

## LIVING & EFFECTIVE TRANSCRIPT – EPISODE 4 – The Bible Goes Viral

**Rich Clark:** Martin Luther thought he was going to die.

**Jennifer McNutt:** He's sort of going into law, initially, until 1505 when, you know, the famous story of: he's returning back to university, he's just a few miles away, and he gets caught up in this thunderstorm. And of course there's a pattern of, like, how climate changes people's lives.

**Rich:** Jennifer McNutt is an Associate Professor of Theology in the History of Christianity at Wheaton College.

**Jennifer:** So, you know, he's terrified and he almost is struck by lightning. And in that moment he makes this vow to St. Anna, who is the patron saint of miners - so that makes sense - that if he is saved, if his life is preserved, that he will go into the monastery.

**Rich:** Luther was always supposed to be a lawyer. It was what his father wanted for him, and it was what Luther wanted, too. But an act of God put him on another path altogether. That lightning storm was the first of several acts of God that led to one of the most revolutionary religious events in history.

*The Christian Standard Bible and Christianity Today present Living & Effective, a podcast about the moments when humanity and the Bible collide.*

**Jennifer:** And he's true to his word, even though this creates, at least initially, a break with his father. His father, Hans Luther, was very successful in the copper mining industry and is able to sort of pull their family up a station. He makes a good marriage to Margarethe, his [Martin's] mother, who came from - her family were citizens, and he [Martin] was born in Eisleben. And because of some of that success he was able to get an education.

**Rich:** Luther's relationship with his relationship with his father may have been strained by his vow to God, but he found a certain amount of parental guidance from someone else who shaped Luther's calling in something more fitted to his disposition.

**Jennifer:** He is hugely shaped by a man, Johann von Staupitz, who becomes a mentor, even some biographers call him like a father figure. He's a second father figure to Luther. He is someone who's able to help curb some of Luther's earnestness. Now, I'm going to use that word: [laughing] Luther is so earnest, I think, to be true to

his vow; he's so earnest to be faithful; to reach this level of righteousness that he's, you know, pedantic really [laughing].

**Rich:** Right. Right.

**Jennifer:** There's lots of funny quotes by Staupitz who's like, you know, "You're confessing these sins? These are nothing! This is nothing!" [Laughing] You know, it's interesting to see how Staupitz recognizes in Luther this potential, this intellectual potential, and I think a leadership potential as well. And so he begins to direct his energies towards the life of the university. And that's really the first place that, you know, Luther teaches actually at the University of Wittenburg. He teaches Aristotle, you know, before he becomes permanently put there in 1512.

**Rich:** When Luther is given the task of studying and teaching the Bible, of really digging in, he's in his element. He's doing that thing that he is passionate about, and when he's doing that he is unstoppable. That's going to be a real problem for the Roman Catholic Church. His written revelations about what he's learned at Wittenberg will go on to start a wildfire [of] religious protests and activism. But Luther's own personal reformation doesn't happen as suddenly. His discoveries came with time and hard work, digging into the written Word of God.

**Jennifer:** So in 1512 is when he finally has received his doctorate and he enters into the task of teaching the Bible. So he's lecturing on the Bible and that's where we get his theology. And you can actually see, you can trace his lectures from 1512, and in 1515 [or] 1516 is when he starts to lecture on Romans. And you can see his theology beginning to make some changes.

**Rich:** Those changes culminated in a theological breakthrough known as justification by faith alone. That's the idea that our sins are forgiven through faith, not by good works. These were big revelations. They hit Luther like a lightning bolt.

**Martin Luther:** "At last, meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt as if I were entirely born again, and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.

**Rich:** This theological foundation for the Protestant church was just the beginning of the shifts that were taking place, all of which had a direct effect on how religion was being practiced.

**Jennifer:** From the Medieval Period into the late Medieval Period sees, with the rise of the universities and education, also sees the rise of cities and issues of urban

poverty. So the Reformation also has a response to the way that funds should be properly used, that the church is not being a good steward of its wealth to the community. That's one of the major critiques that Protestants have. So when they sort of take over a city, then they also end up not only taking over the way that worship happens, but also the way that the poor are cared for, as well.

