



Welcome. As Marie noted, I am Mark Harris, the Principal-Dean of Martin Luther University College, formerly known as Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. On behalf of Third Age Learning, I want to welcome you to this series entitled ***Shifting Paradigms: Martin Luther's Enduring Global Impact***. On behalf of my colleagues, who will be presenting over the coming weeks, we are pleased that you who are joining us for this exploration of the historic and controversial figure of Martin Luther. But more than just looking at the man, we are going to be tracing the manner in which Luther's thought, his way of understanding, contributed to the emergence of the modern era - both for good and ill - and continues to influence the western world down to this very day.

Now, by virtue of having enrolled for this series, or at least this

lecture, I would like to assume that everyone here has at least a passing acquaintance with Martin Luther? However, just to make certain that there is no confusion, the focus of this series is this fellow



Martin Luther: the Augustinian Priest who came to be celebrated or vilified – depending on your point of view - as the “father of the Protestant Reformation.” Luther inaugurated a movement for reform that changed the Western Church and, thereby, the course of European history.

We will not be speaking about this fellow...




Martin Luther King Jr.  
1929 - 1968

Martin Luther King, the African-American pastor who became a spokes-person and figurehead for the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, civil rights movement in the United States.



For even though both were iconic figures, who gave voice to the Zeitsgeist, or the defining spirit or mood of their age, Martin Luther King was – it could be argued – an heir of the older Luther's insights.

Martin Luther King is certainly worthy of a Third Age Learning series of his own, but that will have to wait for another occasion.



Martin Luther  
1483 - 1546

- ▶ Priest
- ▶ Teacher
- ▶ Biblical Scholar
- ▶ Theologian
- ▶ Reformer
- ▶ Heretic

Our series will focus on this figure, whose thought and lasting influence has been praised, criticized, celebrated, and condemned for the last 500 years!

Like all public figures, and indeed – like all human beings – Luther was man of his age and a character of deep contradiction. He was deeply gifted and deeply flawed.

But in an era when the statues of historic figures are being removed from public parks and their names being removed from institutions – precisely because of such their contradictions – why are we looking at this man?

Well, there are two reasons:

The late historian Phyllis Tickle argued that we are at a turning-

point in history, the magnitude and character of which will rival that of the Reformation. By exploring Luther, who played such a pivotal role in his own era, perhaps we can gain some insights into what is unfolding in our own time.

The other reason is that – whether you are aware of it or not – we continue to be influenced by Luther’s thought even today.

How many of you believe in the importance of universally available public education? Then you are an heir of Luther!

How many of you believe that it is important for an individual to act according to his/her conscience, even if it means challenging the status quo? Then you are an heir of Luther!

How many of you believe that a community has a responsibility to look after its most vulnerable members? Then you are an heir of Luther.

So, in this series, we want to explore not just Luther the man, but the ways in which his influence continues to shape our values today.

So where do we begin?

Next week, Dr. Robert Kelly is going to lead us in an exploration of Martin Luther’s life and career, within the context of the turbulent times in which he lived. However, for today’s lecture, I would like to provide some important background as a way of setting the stage for next week’s presentation and the entire series.



Any of you who have ever purchased a home or other property are probably familiar with the old adage that there are three important things to consider when purchasing real estate: Location, location, and location.

Similarly, if we want to understand Martin Luther, it is important to begin by considering his location, that is, how Luther was situated within the wider context of the historical forces that were profoundly reshaping Europe in his lifetime.

Often, in our recounting of history, we are tempted to consider the deeds of influential women or men as if they alone held the key to their own influence. However, such a perspective fails to recognize the degree to which any context shapes the individuals who inhabit that context. It is not just the case that every era and setting has its own, unique opportunities and challenges, but that



these very conditions shape the individuals who inhabit them.

We, as individuals who were born and raised in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, probably largely in North America, have been significantly influenced by being part of the post-war generation, shaped by the experiences of the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, women's liberation, etc.

But what is important, for the topic at hand, is that occasionally, history calls forth individuals who are not just been shaped by their context, but who are able to speak into it, that is, to influence or reframe the context in which they live, by identifying and addressing the issues which define their era. And when this happens, these exceptional individuals may become known as the icons or spokes-persons of their age.

