

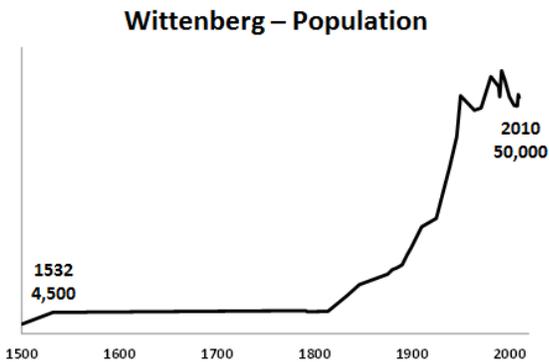
We live in an age of uncertainty. Not only do none of us know what tomorrow will bring – that has been the case for everyone throughout history. But also we live in a time when absolutes have been cast aside: for most people in our time, there are no absolutes. Everything is relative. What’s true for me is true for me; what’s true for you is true for you. Our motto is, “Whatever!”

My aim today is to present a different view. I plan to go back in time, to a previous age of uncertainty. I want to show how in that bygone age one man, Martin Luther, re-discovered certainty. I want to show that that certainty is as true and relevant today as it was during Luther’s time. It is an antidote to depression and despair. It is dynamite that puts the world right side up.

Five weeks ago, I was in Wittenberg, the town that Martin Luther spent most of his life in, from the early 1500s to 1546. Wittenberg is in the eastern part of Germany, in the former East Germany.

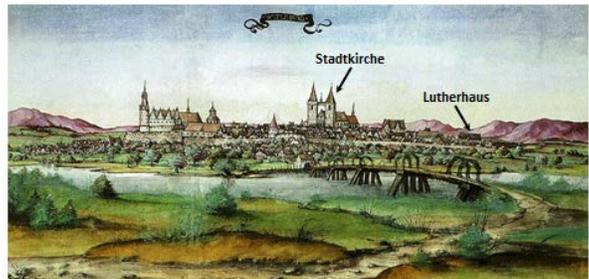


Five hundred years ago, Wittenberg was a very small town. Today it is bigger, but still a small town!



The Stadtkirche (City Church) was in the centre of the town. This was the church that Luther preached in.

Wittenberg in Luther’s Time



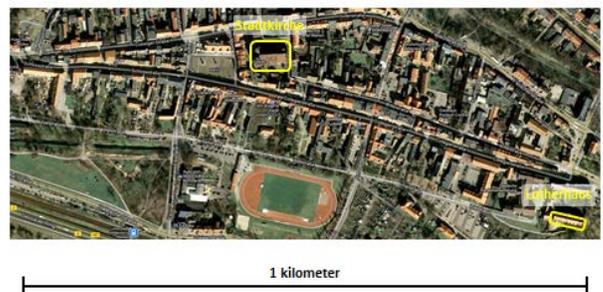
At the right was the Lutherhaus, the house that Luther lived in with his family. However, when Luther first moved to Wittenberg, he was a Augustinian monk, and the Lutherhaus was an Augustinian monastery! The Stadtkirche and the Lutherhaus still stand today.

Wittenberg in Our Time



They about 700 meters apart, so Martin and his wife Katharina von Bora walked about 10 minutes to church.

Wittenberg in Our Time



As you can see, the Lutherhaus is large. Martin and Katharina had six children of their own, raised several

orphan children, and took in many boarders, usually students – it was a busy and boisterous household!



In 1470, forty-seven years before Martin Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses*, and thirteen years before he was even born, the thirty-five year old Franciscan friar Dederich von Münster (also known as Dietrich Coelde) published the first edition of his *Handbook for Christians*. It was a brief, popular treatise on truths of the Catholic faith. It went through thirty-four editions and is considered to be the first German catechism.¹

The title of chapter 44 is, “How one should die, and this is the most fruitful teaching of the world.” That is its title, but it is far from “the most fruitful teaching of the world.” Rather, it is a litany of despair.



Dederich von Münster
Handbook for Christians
1470 A.D.

Chapter 44
“How one should die, and this is the most fruitful teaching of the world.”

Bottom line: a litany of despair!

I’m going to read parts of the last paragraph. I’m doing this to give a brief glimpse of what the world and the

church were like 500 years ago, when the Reformation began.

The last paragraph begins, “O Mary, mother of grace and mother of mercy, protect and shield me from the enemy and receive my poor soul in the hour of my death.”² Note that the person dying is asked to call on Mary, not on Jesus.

The paragraph continues, “O mild advocate and guide, please don’t leave me now.” Note that Mary, not Jesus, is deemed to be the intercessor, the one who advocates for us before God.

The paragraph continues, “O Mary, let me never hear the voice of Jesus the strict judge.” This is the only reference to Jesus in this paragraph. Jesus is presented solely as “the strict judge.”

