

A Reformation Preview  
Rev. Shannon White  
Wilton Presbyterian Church  
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When Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses (or ideas) onto the church door at Wittenberg, he didn't have any idea that his desire to have an academic debate with church officials would start a revolution. And why was there such a fuss over **these** theses and not over the ninety-seven theses he posted weeks earlier—September 1517—where he hoped to reform the method of scholarly thought and study of theology? But Luther's actions based on his deep love for God would end up changing the Church forever in that time and in that place. Luther, a little known priest of a small church in Germany and university professor was hoping to help his beloved Church (the Catholic Church) reform, or change while maintaining his membership in it. But that was not to be, and those of us in Protestant churches, some 22,000 denominations, can trace our origins to it all these years later.

Next Sunday, thousands upon thousands of Protestant churches around the world will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of October 31, 1517, when Luther took his grievances public. Today we do a bit of a preview and look at what lead up to this incredible transformation in the Church, and who was responsible for it.

Let's go back and see what was happening in that day and why Luther and others after him felt they could do no other but to call for change. The church has always been seen as a holy institution, one which has managed to survive countless struggles since the time of Jesus. By the time of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, it had long reached institutionalization. It had been run for over a thousand years at that time. It has been described as "flexible and creative, a walled garden with plenty of scope for novelty and variety, and room to adapt to changing political, social and economic climates. But it also had boundaries, marked and unmarked. Those who wandered too far would be urged, and if necessary forced, to come back." (*Protestants*, by Alec Ryrie)

The Western church was wealthy, to say the least. It had a vast amount of: personnel-- priests, monks, friars, nuns; real estate including huge cathedrals, monastic houses "supported by an international bureaucracy of unparalleled sophistication" ...all which costs big dollars. In order to survive apart from the political world, the church's leaders were chosen from noble and royal stock—men and some women (abbesses) who knew the ins and outs of proper society and had the leadership skills to run communities and interface with outsiders.

But theologically this was also a time when the poor were honored, seeing the positive value of denouncing wealthy lifestyles. The ideal cleric was a friar, who took vows of poverty. That ideal contrasted with the extreme wealth of the institutional church provided many with an untenable disconnect. An example was no clearer than having communion wine served in many places in wooden goblets vs. golden ones in high ecclesiastic settings. Resentment built and built around

rents and tithes which the church collected along with other payments. Financial abuses were assumed to be rampant.

A modern day example: I'll never forget the image of just this juxtaposition. The very first time I went to Nicaragua in 1992, the middle of Managua was **still devastated** from the earthquake of 1972. Yet there in the middle of the city was a lavish cathedral. Word from the locals was that the owner of Dominos Pizza international at the time was a devout catholic from the US. He had given ½ to ¾ of the money to build and adorn the cathedral with lavish decorations, but the remainder was left for the local people ...poor people to fund, which, of course they couldn't. They needed their money to provide the subsistence living for their families and rebuild after the earthquake from years before. So, there this grand edifice stood, unfinished, because of unmet expectations.

But the issues Martin Luther and the other reformers rallied against went further than money and financial abuses. There was the issue of power. The church had already gotten free from political control and had quite a bit of independence. By the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the church had claimed universal power, but officials knew when not to push their luck. A large schism had taken place between 1378-1417, followed by a period of reform. But by 1500 people generally accepted the role of the papacy, but didn't necessarily like it.

There were also rivalries between leaders in various parts of what had been the Holy Roman Empire. Racial stereotypes between those in the papal court in Italy and other parts of Europe including Germany existed as well. So when this German friar and professor challenged the Italian leadership of extortion and tyranny...it didn't quite go over well.

But there was a third element at work which promoted this massive breach. Principle. The Renaissance gave Western Christendom a slogan: *ad fontes*, or "to the sources." Literally in every area of society, people tried to return to the way things had been in the ancient world. The church was no different. There were many who wanted to return to a Biblical church (of course that would mean different things to different people). Still, the idea was to renew the church from within and not to destroy it.

