

# The Reformation: Changing Europe For Ever

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Five hundred years ago, on 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1517, a young German Professor of Theology, Dr. Martin Luther, pinned his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, a university town south-west of Berlin. The target of the Theses was the Papal Indulgences then being hawked around Germany, promising that on payment of a sum of money the Pope would grant not only remission for one's own sins, but even immediate release from Purgatory for loved ones. As the popular jingle put it, 'As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs.'

Luther protested that Indulgences could have no such power, nor indeed had the Pope. Nor was any such power needed. Every truly penitent Christian already enjoys full remission of sins, and participates fully in the blessings of Christ. More daringly, he declared that true repentance had nothing to do with the sacrament of Penance.

In posting his Theses, Luther was simply following standard academic procedure, expecting no more than a routine disputation with his university colleagues. But he was quickly disillusioned. Instead, as he recalled many years later, he found himself accused of 'demolishing heaven and consuming the earth with fire.' 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517 became the birthday of the Reformation, and by the time Luther died in 1546 Henry VIII had abolished papal power in England, Patrick Hamilton<sup>1</sup> had been martyred at St. Andrews, John Calvin had published the first edition of his Institutes, and John Knox was accompanying George Wishart<sup>2</sup> on his evangelistic tours. Europe was in a ferment of reformation and revolution.

Only the tiniest green shoots of reform can be seen in the Ninety-five Theses, but the movement they launched would mark the beginning of a new era, saving the church from terminal decline, suffusing religious life with prodigious new energy, and changing European life and culture forever. But why is it still important today?

## **Recovering the Christian doctrine of salvation**

Because, first and foremost, it is to the Reformation that we owe the recovery of the Christian doctrine of salvation. Luther was tormented by the question, How can I get right with God? The mediaeval church had its own answers: penances, pilgrimages, monastic vigils, self-flagellations, and innumerable other 'good works'. Luther had tried them all, and found no peace. Do what he might, the great problem remained: the righteousness of God. It terrified him because he saw it as a demand: something he had to be in order to be saved, and yet couldn't be. How could he ever be so righteous as to satisfy the righteousness of God?

But then, as he prepared to lecture on the Epistle to the Romans, he made an astounding discovery. He came to Chapter One, verse 17: 'the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."' This was the pivotal moment of the Reformation. Righteousness was not something God demanded. It was something he gave; something we can only

receive, not do; something to be received by faith, and by faith alone, without works.

Later reflection would bring greater clarity. The faith that saves is not faith in faith, but faith in Christ. Had he not died for us, we would perish eternally, but now we, the ungodly who believe, are forgiven, not after we have ceased to be sinners or after we have conquered sin, but while still sinners. In Luther's great paradox, we are simultaneously<sup>3</sup> righteous and sinners: unrighteous in ourselves, but righteous in the Christ who died for us. This is what faith does. It accepts God's forgiveness even while we are still sinners. 'What would I do,' cried Thomas Chalmers<sup>4</sup>, 'were it not that God justifies the ungodly!'

This message is the greatest legacy of the Reformation. Without it, we have no gospel. Without it our missions have no substance. Without it we have no leverage by which to promote practical Christianity.

### **Certainty**

But just here lies something which the generations after Luther and Calvin sadly lost: assurance. Mediaeval Catholicism had taught that it would be presumptuous to be sure of our own salvation. Instead, we must live in doubt and uncertainty all our days. The Reformation, by contrast, was about certainty. At one point Luther even congratulates the young people in his audience that they did not have to endure the doubts and fears which had plagued his generation. In Calvin, the note of certainty is clearer still. For him, faith is certainty, 'a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us'; or, as he says in one of his Sermons on Galatians, 'we cry out that God is our Father with a loud voice and absolute certainty'.

We urgently need to recover this certainty. Believers may doubt, and even, like Luther, be haunted by depression, but faith does not doubt and should never be encouraged to doubt. The joy of the Lord is our strength ([Neh. 8:10](#)) and there can be no such joy unless we can fall on our knees and cry with absolute assurance, 'Our Father!' It was such certainty that released the energies of the Reformation. Men and women lived and died for God because they knew that he loved them; and that mattered to them more than anything else in the whole wide world.

### **Sola scriptura**

But then we owe the Reformation a second great debt: it put Scripture back at the heart of the life of the church, proclaiming the Bible as the one and only Rule of Faith, by which all doctrines were to be judged, all worship was to be regulated, and the power of every king and every emperor was to be restrained. Sola scriptura ruled. But this was not all. For centuries the Bible had been locked away in the Latin Vulgate, an unknown tongue even to most of the priests. The Reformation gave it to the people, and in their own tongues. Luther himself was a master translator, guided not so much by the quest for a literal, word-for-word translation as by the question, 'How would a German say this?'

The English language quickly found its own Luther in the heroic labours of William Tyndale, whose translation of the New Testament was already reaching the ports of Easter Ross<sup>5</sup> a mere ten years after Luther posted his Theses. Tyndale's work profoundly influenced all subsequent English translations, especially the Authorised

Version of 1611, and the passion that drove him was summed up in his famous reply to a learned priest, 'If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost.' The dream found its fulfilment, and the Bible, with Tyndale's memorable phrases, saturated not only the religion of the English-speaking world but its whole life and literature.

But mere translation was not enough. Would the ploughboy be able to understand it? Mediaeval Catholicism said, 'No! The unlearned should not presume to understand the scriptures.' Against this the Reformation protested with all its heart. The Bible was so clear that even the unlearned could understand its saving message. But there was an important rider: such an understanding could be attained only by 'a due use of the ordinary means,' and by this they meant not what we today would call Bible-study aids, but the preaching of the word.

It was this passion to help ordinary people understand the Scriptures that led the Reformers to place preaching at the heart of worship; and not just any preaching, but expository preaching. They had a clear idea, too, of what this meant: explanation plus application. 'Without explanation,' wrote T. H. L. Parker, the leading expert on Calvin's preaching, 'it is not expository; without application it is not preaching.' Explanation focuses on what the text actually says, application on the challenges and comforts it presents to the actual congregation sitting in front of us.

This was the classical form of Protestant preaching, frequently, though not always, involving patient, verse-by-verse, explanation of the books of the Bible. It shunned all pretensions to human originality, avoided personal references, and was content simply to serve the text, getting to it with the minimum of introduction in order to expose its meaning and drive home its relevance.

It was such preaching that delivered reform, energized the church and changed the face of Europe. It will do so again, if we are prepared to put our trust in it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reformationhistory.org/patrickhamilton.html>

<sup>2</sup> George Wishart (also Wisehart; c. 1513–1546) was a Scottish Protestant Reformer and one of the early Protestant martyrs burned at the stake as a heretic.

<sup>3</sup> [Simul iustus et Peccator](#)

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847), was a Scottish minister, professor of theology, political economist, and a leader of both the Church of Scotland and of the Free Church of Scotland. He has been called "Scotland's greatest nineteenth-century churchman".

<sup>5</sup> Easter Ross is a loosely defined area in the east of Ross, Highland, Scotland.