

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

Martin Luther's posting of his [95 Theses](#) sparked one of the most incredible movements in human history. It stirred the consciences of men and women to come back to the authority of Scripture and by doing so, brought to light the excellent and holy doctrine of justification by faith alone. In 1517, the Roman Catholic church sold partial and plenary [indulgences](#). These indulgences gave the Roman Catholic church prosperity at the expense of burdening the souls of men and women with a false gospel. Indulgences coincided with the Roman Catholic doctrine of [purgatory](#), a place of temporary punishment. The *95 Theses* inadvertently challenged the papal claim of the existence of the [treasury of merit](#), and led to the Reformation, the *5 Solas*, an abundance of Bible translations, and a Catholic Reformation.

Climate, Luther, and the *95 Theses*

Leading up to the Reformation, one of the many groundwork elements was the production of both Greek and Latin New Testaments by the scholar and Renaissance humanist, [Erasmus](#) (1466-1536). These editions corrected around 600 errors in Jerome's Latin Vulgate. A better translation of the Bible prepared the way not only for Martin Luther and the Reformation, but helped the Catholic Reformation as well. Although he did align himself with the church of Rome and distanced himself from Martin Luther and the Protestant movement, Erasmus did like Luther's work.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was originally pursuing law to please his father, a miner. In 1505, a thunderstorm scared Luther for his life to [cry out](#) to saint Anne, the mother of Mary and patron saint of miners: "Save me, St. Anne! I will become a monk!" Luther committed to the faith and became an Augustinian friar in Erfurt, ordained in 1507. His ordination could likely be the fulfillment of the prophecy of John Huss, who was burned at the stake as a heretic for denying the infallibility of the church. The priest who condemned John Huss died a century prior to Luther's ordination. In fact, Luther was ordained over this priest's grave

at the base of the altar in the monastery. In 1530, Luther wrote: "This which has been begun during my lifetime will be completed after my death. St. John Huss prophesied of me when he wrote from his prison in Bohemia, "They will roast a goose now (for 'Huss' means 'a goose'), but after a hundred years they will hear a swan sing, and him they will endure." And that is the way it will be, if God wills." (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 34, 104).

As a monk, Martin Luther was very diligent and of good conduct, though plagued with anxiety and guilt for his sin before God. His training as a lawyer helped him to understand his personal failure to love God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength and love his neighbor as himself ([Matthew 22:36-40](#)). He might spend up to two hours in [confession](#), which annoyed the priest who listened to him. Luther went through some periods of self-flagellation, severe fasting, and asceticism, yet he remained without consolation.

In 1510, Luther took a pilgrimage to Rome to represent the Erfurt Monastery. He was joyful at this opportunity, as it was considered significant for salvation and worth many indulgences. Martin Luther did not need the indulgences, but intended to dedicate them to his grandparents. After walking from Germany to Rome, Luther was stunned to find sexual immorality in the city, including priests openly hiring male and female prostitutes. Mass was accomplished as quickly as possible for a fee and the personal gain of the preacher. The Borgia pope Julius II was the pope during Luther's visit to Rome and is considered one of the most corrupt popes in history. This disillusionment climaxed when Luther went through the customary practice of kneeling and praying at each step of the *scala sancta* (sacred stairs), an indulgence practice which continues even to this day. These stairs were walked by Jesus Christ in his trial before Pontius Pilate and brought by crusaders to Rome from Jerusalem. After reaching the top Luther said, "who knows if it is true?"

Martin Luther began to lecture at the newly created Wittenberg University in Germany, after prompting by Frederick, the elector of Saxony. As a teacher Luther publicly studied and taught through various books, including Psalms, Romans, and Galatians. As Luther prepared for his lectures through Romans, he studied the works of Augustine. In those works Luther found Augustine's commentary on the righteousness Paul mentioned in [Romans 1:17](#). The righteousness Paul was referring to is the righteousness God freely provides to people who are not righteous, by faith in Christ ([Romans 5:1; 6:23](#)). Luther

considered this discovery of the doctrine of [imputation](#) his conversion. He felt in his soul the door to heaven open and his eyes were able to recognize this teaching clearly throughout the Bible.

