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Luther Tyndale Cranmer

This series has been written to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther posting his 95 theses and, unwittingly, beginning what became the Protestant Reformation. Many people are unfamiliar with these crucial events which have shaped our churches as well as our land; perhaps you, too, are unaware of what happened.

As a leader it would be worth taking a little time to read some more. Background notes on Martin Luther, William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer are included in this pdf. Two recommended books giving a brief introduction to the Reformation as a whole are:

- *The Essence of the Reformation* by Kirsten Birkett (Matthias Media) – at only 100 pages this is a pithy and clear little primer on the key events and people.
- *The Unquenchable Flame* by Michael Reeves (IVP) – this is a fun and helpful book tracing the impact of the Reformation through Europe.

There are also some excellent talks and resources at www.uniontheology.org

There are three sessions in this pack aimed as Sunday morning material. Each could be used as a standalone session but they work well as a series. The flow is as follows:

- **Martin Luther** shows us the rediscovery of the gospel of grace, how everyone can be saved only by faith in Jesus.
- **William Tyndale** shows us how this came to the English language, by translating the Bible. He wanted even the ploughboys to be able to read about Jesus for themselves.
- **Thomas Cranmer** shows us how this was communicated to every church in England, all should hear about Jesus no matter which church they are part of.

So what ties the three sessions together is the idea that being a Christian is not just for the well behaved, the wealthy, those with privilege or intelligence, nor monks in their cloisters or priests with their Latin. It was for all and, for Tyndale and Cranmer, this passion cost them everything.

The series includes sessions on Luther, Tyndale and Cranmer for introductions in church services, Sunday schools (3–5s and 5–11s), youth groups (11–16s), and school assemblies. There is also additional material to use at Reformation-themed Light Parties.

Soli deo Gloria – to God alone be the glory!



Martin Luther

Martin Luther (not to be confused with Martin Luther King!) was born in Germany in 1483 and was destined for a career as a lawyer until, age 21, he was caught in a July thunderstorm. Luther was terrified and considered his position before God. At this point he made a rash vow – ‘Saint Anne, help me,’ he prayed, ‘I shall become a monk!’

To become a monk was to ‘enter a world of rules’ and Luther took his duties very seriously. Yet this never truly satisfied Luther and guilt always sat heavy on his shoulders. At his first communion he stood terrified of speaking directly to God rather than Mary.

At this time, and still today, the good deeds of the saints could be purchased on behalf of your dead relatives to relieve their time in purgatory (a shadowy waiting room) as they were prepared for heaven. These were called indulgences and the most famous salesman of the time was Johann Tetzel who sang, ‘When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.’ Essentially, friendship with God could be bought and this contributed to an already incredibly wealthy and corrupt church, while many of her people struggled in poverty and squalor.

This made Luther furious for, if salvation could be bought, this cheapened the act of repentance; there was no need to say sorry. So, on 31st October 1517, he nailed 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, the very day on which indulgences were to be offered. This was a call to debate but unwittingly began a Reformation both in the church but also in Luther’s thinking.

By 1519 Luther had discovered Romans 1:17, ‘he who through faith is righteous shall live.’ This made him realise that righteousness, that is, being right before God, is not something that can be earned by good works, never mind bought with money. Rather, God promised forgiveness and righteousness; the question was whether the sinner would trust it. This was a whole different Christianity to that which was being peddled by Tetzel and the rest of the established church.

The church authorities were horrified by what Luther was now saying and in 1520 he was served a papal bull, an order charging Luther to recant within 60 days, or face excommunication, that is, being thrown out of the church. Luther burnt the order and was effectively no longer a member of the church, a horrifying idea for most who believed that salvation was only found in the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1521 he was summoned to the German city of Worms to appear before an imperial council or Diet, hence the rather unappetising sounding Diet of Worms! Here he was asked whether he denied his writings. After asking for 24 hours to consider, he returned the next day and the story has it that he said, ‘Here I stand; I can do no other!’



Martin Luther continued

Luther was outlawed and, on leaving Worms, he was kidnapped. This was actually a ploy to keep him safe and Luther carried on writing and speaking out against the church authorities, gaining followers who would become leaders in the Lutheran church.