**Rich:** Luther's impact began in earnest with his 95 theses. But it was his further work, fleshing out his theological insights and going deeper into the implications of his biblical discoveries, that would result in the kind of theological upheaval we are familiar with today. This was what was causing problems for those in authority in the Catholic Church. They needed him to put the genie back in the bottle. Luther understood the implications of his words for the church, and believe it or not, he understood that he had made some mistakes.

**Jennifer:** In the Diet of Worms in 1521, he's called before Charles V to give an answer to these books that he's written. And the first question is really just "Will you revoke them?" And he's like, "I need a day to think about it." So then he comes back the next day and then he gives this wonderfully academic answer which is, you know, "In these ways, no, I cannot revoke it; but then in this other way," he says, "I was probably too harsh with my opponents and how I treated them and how I spoke to them," and he sort of repents, I guess, of that in front of Charles V.

**Rich:** When the gauntlet was thrown down, Luther expresses what seems to be sincere regret for his tone, but zero regret for the substance of his work.

**Martin Luther:** "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason - for I can believe neither Pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves - I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus, I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen."

**Rich:** Those problems with tone will be a theme in Luther's life. While his harshness was directed at himself in his early life, and then the Catholic Church as he dug into Scripture, Luther's attacks would extend well past his foes toward many of his friends later on.

**Jennifer:** He could be harsh. Again, scholars talk about how his rhetoric becomes more and more aggressive as he gets older. You know, he's also very unwell; I think that's important to keep in mind. He really struggles with his health, and there's a few times where he thinks that he's at death's door and then, you know, he recovers. So I think that that's part of it. There's now been, by the end of his life, there has been quite a bit of violence that has emerged. And I do think he feels responsible for that. That would be hard, to be identified with a movement but not be able to actually say, "Yes, I approved of all of these things that occurred." [laughs]

**Rich:** The reason? Luther was ultimately powerless in the face of his own movement. It turns out the movement he thought he was starting was just not going the way he planned.

**Jennifer:** So Luther has this expectation. This is actually a mindset that's really held by the people of this time which is that they're living in the last era, that they're living in the last times. So, that is why this reform is happening in the church and that means that the different groups are going to fall in line. So Luther gets frustrated. He's very optimistic in the beginning of his ministry that reform will be embraced, and then by the end of his life he is frustrated, not just with people in his own camp, but he's frustrated with the Anabaptists, so the radical reformation; he's frustrated with the papacy, as he would call them; and he's frustrated with the Jews, again because the expectation is that in the last days the Jews convert.

**Rich:** Luther had a hard time managing his own expectations. Disappointment and disillusionment led him to some unhealthy, even sinful views. In those moments, when he was obsessed with control, Luther failed to love his neighbors. He experienced a very real tension between feeling ownership over the Reformation and acknowledging God's own Providence over what was taking place.

**Jennifer:** Again, I think he feels responsible. So I think it's more just that he is identified very strongly at that time with the emergence of the Protestant Reformation.

**Rich:** Luther's problem was that he was associated with a movement that was now totally out of his control, not only as its instigator but as its authority.

**Jennifer:** So when Calvin receives word, for example, that Luther is happy with this treatise that he wrote to this cardinal, he receives word of it through two of his friends. He doesn't receive word of it directly from Luther, but he's told Luther found favor with your piece, you know, and that's like so fabulous for him. [laughs] So then there's just a few examples of the reformers saying - even Calvin is a good example - but they admire Luther so they believe that he's, you know, like an apostle he's actually referenced as an apostle.

**Rich:** Here's the thing: what frustrated his allies was exactly what made him their leader in the first place. Luther was a master of rhetoric, both a product of his time and a mastermind behind many of the innovations that characterize his time.

Do you think that he became more harsh over time, or that he became more harsh to the people within his own camp over time? Because he's pretty harsh with the Catholic Church, right?

**Jennifer:** He is, yes. It's always important to understand: how do people talk to each other in that time and is Luther any different than other people? Right? That's - we always have to contextualize it...

**Rich:** Sure.

**Jennifer:** ... and that is really, he is representative of the rhetoric of the time, though he could be particularly crude, right? [laughs]

**Rich:** Right. Right.

**Jennifer:** It's kind of both, like, it's not that the people didn't speak that way to each other, and in the elite levels even. But yeah, he has a special way with words.

