

*Foreword by Michael Reeves*

# Convinced by Scripture



*The Life of Martin Luther*

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# Introduction

*‘My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge’*

HOSEA 4:6

In a culture in which I have several Bibles on my bookshelves and a multitude of translations on my mobile phone, it is difficult to imagine how far to the margins of Christian life the Bible had been pushed in the Middle Ages.

Bibles were simply not available in any form at all before the invention of printing and the publication of the Gutenberg Bible in the 1450s. Moreover, the Bible which was available in this period was in Latin, utterly incomprehensible to the vast majority of people. St Jerome’s Latin translation, the Vulgate, had been used by the Western Church for over a thousand years. But this was the language of a small educated elite, not that of ordinary people. What is more, probably as few as 5–10% of the population could read at all, even in their own language. Not even all parish priests were literate.

Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to imagine just how poor the typical sermon was at unpacking the

truth of Scripture. Although preaching was a part of the responsibility of the local parish priest, it was by no means top of his job description. Other responsibilities such as the administration of the sacraments of the Church ranked much higher. When he did preach a sermon, it would not be the exposition of a Biblical text but, much more likely, an exhortation to good conduct and works of charity.

The movement that Martin Luther began in 1517 put the Bible back centre stage in the life of the individual believer and in the Church as a whole. The Ninety-Five Theses which he nailed to the church doors in Wittenberg on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517, thus beginning the Protestant Reformation, begin with a Bible quote:

‘When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17) He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.’

When Luther stood on trial before the Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms in 1521, his defence, fundamentally, was an appeal to Scripture:

‘Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.’

A year later, after an intense period of study, Luther published his German New Testament, a pocket-sized book that put the words of Scripture into a language and a format accessible to ordinary literate Germans.

Twelve years later he completed his task and published a whole Bible.

Furthermore, as a pastor, Luther preached over 3,000 sermons, interpreting and applying the Biblical text into the hearts and lives of the people of Wittenberg.

Take the Bible out of Luther's hands and we are left with no Reformation at all. The movement that Luther unleashed in 1517 was a reform of the Church which sought to put the Bible right back at the heart of Christian faith. The Bible was important not simply because it is authoritative, though Luther was in no doubt on this point whatsoever. Scripture was important for Luther because it is a revelation of Christ. As early as 1515 Luther preached a sermon in which he said:

*'He who would read the Bible must simply take heed that he does not err, for the Scripture may permit itself to be stretched and led, but let no one lead it according to his own inclinations but let him lead it to the source, that is, the cross of Christ. Then he will surely strike the centre.'*

Five hundred years later, our culture is arguably even more Biblically illiterate than late medieval society. Scripture is more readily available, but is no more understood or lived out by large numbers of people. If we are to see the re-evangelization of Europe in our day, it will take a similar commitment and clarity to that of Luther. Like Luther, we need to see Scripture as the ultimate fixed reference point. This is not simply a theological statement