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Who, What, When, Where, and Why: Reformation Basics

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WEEK 4: Who, What, When, Where, and Why: Reformation Basics

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TOPIC SUMMARY

The Reformation is a 16th-century movement in Western Europe when many leaders of the Catholic Church mounted efforts to rid the church of what they perceived to be corruption and false teachings. These leaders understood themselves to be recapturing the biblical faith and/or the best of the ancient traditions of the faith. (In the case of Martin Luther this meant a return to Paul's teaching of justification by grace through faith.) When Catholic leaders failed to move quickly enough or thoroughly enough on the reforms demanded, various Protestant bodies, including Lutheranism, emerged.

October 31, 1517, is usually identified as the watershed moment of the Reformation—its beginning—for that is the day that a German monk and university professor Martin Luther is said to have posted a protest against the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences in Wittenberg, Germany, where he served. The events which transpired as a result of this protest (his Ninety-Five Theses) awakened a movement of protest and efforts to reform the Catholic Church which we now call the Reformation.

Luther was by no means the first Reformer. Most church leaders in the 15th and 16th centuries dreamed of reform, believing the Church needed to rid itself of corruption and get back to biblical principles. Even the famous Queen Isabella of Spain had tried to reform the Catholic Church in her nation. But most of these reforms petered out until Luther's in 1517. Though it failed (like his peers Luther was seeking to reform the Catholic Church from the inside, not start a new church), Luther captured the attention of the media of his day, gained a lot of German nationalistic support (he was perceived by Germans as "our guy" standing up to Spanish, Italian, and Dutch power-brokers). His was a movement that could not be denied or crushed, and so once he was excommunicated by the Pope for his failure to renounce positions he held, he and his followers were forced to start a new church. Subsequently other Reformation leaders like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Menno Simons, and various English Reformers followed by starting their own evangelical communities.

There is a lot of controversy over whether Luther actually nailed The Ninety-Five Theses on the Church Door in Germany. We do know that he sent a copy on October 31 to his bishop, but the only evidence we have that he publically attached the Theses to the Wittenberg Castle Church on that date comes from the writings of Philip Melancthon. Luther himself never claims to have done this. Perhaps he did it, and perhaps he sent a student or servant to do it surreptitiously for him.

Why did he do it? The standard rationale is that selling indulgences implied that by our own works we could contribute to our own salvation, since buying indulgences is something we do. And this contradicted Luther's new insight (which he received from Paul and perhaps from the ancient African theologian St. Augustine) regarding our salvation by grace alone. But Luther also posted The Ninety-Five Theses because he found the sale of indulgences undermining the quality of faith, as if one who obtained salvation or who was concerned about the salvation of others might pay no attention to repentance, prayer, and thankfulness to God, but just pay money.

KEY WORDS

Augustine (354-430): The greatest, most influential theologian of the West. An African Bishop, he is most famous for developing the doctrine of Original Sin and for affirming the priority of grace in God's Work of saving us. His writings influenced both Luther and John Calvin, as well as the Roman Catholic Church.

WHERE DOES LUTHER STAND?

In one of Luther's most important writings, "The Freedom of a Christian," the reformer outlined the Christian's simultaneous freedom and bondage, an idea that shaped his understanding of God, the church, and the relationship of Christians and God. Luther writes, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully...Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved."

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- + Is the Reformation something to celebrate – the birth of the Lutheran Church and the rediscovery of justification by grace alone? Or is it something to mourn – a series of events that further divided Christians from each other?
- + The first thesis of The Ninety-Five Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' He willed the entire life of believers be one of repentance." Is he right? Can't we improve so we don't need to keep repenting?
- + Was Luther really attacking the papacy? Or was he a good Catholic seeking to defend the Pope and just trying to set the church straight? Read thesis #42, #50, #51, #55 of The Ninety-Five Theses (<http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>). What do you think our relationship with the Roman Catholic Church should be today?
- + Consider #43 and #45 of The Ninety-Five Theses. What do Luther's expressions of concern about the poor getting fleeced by Indulgences say to us about Lutheran views regarding poverty?
- + Has the Reformation been a success?