CONTENTS

1

HERETICS NEEDED: APPLY WITHIN

It was getting hot up there on the podium. I could feel it. A prickly heat causing sweat to start trickling down the middle of my back.

I feared people in the crowd would notice I was both ultra-nervous and profusely perspiring. Of course, this worrying only added to my anxiety, which added to the sweating. I was starting to rethink my wardrobe choice that day: the lowly sweater vest.[1] (The sweater vest gets a bad rap, but it's both stylish and amazingly well-ventilated. But not on that day. It was holding in heat like a seat belt buckle in the sun.)

It was 2009, and I was presenting at the first ever Cultivate Conference, held at Park Community Church in Chicago, an event geared toward church communicators and creatives. I had spoken to crowds big and small, but for some reason this room was different. This crowd was different. The people in the room weren't there just to mindlessly absorb information; they were there to contribute. To help build and shape. There was a strong element of the unknown, and as the presenter, I knew I'd be going off-script soon and very soon. I'm comfortable with deviating from

scheduled programming, but somehow I knew this experience would be unlike other workshops.

Here is how most of the conferences you and I attend transpire:

- A speaker, usually a white male, stands in front of the room.
- Speaker shares message, usually associated with their most recent book.
- Attendees sit for uncomfortably long periods of time in the same spot.
- Speaker leaves stage and the politely humorous emcee(s) distracts with giveaways, promotions, book releases . . . and MORE!
- Conference ends, we forget what was said one to three days later and go about our normal lives.

When Cultivate was in the planning stages, the creators wanted it to be different, and Cultivate was unique. How? For starters, the participants in the room could talk back. No more mindless consumption. Workshop sizes were purposefully kept small, no bigger than an elementary school class. Didn't understand a point the speaker made? Raise your hand and ask. Wanted to camp out on a particular point and explore an idea further? Pitch your tent and stay awhile. Cultivate created the space to freely interact. It was, most definitely, a two-way street.

My role as a workshop leader was more *discussion facilitator* than subject-matter expert, a pattern I wish more conferences would adopt. (The chances of being the one person in the room who knows more than anyone else are fool's odds.) At Cultivate, the audience was in control and they knew it.

What made this room so different was the size—no more than thirty people—and the nature of the talk. I couldn't just gloss over unclear ideas. Think of it as TED, but with the most

brilliant minds on one subject converging in the same room. If you've ever spoken in public, you know there are times where a point you're making just isn't connecting—either with the audience or in your own mind—but you keep trudging forward. Cultivate exposed message confusion.

The message I shared at Cultivate was one I cared about deeply. The talk was called "What Would Luther Do?" It encapsulated everything I believed about where the church was headed and how we as leaders needed to face the changes in our congregations. In short, it focused on Martin Luther's efforts to widen the reach of the church using technology. As a life-long Lutheran, his story has always intrigued me. The more I dug into it, the more I realized Luther's narrative had real-time implications for some of the same changes and challenges the twenty-first century church is facing.

TUESDAYS WITH MARTY

In 1517, with a stein of beer and a fiery desire to see reform, a German monk named Martin Luther sat down to write. He wrote about the bothersome practices he saw in his local church. His focus narrowed on religious activities that betrayed the gospel message he had come to know intimately.

Church leaders during this period of history decided one of the best ways to fund the mission of the local church was to sell indulgences. The basic idea behind indulgences was simple: pay the church money, and one of your hell-bound relatives goes to heaven. A divine "get out of jail, free" card. You'd think I was joking, but sadly this is an all-too-real pit stop in the journey of the church.

In Luther's day there weren't denominations, per se. At least not in the sense you and I know them. There were the Eastern Orthodox folks (think "smells and bells"), the Moravians (liked to pray a lot, holed up on the side of a mountain), and the Roman Catholics. Roman Catholicism gave birth to Protestantism, thanks in part to Martin Luther and the rest of the Reformers, a group of individuals who wanted to see the church become all she was created to be.

Part of the impetus behind the Protestant movement was how the church dealt with indulgences. Luther, in short, wasn't down with it. He, along with many others, didn't see the connection between the gift of God's grace, freely available to all, and paying your way out of hell. The two seemed incompatible, and they were. Luther agreed deeply with St. Paul as he wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*not by works, so that no one can boast*"[2] (emphasis mine). Those "works" included paying an amount—any amount—to the church to guarantee an existence with God in eternity. It is enough absurdity to even consider the logic of indulgences, but there were faithful men and women who clung to the false hope they offered. Johann Tetzel, a preacher and infamous spokesperson for indulgences, was fond of speaking to crowds and goading them to imagine a deceased family member trapped in purgatory.