Luther stood for the free forgiveness of the gospel; we are made right before God by His promise of Jesus Christ and we take hold of that promise by trusting it, not by good works nor by paying for it. This began a Reformation, a complete reshaping of the church which still has massive impact today.

Further reading and references

- Mike Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame* (IVP), Chapter 2.
- Kirsten Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation* (Matthias Media), pp35–48.
- Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided* (Penguin), Chapter 3.

William Tyndale

We are not entirely sure when **William Tyndale** was born, but it was probably around 1494. In 1522 he became a tutor to the children of Sir John Walsh in Gloucestershire. He had already been reading the New Testament in Greek, a relatively new thing to do, and in doing this he was becoming increasingly convinced of problems with Roman Catholic teaching. At one dinner table conversation he is reported to have said, 'I defy the pope, and all his laws, and 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.'

There was a relatively poor English translation of the Bible at this point by John Wycliffe but it had been banned, so William Tyndale set out to do better. Where John Wycliffe had translated the Bible from the Latin translation available, Tyndale went back to the original Greek and Hebrew.

Having been denied permission by the Bishop of London, in 1524 he sailed for Hamburg, Germany to begin his work and by 1526 he had finished the New Testament and was able to mass print it and smuggle it into England. It was a brilliant translation; precise and accurate, it was also beautiful English. However, not everyone was quite so impressed and any copies found were burnt along with their owners. But for those who could get hold of a copy, the translation allowed the readers to read for themselves the biblical gospel which undermined much of the teaching of the Catholic church.

Cardinal Wolsey attempted to have Tyndale arrested so he fled to Marburg where he carried on translating the Old Testament and circulating it along with his own writings. In 1529 he lost all his papers in a shipwreck and had to begin again. He then moved to Antwerp, Belgium, and stayed with an English merchant, Thomas Pointz. While Henry VIII called for Tyndale's arrest, Emperor Charles V declined to help because Tyndale had opposed Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Charles's aunt! For the time being he was safe. However, Tyndale was to be betrayed: another Englishman by the name of Henry Phillips had fallen into debt and needed to find a way out. Phillips was paid to capture Tyndale and so, pretending to be a sympathiser, befriended him and invited him out to dinner. Tyndale was then arrested and captured.

In 1536, Tyndale was strangled then burnt near Brussels for heresy. His last act was reportedly to cry out: 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes!' His prayer was answered; just two years later Henry VIII decreed that an English Bible be placed in every church in England. These were Bibles based on Tyndale's original translation.

Further reading and references

- Mike Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame* (IVP), pp115–118.
- Kirsten Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation* (Matthias Media), pp66–70.



Thomas Cranmer

Thomas Cranmer was born in 1489 and rose to become Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII in 1533, for the sole reason that Cranmer was happy to agree to Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn and to the separation of the English church from Rome. Cranmer was keenly evangelical, having secretly become married in Germany, rare for a minister then (although he kept his wife hidden in a box while travelling).



Thomas Cranmer then encouraged Henry to stop monks living in monasteries which were full of corruption, and seize their money for the crown.

Cranmer's main act, however, was to make sure that all church services in England were in English and were primarily teaching the gospel. The first of these may seem strange to us, but many services were still in Latin or were teaching Roman Catholic ideas about purgatory and indulgences. So Cranmer wrote a Prayer Book which would be read as the order of service during a church gathering. This would make sure that everybody was hearing the gospel when they came to church. Two of these were produced, in 1549 and an updated version in 1552.

Not every church minister could preach, either, so Cranmer made sure that a book of Homilies was written. This was a book of sermons that a minister could pick up and read. This further meant that people were hearing how we become friends with God by faith alone in Jesus' death, Sunday by Sunday.

However, in 1553 Queen Mary restored Roman Catholicism to England and Thomas Cranmer was in trouble! Cranmer was removed as Archbishop of Canterbury, Bibles were taken out of churches, and church ministers were to separate from their wives. By this stage Cranmer was 70 and, under extreme pressure, he signed a piece of paper saying that he no longer believed what the Bible taught about how to be friends with God. He was still put to death and was burnt at the stake in Oxford in 1556. However, Cranmer refused to read out the document he had signed and instead held the hand that had signed it into the fire to be burnt first.

Further reading and references

- Mike Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame* (IVP), pp118–138.
- Kirsten Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation* (Matthias Media), pp65–78.