



What is so Good about Martin Luther?

John Benton

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John Benton was pastor of a local church in Guildford, Surrey, for 36 years and then became Director for Pastoral Care at the Pastors' Academy, based at London Seminary, for 7 years from 2017 to 2024.

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Introduction

I love the story of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the great Reformation, for many reasons. But here are three.

First, it stands as testimony to our God as the God who can turn the tables, bring total revolution in a remarkably short space of time from such small beginnings: One man; one small out of the way town, one document, one day, one invention (the printing press) – and everything changed: Martin Luther, Wittenberg, his 95 Theses nailed to the church door, 31 October 1517. It is like a hinge on which the door opens into a new world. Medieval darkness shrinks back before the spiritual sunlit dawn.

Second, I love the story because of the character of the man. Luther was someone who was determined to face reality, to seek the truth whatever it cost. He was in many ways a deeply flawed man – I would not want to defend all he said or did as we will see – but he was prepared to be brutally honest in a way in which others were not, as God gave him strength. He was a brave man and a person of no compromise.

Thirdly, of course, he rediscovered the Biblical gospel of salvation for sinners. We are saved through faith alone in Christ alone. The gospel re-emerged truly as good news for spiritually enslaved and fallen people. There is the forgiveness of all our sins and the gift of a righteous standing before a holy God, not rooted in our supposed merits in or good deeds or keeping God's law (which becomes an unbearable burden), but simply because God is good and gracious to all who call upon him in Christ. Absolved! Forgiven! Justified! Welcomed! Luther rediscovered this good news from Scripture that led ordinary failing people to truly love God again and, for example, to Charles Wesley writing with unfettered joy, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise!' Gone was the night of religious darkness and fear. The day had dawned.

These are great things and things which churches and preachers do well to revisit often.

A pen portrait

Here is a description of Martin Luther from someone who saw him at the Diet of Worms (1521), as Luther was called to defend himself before Emperor Charles V and Jerome Aleander, the Pope's *nuncio*.

'A man was let in whom they said was Martin Luther, about 40 years old or thereabouts, coarsely built and with a coarse face with not especially good eyes, his

countenance restive, which he carelessly changed. He wore a cassock of the Augustinian order with its leather belt, his tonsure large and freshly shorn, his hair badly clipped.'

It was there at Worms that his supporters heard his great words which sum up his stark honesty and determination: 'I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God...I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.' And this was his stance as the possibility of martyrdom was still very real and hanging over him. Under God it was this trenchant honesty that was like a battering ram which smashed the darkness and oppression of the medieval world, setting people free.

Doctrinal breakthrough

Cambridge Professor, Owen Chadwick, states interestingly: 'The Reformation came about not so much because Europe was irreligious as because it *was* religious.'¹ Roman Catholic religiosity oppressed everything, and at the same time it was heretical and corrupt.

Many others had talked of the need for reformation before Luther. But says Chadwick, 'When churchmen spoke of reformation, they were almost always thinking of administrative, legal or moral reform; hardly ever about doctrinal reformation. They did not suppose the Pope's doctrine to be erroneous.'² But, though the Englishman, John Wycliffe and the Czech, John Huss, did see this before him, it was through Luther that the sweeping breakthrough for gospel truth came.

We try to sum up the detail of this wonderful story in 4 short chapters.

¹ *The Reformation, vol. 3 of The Penguin History of Christianity*, by Owen Chadwick, page 22

² *Ibid* page 13

Chapter 1: Background

Martin was born into the world of medieval Germany. It is a world of peasants, serfs, a feudal system and local lords; the privileged and the under-privileged with almost everything dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Germany consisted of a patchwork of little kingdoms under princes and electors, part of the Holy Roman Empire and answerable to Emperor – who had his position by gift of the Pope. Life was hard for ordinary people. The lords taxed the poor and the church milked cash from them too – playing on their fears concerning the afterlife.

Though ordinary people were fairly ignorant and illiterate, at the same time the academic renewal (based for the most part in Italy) of the Renaissance was underway among intellectuals – challenging long accepted ideas and insisting that truth would be found by a return to the ancient sources of civilization – mostly literary sources. Its spirit was ‘let’s look again at what the Greek philosophers and Roman jurists really said’. It raised questions for the Catholic Church, but this Renaissance was easily contained within the infinitely flexible corrupt structure of Popery. Into this context Martin Luder (that was the surname) was born in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany into a mining family who moved the following year to nearby Mansfeld. His father Hans Luder was a man who through hard graft had managed to become owner of a number of mines and smelting businesses and had climbed the social ladder a little.