As we stand at the beginning of this series, exploring the person and lasting influence of Martin Luther, it is crucial to begin by sketching out the broad social, political, economic, and religious forces that were shaping the Europe into which Luther was born and from which he emerged onto the public stage. For these forces shaped who Luther was. But perhaps, even more important, it was Luther's ability to address the underlying issues of his age, to address the existential and theological issues - that were bubbling and seething beneath the surface - that contributed to his public appeal and his lasting influence through succeeding generations.

This being the case, in the balance of this presentation, I would like to identify five, major shifts which were reshaping Europe in the late Medieval period, and setting the stage for Luther's rise to prominence. While this list could be expanded (or elaborated

upon), I will argue that it was the convergent influence of these factors which created the context which was not just ready... but which called forth the emergence of this reformer. So lets begin...

## 1. The Black Death



► 1347 to 1353

As strange as it may seem, the place to begin is almost 2 centuries before Luther's birth, when the Black Death – a form of bubonic plague - swept through Eurasia. Named for the manner in which it caused the fingers and toes to turn black, due to the loss of peripheral circulation, the plague was one of the most devastating pandemics in human history.

## The Black Death



Thought to have originated on the dry plains of Central Asia, the Black Death was carried along the trade routes of the Silk Road, before reaching the Crimea in 1344. From there, the disease was spread by fleas, living on the black rats that traveled on all merchant ships. As these ships plied their trade in the Mediterranean and north - along the coast of the eastern Atlantic - they carried with them the rats that carried the fleas that carried the contagion.

As these ships landed in port cities, they inadvertently spread the disease which made its way into nearly every city, village, and hamlet of Europe

This map illustrates that spread (use pointer to show the spread)

Since no one – in that era - understood what was causing this

plague, the terror that spread across Europe was as infectious as the disease itself, and for good reason.

## The Black Death



Between 1347 and 1353, the Black Death is estimated to have killed between 30% to 60% of the population of Europe. Estimates are that this numbered to somewhere between 75 and 200 million people. The impact was so severe that it took over 200 years for the global population to recover to the levels it has achieved before the onset of the Black Death.

As unimaginable as the human suffering must have been during this time, what is relevant to our topic are the social, economic, and political consequences of the massive decline in population caused by this plague.

## The Black Death



Late-medieval Europe had largely organized itself into an agrarian economy that heavily relied upon the manual labor of serfs to generate wealth for the nobles and ruling class, who thereby drove a slowly growing, trading economy. The loss of nearly half of that labor force, within a 5-year period, was devastating.

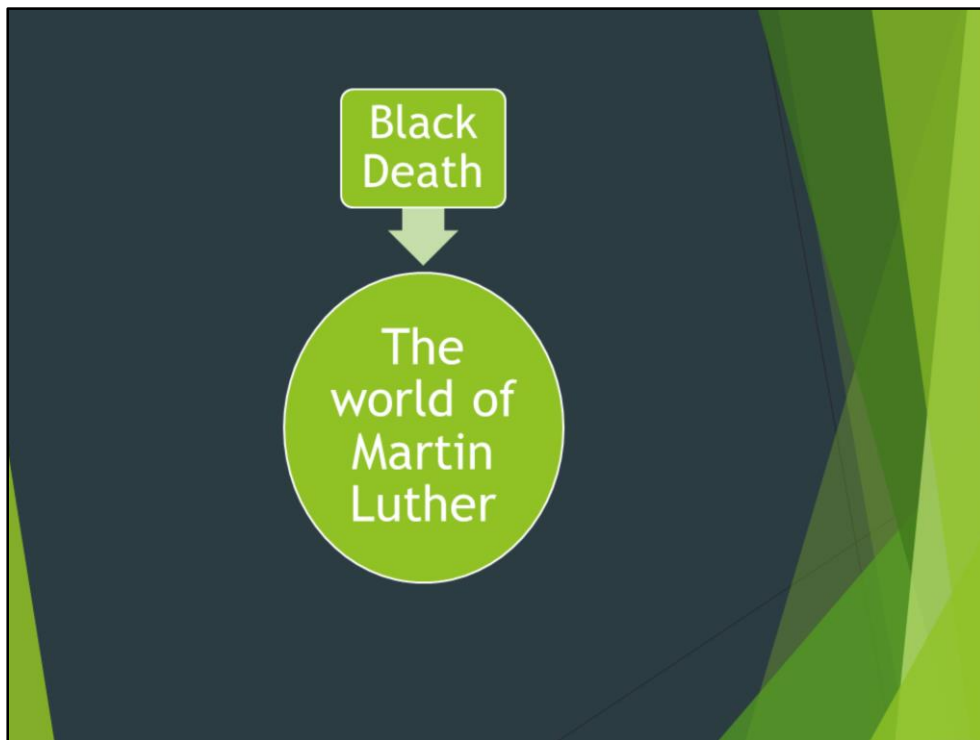
Farms, that had been tilled for centuries, went uncultivated. Landowners lost their source of agricultural income and could not pay their taxes. This financially crippled the ruling classes who were further stretched because labor shortages drove up wages.