**Martin Luther:** [Read over a montage of other Luther quotes] "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me. I would not smell the foul odor of your name.

Faith is the "yes" of the heart, a conviction on which one stakes one's life.

You people are more stupid than a block of wood.

If we Christians would join the wise men, we must close our eyes to all that glitters before the world and look rather on the despised and foolish things, help the poor, comfort the despised, and aid the neighbor in his need.

May God punish you, I say, you shameless, barefaced liar, devil's mouthpiece, who dares to spit out, before God, before all the angels, before the dear sun, before all the world, your devil's filth.

Temptations of course cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.

You seem to me to be a real masterpiece of the devil's art."

**Rich:** For better and worse, Martin Luther was a master of the rhetorical style of the day. He embodied the kind of persuasion techniques that were most effective and embraced during a time when the world seemed to be splitting apart. But this was

more than a rhetorical understanding. Luther was a man of the people at heart, and he understood that what everyday people were craving was the ability to read the Bible for themselves.

It seems like his particular way of words, his giftedness at this sort of back and forth is what leads to part of his success.

**Jennifer:** You're exactly right. I mean, one of the reasons why his German Bible is so successful is because he understands that the language that - the German language that he's using - needs to be the one that people are actually speaking. Now Luther's German Bible is not the first German Bible. That's a common misconception. It's the first one based on the original languages, but it's not the first German Bible. What sets it apart so hugely is that it's actually trying to use the words that people were using on the streets so they could understand the message.

**Rich:** Luther is born where God wants him. He received a good education so he can read. God throws a lightning bolt at him and he drops a printing press in his backyard, and he has an implicit understanding of the publishing technology of the time. But make no mistake: that technology was as important to the Reformation as Luther was.

Read Schuchardt is an Associate Professor of Communication at Wheaton College.

**Read Schuchardt:** If you look at the European cities and the years they got their printing presses, and if they didn't get their printing press by the mid-17th century, they didn't get the Reformation. One of the most interesting examples was Einsiedeln in Switzerland, [a] very small town but the town that [Huldrych] Zwingli was actually from and where he preached the Reformation. But because he then went to Zurich and became Zurich's preacher, Einsiedeln didn't get a printing press until decades later, and to this day they're still Catholic.

**Rich:** Luther was a power tool in the hand of God. But the machinery he was using to broadcast God's word was just as essential to the moment as his mind. Why? Because the printing press fundamentally severed the message from the messenger. It took a person's ideas, put them onto paper, and spread them further and broader than any one person could go.

**Reid:** In all previous ages, if the Catholic Church had a problem they would just censor you. And typically censorship under Medieval conditions meant, "We [the Catholic Church] will burn you at the stake, because if we stop the messenger from speaking we stopped the message." But under printing press conditions, why

does Luther not get burned at the stake? There's a couple of attempts where they try to, sort of, get him in, a certain sense; but for the most part it's not an effective method anymore. Because with a printing press, burning him at the stake is a little bit like putting a Parental Advisory label on a record album. It's just going to make it sell more. It's just going to make it more controversial and thereby more interesting to the readers. You know, you always hear the famous story of the Czech reformer Jan Hus about 100 years before Luther, and he tells the famous story of the swan and the goose. But one of the little specific details of his story is right before they burned him at the stake in Konstanz, Switzerland, they actually walked him by a pile of his burning books. Those were books made under manuscript conditions. So the message to Hus was clear, which was, "There's your books, and they're all being burned up, and now we're going to burn you up and your message is no more. It's not going to last." Now some copies did exist and we still have Hus's writings, thankfully, but that was clearly the intended rhetorical effect and sort of, you know, political and cultural statement of, "We're going to totally annihilate you from the record book here."

**Rich:** The spread of ideas spurred on by the printing press was a double edged sword. Luther had unprecedented influence over far more people than he would have otherwise, but he also felt fundamentally out of control of his own message. His message was taken out of his head, stamped on the paper, spread around the world, and then iterated on by others in the same way. In fact, the printing press oiled the machinery that necessitated the Reformation in the first place.

