

1 The Reformation starts in Europe

Martin Luther challenged church tradition and the Pope by appealing to the authority of the Bible when he nailed his famous '95 Theses' to the door of Wittenberg Church on 31st October, 500 years ago. This act launched a reformation that spread across Europe in just a matter of a few years, as people rediscovered the truth of the Gospel. Calvin was the most significant theologian to follow Luther, with a systematic exposition of Protestant doctrine according to the Bible.



Martin Luther, by Lucas Cranach the Elder. [wikimedia.org](#)

Martin Luther

Martin Luther was the person who kicked off the Reformation on 31st October 1517. He was a monk who taught at the University of Wittenberg in Eastern Germany who became very concerned about abuses in the church. He sent a letter to his church superiors containing 95 Theses (arguments) against these abuses and is also believed to have nailed the Theses to the church door, inviting debate. He sent copies to his friends and academic contacts who published his Theses using the newly invented printing press so the debate quickly became widely publicised across Europe.

A visit by Luther to Rome in 1510 opened his eyes to the corruption that was rife in the Catholic Church at the time. He was appalled at the way the Church took advantage of the fear of death and hell, in order to make money. He was especially angered by the sale of 'indulgences' (a promised remission of punishment for sin). Luther claimed in his Theses that repentance of sin before Christ was the sole action needed for salvation, and his famous cry of 'Justification By Faith Alone' became a focal point of the Reformation.

Luther soon began to produce and circulate tracts speaking out against the Catholic Church and its abuses and he also translated the Bible into German. Not surprisingly the church tried to discipline him and Luther had to defend his beliefs under questioning by a papal legate in Augsburg in 1518. However, he continued to question Roman Catholic teaching and this led Pope Leo X to excommunicate him in January 1521.



Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521, by Anton Von Werner. [Commons.wikimedia.org](#)



The Castle Church doorway (with modern bronze doors) where Luther traditionally is believed to have nailed his 95 Theses. Photo courtesy of J. Horrocks

Left: Wittenberg town square today, with the Town Church where Luther preached over 2,000 sermons. Photo courtesy of J. Horrocks

Supported by his local Prince, Frederick III, however, Luther went into hiding. As people began to read the Scriptures for themselves in Luther's German Bible, the Catholic Church faced dissent from across Europe.

John Calvin

John Calvin was a French lawyer, but he had to flee France in 1534 after converting to Protestantism. Two years later, Calvin found himself in Geneva, where he helped set up a new Protestant church. Geneva was transformed into a centre of Protestant learning and morality, with up to 17 sermons being preached each week, and attendance at many of them expected of the citizens.

Calvin was a scholar steeped in the Bible and his major work *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was the first written collection of Protestant beliefs, which he added to and extended continuously throughout his life.

Under Calvin, Geneva became a centre of Protestant scholarship, and one of the powerhouses of the Reformation.



John Calvin, by an unknown artist. Picture hanging in Abbot's Hospital. Courtesy of the Master. Photo J. Skelton