Luther as a Crusader.
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Martin Luther, an unknown theology professor in a small German town, called for an academic debate on 31st October 1517 – the topic: the practice of Indulgences. Other debates had been called in the past. Although they caught the attention of some, they usually had little impact on the general populace and were regarded more as a pastime in academia. This seemingly unassuming beginning however had unusual consequences as within the next five years of Luther’s life he caused an uproar in Western Europe, destabilised the papacy, translated the New Testament into German, wrote many controversial pamphlets, was excommunicated, put under imperial ban, kidnapped in order to save his life and ‘imprisoned’ in a castle. The impact of his reforming ideas for the Church of his day changed the religious, political and economic landscape around him.

The dictionary defines a ‘crusader’ as: ‘A person who campaigns vigorously for political, social, or religious change; a campaigner.’ Seeing the fruits of Luther’s life we see that seemingly this was true for him, although as with many who become campaigners for change he was not looking for his crusade, rather it found him. McGrath calls him ‘The Accidental Revolutionary’ Although ‘Crusader’ and ‘Revolutionary’ are viable words to associate with Luther, I would like to argue in this paper that a better word or idea would be a ‘catalyst’ even in the true chemical meaning of this term. ‘A substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change’. The fact that Luther lived and was true to his convictions increased the speed of the changes which were already afoot in the time in which he lived.

What caused Luther to become such a catalyst? What were his fundamental beliefs? How did he harness the culture and resources around him to quicken the advancement of his cause? These are the questions I would like to look at in the remainder of this paper.

It was during his time as a lecturer in Biblical studies at the University of Wittenberg where he developed a “wonderful new definition of God’s righteousness”. This change of thought – from salvation being dependent on personal austerity, denial and discipline to being dependent on God’s grace alone brought an inner revolution to Luther. “The desire of self-justification,” said he, “is the cause of all the distresses of the heart. But he who receives Jesus Christ as a Saviour, enjoys peace; and not only peace, but purity of heart. All sanctification of the heart is a fruit of faith.” It was as if Luther had a personal experience of Ezekiel 36:26 (NIV) ‘I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.’ This fundamental change in his understanding brought with it unshakeable convictions, ones which he would later not deny, even when under the most enormous pressure to do so.
He was not a great mastermind causing a revolution, but he was simply following his conscience. 'Luther claimed to have discovered, or rediscovered, something called the Gospel.'9, and this made him a catalyst for change.

What were the fundamental beliefs of Luther which caused such a strong reaction within the Church and society of his time? The first big idea has already been outlined – justification by faith. That salvation was not found in what we can do for God, but in what Jesus Christ has done for us. Salvation was not something to be bought, but to be received. This brought into question the practices of the Church at the time, including the selling of Indulgences (paying money in order to lessen the time spent in torment in purgatory). If salvation was a gift based on God’s grace, such payments had little to do with the gospel found in the Bible. His second big idea was that Scripture is the highest authority both above the Church and above the Pope. This brought into question the total sway of power and authority the Roman Church had over the masses. Luther’s ideas went to the heart of the Church and of Christianity. 'When churchmen spoke of reformation, they were almost always thinking of administration, legal or moral reform; hardly ever of doctrinal reformation.'10 This was what made Luther different – his passion for doctrinal reform. Indeed, he saw it as the only way forward if the Church was to return to what it was originally intended to be according to Scripture.

However, Luther also saw many other things as important for the reformation of the Church. He translated the Bible into German bringing his forerunner Erasmus’ earlier hope nearer to reality ie. that the New Testament would be translated into all languages. Along with the Word of God becoming understandable to all, he realised that it would be far more beneficial for Church services to be held in the vernacular as opposed to the (to some) incomprehensible Latin. Luther also declared his belief in the ‘priesthood of all believers’ thus condemning the authorities that hungered for power and abused the laity eg. through the sale of indulgences. He saw no fundamental difference between clergy and laity. The only difference was in their function.

So, lastly, how did Luther harness the culture and the resources around him to advance his cause? It would be wrong to assume that the Reformation occurred at the hands of Luther alone. At the time Luther was born in 1483 there were many new religious things, new theological and intellectual fashions.9 There had been a rise in the educational opportunities and standards of the public so that a growing intensity for change was in the air. There had also been forerunners to Luther who had paved the way eg. Erasmus, John Hus and John Wyclif. In society as a whole there was a general disillusionment with the Church, especially centred around corrupt authority and uneducated, immoral clergy. As the Pope and the higher authorities in the Church were losing power, there was a rise in national power which also brought about the possibility of change in the Church on a local level, with local leaders within a nation taking responsibility. Taking all these factors together, Luther’s actions were like a spark which set alight all these ‘dry sticks’ which were just ready to become a blaze of change.

Initially the Lutheran Reformation was ‘an academic movement’, and it was only later Luther’s ‘personal activities – such as his posting of the famous ninety-five theses and the Leipzig Disputation – which made waves and brought the ideas in circulation at Wittenberg to the attention of a wider audience.’ 10 This was greatly aided by the printing press, which had not long been invented. This was a great help in the propagation of his dangerous ideas. He was a prolific writer, but remained simple, seeing that a change of heart was needed the most and he was good at speaking to mens’ hearts. He wrote books, ‘with no system in mind, least of all one called ‘Lutheranism’, but simply as the occasion demanded.’11

I have argued here that Luther was a catalyst in that his beliefs and actions sped up the process of reformation of the Church in a society where the soil was already ready for such a revolution. However,
I believe Luther did not see himself as either a Crusader or a Catalyst. “... the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such a damage on it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.” From God’s perspective we can see Luther following in the footsteps of the disciples in Acts 5:38b-39 (NIV), with similar reactions – ‘For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourself fighting against God.’ Time has shown that Luther was indeed an instrument of God whose impact is still being felt today.

ENDNOTES

4 Alister McGrath, Christianity’s Dangerous Idea (Oxford:Blackwell, 1993) 41
5 J H Merle D’Aubigne The Life and Times of Martin Luther (Chicago:Moody Press, 1950) 65
6 Luther’s works 32,112-13, cited in Hans-Peter Grosshans Luther (Londond:Fount, 1997) 8
10 Alister McGrath, Christianity’s Dangerous Idea (Oxford:Blackwell, 1993) 7
12 ibid. 27