His tagline was, "*So wie das Geld im Kasten klingt; die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt*" or "As soon as the gold in the casket rings; the rescued soul to heaven springs." Translated: you can buy your way into heaven. (Purgatory, by the way, is a supposed realm in the afterlife where some folks go after they die. Indulgences were supposed to help these unfortunate souls store up enough "merit" to finally move on up to their mansion in the sky.)

The lunacy behind indulgences was, of course, believing that God's grace could be bought. No repentance was required on behalf of the Christian. If one was feeling charitable, he or she could purchase an indulgence for dead Uncle Harry and hope it would finally tip the scales and dislodge their loved one from spiritual limbo.

This all prompted Luther to write about a new way of seeing reality in the church. A reality where all people—regardless of socioeconomic status—could live in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. No gatekeepers. No middle men. No negotiators. And most of all, no indulgences. Just Jesus. The church had lost its way, and Luther sought to clarify the popular theological thought of the day.

Luther believed everyone should have unfettered access to God. For forgiveness, yes, but most importantly, for relationship. Certainly this idea didn't originate with Luther, but his life's work seemed to hinge on this message. I imagine the words of the writer of Hebrews rang in his ears, "Let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God."[3] In other words, *we don't need no stinking indulgences* (that's a rough translation, by the way). Followers of Jesus need not go through a mediator to receive grace; they had direct access to the place where grace flows from—the throne of God!

Not being one to rest on his stodgy laurels, Luther became a catalyst for the change he wanted to see. As mentioned, Luther began to write. Issues facing the church bubbled through his brain and pushed him to the edge of frustration. Indulgences were just a small part of the equation.

Luther's upbringing played a significant part in forming his theology. His father, Hans, was an exacting personality who pushed Luther to excel in all facets of life. But the pushing never

stopped, and it led Luther to believe nothing he did was ever good enough. One need not be a psychiatrist to make the connection between Luther's relationship with his father and how his God paradigm was formed. A harsh, taskmaster father led him to believe, quite naturally, God behaved the same way. For Luther, indulgences were personal, as it pressed an already tender wound. A wound that told him, "You'll never be good enough for God."

The finished product of Luther's reformation writings was known as the "Ninety-Five Theses," a collection Luther publicly used to declare, "Things have got to change!" Not one for subversion and subtlety, he took his theses and literally nailed them to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. It was a highly visible form of protest, the modern day equivalent of taking out a full-page ad in the *USA Today* that said something like:

Dear Pope,
You're making some pretty serious mistakes.
Cordially,
Marty Luther

Think about this for a moment. In the modern Western Christianity era, Bibles are readily available nearly everywhere. Entire bookstores are dedicated to them. Churches overflow with Bibles. Our iPhones, iPads, and mobile devices can access online versions of nearly every translation imaginable. You can't even stay in a hotel anymore where the Gideons haven't been first! (For the record, that's a good thing.)

Now imagine a culture where Bibles weren't ubiquitous. Imagine a society where Bibles were held under lock and key by the privileged few called "clergy." To have a Bible at your local church was considered a luxury. To have a Bible written in anything but Latin was virtually unheard of. The other problem? Most people didn't speak Latin. Like, not a word. Even if your

church had access to Scripture, you had no idea what the priest was saying!

The first waves of reform crested when Luther began translating the Bible in 1521. He translated the whole canon of Scripture to common German. Then, in an act of measured defiance, he took the newly translated "Luther" Bible and sent it through the cutting-edge social technology of his day: the printing press.

It sounds strange to call the printing press "cutting-edge," but it was a technological marvel for its day. "History bears witness to the cataclysmic effect on society of inventions of new media for the transmission of information among persons . . . the development of printing [is an example]."[4] Writing moved from the scribe's desk to the printing press, and it changed *everything*. New ideas were able to travel across distances—both literal and figurative—previously perceived as unnavigable.

In Luther's case, what transpired next was nothing short of a miracle. For the first time, regular Germans (read: non-clergy) could read the Bible for themselves. Those who couldn't read (which were the majority of folks) could hear the Bible spoken in a language they could understand. Simply divine.

Luther's dream, aided by technology, became a vivid reality. He had done it. He bridged a widening gap between "us" (clergy) and "them" (laity). Boundaries were shattered and new stories could be written. All of this from a German monk with digestive problems. Who knew? Providence, it seems, is no respecter of persons. Perhaps this is what led Luther to declare the printing press was the "highest act of God's grace."[5]

WHAT WOULD LUTHER DO?

