

# Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation

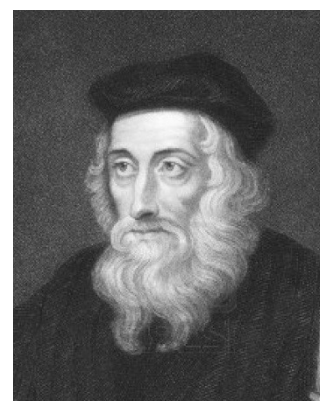
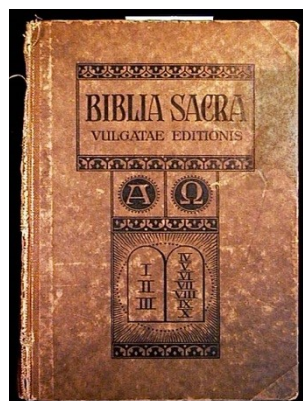
*Notes largely taken from the film of that name on the History Channel*

Pre 1500: Christianity was a **monolithic religion**. The doctrines hailed from Rome – everyone believed and obeyed. **The Pope was more powerful than rulers of countries**. Kings bowed to the Pope and



church – if deviations from doctrine occurred, the recalcitrant would burn in hell forever, and everyone was concerned about the afterlife for themselves and their loved ones – there was a strong desire to minimise purgatory and avoid hell.

**The Mass** was the main form of worship, not the reading of the bible. During the Mass, the priest faced away from the congregation and recited in Latin which hardly anyone could understand. The bible the priests read was the Vulgate and it was a 1000 year-old version.



1370s: **John Wycliffe** in England read the bible and **translated it into English**. It was copied by his followers (**the Lollards**) by hand (no printing press yet) but to own a copy was to commit heresy in catholic England.

1384: Wycliffe died.

1415: Wycliffe was declared a heretic and the church ordered his corpse be exhumed, burned and the ashes spread to the four winds.

1483: **Martin Luther** born.

1492: **Alexander VI** became Pope. He was a **Borgia** whose family was very rich and bought the Papacy because led to immense power and wealth. He was decadent and his lifestyle needed huge funds so he targeted rich enemies, had them executed and confiscated their lands.

During this time priests had wives and took money for **indulgences** – this helped their personal fortunes and also that of the Roman church.

1504: Martin Luther was intended to be a lawyer as he was very bright, but at 21 he became an **Augustinian monk**. He was possibly obsessive/compulsive concerning his personal purity in front of the God he had been taught was very demanding (his confession lasted for as much as six hours). He worried about his personal relationship with God. At the monastery/university in Wittenberg he became a teacher and soon a **Professor**.

In Wittenberg, a travelling Dominican friar **Johann Tetzel**, gathered crowds and sold indulgences. He was a snake-oil salesman of his day and very successful at raising money for himself, the Pope and for rebuilding St Paul's in Rome.

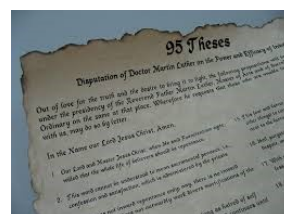
The selling of indulgences was based around the fact that **the saints had done good work** and that could be used to offset normal people's sins and also the sins of their relatives. It was believed that dead people spent a time in purgatory before going on to heaven. Tetzel is alleged to have claimed "*as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs*". Luther studied the bible closely but could find no justification for the practice and he worried about the souls of people who were conned into buying them. Indulgences were mass produced on the Gutenberg printing presses and the buyer's name was filled in by hand along with the amount paid and the soul for whom the indulgence was purchased.

1517: Luther believed that the church had lost its way and he found a verse in Paul's letter to the Romans "*the righteous will live by faith*" from which he concluded that those who are righteous through faith are right with God. Thus Popes and priests are not necessary for a person to go to heaven.

This revelation was the spark that set off the Reformation.

1517 Oct 31<sup>st</sup> Luther posted ideas or arguments (**95 theses**) on a notice board, very much like those on campus at Otago, (tradition has it that they were nailed to the church door but this is likely apocryphal) at Wittenberg for a debate "*Disputations on the power and efficacy of indulgences*". This debate also addressed the limits of Papal power –was it better to help your neighbour than buy indulgences?

**Luther wanted a debate**, not to start a new church. Pope Leo X opposed him but Luther stood firm because he was sure of his scholarship and the instruction of the Bible. "*I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes the righteous will live by faith*" (St Paul to the Romans).



At the time anyone who took the church to task was excommunicated – Luther was on dangerous ground and if he were convicted then he would be burned at the stake and his soul would go to hell for ever. This threat was enough to keep even the most powerful military men in obedience to Rome.

1440s: **Gutenberg** developed a printing press with moveable type. Luther was a very good writer in many styles. The technology of printing press allowed his ideas to spread.