Perhaps you have heard of Erasmus of Rotterdam. He was also wanting reform, but in a different way. He was a monk who was known as a huge intellectual. He translated the Bible into Latin in 1516, and wanted it translated into all languages so that everyone could read it, not just church elites. It is said that "he was offering the chance to use the Bible to judge the church."

Then, enter Martin Luther, a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. He didn't follow his father's choice for him and become a lawyer. He wasn't your predictable image of what we might think a Christian revolutionary would be like. He came from a wealthy family who got their money from the mining industry, but Martin became a monk, forsaking all that. He never held a particularly high position, and he remained in his University position all while squeezing in his activities. And his personality? He was a bit like how I imagine John the Baptist...rough around the edges. He is described as "grouchy, obstinate, and an unabashed sensualist, from his

boisterous, flirtatious, and deeply affectionate marriage, to his well-documented fondness for Saxon beer.” Many, in fact, think he might have had a drinking problem. He is described as obese...and as a person who was larger than life in his flaws as well as his spiritual experiences.

The descriptions of him make me really like him. So often, in the history of our faith it is the most unlikely followers who have had huge roles...Martin Luther was one. God moved in him in huge ways. One author describes him this way: **“Luther’s theology was not a doctrine; it was a love affair. Consuming love for God has been part of the Christian experience since the beginning, but Luther’s passion had a reckless extravagance that set it apart...he pursued his love for God with blithe disregard for the bounds set by the church and his tradition. It was an intense, desolating, intoxicating passion, sparked by his life-upending glimpse of God’s incomprehensible, terrible, beautiful love for him. Like any lover, he found it incredible that his beloved should love him, unworthy as he was. And yet, he discovered, over the long years of prayer and study that God loved him wildly, irresponsibly, and beyond all reason. God, in Christ, had laid down his life for him. This was not, as the medievals’ subtle theology had taught, a transaction, or a process by which believers had to do whatever was in their power to pursue holiness. It was a sheer gift. All that mattered was accepting it.”** (*The Freedom of a Christian in Three Treatises* by Luther 1520).

This deep realization and experience rubbed up against his church’s practice of indulgences: documents in which the church promised to bestow God’s grace in recognition of a charitable gift.

Hear it in Luther’s own words, “Evidently the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters they are then assured of their salvation. They are likewise convinced that souls escape from purgatory as soon as they have placed a contribution into the chest. Further, they assume that the grace obtained through these indulgences is so completely effective that there is no sin of such magnitude that it cannot be forgiven.” (Luther’s Works 48:46) And then, Luther stated the proper way: The first and only duty of the bishops, however, is to see that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ. For on no occasion has Christ ordered that indulgences should be preached, but he forcefully commanded the gospel to be preached. (Luther’s Works 48:47)

Luther wanted to simplify the church teachings--Faith alone (*sola fide*) and scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). He was preaching FREE GRACE...it only cost repentance, thus going directly against the teachings in his own archdiocese and Archbishop Albrecht’s main revenue stream.

Church officials engaged Luther in conversation. But he didn’t budge. He remained firm. In fact not only that, but the new technology of print media had just found a true ally. Luther plugged into mass-marketing of pamphlets, which were short, cheap (the same cost as a hen) and quickly produced in large numbers.

This changed the game and the dynamics of the struggle. No longer was it the elites who were reading theology. Now the common man and woman could have access to theological thinking

During his career, Luther produced 544 separate books, articles and pamphlets. That's slightly more than one every three weeks during his 30 year public career.

People read his works. A lot of people read them, and the masses began to be educated, and there was no going back.

So, as we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this massive change...let us ask ourselves several things:

1. When you think of the Church, what changes have been good and what still needs changing?
2. When you think about THIS church. What is good and what needs to be changed?
3. Do you/do I have an understanding and experience of the utter, complete and extravagant love of God for you/for me? Do you know that God loves you wildly, irresponsibly, and beyond all reason, and that all we need to do is receive that love?

I invite you to meditate on that over the next week and come to honor our heritage next week.

Praise be to God!

Amen! May it be so!