Pope Leo X was looking to expand St. Peter's Basilica, so he commissioned the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel to bring an indulgence program to Germany. Tetzel sent forth a papal bull through territories including one very near to Wittenberg. Tetzel is infamously known for his saying, "as soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." A few members of Luther's congregation participated in the buying of indulgences. This provoked within Luther a righteous pastoral indignation of the practice. He passionately drafted his *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, also known as the *95 Theses*. The intent of his writing was not to spark a schism in the church, but rather to begin an academic debate among other scholars about the Biblical merit of the sales of indulgences. Martin Luther nailed the *95 Theses* in Latin to the All Saints' Church door in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31st, 1517. Some pupils found his work and translated it into German. With the help of the Gutenberg printing press these documents were duplicated and spread throughout Germany.

In 1521, the [Diet of Worms](#) was called by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in an attempt to force a recantation by Martin Luther. Johann Eck, the Emperor's representative, would not allow Luther to defend his work. After this direct confrontation, Martin Luther asked for 24 hours to think it over. It was granted him, and through this recess he spent much time in prayer and struggled with the personal question, "am I alone wise?" When he returned to stand before the authorities, he declared: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen." Luther was declared a heretic in the Edict of Worms and his work banned. He was able to escape by a kidnapping from his friend, Prince Frederick III of Saxony. He was hidden in Wartburg Castle and during his time there translated the Bible into German from the original Greek and Hebrew. This became known as the Luther Bible.

In 1526, princes met to discuss the Edict of Worms at their meeting known as the

First Diet of Speyer. The conclusion of which was to leave it to each prince to decide whether or not the Lutheran teachings and worship would be allowed in their own territories. They wanted to wait until a general council could be called to decide whether or not to enforce the Edict of Worms against Luther and his work. Until then they would not enforce it. This decision was reversed at the Second Diet of Speyer in 1529, resulting in the protests of several Lutheran princes, other political leaders, and various territories within the Holy Roman Empire. This is where Protestantism gets its name.

In the 1520s, Martin Luther began to do a visitation of churches to appraise where they were at in their understanding. He had a very public role alongside other leaders in the church, who sometimes differed in their vision for the future of it. Two other prominent reformers were John Calvin (France) and Huldrych Zwingli (Switzerland).

Unfortunately, Martin Luther became more anti-Semitic toward the end of his life. He was expecting more Jewish converts after what happened with the Reformation, and was upset when there was not a mass conversion of them. He could be foul in his language toward those he considered his enemies. He died in 1546, but his influence continued for better or for worse. While he was able to bring the Scriptures the position of authority they rightly deserved, this placed the responsibility of interpretation upon the individual.

Reformers

John Calvin (1509-1564) recognized the truth of the reformation movement and converted in Catholic France, prompting him to depart to Basel, Switzerland to escape persecution. It was in Basel that Calvin wrote [*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*](#). *The Institutes* is a systematic theology to convey understanding of the Christian faith. The sovereignty of God is a high theme of the work, and the [doctrines of grace](#) described therein is one reason why *The Institutes* is so famous. Calvin also helped the leaders of Geneva, Switzerland to build a theocratic society at the request of William Farel.

Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) played a large role in the Reformation in Switzerland. He helped to challenge the stance of [clerical celibacy](#) and was

married. Zwingli brought two disputations before the Zurich City Council to carry out reforms. Some of these included the preeminence of Scripture and the removal of images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints from the churches. Later the city approved his petition to remove the [Mass](#). In its place was a simple service which included the Lord's Supper, emphasizing the symbolic nature of the elements instead of [transubstantiation](#). Despite many of the similarities between Luther and Zwingli, the Lord's Supper remained a dispute between the reformers. Luther and Zwingli could not agree on this matter at Marburg in 1529 and irreconcilably parted ways. Zwingli later died in a battle defending Zurich against Catholic armies.

Philipp Melancton (1497-1560) was one of Martin Luther's close friends, having met him at the University of Wittenberg. He represented Luther in many circumstances and took over Martin Luther's leadership after he passed away in 1546. He was the primary author for the [Augsburg Confession](#) (1530). He was doctrinally less staunch of a protestant than Luther was, and desired to see a reunion between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Reform in England

The Protestant movement in England had early roots in the work of **John Wycliffe**. He helped give a foundation for reform in England by translating the Bible into the English language from the Latin Vulgate. This translation is known as the [Wycliffe Bible](#). As early as the 13th century there was a mix of anti-Catholic sentiment in England. The Lollards wanted reform in the Catholic church, but it wouldn't be until the efforts of **Thomas Cranmer** (1489-1556) and **Queen Elizabeth I** (1533-1603) that reform would take hold.

