

# The Story of Christ's Church

---

## The story of Christ's Church – Part 4

1500 – 1650 AD : the challenge of reformation – longing and resistance



**Introduction:** on 31 October 1517 Dr Martin Luther, a 34 year old Augustinian monk and Professor of Biblical Theology at the newly opened Wittenberg University in Germany nailed his 95 theses, or issues needing urgent debate, to the door of All Saints Church. He was challenging head-on the disgraceful and widespread financial exploitation of ordinary people through the sale of Indulgences. The 95 theses begin as follows:

**DISPUTATION OF DOCTOR MARTIN LUTHER  
ON THE POWER AND EFFICACY OF  
INDULGENCES  
OCTOBER 31, 1517**

**Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light,  
the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg,  
under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther,  
Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology,  
and Lecturer in Theology.**

**Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present  
and debate orally with us, may do so by letter.**

He didn't realise that the Reformation was about to begin.

For a century before this the Catholic Church throughout western Europe was rumbling with alienation. There was widespread anger at the Church's lack of spirituality, morality and financial sensitivity to the burdens of the poor. Many felt that the "church was in ruins", like a once beautiful cathedral now totally neglected. They longed for the Reform of their Church **in the image of Christ** and for social justice in line with Christ's teaching. This longing for change met with resistance from the leaders of Church and State.

# The Story of Christ's Church

---

Tonight we examine this longing for reform and those who carried it in their hearts and suffered for it in their lives. Changing the Church and transforming communities is not easy. Those who sought reform had no intention of founding a new Church, but of turning around the sad condition of the Church they loved. Resistance to change and the stubbornness of those in power, not unlike Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, pushed the Reformers out of the Catholic Church, a choice they never wanted to make.

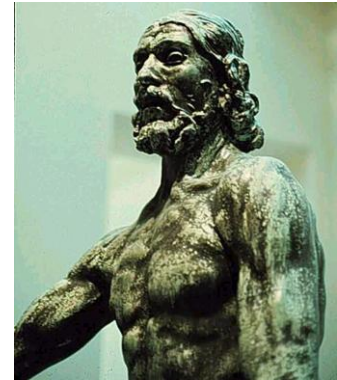
## 1. The longing for reform - awakening of the Church's ancient prophetic tradition



**Moses (1446 – 1406 BC)**



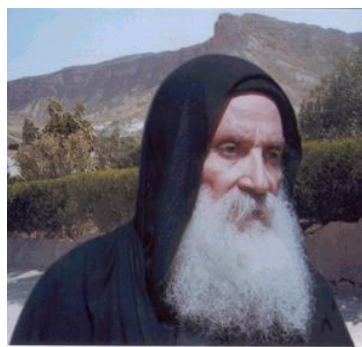
**Elijah (875 – 848 BC)**



**John the Baptist (6BC - 30 AD)**



**Jesus cleanses the Temple  
(33 AD)**



**St Anthony of Egypt  
(251 – 356)**



**Pope Gregory the Great  
(590 – 604)**



**John Wyclif, Oxford  
(1330 – 1384)**



**John Huss, Prague  
(1374 – 1415)**



**Gerhard Groot,  
(1340-1384)**



**Savonarola, Florence  
(1452 – 1498)**

## The Story of Christ's Church

---

During the century before Luther the desire for reform within Catholic Church expressed itself in grass-roots movements in different countries: John Wycliffe (1330-1384) led the movement in England, John Hus (c1372-1415) in Bohemia or Czech Republic, Gerhard Groote, (1340-1384) in Holland, and Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) in Florence, Italy.

***“These movements bore witness to a widespread feeling of discontent with the state of the Church.” (Bettenson, 192 AD)***



**St. Nicolas Church, Prague**



**John Huss**

John Hus was a scholar, priest, preacher, reformer, nationalist hero and martyr. He was born in the Czech Republic and educated at Charles University in Prague where he became a lecturer in theology and Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy. In 1401, he was ordained a priest and at 30 began preaching close to the University. His sermons were in Czech, not Latin. He was part of the movement for the Bohemian political independence and Church reform which were sweeping through the country. He gave powerful expression to his people's grievances.

He was deeply influenced by English reformer John Wycliffe; both attacked abuses by the Church leaders as well as the clergy's unholy lives. They believed in predestination, regarded the Bible as the highest authority for faith and practice, and held that Christ is the true head of the Church, not some corrupt Church official.

His preaching aroused the anger of his local archbishop and he was forbidden to continue his ministry and was excommunicated two years later (1410). Riots of support broke out in Prague as he defied his archbishop and continued to preach openly. As time passed many of his influential supporters fell from power and he had to flee from Prague.