One last quote: “O Mary ... please stand by me and help me fight, because if you don’t help me, my fight is lost.”

As I mentioned, it is a litany of despair.

It is also completely false. There is not a single verse in the entire Bible that supports the notion that without Mary’s help we are lost! Not one! And in the Bible, Jesus is presented as the beloved Son of God and *Saviour* of the world (John 3:16-17).

But, because of teaching like that of the paragraph we just read portions of, the people in Europe five hundred years ago lived with a fundamental *uncertainty*: they were not sure of their salvation; they expected that they would be judged; they believed that the outcome of that judgment was not clear; they were taught that the outcome depended on their own works as well as the intercession of Mary and the saints who had gone before; and they were told that that outcome would only be determined *after they died*, so there was no way for them to know in this life where they would go in the next life. In other words, as long as they had breath in their lungs, as long as their hearts were still beating, they did not know where they were going, and it *terrified* them.

This is the world and the faith into which Luther was born, the world in which he lived: an age of uncertainty.

When Luther moved to Wittenberg, it was to take a position as professor of theology at the *University* of Wittenberg. He was still thinking and living completely in the mindset of the paragraph that we quoted from, earlier.

This was a mindset of uncertainty.

² Christoph Mofang, *Katholische Katechismen des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts in deutscher Sprache*, Mainz, Verlag von Franz Kirchheim, 1881, page 48. My translation.

¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04092b.htm> [retrieved 2011.01.08]

Uncertainty pervaded all of life: only death was certain, what happened after that was not certain at all.

Maybe we would go to heaven. Maybe we would go to hell. There was little that we could do about that except pray earnestly, try to live a good life, and hope that Mary and the saints would intercede effectively for us before Jesus the judge.

This uncertainty was *excruciating* for Luther. He described it as the “*monstrum incertitudinis*” (“monster of uncertainty”). He wanted desperately to be loved by God and to experience that love. He tried doggedly to win the love of God by doing everything in his power to make himself right with God. He experienced constant and overwhelming despair at the thought that what he was doing was not good enough.

It was finally when he meditated on Romans 1:16-17 that he realized God’s love for us in Jesus Christ:



**Paul the Apostle
Letter to the Romans
55 A.D.**

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

In Luther’s own words:

“At first I clearly saw that the free grace of God is absolutely necessary to attain to light and eternal life; and I anxiously and busily worked to understand the word of Paul in Romans 1:17: The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel.”³

So far, so good! Luther continues:

“I questioned this passage for a long time and labored over it, for the expression ‘righteousness of God’ barred my way. This phrase was customarily explained to mean that the righteousness of God is a virtue by which He is Himself righteous and condemns

***sinner*. In this way all the teachers of the church except Augustine had interpreted the passage. They had said: *The righteousness of God, that is (id est), the wrath of God.*”**

What Luther is saying is that he – and all other readers and interpreters (except Augustine) – understood this passage as talking about the wrath of God. But keep in mind that Luther and his contemporaries had been raised on the kind of teaching we just read earlier, from Dederich von Münster. They were *steeped* in that teaching, they lived and breathed that perspective, they were – without the guidance of the Holy Spirit – incapable of changing their point of view.

Luther continues:

“But as often as I read this passage, I wished that God had never revealed the Gospel; for who could love a God who was angry, who judged and condemned people? This misunderstanding continued until, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, I finally examined more carefully the word of Habakkuk: ‘The just shall live by his faith ...’ (2:4).”

Luther is saying that – for him – the Gospel was the very opposite of its name. Gospel actually means “good news.” But for Luther and his contemporaries, the Gospel meant that they had to “love a God who was angry, who judged and condemned people.”

Of course that made no sense! Of course it led to depression and despair. But Luther and his contemporaries could not get around their engrained understanding of the meaning of “the righteousness of God,” And because they could not get around their engrained understanding of “the righteousness of God,” they remained stuck in their litany of despair.

This led to all sorts of odd behaviour, not least the sale and purchase of indulgences to reduce or eliminate the post-death punishment due to sins.

Luther continues:

“From this passage I concluded that life must be derived from faith ... Then the entire Holy Scripture became clear to me, and heaven itself was opened to me. Now we see this brilliant light very clearly, and we are privileged to enjoy it abundantly.”

What Luther meant was that ...

³ Plass, Ewald M., comp. *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1959, § 2600.

“The righteousness of faith ... is nothing else than the forgiveness of sins and the gracious adoption of the poor sinner for the sake of Christ’s obedience and merit alone.”⁴

In other words, we are saved entirely by and through faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul says later:

Romans 10:9

“... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Other than believing in Jesus, there is nothing else that we can do to earn salvation, eternal life, everlasting life with God.

Nothing.

And the good news – in other words, the Gospel – is that nothing else is needed.

Believing in Jesus – believing that He is the Son of God, that he died to make us right with God, and that God raised Him from that dead – is enough.