After Martin Luther posted the *95 Theses*, **King Henry VIII** (1491-1547) wrote a book opposing him, gaining the title of 'Defender of the Faith' from the pope. However in 1534, King Henry VIII would be excommunicated by pope Clement after declaring himself head of the Church of England. This partial break from Rome was not on theological grounds, but because the pope would not permit Henry VIII to divorce his wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon. Catherine bore him a daughter, but Henry wanted a son. When Thomas Cranmer became the Archbishop of Canterbury he allowed the divorce to take place, by a charge of

adultery. King Henry VIII then married Anne Boleyn.

While King Henry VIII reigned, **William Tyndale** (1494-1536) sought to translate the Bible. He was denied permission and so moved to Worms, Germany where he could freely work. He was active in good deeds and there translated the first English New Testament from the original Greek edition by Erasmus. He had copies of the book smuggled into England. Tyndale was betrayed by Henry Phillips and accused of heresy in the Netherlands. His English translation would later be referenced by those responsible for translating the King James Version. Yet Tyndale was condemned, tied to a stake, strangled, and burned.

Under the reign of King Edward VI, changes took place in England led by Thomas Cranmer in favor of reform. The archbishop was able to guide the movement into a somewhat halfway point between Catholicism and Protestantism. He produced the *Book of Homilies* (1547), [*the Book of Common Prayer*](#) (1549/1552), and the *Forty-Two Articles* (1553) which moved the Anglican church further toward reformed doctrine. Bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley supported the work of Cranmer.

After Edward VI died, Lady Jane Grey was poised to become the new sovereign of England, but she died within 9 days, allowing Catholic Queen Mary to take the throne. She persecuted protestants to such an extent that she gained the nickname Bloody Mary. Queen Mary used the Tower of London as a prison and publicly executed reformers through various means, including burning at the stake. Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were both condemned and refused to recant, dying together. Thomas Cranmer actually recanted under the pressure of persecution, but later came to his senses and took it back. He was condemned to death and died in the fire. Many stories of persecution are recorded in [*Foxe's Book of Martyrs*](#). John Foxe began this work during the reign of Edward VI, but when Mary ascended the throne he left the country. Multiple revisions were made as his friends were being persecuted by Queen Mary.

Two years of rule later Queen Mary died. Elizabeth I became Queen and successfully furthered Protestantism in England. She made a courageous effort, facing many of the difficulties caused by the actions of her predecessors. Yet she had a long reign in England (reigned 1558-1603). The pope ordered Catholics to overthrow Queen Elizabeth and in spite of this she was able to establish the Church of England, despite some unsatisfactory responses from Roman Catholics,

Elizabethan Puritans, and Separatist Puritans. Under Queen Elizabeth, the *Forty-Two Articles* were shortened to the [Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion](#).

The Catholic Reformation

Pope Leo X (1475-1521) did not take heed to the *95 Theses* and thought little of it. This response made Martin Luther more popular in Germany and showed how the Catholic church underestimated the situation. The split between Rome and the Reformers widened after Martin Luther published the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in 1520. After the Diet of Worms concluded, Luther became an outlaw. But what Luther brought to light by the *95 Theses* touched the hearts of many in the Roman Catholic church. One informal group began to seek reform from within. The Oratory of Divine Love met to fellowship, pray, and discuss reforms which were close to Erasmus' ideas. When Alessandro Farnese became pope Paul III he brought about sincere reform in Rome. Many of the abuses were corrected and positive change was introduced. He sought to improve the morality and mission-mindedness of the cardinals. He brought reform to correct abuse of papal authority, bribery, sexual immorality, abuse of indulgences, monastic laxity, and church law evasion. A copy of the report was gained by the Protestants and published to show evidence for the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church. The missionary intent of pope Paul III was displayed strongly through [the Jesuits](#).

