

THE REFORMATION

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Have you ever studied the Reformation? What do you know about it?

On June 25, 1580 the *Book of Concord* (BoC) was offered for sale for the first time. It contained the seven confessional documents of the Evangelical churches. The Formula of Concord, the last of the confessional writings of the evangelical reformers had been completed in 1577. The signing of this agreement brought to a close the period of religious, political, and social upheaval known as the Reformation.

While there had been rumblings of reform for decades, in 1517 those rumblings turned to shouts. On October 31 of that year, Martin Luther, a monk of the Augustinian order and a professor at the University at Wittenberg in Germany, posted an invitation for debate on the sale of indulgences.

Luther made a list of his objections to indulgences and posted them on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. These 95 Theses were intended as points for debate among academics, but in no time they had spread throughout the country. What followed was a movement that changed the church and the world forever.

How could a questioning of one church practice lead to a movement as significant as the Reformation?

In the beginning, Luther confined his criticism to what he saw as abuses in the church. At first, Luther thought it would be possible to reform the abuses in the church without radically changing the basic structure of the church. But soon it became clear that there were problems at the very heart of the Roman church.

In 1518 Luther participated in the Heidelberg Disputation in which he laid out his ideas about sin, the bondage of the will, human cooperation in salvation, and faith. He also clarified his theology of the cross which he contrasted with the theology of glory. Later that

year, at the Diet of Augsburg, Luther was examined by Cardinal Cajetan who demanded that Luther retract all his teachings. Luther refused.

Meanwhile, Luther continued to preach and teach in Wittenberg. There, Luther found a friend and colleague who shared his theological perspectives in the person of Philip Melancthon. Philip was a brilliant young scholar who joined the faculty at Wittenberg in 1518 (at only 20 years of age). Together, Luther and Melancthon continued to formulate and clarify the evangelical teachings that eventually would be the heart of the Lutheran Reformation.

In 1519, the disagreement between Luther and Rome deepened. In that year a debate was held in Leipzig. Luther's colleague Andreas Karlstadt started out representing the evangelical position, with Johann Eck representing the Roman position. While Karlstadt was a fine teacher, he was no debater. Eventually, Luther took over the debate. In the course of the meeting Eck, a masterful debater, got Luther to admit that his teachings were quite similar to those of Jan Hus. Hus, a Bohemian reformer, had been burned at the stake for heresy one hundred years earlier. By identifying himself with Hus, Luther had admitted to being a heretic. From there, he had no choice but to argue that the church, itself, was in error.

What are the implications of arguing that the church itself is in error?

Following the Leipzig Debate, Eck was quickly able to convince the Pope that Luther's teachings were heretical and he should be excommunicated. Luther's own words had convicted him. In 1520, Luther received the letter of excommunication. The letter gave him sixty days to recant his teachings and writings. In response, Luther burned the letter. His break with Rome was nearly complete.

In 1521, Luther was summoned to appear before the Emperor in the city of Worms. Finally Luther thought he would be allowed to make his case. But when Luther

1517 - Martin Luther posts the 95 Theses, attacking the sale of indulgences

1518 - Heidelberg Disputation

1518 - Diet of Augsburg

1519 - Leipzig Debate

1520 - Luther receives and burns letter of excommunication

1520 - Luther writes *Address to the Christian Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and On the Freedom of a Christian*.

1521 - Diet of Worms

1521 - Luther declared an outlaw

1522 - Luther returns to Wittenberg and publishes his German translation of the New Testament

1523 - Luther writes *On Temporal Authority: the Extent to which It Should Be Obeyed*.

1524 - Erasmus writes *On the Freedom of the Will*, attacking Luther.

1525 - Luther marries Katherine von Bora, a former nun

1526 - Luther writes *On the Bondage of the Will* in response to Erasmus.

1527 - Luther writes *A Mighty Fortress*

1530 - Augsburg Confession, written by Philip Melancthon, presented at the Diet of Augsburg.

1531 - Luther writes *Small Catechism*

1546 - Luther dies at Eisleben

arrived at Worms he quickly realized that he would, once again, not be allowed to argue his case. Instead, he found his writings in a pile on the table in front of him and was asked two questions: 1) Had he written these books? and 2) Was there any part of them he would now choose to recant? Luther answered that they were his writings and he had written even more. To the second question, Luther asked for more time to consider his answer. He was given one day.