Monk

Martin was educated in Latin schools in Mansfeld, Magdeburg and Eisenach and then sent by his ambitious father to study law. A lawyer in the family would bring status. He began his course as a student at the university of Erfurt around 60 miles from his home-town of Mansfeld. The next part of the story is well-known. Caught in a ferocious thunderstorm on one of his journeys – frightened witless, afraid of death and God’s judgment – Martin called out to Saint Anna, patron saint of miners, to save him. Driven by fear, he made a vow to become a monk if his life was spared amid the terrifying thunder and lightning. And having escaped with his life, he was determined to follow through on what he had promised in that moment of panic.

His father was furious with Martin’s decision. But, sincere to the last, 22-year-old Martin went through with it and joined the Augustinian order at Erfurt in August 1505.

Propelled by his near-death experience and desperate to find salvation, his extremely conscientious nature, meant he threw himself into the disciplines of life as a monk

with enormous energy. Later in life, Luther speaks of his strivings to find salvation through a dedicated monkish life like this: 'I was as zealous for the papistical law and traditions of the fathers, as any ever were, maintaining and defending them as holy and necessary to salvation. Moreover, I endeavoured to keep them myself, as much as was possible for me to do, punishing my poor body with fasting, watching, praying, and other exercises, more than all they which at this day, do so bitterly hate and persecute me, because now I take from them the glory of justifying (themselves) by works and merits. For I was so diligent and superstitious in the observation hereof, that I laid more upon my body, than without danger of health, it was able to bear.'³

Darkness

But it was all to no avail. He did not find forgiveness and life through all his strivings and disciplines. God seemed as far away as he could be.

And Martin had the attitude, 'If I don't feel forgiven, how do I know I am forgiven?' Moreover, in undertaking his extremes of 'obedience' – fasting and penances – Luther became subject to periods of great darkness, despair and temptation – which he terms in German '*Anfechtungen*'. It was a kind of looking into the abyss with apparently no way out. Luther writes, 'Then I was the most miserable person on earth, day and night was pure howling and despair, that no one could steer.'⁴

At one period in 1511 he was sent from his monastery on an errand to Rome with a fellow monk – but Martin was absolutely appalled by what he found there. There was blatant sin, superficiality and superstition everywhere. Ungodliness ruled right at the geographical heart of Catholicism. Luther returned even more disillusioned with the Church than before. But where else could he find salvation?

The vicar general of the Augustinian order, Dr. Staupitz by this time had begun to hear Luther's painful and lengthy confessions and had taken interest in this sincere young man. Johann von Staupitz was a man with a sense of God's grace. Sadly, Luther at this time saw God as only the inflexible judge who demands a righteousness which Luther knew he could never attain. This distorted caricature of the deity drove Martin to confess to hating God rather than loving him. He said, "If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz I should have sunk in hell."⁵

³ *Commentary on Galatians*, Martin Luther, Kregel, 1979, page 35

⁴ *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, by Lyndal Roper, Vintage Publishing, 2017, page 59

⁵ *Here I stand: the life of Martin Luther*, by Roland Bainton, Bantam Press,, page 40

But Staupitz directed Luther in one sense away from the Church and back to the source of the Church – that is to the Bible and Bible study. This Martin pursued with his usual diligence. Soon he was appointed to the Chair of Bible at a newish university in the northern town of Wittenberg. Still a monk living in the cloisters, on 1st August 1513, now aged 30, he commenced lectures to theological students on the Psalms.

By the autumn of 1515 he was lecturing on Paul's epistle to the Romans. Using the original Greek New Testament he taught his students Galatians throughout 1516 – 17. He had jumped right into the middle of the apostolic explanation and defence of the gospel, God's good news of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Studying the Scriptures with a willing honesty brought many challenges but also great change to Martin.

Chapter 2: Indulgences

It was while he was studying Romans that the great breakthrough came.

The precise timing of this is difficult to pinpoint because Luther only refers to it later in life. Some scholars like Lyndal Roper want place it around 1519 – after the 95 theses. But other scholars like Owen Chadwick see it as early as 1512⁶.

Justification by faith alone

These are Luther's own words: 'I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that 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 I was 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 dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

'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 me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...'⁷

This was the great rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith which is central to the Reformation.

Chadwick says: 'The 95 Theses contained no mention of the doctrine of justification by faith. But in spite of the silence of the theses, his attack upon indulgences sprang out of 'my theology', out of a Pauline conviction of God's grace.'⁸

Purgatory

⁶ Owen Chadwick, *op cit.*, page 45

⁷ Roland Bainton, *op cit.*, page 49

⁸ Owen Chadwick, *op cit.*, page 46

What were indulgences? Catholicism believed in both temporal and eternal punishment for sins. If you did not properly fulfill penances to cover the earthly punishment due (and who was ever sure they did? – certainly not Luther) then that rolled over into the afterlife. This is what the un-Biblical idea of purgatory was about.