If we try to add anything to that, we deny who Jesus is and what He has done.

If we try to take anything away from that, we deny who Jesus is and what He has done.

If we believe in Jesus, we can be sure of our salvation long before we die.

If we believe in Jesus we do not need special prayers on our deathbed. We can be at rest. We are going home.

John 14:6

Jesus is, “the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through” Him.

As you know, those are Jesus’ words, not mine.

You may be sitting here now thinking, well yes, I know and agree with all that. What does it have to do with uncertainty and certainty? Why did we spend so much time looking at what happened to Luther? What does your trip to Wittenberg have to do with this?

Think about this:

⁴ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, III, 54.

Luther meditated on a single verse. The Holy Spirit gave him a right understanding of that verse. It turned Luther upside down. Or better, right side up.

Luther used that verse to unlock the rest of Scripture. He found the Gospel throughout the Bible, beginning with the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk whom Paul was quoting in Romans 1:17.

Luther then started speaking and writing against the abuses of his time, especially those of his own Catholic church.

He gained supporters and followers, but he also gained opponents and enemies.

He was ordered to appear before the emperor and recant. He knew his life would be forfeit if he didn’t recant.

But he also knew that his eternal life was secure, certain, real, present, now. Luther himself no longer lived in the age of uncertainty. The times had not changed. Everyone around him still lived in the age of uncertainty. But Luther was now living eternal life. As Pastor Jeff reminded us a few weeks ago ...

John 17:3

“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Again, Jesus’ words. I didn’t make them up.

Luther – one man – was certain of eternal life. It was his entire present reality. When he was before the emperor, Luther did not recant. In fact, he said that he could not recant, because the truth that he now knew was greater than all the lies that those around him, in the age of uncertainty, were still trapped in. Luther was a free man, surrounded by a sea of humanity enslaved to uncertainty, depression and despair.

Slowly, person by person, others came to freedom in Christ, others discovered the certainty of the Gospel, the certainty of God’s love for them, the certainty of eternal life. Who and what do you think was at work here?

Isaiah 55:10-11

“10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

**11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."**

In an age of uncertainty, in *any* age of uncertainty, we can be certain that God's word is true, is powerful, and is effective.

Romans 1:17 unlocked Luther, who unlocked the Reformation, which unlocked the world. One verse changed one man. One man changed the world. Not by any power of his own, but entirely by the power of the Word that unlocked him and unlocked all those willing to hear it, accept it, believe it.

That same Word is still at work today, changing hearts, changing lives, changing homes, families, and communities, changing the world.

So ... What about Wittenberg?

It's just a sleepy town, or at least was in the first week of December last year. It does wake up more in the summer, when many tourists visit. There are historical recreations, including Luther's legendary nailing of his 95 theses to the door of the palace church, as well as the joyous celebration of this marriage to the ex-nun, his beloved Kathie.

In five years, it will be the 500th anniversary of that nailing of the 95 theses to the door of the palace church. There will be a huge celebration. People from all over the world will attend. Hotel rooms for miles around will be booked solid. Wittenberg will be standing room only. It will be a grand time to be there.

Or not.

What we have talked about today has everything and nothing to do with Wittenberg.

It has everything to do with Wittenberg because that is where Luther lived and where the Reformation began.

It has nothing to do with Wittenberg, because it is not about the man or the place.

It's about the Word of God.

The Living Word of God Who is Jesus Christ, God's Beloved Son, our Lord and Saviour.

And the written Word, Scripture, the Bible, the only book that can be trusted cover to cover, word for word. In it we find all the promises of God we need.

And we know that God has kept, keeps, and will keep every promise that He has made there.

Luther staked his life on it.

Thousands of others have done the same.

And so can we.

On New Year's Eve, Kris Hansen reminded us of Mahatma Gandhi's famous quote:

**Mahatma Gandhi
(1869-1948)**

"You Christians have in your keeping a document with enough dynamite in it to blow the whole of civilisation to bits; to turn society upside down; to bring peace to this war-torn world. But you read it as if it were just good literature and nothing else."

Gandhi meant the Bible, of course. Luther, Wittenberg, the Reformation – they are all proof that Gandhi was right.

In Genesis 3:1, just before the Fall, Satan opening line to Eve starts with these four words: "woman, "Did God actually say ..." He proceeds to misquote God, but Eve takes the bait anyway, and everything unravels from there.

Romans 1:17

"The righteous shall live by faith."

You can count on that.

It is for you. It is for all. *It is certain.*

Let us go forth into the world as those who truly live the age of *certainty*.

Let us go forth into a hurting world that desperately needs that same certainty, that desperately needs Jesus.

In Jesus' name, amen.⁵

⁵ Matthias Benfey, "Living in Certainty in an Age of Uncertainty," Mississauga: Church of Saint Mark – Lutheran, 2012 January 8.