16th Century Western Europe, whether it knew it or not, was ready for Reformation. All it took was a man of courage and conviction to lead the way. Martin Luther never set out to be that man. He started out as a young man riddled with fear and superstition seeking peace of mind. He knew he had to find assurance of salvation and he was not going to be put off by anyone, not even by the pope himself.

A Young Man Seeking Salvation

Luther was born in Saxony on November 10th, 1483, one of a family of eight. At 18 he went to the University of Erfurt intent on becoming a lawyer but soon after gaining a master's degree he abandoned his studies. Despite angry opposition from his father, driven by a passion for the salvation of his soul and disturbed by a growing sense of his own sinfulness, he joined the Augustinian order of friars in Erfurt at the age of 22.

As a young monk, he followed the rules of his order strictly, confessing for hours on end in an effort to make sure that every sin was accounted for. He soon realised, however, that he could never confess enough; neither could he do enough penance to atone for his sins.

Luther was soon recognised as an outstanding theologian and preacher and, after being ordained a priest in 1507, he was invited to become a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg, newly founded by Prince Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony. He served under Johannes von Staupitz who took Luther under his wing and passed on to him his love for the teachings of Augustine of Hippo.

In 1511 Staupitz sent Luther to Rome on important business for the Augustinian order, hoping that a visit to the holy city would bolster his faith and enable him to find the peace he so earnestly sought. The experience became a major disappointment to Luther when he observed the cynical attitude and obsession with money so evident among the church hierarchy.

The Light Breaks Through

Luther began a quest to understand the way of salvation as it is taught in Scripture. In the years that followed he gained important insights which were to play a big part in both leading him to assurance of salvation and shaping his future.

Around 1513, under the influence of Staupitz, he espoused Augustine's doctrine of the sovereign grace of God — belief in a God who chooses helpless sinners for salvation according to His own unmerited mercy. He also came to see that the righteousness of God spoken of in Romans 1:17 is not the righteousness according to which God punishes sinners but righteousness which God gives to sinners as a free gift. At a later stage Luther came to realise that faith is essentially trust in Christ rather than assent to the Church's teachings.

Others on the staff of Wittenberg University joined Luther in his quest for theological understanding. Best known among them were Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt and Philip Melanchthon. Carlstadt was the senior lecturer at the University. He was in complete harmony with Luther in those early years but, lacking in common sense, in years to come he would go beyond Luther in the radical actions he encouraged followers of the Reformation to take.

Melanchthon was a brilliant young academic who became a close friend and colleague of Luther. To later generations he became known as the “Teacher of Germany”.

A Leader Emerges

Luther’s academic ability, strength of character and concern for people meant that soon he acquired additional responsibilities in Wittenberg. In 1512 he was awarded a doctorate in theology and Staupitz stepped aside to allow him to become professor of Biblical studies. In the same year he was appointed sub-prior of the Wittenberg Augustinian convent, responsible for the studies of all new friars. In 1514 he was appointed parish priest of the “castle church” in Wittenberg where he preached every Sunday. Around the same time he was given responsibility for oversight of 11 convents in the surrounding area. All of these were responsibilities that he took seriously, having a sincere pastoral concern for the souls of all those under his care.

A Challenge Is Issued

In 1515 pope Leo X authorised the sale of special indulgences in Germany to help finance the building of St Peter’s basilica in Rome. He sent Johann Tetzel to promote their sale and Tetzel did the job with enthusiasm and powerful emotional manipulation. His approach was crude, tasteless, sensational and contrary even to the official theology of indulgences, which taught that to be effective they had to be accompanied by repentance.

By 1517 Tetzel, although banned by Prince Frederick from his own lands, came to preach within easy distance of Wittenberg. Luther, as parish priest, was horrified that his people were buying Tetzel’s indulgences, thinking that salvation could be purchased. He therefore invited open debate on the subject of indulgences. In Luther’s day such debate was initiated when someone pinned a summary of his views to the door of the church. On October 31st, 1517 Luther nailed 95 points, or theses, to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. They offered penetrating criticism of the use of indulgences.