**Reid:** Before the printing press indulgences were rare. They were actually large, they were much bigger physically, and they were for groups of people not individuals. So you get an indulgence for the whole monastery, you get an indulgence for the whole court of the king, and you can see some of these museums in Europe. They're beautiful.

Once the printing press comes out, you can produce 10,000 indulgences in a one week print run. 10,000 indulgences would have taken a single monk about two years to produce under manuscript conditions. So it's not the fact or the theology of the indulgence that bothers Luther, it's the [fact that] now everybody's got one and everybody's using them because of their easy mass production and portability, and now he feels like, wait, the poor parishioners are being exploited and this is damaging their soul.

**Rich:** Technology isn't neutral. It's a mercenary. It cares about efficiency and execution, not ethics. Luther used that to his advantage and benefited from the new technology. That is, until he didn't.

**Reid:** I think the surprise for Luther was that the Protestant Reformation didn't produce Lutherans versus Catholics. What it produced was Protestantism which was

a gift that kept on giving new denominations every decade until now where we have about 35 to 40,000 depending on who you're asking. And that is one of the, sort of, legacies of the printing press. It's important that Protestants get that that's not Luther's fault, that's Gutenberg's fault. It's the printing press that produces the point of view that allows your interpretation to be just as valid as my interpretation, because I have my own point of view under literate conditions.

**Rich:** This wasn't lost on the Reformers. The preponderance of translations and the proliferation of the published word were accompanied by their careful commentary. The Roman Catholic Church preached about the dangers of decentralized spiritual authority, but Luther and company were saying the same things about the Anabaptists and others who pushed for the radical reformation, emphasizing the priesthood of believers from an even more anti-authoritarian individualistic prism, to extremes and questions of interpretation, politics, and more that the Reformers weren't comfortable with. Properly stewarding the new technology that had fallen into their lap was a bit of an obsession for the reformers, partly because they recognized their own responsibility in controlling the message. It's worth noting, too, that church and state powers aligned with the Protestants hadn't completely abandoned the Catholic Church's playbook. They used age old methods of persecution and violence against theological opponents when the force of the printed word was not getting the job done to their liking.

It's good to embrace innovations. More people having access to the Bible is a good thing. But increased accessibility to God's Word means increased responsibility, a reality for which the Church, through the Holy Spirit's leadership, has been preparing for throughout history.

**Karen Swallow Prior:** So this is a special and important gift that we must steward.

**Rich:** Karen Swallow Prior is the author of *On Reading Well; Finding the Good Life through Great Books*.

**Karen:** One of the ways, I think, that we have been able to steward the gift of God's complete Word is through the wisdom of the early church councils and the church fathers who have established the biblical canon and the order of the books. We now have a Book of 66 books that reflect different modes and genres and subjects and themes, and so therefore we can read it in this way. We can understand one book as a book of poetry, another book as a book of prophecy.

**Rich:** We haven't always had the Book, and Christians haven't always had unfettered access to the bound Bible. In the scope of human history, we are the exceptions. That



doesn't make us better; it makes us privileged. And that means we're responsible for stewarding the privilege we have for the good of the world and God's Kingdom.

**Karen:** We, in this 500 years or hopefully longer span, who have this written [and] printed text to steward and preserve and teach and understand, can do so in a way that is unique within human history. And I don't know why that is or what God will do if this period of literacy and print culture comes to an end before human civilization comes to an end, but it is a unique and powerful and special calling that He has given those of us who live in this age of print culture.

**Rich:** We're in the midst of another technological shift. With all the changes brought on by the internet, it's easy to feel like we're experiencing something new. Then again, so many of the problems we're experiencing now have been seen before.

**Karen:** By the time we get to the 18th century in England, there was literally a street where most of this garbage was being produced, and it was called Grub Street. And so Grub Street was a place where all kinds of trashy and questionable materials were being printed, and people were vulnerable to this kind of material. And in that sense, ignorance and fake news was being spread, just as we see it today on the internet. [There were] ballads and songs and witchcraft and bawdy entertainment, which really concerned religious and political conservatives. Fast forward a few hundred years and I think we're facing some similar kinds of anxiety, because we have the proliferation of all of this material out there in the digital realm that doesn't have the traditional publishing gatekeepers or editorial boards, and we have a lot of fake news circulating and a lot of bad writing and bad ideas and people are vulnerable to that just as they were in the 17th century.