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), a professional soldier, retired after a leg wound and devoted himself to Christ. In Montserrat he hung up his sword at the altar of Mary. During his stay at the Manresa Monastery, he wrote a devotional book which included a four-week ascetic program called *Spiritual Exercises*. He formed the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, in 1540 with the approval of pope Paul III. These members were obedient to the pope and engaged in missions for the Catholic church. They focused on countering protestants, high-quality education, and missionary expansion. As part of Rome's counter-reformation, the Jesuits would recapture Protestant territories using different means and were many times successful, with exception to England. The efforts to counter Protestantism were not part of Loyola's original goal. As part of the missionary endeavors of the Jesuits, new regions in Africa, America, and Asia were reached with Catholicism. The rigorous devotion of the Jesuits was impressed upon natives, with special

attention to children. There was much overseas Catholic growth through the Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans, and the Jesuits. Through these missions, many scholarly accounts arose of culture, geography, and history.

An ecumenical council was called by pope Paul III to discuss the challenges of Protestantism and church reform. The Council of Trent convened in three sessions of 1545-1547, 1551-1552, and 1562-1563. The council did not achieve the entirety of its goals, but was important because it shaped Rome's response to the Reformation. In the second session there were actually some Protestants there. However, there were no Calvinists nor leading Lutherans because the Protestants were not allowed to vote. There wasn't any theological compromise by the Protestants who were present. In the third session, papal power was increased and nearly all Roman Catholic doctrine was held fast. The only things condemned were the abuses of indulgences and the position of indulgence-seller. This displayed how the Catholic church was unwilling to reform to the dismay and expectation of some Protestants, and provided the doctrinal foundation for Rome's continuing missionary expansion.

Cardinal Caraffa pushed to revive the Roman Inquisition, which succeeded. He was given the title of Inquisitor General. Violence against heretics in Rome's eyes led to confessions, and if need be, executions by civil authorities. Countries with large Roman Catholic influence were often territories where the Inquisition was effective. Their efforts in Italy and Spain were the strongest. Nearly three-quarters of published books in Europe were officially banned in 1559 by pope Paul IV. Europe became more and more divided between Roman Catholics and Protestants, leading to a variety of wars ending finally with the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Peace was finally obtained by agreements in Westphalia, though Germany was largely devastated. Many political lines would endure.

New Movements

The Anabaptists were a movement that rejected infant baptism and took issue with the civil government's involvement in the church. They were largely missionary and held strong convictions of Christian discipleship. They promoted love and were doctrinally pacifist. Within some Moravian Anabaptist communities there was even a type of Christian communism. They held a congregational view

of church authority, emphasized the separation of church and state, as well as the distinction of the church from society. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants persecuted the Anabaptists. Thousands died by drowning, fire, and the sword. Many more recanted and did not die. At Münster, a group of Anabaptists captured a town while fleeing persecution, expecting the millennium. They were killed when they bore arms to defend themselves against Protestant armies. This group of around three hundred had fanatical leaders delving into acceptance of polygamy, wrong views of Old Testament church ethics, prophetic authority with new revelation, and even had a 'King David' crowned. The odd views of fringe Anabaptists were used to describe the movement as disorderly and fanatic by churches and governments, despite this not being the norm in the main body of Anabaptist faith and practice.

Menno Simons (1496-1561) was preaching in Germany and was heard by Anabaptists. Through monasticism he was educated as a priest, but after reading Scripture became disillusioned with the doctrine of transubstantiation. It was only after a period of internal struggle that he accepted what the Bible said, that the element was in fact bread. He turned to believe in the authority of Scripture over the Catholic church. As he examined the Scriptures he could also find no mention of infant baptism. In his preaching he was steadfast to pacifism, and preached from a Catholic pulpit doctrine that was often Anabaptist. He left the Catholic church and joined the Reformation a year later. The descendants of Anabaptists who were stemmed in their fanaticism by Menno became largely known as Mennonites. They needed knowledge to accompany their zeal, though at some points Menno could be considered legalistic. For example, he refused to use the word 'Trinity' because it was not in the Bible. This group distanced themselves from more extreme sects of the Anabaptists.

Apart from the Mennonites, the Anabaptists other main surviving branches were the Hutterites and Brethren. Some Anabaptists came across Jakob Hutter through communities in Moravia and with his leadership became known as Hutterites. The Anabaptists became known as Brethren in Switzerland. The Baptist denomination is *not* directly descended from Anabaptists.