This story has always fascinated me. Maybe it's because I was raised Lutheran—baptized, first communion, confirmed, the

whole bit. Potlucks, church coffee (which, described in a word, is gross), and liturgy. At times, we Lutherans have a tendency to idolize Luther to the point where, in some churches, he has more wall space than Jesus! Ol' Marty Luther certainly holds a special place in every Lutheran's heart.

This story resonates with me because it's a look at what a kingdom-minded person can accomplish with and through technology. By using the printing press to mass-produce the Bible, Luther set off a firestorm of reformation in the local church. Something needed to change, Luther felt the call, and he decided to do something about it. No waiting. No sitting around hoping someone would do it for him. Just a conviction and the confident assurance that God was with him. The printing press became an evangelistic tool in Luther's hands.

That was Luther's time. But what about our time? What stories have yet to be written for the twenty-first century church? What will our testimony be to the church universal? Will we seize the profound and unprecedented opportunity in front of us? Or will we allow the moment of innovation to pass? The church will never fail, but our methods might.

Becoming a social church means we need leaders who are willing to serve as heretics. Not theological heretics, mind you. I mean to say we need men and women who are willing to challenge long-standing and widely beloved methods of communicating the gospel message. People who are willing to bring some sacred cows to the barbecue and butcher them in front of everyone.

When describing a heretic, Seth Godin says in his book *Tribes*, "Heretics are engaged, passionate, and more powerful and happier than everyone else. . . . Heretics *must* believe. More than

anyone else in an organization, it's the person who's challenging the status quo, the one who is daring to be great."[6]

I believe he's describing people like Jon Acuff, writer of the popular blog *Stuff Christians Like*. Jon rallied his readers to raise enough money to build not one, but two orphanages in Vietnam in the name of Jesus (that's $60,000 if you're keeping track[7]). This was all done without a church building, without a giving campaign, without a pastor quoting from Proverbs 3 or Deuteronomy 8. Just a man with a Spirit-breathed vision and a desire for change. No one gave him permission. He simply acted on faith and did something. In an age of budgets, committees, protocol, and church politics, this is heretical.

My friend Evelyn is a heretic. She's building a dance studio for young girls in one of the most heavily oppressed, patriarchal cultures on the face of the planet: Kabul, Afghanistan. Through the dance studio, she's inspiring a new generation of girls to think differently about themselves and what it means to be female. Social technology like Skype and email allow her to coordinate a team of overseers from literally around the globe. When it becomes safer to do so, she'll fund-raise for supplies and materials through the studio's website. Evelyn is heretical, in the best sense of the word.

Luther was a heretic. He was willing to stand for the change he wanted to see, regardless of the consequences. Whether it was persecution from church leaders, challenges from friends and colleagues, and, at times, his own crippling self-doubt, Luther stood against the common theological ideology of the day and said no. He leveraged social technology and pushed his message further and faster than it ever could have gone single-handedly or by word of mouth. We know the ending, so Luther's courage

and vision easily get diminished. But he risked *everything*—sometimes unknowingly—to see his vision become reality.

Hearing these stories begs the question, "What would Luther do?" Thanks to the transition of broadcast to digital, and the pervasiveness of social media in nearly every facet of society, I can't help but wonder what Martin Luther's take would be.

Would social media be his new printing press? What might his Twitter feed look like? Would he have turned the Ninety-Five Theses into a flashy infographic? Blogged about the merits of infant baptism? Would his job title on LinkedIn be "Pastor, Reformer, Beer Drinker"? Maybe he would have configured a way to live stream his classes, giving access to all who wanted it. Either way, Luther would have been all over social media.

Church in the digital age necessarily requires heretics. The challenges and opportunities afforded by the advent of social media need to be addressed by men and women who see things differently, who aren't afraid to break rules. People who can embrace the "squishiness" and tension of the moment, and act.

I believe you're reading this book because you're a heretic. You see the power in social. You've experienced it firsthand. You've built new relationships, fortified existing ones, and seen the microcosm of your own world radically shift because of social technology. I believe your desire is to see the bride of Christ rise up and seize the opportunities in front of her. If that's you, you're in good company.

Much of what was discussed in this chapter was a direct extension of the conversation we had in the room at Cultivate. The ideas I brought to the room that resonated were built upon, changed, and improved. The ideas that fell flat remained there. While this certainly isn't a new way of presenting information

(Socratic method, anyone?), it's one that's suited for where our world—and the church—is heading.

This is what I appreciated about Cultivate. It was practically modeling a new way of "doing conferences" in a culture that demands to be heard. The organizers had their finger on the pulse of the values and thought processes of the real-world, flesh-and-blood culture just outside the doors of our churches, and they built a mechanism to reach it.

The world is waiting for the church to rise up in the digital era. Leaders and heretics are needed. The question we'll answer together is this: What does it look like to be the Social Church?