## The Story of Christ's Church

---

In 1415 he was summoned to the Council of Constance which was out to suppress heresy. He thought he had a good chance to defend his views, so he travelled to the Council. But when he arrived his enemies imprisoned him and his views were condemned as heresy. He was asked to recant and never preach again. When he refused he was denounced by the Council and handed over to the State to be burned at the stake. He died heroically aged 43, and his martyrdom gave rise to the Hussite Wars as the nation mobilised for change.

His supporters in Bohemia and Moravia organised resistance and drew up the Four Articles of Prague (1420). They demanded (1) the freedom of priests to preach from the Scriptures; (2) Holy Communion for the laity in both kinds, chalice and host/bread; (3) mandatory poverty for the clergy and the return of most church lands to their former owners; (4) the prohibition of prostitution and the punishment of serious sinners.

When Pope and the King of Hungary launched a crusade to crush the resistance they met with stunning defeats. After 16 years of war the Council of Basel ended the conflict by giving the Hussite Church some of its demands: they permitted Communion in both kinds, appointed a nationalist cleric as archbishop of Prague, and allowed Bohemian Church almost complete independence within the Catholic Church which they enjoyed for 200 years.

What do you notice about the movement for Reform?

It is the old prophetic tradition reasserting itself

It is complex: political, social, economic, spiritual, doctrinal and moral

It is lived personally before being promoted more widely

It is led by people who love their Church: priests, theologians, scholars

It is led by people devoted to Christ: they return to Christ through Scripture

They are inspired by others and inspire

They demonstrate courage in leadership

They meet determined resistance: attempts to silence, suppress and eliminate  
The Reform Process is never complete, only an approximation to the ideal.

*Ecclesia semper Reformanda*

# The Story of Christ's Church

---

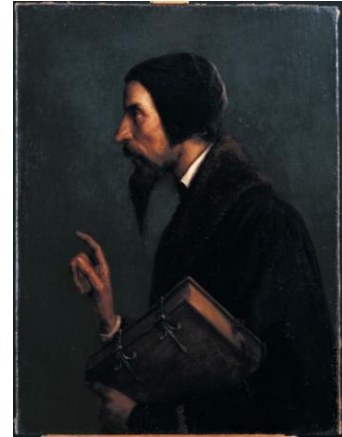
## 2. The Reformation in Europe: 1500 - 1650



**Martin Luther**  
(1483 – 1546)



**Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich**  
(1484 – 1531)



**John Calvin of Geneva**  
(1509 – 1564)

The three leaders of the Reform in western Europe were Martin Luther of Germany, Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich in Switzerland and John Calvin of Geneva.



**Luther's family rented one room in Eisleben house**



**Luther lived as monk in Erfurt Monastery**



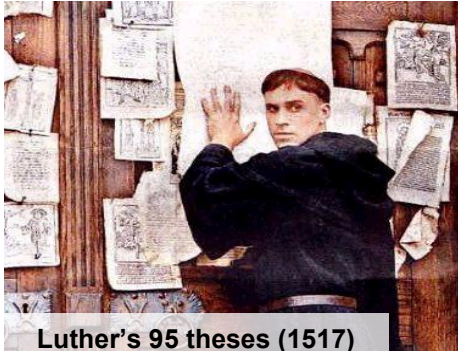
**Luther's cell in monastery (1505 – 1511)**

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben in Germany in 1483, the son of a miner who worked in the copper mines. He was proud of his working-class roots but his father saw the family's way out of poverty as through education. So he pressurized Martin to study Law. At 17 he entered University of Erfurt and eventually graduated with a Master's degree. However, at 22 Martin shocked friends and enraged his father by entering the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. He had undergone several near-death experiences that had impressed on him how fleeting life was. In the monastery he diligently observed the rules imposed on novices but didn't find the peace his heart sought. Nevertheless, he took his monastic vows in 1506, and was ordained a priest a year later. He approached his first mass with awe. After ordination, his Order asked him to pursue his theological studies in order to become a professor at one of their new universities.

## The Story of Christ's Church

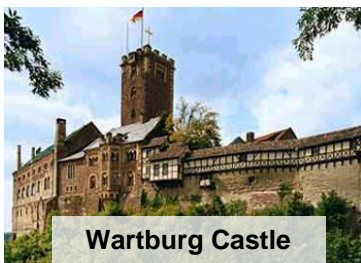
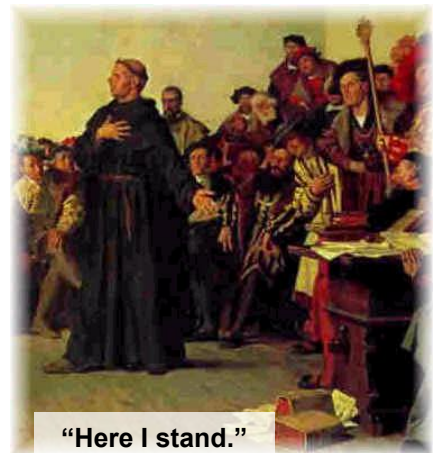
---

In 1510 he made a pilgrimage to Rome and was shocked by the worldliness of the Roman clergy. On his return he took the degree of doctor of theology at Wittenberg University and in 1512 was appointed to the chair of biblical theology which he held until his death.