1521: Luther was brought in front of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at Wurms. There was a church meeting called a Diet. Luther stood firm. He is reputed to have said *“Until I am proved wrong by Scriptures or by evident reason, I am a prisoner in conscience to the Word of God. I cannot retract and I will not retract. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”*

Thus he said to Charles V that he must defy him in the name of God. After the Diet, the news spread all over Germany and pamphlets from printing presses distributed Luther’s arguments.

In Wurms, Luther was declared a heretic and banished from Holy Roman Empire. This robbed him of all civil rights and if someone killed him they would not be subject to a prosecution. However, Luther had a supporter in Prince Frederick III of Saxony who gave him refuge for ten months in his castle at Wartburg. The princes in Germany rather liked Luther’s challenge to the political authority of Rome and they were supportive.

As the church and state were intermeshed the challenge to the church had consequences for state politics.

Whilst at the Wartburg castle, Luther **translated the New Testament into German** – thus the word of God became understandable to all. The Latin (Vulgate) and Greek versions were only understandable by priests and they were only ones allowed to read it.

This was now a true split in the church and the **Bible in German** gave rise to *the priesthood of all believers* – so everyone was expected to carry out the work of Christ in their particular circumstances. Some people were amazed that Jesus could speak such good German.

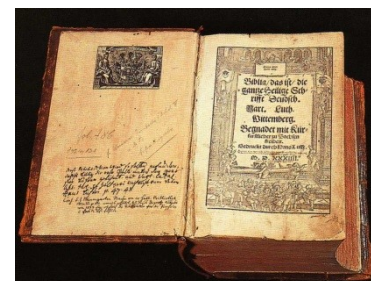
The rebellion against the church prompted other rebellions against authority – *“It is better to obey God than man”* Acts 5:20 although in Paul’s letter to the Romans he stresses the need to obey the civil authorities.

1524-25: Bad harvests and high taxes led to the **German Peasants’ War** – led by Thomas Müntzer, who tried to make the social revolt justified on scriptural lines. Luther wouldn’t support that and tried to stop it. He believed in obedience to magistrates. During one battle 6000 peasants died at a cost of six soldiers.

Müntzer was excommunicated and his head impaled on a spear as an example.

1525 June: Luther continued writing and **argued against celibacy for priests**, a happy domestic life was to be preferred. At age 41 he got married to 26yr old former nun and they subsequently had six children.

Luther believed that changes to marriage the most important of his writings. He



believed that when his wife was washing the children's nappies it was more pleasing to God than a monk saying his prayers – serving the neighbour and thus serving God. This gave daily life meaning as the context of faith.

Luther taught that **marriage was a civil rite not a religious one** and thus unions could be broken.

1530s the ideas swept through Europe causing violence and unrest. **John Calvin** (born 1509 in Picardy, France) was austere, serious, more harsh and uncompromising than Luther. He moved to Geneva Switzerland where he developed his version of the new faith.



Calvin's version of God was to say that God could do as he liked and would *predestine* people one way or another. No amount of pious work by an individual could cause God to change his mind.

Calvin believed in **predestination** – God chose a lucky few folk called *the elect* – who are to be saved. The rest were to be damned.

How does an individual know if he is one of the elect or not? Good works might demonstrate if you were amongst the elect — the harder you work, the more successful and therefore saved. This was the **rise of modern capitalism**.

Up to that date, **interest on the use of money** was frowned upon but Calvin argued that money belonged to the world of work and thus could have interest charged and be made useful. The Protestants now competed with the Medici family bankers.

Before Luther died he made **comments about the Jews** which were used by the Nazis to justify their persecutions in the 1930s-1940s. The Lutheran Church in USA absolutely refutes those writings and opinions of Luther's.

1546: Luther died in Eisleben, Germany and after that the Protestant reformation hesitated but the reformed Protestants (Calvin et al) took it on.

Calvinism competed with Lutheranism – led to Holy Wars, princes, kings and emperors fought for land and used a justification of God to do so.

1521: Catholic England rejected Protestantism and Bibles written in English were banned. Those with bibles in the English language were burned at the stake.

1526: Full translation of the New Testament in English by **William Tyndale**.

1521: Pope Leo X was grateful to **Henry VIII** for his pro-Catholic stand and so made him **Defender of the Faith** (Fid. Def. on coins). Henry's allegiance to Rome switched when he needed a divorce to get an heir. Henry used Luther's secularisation of marriage to advance his case. **Henry was excommunicated** (1538) after his divorce by Pope Clement VII, he formed the Church of England, **dissolved monasteries** (and made a fortune to fund his wars) but was a practising catholic in all but name until the end of his life.

1536: William Tyndale burned at the stake.

1611: **King James Bible** produced by 47 scholars – Tyndale's version used in the process.

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