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent,” He meant that the entire life of believers should be a life of repentance.
2. The word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance — that is, confession and satisfaction — as administered by priests.
27. It is nothing more than human talk when men preach that a soul flies out of purgatory “as soon as the coin in the money-box rings”.
32. All who believe they are sure of salvation because they have papal certificates of pardon will be eternally damned, along with their teachers.
33. We must especially beware of those who say that papal pardons are “the supremely precious gift of God by which a person is reconciled to God”.
36. Any Christian at all who is truly repentant receives (as is right) the full remission of his punishment and guilt, without any certificates of indulgence.
43. Christians should be taught that a person who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than if he buys pardons.
54. The Word of God suffers harm if, in the same sermon, a preacher gives to papal pardons a length of time equal to, or greater than, the time given to the Word.
62. The true treasury of the Church is the holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.
75. It is madness to think that papal pardons have such power that they could absolve a man even if he had done the impossible and raped the Mother of God.
81. This immoral preaching of papal pardons makes it hard even for learned men to redeem the respect owed to the pope from the slanders (or at least, from the shrewd questions) of the laity.
82. For example, “Why doesn’t the pope set all the souls free from purgatory simply out of holy love and the supreme need of those souls? This would be the most righteous of reasons, seeing that he can redeem countless souls for the sake of filthy money with which to build a chapel, which is the most trivial of reasons.

In posting his theses Luther loosed a storm of controversy that would rock Western Europe. Initially His intention was not to criticise the official theology of indulgences, merely Tetzel’s perversion of it, but when others without his approval translated, printed and distributed

copies of his 95 theses throughout Germany he found himself under attack from the Church. He also won widespread support from Renaissance scholars who supported the teaching of Erasmus, from German nationalists who were glad to stem the flow of cash from Germany to Rome and from many ordinary German Christians who needed a leader to give voice to their grievances with Rome.

Battle Begins

The Dominicans (Tetzel was a Dominican) and archbishop Albert of Mainz who was profiting handsomely from the sale of indulgences, lodged charges against Luther with the pope. Initially Leo did not take the matter very seriously but he instructed the head of the Augustinian order to examine Luther's views, which he did in April 1518. Luther appeared before the governing body of the Augustinians in Heidelberg and ably defended Augustine's doctrines of sin and grace. His argument won over two young friars, Martin Bucer and Johannes Brenz, who were later to become leading Reformers.

At this stage Luther had no thought of breaking with Rome or with the papacy but soon, as his thinking developed, he was criticising even the official doctrine of indulgences and denying that the pope had power to release souls from purgatory. In August 1518 He was summoned to appear before the pope within 60 days. However, Prince Frederick sided with Luther and instead arranged a meeting between Luther and the papal legate, cardinal Cajetan, at Augsburg in October. Although Cajetan agreed with some of Luther's criticisms of indulgences the two men quickly came into conflict and Luther was forced into openly denying the doctrine of papal infallibility.

The Issues Become More Clear

Political events gave Luther a temporary respite during which time his views on the papacy became more clear. He came to believe that the pope was in fact the Antichrist — a view previously put forward by the Waldensians, Cathars, Lollards and Hussites.

In Leipzig, in June and July of 1519 Luther, Carlstadt and Melanchthon took part in a dispute with Johann Eck, professor of theology at Ingolstadt University and one of the greatest debaters of his day. Carlstadt, the senior man of the trio, was a boring bumbler in debate and Eck soon had the better of him on the doctrines of Augustine. Then Luther stepped in and took up the subject of the papacy.

Eck cleverly cornered Luther into admitting that his views were similar to those of John Huss whom the Council of Constance had burnt for heresy 100 years before. He forced Luther to acknowledge that even Church Councils are fallible and to openly state that the Scriptures are the only infallible authority.

Melanchthon did not dispute directly with Eck but suggested arguments to Luther and Carlstadt. It was he who put forward the view that the early Church fathers should be judged in the light of Scripture, rather than reading Scripture in the light of the teaching of the Fathers. This view led to the coining of the Latin phrase "sola Scriptura" (Scripture alone) which became a motto of the Reformation.

Justification By Faith

It was probably around 1519 that Melanchthon's knowledge of Greek brought Luther to a right understanding of the word justification. The Catholic Church, influenced by the Latin translation of the Bible it used, the Vulgate, believed that the word meant "to make righteous" in the sense of causing moral transformation — a process of change from sinner to saint — the process Scripture calls sanctification. Luther came to see that justification is a legal term which means "to declare righteous". By tying justification and moral transformation together the Catholic Church was able to support its teaching on the necessity of good works for salvation. By showing that the words justification and sanctification refer to two different things Luther demonstrated that justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. As early as 1513 Luther had already been convinced that salvation is entirely by grace but Melanchthon's new understanding of justification, based on his study of Erasmus's Greek text, gave a more solid Scriptural foundation for that belief and led to a more Christ-centred understanding of God's grace.