Socially, the lack of understanding – as to the causes of this pestilence – led to religious fervor and fanaticism, that bloomed in the wake of the Black Death, as Jews, friars, foreigners, beggars, pilgrims and Romani were targeted, thinking they were to blame for the crisis.

In recent years, climatologists have speculated that the Little Ice Age, a period of cooling across Europe during the 15<sup>th</sup> century that further compromised food production, was prompted – at least in part – by the reforestation of Europe, caused by the loss of laborers who were available to till the land.

But for our purposes, the most important thing to understand is this:





... the Black Death – of the 14<sup>th</sup> century - so disrupted the social, economic, and political fabric of Europe, that it would never recover to its previous state. The depopulation of Europe, prompted by the Black Death, set in motion forces of change that would begin to profoundly reshape Europe. And if we are to understand the time and place wherein Martin Luther would become such an influential figure, it is crucial to understand the profoundly disruptive role that the Black Death played in giving rise to that era of change.

## 2. Papal Authority



If the precipitous loss of population - prompted by the Black Death – was the first historical trend upon which we focus our attention, the second and third historic trends – which contributed to setting the stage for our series - really need to be understood in tandem, for they represent the dynamic balance of power that had – for much of the Middle Ages – defined the relationship between the Church and the temporal authorities.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Western Church – with the Pope at the centre – was at the heart of European Society. Consequently, the papacy exercised significant influence upon the political affairs of states. However, the relationship between the authority of the pope and that of the secular authorities was never clearly defined or agreed upon. For example, Boniface VIII (1302), decreed that "it is necessary to salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman pontiff," thus

arguing for the complete subordination of the state to the church. This reflected the medieval ideal of unifying all Christendom into a single political entity, with the Church and the Empire as its leading institutions, but with the Church – in other words, the papacy - as the final authority.

This dynamic relationship of tug and pull had been played out for centuries. However, in the era leading up to Luther and the Reformation, a series of events began to erode papal authority and shift the balance of power.

## Black Death



The first of these was the “Black Death,” which we just discussed.

While the plague, and its devastating impact upon the population of Europe, prompted increased religious fervor among many, it began to undermine the credibility of the church for many others. The inability of the Church to provide an adequate response or explanation, as to why this pestilence had descended upon Europe, began to raise serious questions regarding the Church and its proclamation.

## Avignon Papacy



These murmurs of discontent were enlarged by a series of events which came to known “Avignon Papacy.” (1309-1378)

Following a period of conflict between the papacy and the French king, the death of the reigning pope gave the French the opportunity to force the election of a French Pope. So, in 1309, Clement V was elected to the pontifical office, but refused to move to Rome. Instead, Pope Clement relocated the papal court from Rome to Avignon, France, where it remained for the next 67 years. A total of seven popes reigned at Avignon, all of them being **French**.

During the seven decades of the Avignon Papacy, the curia's relationship with many of the other rulers of Western Christendom became increasingly strained. One reason for this is that the French were perceived to be exercising

undue influence over the decisions of the papal court. In addition, papal efforts to extend its powers of patronage - in order to increase revenues – competed with the interests of many of the nobility across Europe.

So a consequence of the “Avignon Papacy” was not just the geographic relocation of the curia, but that the authority and credibility of the papal office – and therefore the Church - began to be further questioned in ways that had not previously been the case.



The events which immediately following the “Avignon Papacy” only served to further erode papal authority.

In 1378, Pope Gregory XI, returned the papal offices to Rome. However, Gregory died soon thereafter. The election of his successor – Urban VI - turned into such a disaster, that the College of Cardinals responded by electing another pope – Clement VII – while Urban was still alive. This created a situation where two, legitimately-elected Popes were simultaneously in office, each vying for the support of the secular authorities. This prompted the countries and territories of Europe to become a patchwork, divided among those who supported the pope in Rome, those who supported the pope in Avignon – and for a short time, those who supported a third pope who reigned in Pisa.