When he returned the next day, Luther explained that there were three types of books in the stack. Some taught the Christian faith in such a proper manner that even his opponents supported them. He would not recant those. Some attacked the papacy and Roman teaching. He would not retract those because to do so would be to encourage papal tyranny. He agreed that the third type, in which he had attacked individuals were perhaps too harsh, but he would not retract them either because those he had attacked were defenders of errant Roman teaching and tyranny. But Luther's accusers would not be lured in to any conversation. They told him that he must simply answer the question - will you recant or not. Luther replied, "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scripture or with open, clear and distinct grounds and reasoning - and my conscience is captive to the Word of God - then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."

How does Luther's answer undermine the authority of the church?

With this statement, Luther put himself squarely outside of the Roman Church. He was condemned as a heretic. Remembering the fate that Jan Hus had met, Luther's supporters kidnapped him on his way back to Wittenberg and kept him in hiding at the Wartburg Castle for the next ten months. While in hiding, Luther translated the entire New Testament into German. But with Luther away, the reforms in Wittenberg took a dramatic turn. Under Karlstadt, one of Luther's early colleagues, the Wittenberg churches were tearing down statues and painting over icons. Karlstadt preached and led worship wearing street clothes, rather than the traditional priestly robes. The Reformers were intent on ridding the church of any last traces of Roman practice. Luther had to return from hiding to salvage the Reform movement in Wittenberg.

Luther understood some things that Karlstadt and others did not. He knew that the worship practices of the Roman church were not the problem. The teaching was the problem. While the Reformation teachings certainly *allowed* Karlstadt and others to introduce the changes they desired, they were not *required*. And if the radical direction Karlstadt took frightened people away from the Reform movement, away from the gospel, they were accomplishing precisely the opposite of what they had intended. Luther's approach was to maintain any traditions of the Roman church that did not directly contradict the gospel.

What are some advantages of Luther's approach to reform? What are some disadvantages?

Luther remained living in Wittenberg until the end of his life. For the next twenty-five years he continued to teach at the university, preach at least once every week, and publish

countless books and essays. In 1525, Luther married Katie Von Bora, a former nun. At the time, Luther was involved in a bitter debate with the great Catholic teacher Erasmus on the nature of human will. Erasmus contended that humans have the ability and the responsibility to follow God's commands and do his will. In effect, humans could stop sinning. In what would become a defining teaching of the Reformation, Luther argued that the human will was in bondage to sin. Though we had been created with free will, we had fallen into sin and we could not regain the freedom we had given up.

What makes this teaching so important?

In 1530, the Evangelical Reformers were invited to present their teachings at an Imperial diet in Augsburg. Because Luther was under the ban and could be arrested or killed it was too dangerous for him to attend the meeting himself. Instead, Philip Melancthon went and represented the evangelical position. He wrote the Augsburg Confession as an attempt to organize the teachings of the Reformers into one document. Philip was always more inclined to compromise than Luther. The Augsburg Confession, therefore, attempted to find room for compromise so that the evangelical reformers could return to the fold of the Roman church. Philip gave up as much ground as possible, without abandoning the evangelical teaching completely. Despite his best efforts at compromise, the Roman Church rejected the Augsburg Confession. Later, Philip wrote an Apology to the Augsburg Confession, in which he sharpened the evangelical position, and took back some of the ground he had given up. Luther, meanwhile, wrote a confession of his own, called the Smalcald Articles. In it, he offered many of the same teachings as Melancthon, but always with a sharper edge and a clearer understanding of where compromise was possible.

In 1531, Luther turned his attention from the battles with Rome to his real concern, the people of the church. He went visiting in congregations throughout Germany. What he found disturbed him greatly. The people had no idea what Christianity was about. Many could not even recite the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed. The preachers had completely failed to teach anything to their congregations. This prompted Luther to write the Small Catechism. In it, he laid out in their most basic forms, the teachings of the Christian faith. He intended it to be used by families, as a way of parents teaching their children the faith. This gave a responsibility and honor to parents that they had never before been allowed.

In 1546, Luther died. His last written words were, "We are all beggars. This is the truth." After his death, his followers developed divisions within their ranks. Some wanted to follow Philip's accommodating approach. Others were attracted to the radical reforms of Karlstadt. Still others attempted to remain faithful to what they thought Luther wanted. In 1577, they came to an uneasy truce. The Formula of Concord attempted to make room for all the strains of evangelical reformers. The Lutheran family has been diverse since the day it began. In spite of this diversity, the heart of the evangelical message has gone unchanged. Sinners are justified by faith in Christ alone. Any church that has that center is rightly called Lutheran.

What implications does the Reformation have for our church today? What can we learn from it?