**Rich:** When Luther stepped onto that road in Erfurt, he couldn't have anticipated the storm that was coming. And like the lightning storm, technological revolutions are acts of God largely out of our control as individuals. The question for us is how we will respond to them.

**Karen:** In some respects, I think we are returning to some of the conditions of the pre-literate age. The key characteristic of a literate age is the ability and the desire to read things in a linear fashion. And with that, to exercise the same kind of logical and rational thinking that is also linear. In the pre-literate age, the Bible came in pieces. It was sort of immersed in the culture in ways that you couldn't really separate out. And today, I think, we are seeing a repeat of that in some respects; because, although people do read and probably are reading more, there's less reading in this linear, sustained, logical, rational fashion, and it's more in snippets and pieces. And so the Bible that we're being exposed to and the ideas that we're being exposed to are more like the images in stained glass windows, that appear to us piecemeal, as opposed to ideas that occur in the context of a linear, sustained, logical narrative.

**Rich:** It's easy to be amused at Luther's impulsive commitment to the ministry in response to a lightning storm, but he models something important for us: the call of the Christian is to adapt, to be ready for any given sudden act of God that might change the nature of how we read and share the Bible. As Read Schuchardt points out, when the context of how we read the Bible changes, how we experience God changes, too.

**Reid:** When you look at all of the key moments in Christian and Jewish history, every spiritual revolution is also always a media revolution. So when you look at Abraham, he says, to his father, "No more will I worship gods made by human hands, idols of wood and stone." He has a religious revolution, a spiritual evolution, but he exchanges wood and stone for an invisible God. When Moses delivers his people he's changing from the hieroglyphic system of the Egyptian system, then through 40 years in the wilderness at Sinai, it's actually plausible to consider, that the proto-Sinaitic and then full Hebrew alphabet, the world's first alphabet, comes about in that 40 year journey. And so to move from a pictographic writing system to an abstract writing system is totally astonishing. And in doing so you're moving from, you know, thousands of symbols down to just 22.

**Rich:** In the end, the Reformation didn't happen because Luther was inspired by a bunch of leadership books. He was inspired by the truth of God's power unto salvation. And it wasn't technology that caused the spread of that message. After all, the Roman Catholic Church had access to the same tools. The Reformation happened because of an act of God. Actually, at least three of them: a lightning storm; a technological revolution; and the living Word of God.

It's that last one, the Bible, that God uses most reliably. Whether it's in a book, an app, or on stone tablets God uses Scripture, not only to change our individual lives, but to set off whole revolutions. And while we may be tempted to give credit to the genius and innovation of perceived leaders, the leaders themselves tend to know better.

**Karen:** The Reformers... they're not as concerned about human free will. They care about reasserting the freedom of God. The reform of the church is God's activity. It's one of the reasons why Luther doesn't ever call himself a Reformer, because God is the only Reformer of the Church.

**Rich:** The call of the Christian is to stewardship, not ownership. When it comes to Scripture, we're the medium, not the message.

**Martin Luther:** "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's word; otherwise, I did nothing. The Word did it all."

**Rich:** Next week, on the final episode of *Living & Effective* season one, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a humble German theologian, was particularly inspired by Luther's approach to the Bible. Bonhoeffer eventually became a worldwide phenomenon, but not before he lost it all.

**Next Week's Guest:** He was compatriot, right? He's his fellow German that served very much as a model to him.

**Rich:** This has been *Living & Effective*. You can find more info and [www.livingandeffective.com](http://www.livingandeffective.com). Make sure to rate and review us on iTunes to help us spread the word. *Living & Effective* is a collaboration between *Christianity Today* and *Christian Standard Bible*. It is written and produced by me, Richard Clark, editor at *Christian Today* and Cray Allred. Executive Producers are Nick Rynerson and me, Richard Clark. Engineering by Jonathan Clawson. Music by Sweeps and the Always People. The voice of Luther was played by Caleb Sjogren. Special thanks to Trevin Wax Brandon Smith, James Kinnard, Michael Wojcik, Jennifer Clark, Morgan Lee, Natalie Liednerhaus, Derek Rishmawy, Alicia Sharp, Ted Olson, and Mark Galli.