This stalemate was known as “The Western Schism.” While it was eventually resolved in 1407, with a single papacy being re-established in Rome, the compounding influence of the Western Schism upon the papacy was undeniable.



## Papal Authority



The “Black Death”  
“Avignon Papacy” and  
“Western Schism”  
eroded the credibility  
and authority of the  
church.

The combined consequences of the “Black Death”, the “Avignon Papacy,” and the “Western Schism” eroded the credibility and authority of the church (and therefore, the papacy.) The implications of this may not have been significant, had the wider environment been stable. However, in a time wherein the social, political, and economic systems were already disrupted, this set up a situation wherein a re-balancing of power and authority became inevitable.

### 3. Shifting Political Power



Now, if the beginnings of that rebalancing of power was underway, it was not just because limits to the authority of the papacy were beginning to come into question. It was also because forces were at play across Europe that were changing the political landscape, emboldening the temporal authorities to assert their political power and influence – over and against the papacy - in ways – and to a degree - that had not previously been the case.

Recalled that Medieval Europe had been a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of political arrangements, where borders and allegiances were constantly fought over and renegotiated. Power – in the feudal system - was based upon military control of land, such that feudal lords could claim the economic benefits from the land under their control, either directly or through the local nobility who were taxed in return

for protection.

But the depopulation, prompted by the Black Death, destabilized that precarious state of affairs. The whole system became destabilized, triggering social unrest, economic decline, and endemic warfare across much of central and western Europe.

## Shifting Political Power

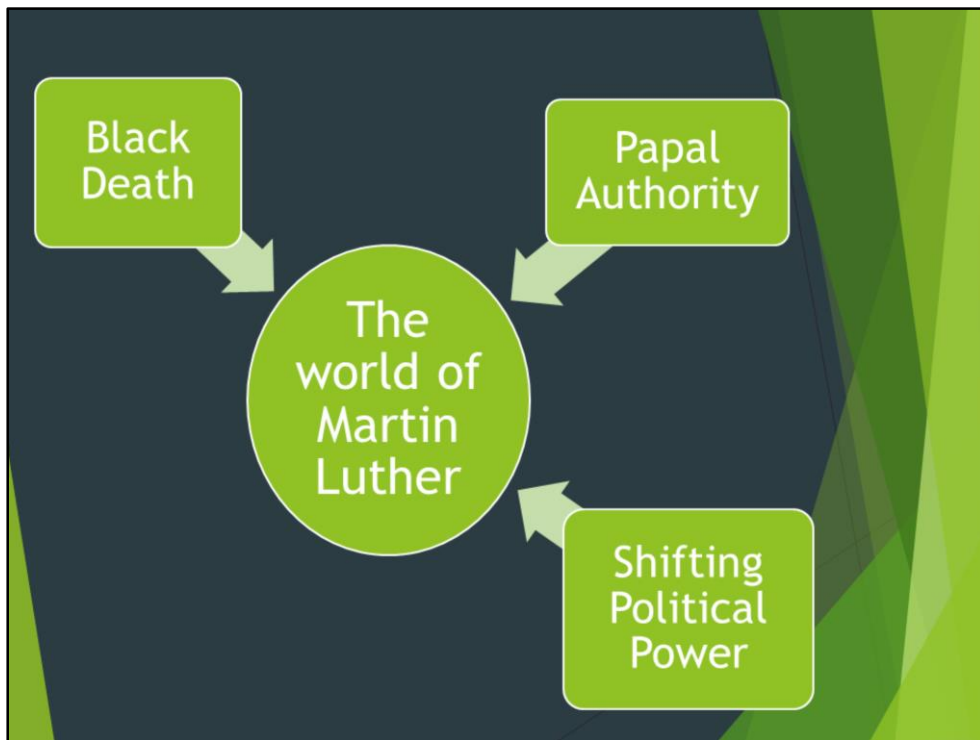


Much of the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries were characterized by the conflicts that accompanied that renegotiation of power as the feudal system of governance broke down. This led to the peasants uprisings in France and England, as well as the Hundred Years War. This renegotiation contributed to a de-centralization of the power that had once vested in the Holy Roman Emperor, as the prince-electors – those who elected the Emperor – began to claim and exercise increased authority over their own territories in the Germanic lands.