But Roman Catholicism said that it, as the Church, had a treasury of merit, acquired from the good lives of the saints, which it could dispense to cancel this punishment and pardon could be obtained via the priests as people paid money to the church – purchased indulgence. And such ‘indulgencies’ were very popular – such is fallen human nature. You could sin and then just pay it off for yourself, or for dead relatives now suffering in purgatory. Luther saw this as recklessly misleading the people and totally without foundation in Scripture.

The 95 theses

In 1517 a priest named Johannes Tetzel was sent into Germany to preach up and to sell indulgences to the common people. The Pope (and others) needed money.

The Protestant chronicler Frederich Myconius said that some of Luther’s own parishioners complained that Luther ‘would not absolve them, because they showed no true penitence or reform.’ Some had appeared with letters of indulgence from Tetzel as they ‘did not want to desist from adultery, usury, unjust goods and such sins and evil.’⁹

Although Luther did not know it directly at the time, the real motive behind Tetzel’s selling of indulgences was, as we have said already, financial. Playing on their fears and their sinful tendencies the people were being fleeced. As Tetzel’s advertising jingle ran ‘as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, another soul from Purgatory springs’. His activities brought money into various pockets. ‘The money raised by the preacher was supposed to go to Rome, to pay for the rebuilding of St. Peter’s. In fact, half of it was going directly to the Fugger banking family in Augsburg, the richest merchant capitalists of the day, to whom Albrecht of Mainz owed money.’ This churchman had borrowed the Fugger’s money to buy preferment from the Pope – to become Archbishop of Mainz – and needed to repay his debt.

It was a scam and people were being spiritually misled. You can’t buy forgiveness of sins from the Church. There must be a looking to Christ in repentance which is not the same as doing penance. Burdened by this terrible situation, Luther felt he must act in some way. He wrote out and then hammered up his 95 theses on the church

⁹ Lyndal Roper, *op cit.*, page 4

door in Wittenberg, challenging the whole indulgence charade. It was really an invitation to a theological debate. But it turned into much more than that. It became a world changing moment.

While we do not have space here to list all Luther's theses, we can get a taste of what Luther was saying by just quoting one of them; *Thesis 6: The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring and showing that it has been remitted by God.*

The theses amount to a direct challenge to the authority of the Pope.

Chapter 3: Struggle

There are a few things to say at this point in Luther's story. *First*, maybe unbeknown to Luther, or maybe with his covert cooperation, the theses were printed and circulated, and within 2 months were the talk of all Germany. This was made possible by the recent invention of the printing press – the new media. Luther later followed this up with a sermon against indulgences. Again, the sermon was printed in German and distributed widely. This did not go unnoticed by the Roman Catholic authorities and Pope Leo X.

Second, Luther was given a great courage – realizing he was challenging the Pope himself. He very much felt that God was at work in him and through him. This is how Lyndal Roper speaks of Luther at this point: 'He later said that at this time he was like a "blinded horse", forced to wear blinkers to keep a straight line... He described a state of mind in which he was not fully in control of his actions but had handed over responsibility to a higher power. Later he often used the word *Spil*, game or play...as if God had been using him to cause mischief, and he were not fully in charge of what he was doing.'¹⁰ This is surely the power of the Holy Spirit upon Luther.

Third, Luther, though clear on many great truths, was still in a state of flux theologically. He had got hold of the great truth of God's grace in Christ, but his thinking was still an amalgam of Biblical ideas and medieval theology. Clarity would be gained through the challenges he had to face from his opponents. Iron would sharpen iron.

Many dangers

There are four key struggles of varying degrees of danger that he had to fight through. They take place in Heidelberg, Augsburg, Leipzig and Worms.

Large distances were involved. Luther often travelled 100s of miles to these crucial debates – sometimes on foot or on a wagon, with a group of friends to take his stand for the gospel of God. The distance from Wittenberg to Leipzig is only 44 miles. But from Wittenberg to Worms is around 320 miles; to Heidelberg around 330 miles; to Augsburg about 300 miles. These were major journeys before the advent of modern modes of transport. But Luther was determined to defend the truth he had discovered. In all these travels he finds a lot of goodwill from the ordinary German people.

¹⁰ Roper, *op cit.*, page 97

aware it could get serious for Luther. He could end up having his teaching condemned by the Pope and being burned as a heretic like John Huss before him (condemned by the Council of Constance and martyred in December 1415 – a century previously).

