

Luther's Event

The Hammer and Nail of Change

When we think of the Reformation and the birth of Protestantism it is difficult, if not impossible, not to think of the Martin Luther. Luther is the man behind the event that propelled the Reformation across Europe. When we study this Reformation event we must ask ourselves, "did he want a new church? What was his purpose or the driving force behind his Luther's theology?" In any study or discussion of Reformation we need to understand this event did not stand alone. Several events and noted theologians helped bring the Reformation forward. Luther's posting his Ninety-Five Theses to the Church door contribute significantly, it is marked in history as Reformation Day, October 31st, 1517. In an historical view, it reminds me of the "shot heard around the world"; the time for change was right. People who had suffered under religious wars were ready to listen. That said, I think an argument can be made for Luther wanting to simply reform the Catholic Church. It is evident from his 95 Theses that, while Luther disagrees with the Church on several points, he upholds or does not address several practices or beliefs of the church. Even so his action created an event that gave the Reformation purpose. In addition to Luther's



event of nailing his theses to the church door, he had the advantage of the printing press. His Theses were published, printed, and disseminated throughout Europe. His ability to publish and distribute his theses created a concern for the Papacy. Germans were taking Luther seriously! Several forces were at work; the world was changing, it was a time of thinking, and the Renaissance man came into existence. "While this is the most famous document of Luther's Reformation, it is not the most important. The importance lies in the fact that this document, was a small step that stirred international attention and action and set up the Reformation events that followed" (Janz88). Posting his theses on the church door was a big deal. Who was this individual behind the event that made a forever impact on Christianity? Martin Luther was born in 1483 to a family with means, and died in 1546. He was a passionate German Monk who is labelled the "Father of the Reformation".

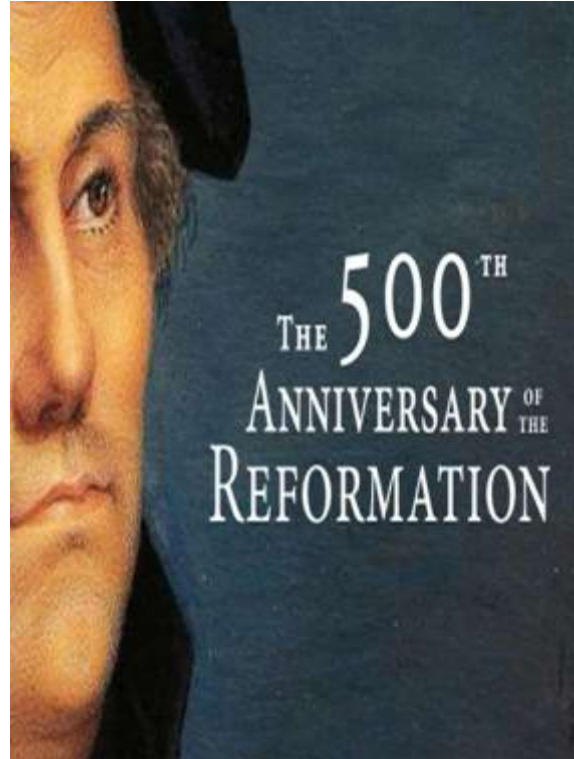
Luther, with his father's wealth, studied at the University of Erfurt. His father had intended for Luther to become a lawyer, however Luther abandoned his father's wishes to study philosophy and theology. Luther later decided to become a monk and devote his life to God. A monk he did become, a very passionate monk. Today we may refer to Luther as a monk on steroids.

Luther's time as a monk was challenging as he became vocal with his feelings about the Church. Luther did not stop with posting his these on the Church door. He felt the Church was not in keeping with scripture and was on a path of corruption. Luther's first action was a protest to the Catholic church about the sale of indulgences. Buying indulgences gave the person full or partial remission of sin and limited or avoided time in Purgatory. He also believed that the Bible was the authority of God, not the Papacy or Church. Luther believed one could go directly to God and, since God gave salvation as a gift, there is no reason to pay for it. Luther, like Paul passionately believed that salvation is a gift from God and not earned by works. One can



easily see the conflict brewing with the Church. The sale of indulgences alone brought great wealth to the Papacy and the Church. Luther's vocal opinion as a young monk was affecting the Church's pocket book. Then the day came in 1517 when Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Church. This event itself may have gone unnoticed had it not been for the prior invention of the printing press. Luther put his argument in writing and distributed his theology all over Europe. The Church would have to quiet this monk soon. Luther's Theses were critical of the Church's practices relating to baptism and the sale of indulgences, and he challenged the Pope's legitimacy. Posted for all to see; these #86 included; "Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of Saint Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?" (Janz92). It only took a few weeks with the printing press to spread Luther's theology throughout Germany. The Church now had a problem that would not go away. Still it was three years before the Church officially responded. Pope Leo X issued a formal rebuttal to Luther's Ninety-Five Theses titled "Exsurge Domine" or "Arise, O Lord". However, the Pope was too late, as the Reformation was already in full swing and was not going away. The birth of the Protestant tradition took root. With the aid of the printing presses the Reformation movement gained in strength and popularity. The Catholic Church's authority would never again go unchallenged. It was a new day and a new freedom from the religious practices of the Catholic Church. Luther was requested by the Pope to recant his Theses, but he refused. In 1520, Luther was officially excommunicated from the Church and his writing banned. This did not stop Luther or the Reformation movement.

The shot had sounded, Luther did not set out to create a new Church, but in the end his writings created the foundation of the Protestant tradition. Luther would continue with his writings but not without struggles. Luther had many adversaries and spent time in exile to avoid certain death. He was married later in life, at age 44, to Katherine Von Bora, a nun and follower of Luther. The couple had six children and adopted several orphans. Luther would say “that his family is like a small church” and he wrote down his experiences of conversations he had with his children while they were eating. His students later compiled these discussions into the famous “Table Talks” (Gon43). Luther would continue his battle with the Catholic Church until his death. His passions were often displayed in an unorthodox style, and he continued to be a man on a mission. His attacks on the Church continued with the production of numerous pamphlets stating his theology. Examples include On Christian Liberty, On the Freedom of a Christian Man, To the Christian Nobility, and On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, all of which influenced the Reformation and Protestant movement for years. In addition, the publication of Luther’s translation of the New Testament into common German in



1522 was paramount in allowing the German people to read the word of God for themselves. However, with all of Luther’s life time accomplishments nothing would sound as loud as his 95 theses nailed to the Church door. Like the shot heard around the world, the posting of his These would echo through history. This year on Reformation Sunday, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. I challenge all modern-day Protestants to educate ourselves on the significance of the Reformation and the contribution of Martin Luther’s action. Today, most Lutheran churches celebrate on the Sunday on or before October 31, Reformation Sunday. The liturgical color of the day is red, which represents the Holy Spirit and the Martyrs of the Christian Church.

For more information on the Reformation or questions on Christianity, please see our web-site www.fpcbilton.org or check out a book from our library. In addition, I listed a good Christian blog site; www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/blog

The Grace and Peace

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