Meanwhile, the economic consequences of the breakdown of the feudal system began to be seen in a redistribution of wealth, the development of a concept of “property” that began to replace more ancient forms of jurisdiction, and the emergence of a merchant class.

In short, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a shift in temporal power from **feudal** lords to monarchs and to common people, as territories began to consolidate and transform into the earliest antecedents of modern states.

Thus, the power and influence of princes, nobles, and Lord - temporal authorities - were asserting and reordering themselves at the same time that papal authority was being challenged.



So the world into which Martin Luther would be born, and in which he would play such a crucial role, was undergoing a period of massive shift, characterized by a breakdown of the feudal system and the process of re-negotiating and re-distributing wealth and authority among the power brokers in Europe.

But there were still other forces at play, serving to change late medieval Europe.

## 4. New Ways of Knowing



Over that same, disruptive time period that depopulation was compelling a reordering of the political and economic systems of Europe, and the balance of power between states and between temporal and ecclesial authorities was being re-negotiated, a slow but growing momentum in learning was becoming another, pivotal force shaping the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was opening up not just new fields of knowledge, but new and innovative ways of thinking... some of which emerged from unexpected places.

## New Ways of Knowing



The Crusades led to the rediscovery of ancient writings unknown to the West

Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Western Christians had engaged in a series of crusades against their Muslim counterparts in the Middle East, primarily over control of the holy sites that were considered sacred by both groups. Without getting side-tracked by the historical debates about the Crusades, what is relevant to our topic is this:

One of the unexpected consequences of the Crusades and Western Christendom's exposure to the Arab world, was the rediscovery of many of the Latin texts of the ancient philosophers, which had been preserved in the Middle East but were largely unknown in Europe. The recovery of these texts prompted a search, through the monastic libraries of Europe, which yielded a further treasure-trove of ancient writings that had been lost or forgotten for hundreds of years. The impact of this influx of ancient – but new – knowledge was further



compounded when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. This forced many Byzantine Christian scholars to seek refuge in the West, bringing with them many of the ancient Greek texts that had been similarly lost.

## New Ways of Knowing



It is hard to describe the impact of the rediscovery of these ancient philosophers or the contribution that they would make in fueling the changes which were transforming the late, medieval era.

While widely received among the learned across Europe, these ancient writings had found a particularly receptive audience among the scholars and nobility in Florence, Italy – where the social, political, and economic conditions were such that it gave rise to an era of florescence now referred to as the Italian Renaissance. This was a period known for its achievements in painting, architecture, sculpture, literature, music, philosophy, science, and technology. But even more fundamentally, the Renaissance reflected an opening up of the imagination in western thought, precisely during a time when the disruption of the status quo was necessitating new ways of thinking.

As the influence of the Renaissance spread across Europe, it gave rise to Humanism, a whole, new way of thinking about the world and humanity's place in it.

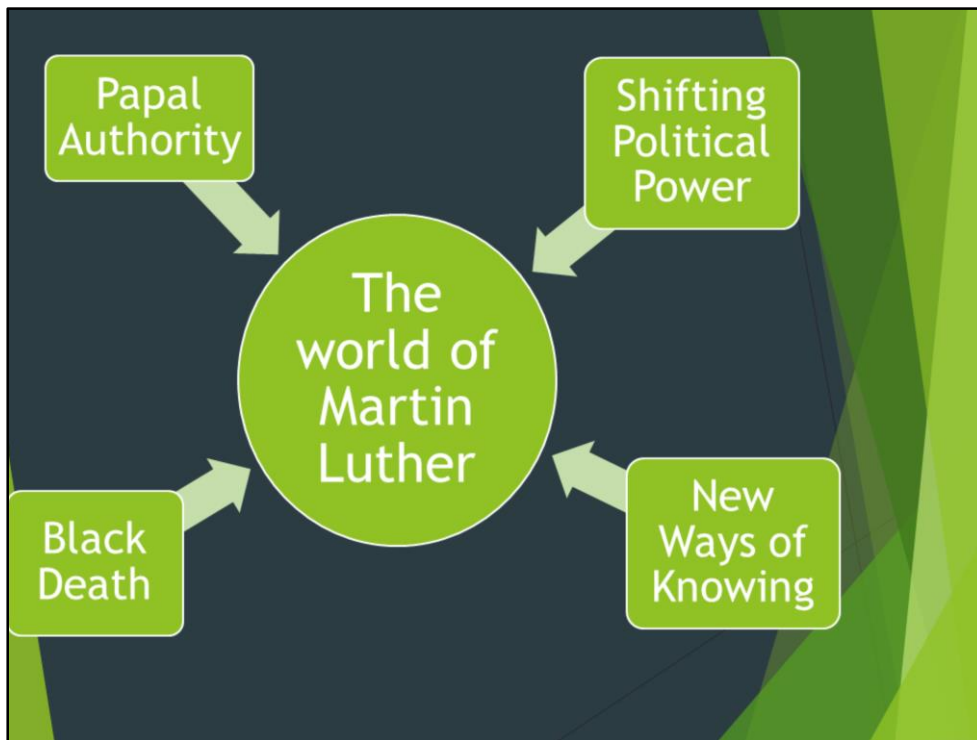
But that is not all, because new ways of thinking and knowing were enabling discoveries that further fueled the hunger for and pace of change.