John Knox (1514-1572) helped to establish Presbyterianism in Scotland. He was imprisoned by Catholic authorities after a battle in St. Andrew's Castle in 1547. Nearly a year and a half passed before his release. Knox left to England and traveled as a preacher, but when Mary became Queen he fled to France to escape

persecution. In Geneva he met John Calvin and admired the city as “the most perfect school of Christ that was ever on earth since the days of the apostles.” He was involved in controversy and in his writing was active to admonish through the use of tracts. In one instance of preaching against Catholic idolatry, a riot broke out. His preaching was fiery and he would pound the pulpit as he applied the text to the current situation in Scotland. Knox and five others wrote *The Book of Common Order, Confession of Faith*, and the *First Book of Discipline* at the command of Parliament. This set tones of Calvinism and Presbyterianism for Protestantism in Scotland.

English Baptists began with **John Smyth** (1554-1612) in 1608. He began as an Anglican, but being unsatisfied with the church renounced it. When King James I started persecuting separatists, Smyth and his group of about fifty fled to Amsterdam. There they broke from other separatist groups. John Smyth recited a confession of faith and baptized himself. While in Amsterdam, Smyth befriended Anabaptist Mennonites and sought membership. Thomas Helwys could not agree with the Mennonites on a couple points of doctrine, so the congregation excommunicated Smyth. Helwys brought the group back to London after Smyth’s death, and planted the first baptist church. In 1612 they were mainly Arminian (general Baptists), but by 1638 there were Calvinistic groups (particular Baptists). With the spread of so many new groups in England, there came a peace and freedom of ministry, alongside an established church.

In the sciences, Nicholas Copernicus discovered that the sun was the center of the solar system, not the earth as assumed. Many did not believe him, and it wasn’t until Galileo that Copernicus’ work was recognized for what it was. In the arts, High Renaissance art accompanied the period of the Reformation, including famous artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo. The Counter Reformation heavily expressed itself through Baroque art in the churches.

The Five Solas

The five solas brought forth from the Reformation remain today as guiding principles for the practice of the Christian faith. It ensures fidelity to the authority of the Word of God, the justification received by faith, the sovereign saving grace of God apart from works, Christ as the Savior and mediator between God and

mankind, and the glory of God being the primary goal of all creation.

- [Sola Scriptura](#) - Scripture Alone
- [Sola Fide](#) - Faith Alone
- [Sola Gratia](#) - Grace Alone
- [Solus Christus](#) - Christ Alone
- [Soli Deo Gloria](#) - For the Glory of God Alone

Sources

- *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* by Mark Galli and *Christian History* Editorial Staff.
- [Church History III: The Reformation](#) by W. Robert Godfrey.
- *Introduction to the History of Christianity* by Tim Dowley.
- [Justified by Faith Alone](#) by R.C. Sproul.
- [Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer](#)
- [The Ninety-Five Theses and the Three Primary Works](#) by Martin Luther.
- [Luther Company: Remembering the Rest of the Reformers](#) by Ryan Griffith.

Recommended

- *Are We Together? A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism.* by R.C. Sproul.
- *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* by Anthony L. Chute.
- [Can I Be Sure I'm Saved?](#) by R.C. Sproul.
- *Christian Tradition #4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* by Jaroslav Pelikan.
- [The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical notes. Volume III. The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations](#) by Philip Schaff.
- *Galatians, Ephesians: Reformation Commentary on Scripture* by Gerald L. Bray.
- *The Gospel's Power & Message* by Paul Washer.
- *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* by Roland H. Bainton.

- *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* by Brian Vickers.
- *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* by John Piper.
- *The Legacy of Luther* by R.C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols.
- *The Protestant Reformation* by Hans J. Hillerbrand.
- *Reform and Conflict: From the Medieval World to the Wars of Religion, A.D. 1350-1648* by Rudolph W. Heinze.
- *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World* by Stephen J. Nichols.
- *Reformation Sketches: Insights into Luther, Calvin, and the Confessions* by W. Robert Godfrey.
- *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* by Gregg R. Allison.
- *Saved Without A Doubt: Being Sure of Your Salvation* by John MacArthur.
- *Theology of the Reformers* by Timothy George.
- *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation* by Michael Reeves.
- *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity* by Anthony L. Chute, et al.