Although still uncertain of God's love and his own salvation, Luther was active as a teacher and preacher. Slowly he realised that Christians are saved not through their own efforts but by the gift of God's grace, accepted in faith. After five years teaching he burst upon the public scene when he nailed his "95 theses", or debating issues, to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517. He criticised the selling of indulgences (release from temporal penalties for sin through the payment of money) for the building of St Peter's in Rome. This caused a huge stir. His theses were translated into German and widely distributed.

In 1520 he called for a council to reform the church and to settle the controversies that he had provoked. Many leaders on both sides supported his appeal, but Pope Clement VII feared that such a gathering might encourage the view that councils, rather than the pope, have supreme authority in the church. Eventually Luther's views were investigated by the Roman Curia and condemned in June 1520; he was excommunicated six months later (Jan 1521). When Luther received the papal letter condemning his doctrines he burned publically in Wittenberg. At the National Assembly at Worms convened by the Emperor Charles V in 1521 he was asked to recant, but refused, asserting that he would be wrong to defy Scripture, reason and conscience.

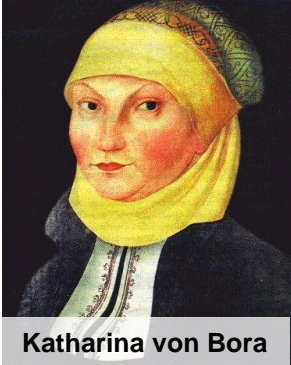


Condemned by the emperor, Luther was spirited away by his prince, elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, and kept in hiding at Wartburg Castle. In Wittenberg there was rioting. But at Wartburg he began translating the NT from Greek into German. When it was safe, Luther returned to Wittenberg to continue his work but got drawn into controversy over to the Peasants' War (1524-1526); this was an uprising of German peasants and urban mobs against their overlords; they were suffering severe economic, religious, and judicial oppression from the nobles and clergy. The peasants demanded the right to choose their own ministers, the abolition of serfdom, the right to fish and hunt game, the abolition of many kinds of dues, and the guarantee of fair treatment in courts presided over by the nobles.

# The Story of Christ's Church

---

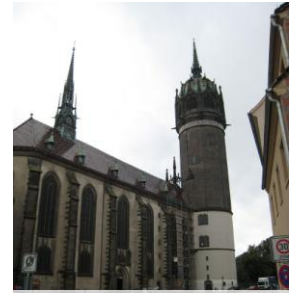
Battles were fought, atrocities committed. Luther condemned the violence of the peasants while being sympathetic to their demands. His attitude towards the war lost him many friends among the poor, who received no concessions from their overlords.



Katharina von Bora

In the midst of this controversy he married (1525:42) Katharina von Bora, a former nun, and had a happy life. Luther was a voluminous writer: his writings now occupy 54 volumes, but his most popular work was his Small Catechism (1529:46) in which he uses a question and answer format in explaining the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. It presents evangelical theology simply and colourfully. In the winter of 1546 he was asked

to settle a dispute between two young princes who ruled the area of Mansfeld, where he had been born. Old and sick, he went there, resolved the conflict, and died on February 18, 1546 in Eisleben. He was buried in the All Saints Church in Wittenberg.



All Saints' Church  
Wittenberg

### 3. The response of Rome

How did the Papacy respond to the challenge?

1. At first not much interest with the Catholic Church. Pope Leo X (1513-1521), the last non-priest to be Pope, was too busy to concentrate on Luther's 95 theses. He was involved in raising money to built St Peter's Basilica, in the politics of Italy and in enjoying his extravagant lifestyle. When he became Pope he said to his brother Giuliano, "Since God has given us the Papacy, let us enjoy it."



