

503 YEARS OF THE REFORMATION

Whenever the Protestant Reformation is mentioned, we recall the person Martin Luther who posted his famous 95 Theses on a church's door in Wittenberg, expressing his views against the sale of indulgences by the RC Church on 31st Oct 1517.



In fact, in the late 14th Century and early 15th Century (i.e., before Luther was even born), John Wycliffe (an English theologian) and Jan Hus (a Czech theologian) had already spoken against the absolute authority of the Pope and the abuses in the RC Church of the day. Both were condemned as

heretics. Wycliffe died of a stroke and Hus was executed.

While no Protestant Reformation arose out of the reformist preachings of Wycliffe and Hus, it was apparent that there was already prevailing and simmering discontent with the RC Church from before the time of Martin Luther.

Martin Luther did not suffer the consequence of having his protest vanishing into oblivion. This was because a few opportune factors worked in his favour:

- It was Halloween on 31st Oct 1517, a day that would draw people far and near to view the church's relics being listed and to make their donations. So, the 95 Theses on the church's door readily captured the attention of many who then spread the stirring message to others like wildfire.
- The printing press was already invented and available in cities throughout Europe. This greatly facilitated rapid printing and dissemination of the message far and wide out of Germany, with translations into various languages.

In Zürich (Switzerland), a prominent theologian named Huldrych Zwingli shared Luther's reformist zeal to underscore the supreme authority of

the Scriptures over the authority of the Pope. The Swiss Reformed Church was founded in 1519 by Zwingli.



Protestant ideas also fermented in France, and a young man named John Calvin (who studied theology and law) was caught up with it. In 1534 when he was just a young man, he left France and settled down

in Germany. He is now a well-known name associated with Calvinism.

Luther (1483-1546), Zwingli (1484-1531) and Calvin (1509-1564) were contemporaries in the 16th Century. While there were distinctives in their thoughts, credits were also due to them for what we know as The Protestant Reformation that led the church to break free from the abuses of the Catholic Church.

Yet, it is reasonable to say that the Protestant Reformation started with Martin Luther, because it was his 95 Theses that lit the flame of widespread excitement and debates, with the RC Church put on the spot to respond to the spreading fire.

Although the 95 Theses had its original title as “Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences”, we can easily notice ideas of church errors beyond the mere selling of indulgences.

For examples:¹

- Theses 1&2/95 (regarding the sacrament of penance)

When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said “Repent,” He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence. The word cannot be properly understood as referring the sacrament of penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.

¹ English translation @ <https://carm.org/luthers-95-theses>

- Theses 79&80 (church's assertion that may be tantamount to blasphemy)

It is blasphemy to say that the insignia of the cross with the papal arms are of equal value to the cross on which Christ died. The bishops, curates, and theologians, who permit assertions of that kind to be made to the people without let or hindrance, will have to answer for it.

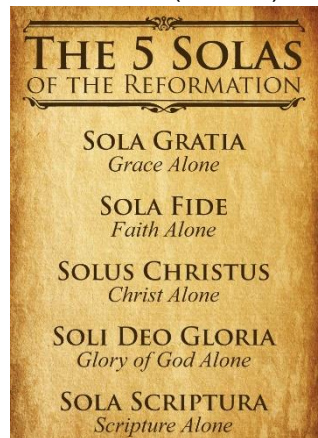
Luther hit two vital points of the RC church: The Pope's authority and the church's finance. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the wrong Catholic teachings and practices that the reformers were against covered many other aspects – images, sainthood, clerical celibacy, etc. Obviously, many of disputations against the church's teachings and practices were fleshed out in greater extent in the course of the Reformation debates that became unstoppable.

Lutherans & The Lutheran Church

The name “Christians” was originally not what followers of Christ called themselves. They would call themselves believers (1 Tim 4:12), brethren (Philippians 4:8), saints (Eph 4:12 NKJV), those of “the Way” (Ac 9:2) ... while the Jews would use the terms “Galileans” (Ac 2:7) or “Nazarenes” (Ac 24:5).

When the disciples at Antioch were first called Christians (Acts 11:26), it was pejorative name-calling by the heathen in contempt of “these people who are associated with Christ.” Nevertheless, the name “Christians” got stuck as a badge of honour whereby believers today joyfully sing the worship hymn “They'll know we are Christians by our love” which was inspired by John 13:35.

Similarly, Christians who followed the reformist teachings of Martin Luther were scorned as “Lutherans” – a title of ridicule foisted on the Christians by their antagonists. Despite strong



disapproval by Luther himself, the title got stuck and then came the name “The Lutheran Church”.

Today, we are honoured to be called “Lutherans” not because we are out to glorify Martin Luther. Rather, we are proud to be associated with “The Lutheran Church”, being minded to contemplate the Reformation legacy and to uphold our faith and practice guided by the Five Solas of the Reformation.

We mull over the “falling away” of the Catholic Church, a spiritual degeneration that had been festering for a long period well before Martin Luther came onto the scene. The “falling away” can be likened to the “lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:7) that was already at work in the time of the apostles.

“Many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1); this warning is relevant to us today as well.

The Reformation history cautions us to be vigilant against purveyors of doctrines that bend towards populism or expediency instead of abiding in the purity of Scripture.

With spiritual traps aplenty in the world, it is good to be reminded of what Martin Luther said in the Large Catechism:



“You must always have God’s Word in your heart, upon your lips, and in your ears. But where the heart is idle and the Word does not sound, the devil breaks in and has done the damage before we are aware [Matthew 13:24–30]. On the other hand, the Word is so effective that whenever it is seriously contemplated, heard, and used, it is bound never to be without fruit [Isaiah 55:11; Mark 4:20]. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devoutness and produces a pure heart and pure thoughts [Philippians 4:8]. For these words are not lazy or dead, but are creative, living words [Hebrews 4:12].”²

John Lee

² Foreword. *The Lutheran Study Bible*.