## New Ways of Knowing



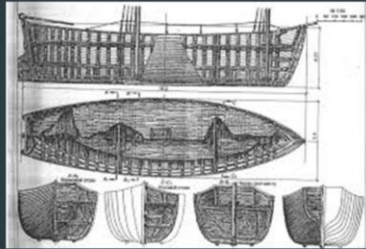
This was the era of Leonardo di Vinci and Michelangelo, when Columbus - in search of a route to India – instead discovered an unknown continent, a New World. This was the era when Vasco de Gama linked Europe with the Indian subcontinent, opening up trade routes previously unimagined, and when Nicholas Copernicus was beginning studies that would totally change humanity's understanding of their place in the universe.

So, it was not just that new fields of knowledge were opening up, but that new ways of understanding were emerging, even as old systems were breaking down and being reconstituted in new ways, and old, trusted authorities were being challenged in ways that had never happened before.



This was the dynamic and shifting context which not only formed but from which Martin Luther would emerge into the public arena. But before I bring this lecture to a close, I need add one more variable that – quite literally – changed the western world and became a critical element in the reformation that Luther ignite.

## 5. Emerging Technologies



Throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the emergence of new technologies were transforming the ways of managing the traditional means of defense, production, and economic growth across Europe. This era saw the introduction of gunpowder from China, transforming military power. This period witnessed the invention of vertical wind mills, spectacles, mechanical clocks, greatly improved water mills, advancements in building techniques - enabling the construction of the first Gothic cathedrals - and improvements in agriculture (such as 3-field crop rotation) which increased crop yields.

There were also significant advances in maritime technology, including improvements in shipbuilding and navigation which made possible the dawning of the Age of Exploration.

But among the many technological advancements of this era, there is one that is particularly relevant to our topic.

## Emerging Technologies



Around the year 1440, a goldsmith named Johannes Gutenberg invented a printing press with movable type.

While wood block printing had been known in China since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and woodblock printing with screw presses had been used in Europe since the 1300's, Gutenberg's introduction of a movable-type printing press was nothing short of revolutionary.

Not only did this new technology drastically reduce the cost of printing books, pamphlets, and other documents, it quickly became the first means of mass communication.