- *Augsburg*

Second, there is a meeting with Cardinal Cajetan who had been sent from Rome to investigate what was going on and what Luther was actually teaching. This took place 12-14 October the same year, 1518, in Augsburg. The dispute centred on the authority of the Pope. Both sides knew that indulgences have no warrant except in the Pope's authority. Luther brought evidence from history that Popes can sometimes be wrong.

- *Leipzig*

Third, in June the following year, 1519, there is a debate in Leipzig with a very aggressive and smart scholar named Johannes Eck. He's a man like Luther who has risen from ordinary roots but is very sharp and sees the debate as an opportunity to make a reputation for himself. In some ways Luther loses this debate. Luther had said the authority of the Pope should be subject to Church Councils. But Eck forces Luther to concede that he believed that some things which John Huss stood for were right and the Council of Constance was wrong.

So, no Pope, no Council – where is authority for the Church to be found? Luther is driven back to recognise the Bible alone as authoritative. This was in fact a step forward for Luther. This becomes his stance and is echoed in the great Reformation banner slogan of '*Sola Scriptura*'. Chadwick writes: 'Eck's glee was patent...The admission was momentous for Luther's cast of mind. He was a conservative by temperament. He resented unnecessary change. He intended no revolution, he aimed at purifying the Catholic Church and preserving its truth. But the Leipzig debate cast down the last barrier that restrained his antagonism to Rome. He had publicly and irrevocably identified himself, in part, with a man (Huss) condemned by the...Church. Henceforth he expected antipathy and incompatibility between the Bible and the ecclesiastical authorities, between the truth taught in the Word of God and the errors taught in the human traditions of papal churchmen.'¹¹

The debate in Leipzig is a great watershed. For Luther there is no going back now. When the Pope sends the document declaring his excommunication in December 1520 – he burns it! The year following the Leipzig debate, Luther's thoughts having

¹¹ Owen Chadwick, *ibid*, page 51

been clarified, became the most intellectually creative of his life. He wrote three major works: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (the Church is so corrupt you leaders must reform it and have the authority to reform it!); *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (an assault on Rome's supposed seven sacraments) and *Of the Freedom of a Christian Man* (a clear statement of the doctrine of justification by faith alone and its implications).

- *Worms*

Finally Luther, promised safe conduct by the authorities, is summoned to Worms by the Catholic hierarchy to answer before Emperor Charles V and the papal *nuncio* Aleander in April 1521.

Luther's books are all there in a pile on a bench for everyone to see. He is asked two questions: whether these books were his and whether he would recant what was taught in them?

At this moment a supporter of Luther from Wittenberg shouts 'Let the titles of the books be read.' They are read. Luther was meant to reply to the questions with a simple "Yes" or "No" – but he takes his time. Yes, the books are his – but he could not say whether he would defend them or recant. He asks for an adjournment to think. He returns the next day. Basically, his considered response is that he thinks he is right and what his books say is right – but he is willing to be taught if anyone was able to 'expose my errors, overthrowing them by the writings of the prophets and the evangelists'.

The imperial orator responded tetchily that he had not answered the question. Luther replies: 'Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason...I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is never safe nor right to go against conscience...Here I stand, may God help me.'

After more discussion, the Diet broke up with many Catholic Spaniards who were there following Luther shouting 'Burn him! Burn him!' So it is that on leaving Worms, he is spirited away by friends to an unknown destination. It is the Wartburg castle. Where he lives anonymously as 'Squire George' for some time and gives himself to translating the New Testament into German for all to read.

Reformation

And from here the Reformation spreads like wildfire across Europe. Thousands of people see the truth of God's grace and justification by faith and turn to Christ.

Catholicism is shaken to its foundations. One result is that many monasteries and nunneries are abandoned and many monks and nuns, including Luther himself, give up their former way of life and get married. To be a married man or woman is no longer viewed as being second-class for a Christian. We are all justified by faith alone. Family life can be cherished.

But the progress of the Reformation is far from smooth. Different kingdoms and principalities become Protestant while others remain Catholic and this sows the seeds of war. There is a peasants revolt, class warfare between the ordinary people and their traditional lords, which is seemingly fuelled by Reformation ideas. Luther feels he must take the side of the gentry for the sake of law and order – but many ordinary people are killed. Then false teachers emerge, like the Zwickau prophets, who reject the Church but downplay the Bible as well, claiming direct revelation from God. These people have to be opposed. And amidst all this Luther makes quite a few anti-Semitic remarks. Luther cannot be defended in this. He is far from a man without fault.