This thinking exposed other weakness in the teaching of the Catholic Church to Luther. The Church held that grace was given through the Church with its priests and sacraments. Luther argued that grace comes through faith — a direct relationship with Christ — and that far from being a substance created in the soul, as the Church taught, it is God's attitude of favour toward undeserving sinners.

The Break with Rome

The controversy with Rome escalated and continued and both sides appealed to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to settle it. He summoned an imperial parliament or "diet" to meet at Worms in January 1521. Before the diet could be convened pope Leo was convinced that Luther was a dangerous heretic. Luther's writings had, among other things:

- Opposed the view that the clergy were superior to the laity and argued for the priesthood of all believers.
- Attacked the claim that the popes were infallibly inspired by the Holy Spirit, pointing out the scandalous lives of many of the popes.
- Denied that the pope alone had authority to call a Council of the Church.
- Argued that refusal to give the communion cup to the ordinary people was unscriptural.
- Criticised the doctrine of transubstantiation as a man-made notion derived from the teaching of Aristotle.¹
- Described the sacrifice of the mass as the most blasphemous bondage of all. Communion, he argued, is not our gift to God but His gift to us; not a sacrifice to make God forgive us but a sign to us to nourish our faith in God's forgiveness.

On June 15th, 1520 Leo issued a papal bull ordering Luther to submit within 60 days or be excommunicated and burnt as a heretic. On December 10th Luther publicly burned a copy of the bull cheered on by a large gathering of students and citizens of Wittenberg.

The Diet Of Worms

By The time the diet of Worms was convened Luther had the backing of most of Germany. The pope's ambassador argued that since the Church had already excommunicated Luther (this had happened on January 3rd) there was nothing for the diet to discuss. They must simply condemn him and sentence him to be burned as a heretic. Prince Frederick demanded that Luther should be given a fair hearing and Charles V finally agreed, promising Luther safe-conduct.

Luther arrived at Worms on April 16th and appeared before the diet the following day. His writings were laid on a table before him and he was asked to confirm if they were his work. He was then asked if he would renounce those writings. Luther asked for time to consider his reply and was given until the next day.

On the following day Luther spoke to justify what he had written and promised that if anyone could prove he was mistaken from Scripture he would be the first to throw his books into the fire. When pressed for a straight answer to the question put by the diet he famously replied:

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of Scripture or by clear reason — since I believe neither the popes nor the councils by themselves, for it is clear that they have often erred and contradicted themselves — I am conquered by the holy Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not withdraw any thing, since it is neither safe nor right to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand. God help me. Amen."

Luther was allowed to leave Worms on April 26th. With him and his supporters having left the diet later condemned him as a heretic and put him under the ban of the Empire but Prince Frederick had already arranged for him to be kept in secrecy and safety in the Wartburg castle. There he spent the next year living in disguise and using the name "Sir George".

¹ Aristotle taught that the appearance of an object is different from its substance or inner nature and so it is possible for the inner substance to change while its outward appearance remains the same.

The year Luther spent in the Wartburg was to be the most creative of his life. Working from Erasmus's Greek text, he translated the entire New Testament into German. Published in February 1522, its impact transformed the religious life of Germany.²

Meanwhile others took up Luther's cause. Most of Germany was now in revolt against the papacy and the pope seemed powerless to stop it.

Questions For Discussion

- What have you learned from this study that will help you when you share the gospel with someone from a Roman Catholic background?
- How would you answer those who say that separation from the Roman Catholic Church was not necessary and that the Reformation was a mistake?
- Some have observed that the Reformation was not so much a movement for reform; more the re-evangelisation of an essentially pagan Europe. What do you think about that comment?

For Further Study

Martin Luther's understanding of the way of salvation depended on a proper understanding of certain key words. Using a concordance look at the use of the following words in the New Testament.

- Grace
- Faith
- Justification
- Sanctification

If you would like to know more about the life of Martin Luther, the book "Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther" by Roland Bainton gives a much more detailed account.

² A translation of the whole Bible completed by Luther and his colleagues at Wittenberg followed in 1534.