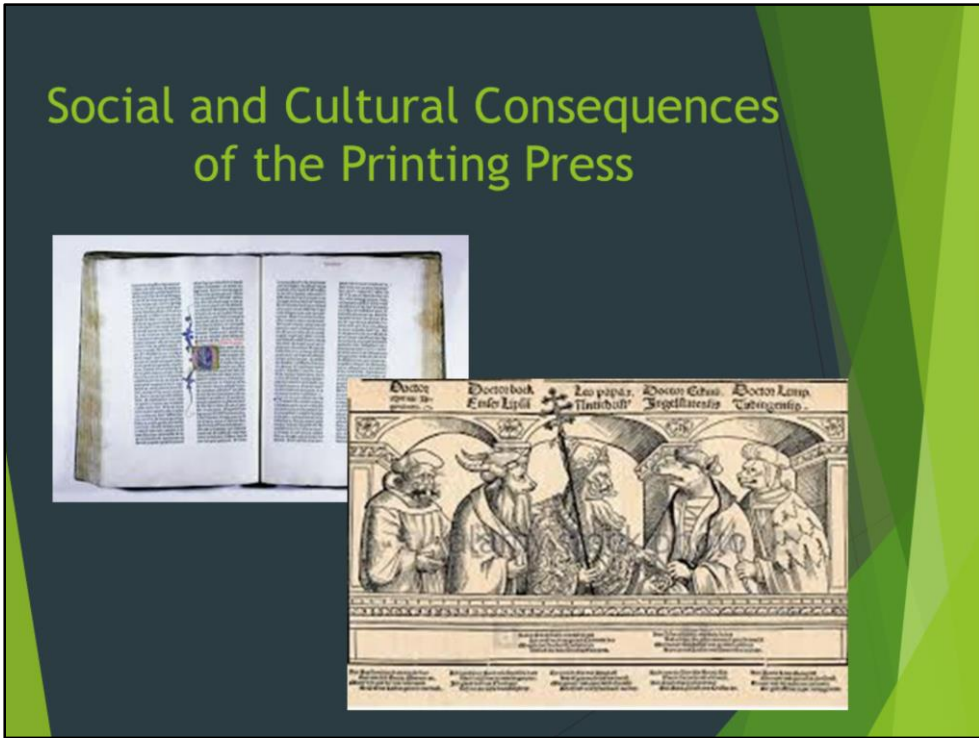
Up until this time, the acquisition of knowledge and distribution of information had been largely controlled by the Church and the nobility. The printing press changed all that.

The relatively unrestricted circulation of information and



ideas transcended borders and made it possible – for the first time - for ordinary people to engage in issues that had previously been beyond their reach. This, in turn, challenged the established power of political and religious authorities, who had previously held a monopoly on education and knowledge.

## Social and Cultural Consequences of the Printing Press

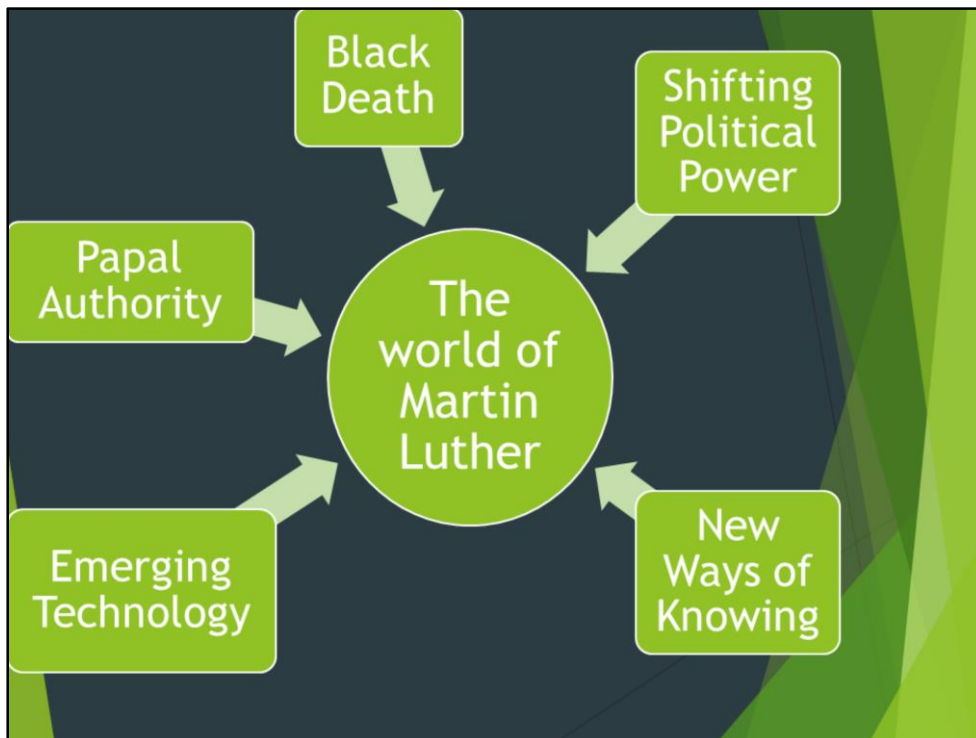


The printing press enabled easy access to written communication, which encouraged an increase in **literacy**, **which thereby** bolstered the emerging middle class.