But the great matter is that the apostolic gospel has been recovered for a world of lost men and women.

Chapter 4: Freedom

What's so good about Martin Luther? I think it is right to answer that question by seeing how he, himself saw what had happened. He saw it in terms of freedom – hence the title of his little book on justification by faith alone is *Of the Freedom of the Christian Man*.

Further, this emphasis on the bringing of freedom showed itself in another way. Around the time of the publication of the 95 Theses, Martin Luder (remember his birth name) changed his name to Martin Luther. He no longer signed himself 'Luder', his family's surname, but took a new name from the Greek *eleutherius* – which means 'the freed one'. Later he dropped Eleutherius – but kept the kernel 'Luther'.¹²

What's so good about Martin Luther? He would say that his main contribution to the history of mankind was that under God he brought freedom. And since the days of Luther that has worked itself out in many ways and has, (we have to say both for good and bad because of secularism's distortion of the concept), become the cornerstone of modern Western civilization for the last few centuries.

Spiritual freedom

First, and foremost, of course he brought spiritual freedom through his rediscovery of the gospel of grace as taught by Christ and the apostles. The publican who prayed 'God have mercy on me, a sinner,' went back to his house justified, Luke 18.13. The religion of fear and guilt for failing to reach the required standard was gone. 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,' Romans 8.1; 'Christ redeemed us freed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,' Galatians 3.13. Here is the source of greatest joy to fallen, sinful men and women. The lost can be saved, through simple faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ, Luke 19.10.

His writings bring liberty to convicted sinners who feel their guilt and shame.

The apostle Paul wrote, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of God our Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen' Galatians 1.3-5.

Here is an example of Luther at his best. This is him commenting on those verses from Galatians: *Let us learn here of Paul to fully and truly believe that Christ was*

¹² Lyndal Roper, *op cit.*, page 99

*given, not for feigned sins, nor for small, but for great huge sins; not for few but for many; not for conquered sins, but for invincible sins. Herein consists the effect of eternal salvation, namely, in taking these words to be effectual, true and of great importance. I say not this for nought, for I have often proved by experience, and I daily find what a hard matter it is to believe that Christ was given, not for the holy, worthy, righteous, and such as were his friends, but for wicked sinners, for the unworthy, and for his enemies which have deserved God's wrath and everlasting death. Hold this fast and suffer not thyself to be drawn away by any means from this most sweet definition of Christ, which rejoices the very angels of heaven: that is to say, that Christ is no Moses, no lawgiver, no tyrant, but a mediator for sins, a free giver of grace, righteousness and life: who gave himself, not for our merits, righteousness and godly life, but for our sins. Christian you are saved. Free from the Pope and canon law and priestcraft. Jesus has done it all.*¹³

Intellectual freedom

Second, he brought a new intellectual freedom. Informed by Scripture he wanted people to think for themselves. He wrote his ideas in German as well as Latin so that everyone could understand what he was saying and come to their own conclusions. He translated the Bible into German so that all could have the Word of God.

The Church wanted to tell people what to think. They kept the Bible from the people. But Luther set people free to read it and left it up to God's Holy Spirit and people's own conscience as to how they responded to it. And under God's word it is no surprise that the Reformation goes hand in hand with things like the beginnings of modern science. A new spirit of enquiry gained momentum as human beings, created in God's image, were able to 'think God's thoughts after him'.

Luther's Theses were nailed on the church door at Wittenberg in 1517. The first great book of modern science is *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* – 'On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres' by Nicolaus Copernicus – published 1543. Copernicus waited until after his death to publish because he was so worried about how the Catholic Church would react to his theory of a solar-centred planetary system. But now the day of intellectual freedom was dawning. We have here the beginnings of the modern world – yes now going astray as people foolishly reject God and Scripture – but nevertheless a revolution in thought.

Political freedom

¹³ Luther, *Commentary on Galatians, op cit*, page 13

Third, Luther brought the seeds of a social revolution and political freedom. The great doctrine of justification by faith alone is a mighty social leveller. Rich and poor, peasant and lord, men and women, people of diverse races are no different from each other. 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus', Romans 3.23-24. Whatever social strata you are from, whatever your race or gender or status, Christ alone and faith alone is the only way of salvation. By faith whether high or low the door is open for us to become God's adopted children.

And this political freedom meant that the Roman Catholic Church's political power was over. And all this paves the way towards democracy and the free societies of the West.

Luther sets people free – spiritually, intellectually, socially. That's what so good about Martin Luther.

Let's make sure we use that freedom well.

Note

This booklet is based on a lecture given by John Benton at Welcome Hall Evangelical Church, Bromsgrove in 2017 in celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.