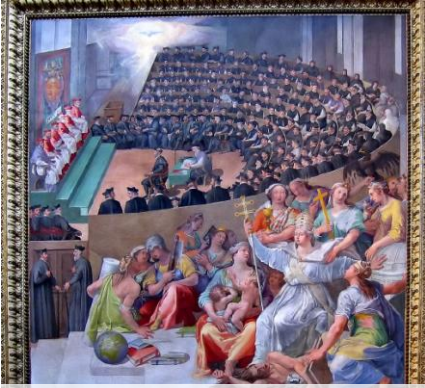
Pope Leo X

2. A society of Reformers emerged within Catholic Church in 1521; 'The Oratory of divine love' was formed in Rome by fifty clergy and laity sympathetic to Protestantism, including Sadoletto and Contarini. They wanted to see the reform of the local clergy whose worldliness, neglect of their own parishioners and disinterest in the poor. Clergy were despised and the most loathed and immoral section of the whole church was the Papal Court itself. There was little concern for spiritual life, social initiatives to help the disadvantaged and no desire to reach the ordinary people with the message of Christ. The 'Oratory of Divine Love' committed itself to serious reform and change, both personally, in parishes and at the top of the Church.

## The Story of Christ's Church

---

3. Reform initiatives: three reforming Popes emerged (Clement VII, Paul III and Paul VI: 1523-1559) pushed ahead with change. Paul III (1534 – 1549) asked Cardinal Contarini, on behalf of the College of Cardinals, to appoint a 'Reform Commission' and in 1537 it is published as "Advice concerning the reform of the Church". They were strong in their criticisms: 'The office of Pope is too secular', 'bribery is rampant in the high offices of the Church', 'Indulgences have been a major source of abusing ordinary people.



Council of Trent (1545 – 1563)

4. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was convened to reform the Church and oppose the Protestant threat. Luther had called for such a council as early as 1518 and while the German princes and the Emperor favoured it, Rome was afraid of the criticisms it might make. But now everybody knew that a Council was essential in order to reform the Church. A general programme of moral, intellectual and spiritual reform was undertaken and the core beliefs of the Catholic Church defined. Many protestant criticisms were taken on board, but the

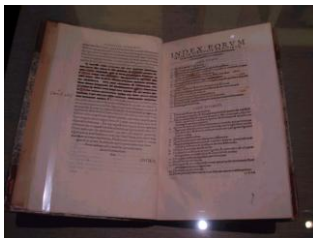
Protestant Churches were anathematized and their beliefs condemned. Catholic beliefs, attitudes and animosities fossilized until the 1960's.

5. The Counter-Reformation: under the leadership of Ignatius Loyola, highly educated men dedicated themselves to a renewal of piety through preaching, helping people understand their faith, and the use of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises for retreats. They sought to promote education, a disciplined life and obedience to Pope. They evangelized newly explored territories in the Far East and in North and South America.



Ignatius Loyola

6. Alongside this, strongly repressive currents entered Catholicism with the Index of Forbidden Books: over the centuries Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Copernicus, Milton, Descartes, Erasmus, Pascal, Voltaire and Jonathan Swift were banned. "**On the**



**Revolutions of Celestial Spheres"** by Copernicus (1473-1543) was first printed in 1543 in Basel, Switzerland. It presented Copernicus' extraordinary discovery of a heliocentric solar system in which the planets rotate around the sun. This radical theory contradicted the Catholic Church's belief that the Earth, God's creation, was at the centre of the universe. The Inquisition placed the book on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1616, and a Papal decree in 1620 demanded alterations to the text in ten specific places.

7. The revival of the Inquisition: this was to ensure and enforce the orthodoxy of the faithful and to suppress political and religious dissent.



## The Story of Christ's Church

---



**The Thirty Years War  
(1618 – 1648)**



**Peace of Westphalia  
(1648)**

With heavy foreign support on both sides, the tensions in Germany erupted in the horrors of the Thirty Years' War (1618 -1648) and left the country devastated and its religious energies exhausted. Europe was divided and polarised for centuries. Germany exhausted with one third of its population wiped out. The Church in Europe was divided, whole communities polarised.

Over the centuries in Europe the relationship Protestant and Catholic communities has slowly changed. This was speeded up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a major change was noticeable from the 1960's with the Second Vatican Council to which several distinguished Protestant Theologians were invited as observers.

In 1520, when Pope Leo X excommunicated Martin Luther he said,

***“Martin Luther is a slave of a depraved mind  
and has scorned to revoke his errors”***

Earlier this year Pope Benedict XVI is reported as saying that Martin Luther was not a heretic but was seeking to purge the Church of her corrupt practices. Cardinal Walter Kasper has said,

***“We have much to learn from Luther, beginning with the importance  
he attached to the Word of God. It is time to take a more positive view  
of Luther, whose reforms had aroused Papal anger at the time  
but could now be seen as having anticipated  
aspects of reform which the Church has adopted over time.”***

(Times, Thursday Mar 6, 2008)