Across Europe, the printing press increased the cultural self-awareness of peoples, as exemplified by Luther's translation of the Latin, Vulgate Bible into German. This accelerated the development of European vernacular languages (to the detriment of Latin's status as the language of the Church and the nobility) further reinforcing the rise of emerging national identities.

At the same time, as you will probably hear next week, the easy circulation of information – made possible by the printing press – became a major tool employed that was by Luther, and the other reformers, to sway public opinion and win the hearts and minds

of supporters.



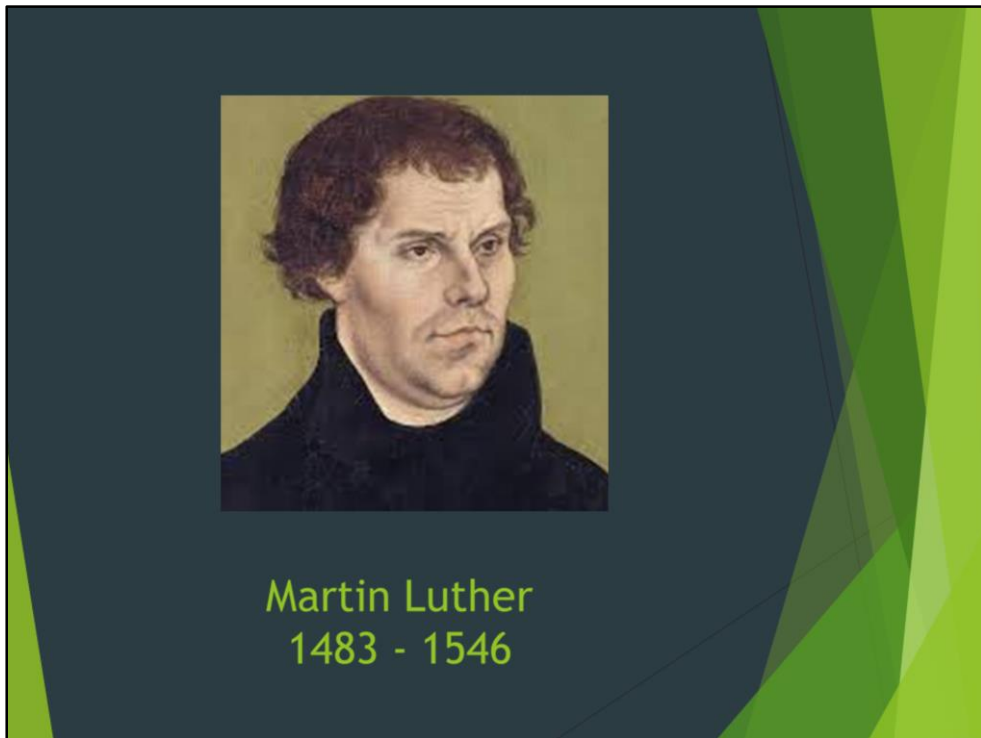
This was the dynamic and changing context into which Martin Luther was born and from which he would emerge into the public arena.

The world of late, medieval Europe was giving way to something else. The paradigm, or ordering of all facets of medieval life were shifting ... changing. Old authorities were being challenged, power was shifting, new ways of thinking were enabling discoveries which further fueled the search for new knowledge. New technologies were enabling the dissemination of information and the engagement of the nobility and masses alike, in the issues which were reshaping their world.

And in the midst of this, people were also asking new questions, theological questions, about what it means to be human. The old answers no longer seemed adequate to the present context.

What does it mean to follow one's conscience, to exercise freedom over one's own destiny? What is the relationship between church and state? What is my responsibility to my neighbour? What does it mean to be "justified?"

Someone was needed who could speak into this dynamic and changing context, providing new language... new ways of understanding which would be appropriate for this new and changing world.



In the coming weeks, you will hear how Martin Luther was a pivotal figures in reconfiguring this emerging world.

While Luther's concern was the reform of the church, the consequences – of what he started – would impact not just the church, but change the face of Europe, and contribute to the emergence of the modern era.



Next week, Dr. Robert Kelly will lead us into an exploration of Martin Luther's life and career, and in the following weeks, a number of other scholars will help us explore how Luther's thought continues to shape the way that we think about and understand the world today.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to continuing our conversation after the break.

# SHIFTING PARADIGMS

MARTIN LUTHER'S  
ENDURING GLOBAL IMPACT

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SETTING THE STAGE...



Federated with  
Wilfrid Laurier  
University