

Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



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Reformation 2022

It is 1517. Martin Luther has passed his 30th birthday and is settled in as a professor of theology at the university in Wittenberg, Germany. But all that is about to change.

Becoming a doctor of letters had not been Luther's life ambition. Indeed, his father had advocated that he become a lawyer so he could support his parents in their old age. Later in life he would argue his case as well as any good lawyer might have done, as if his life depended on it—and it did! However, as a result of a terrifying experience, he chose a different path; he became a monk. In the cloister he worked diligently to be the best he could be to meet all the demands of humility and repentance, thinking that thereby he could live up to God's standards. But no matter what he did, how hard he tried, he knew he failed. His mentor and confessor determined that for Brother Martin to have any peace of mind, he would need to go in a different direction, leave the monastery. Although ordained a priest, he was sent off to earn his doctorate and teach at the university.

The give and take of academic life suited Martin Luther well. His working with men of letters and with astute students seeking understanding honed his skills as both lecturer and debater and broadened his knowledge of Scripture. Through study and preparation, particularly Paul's letter to the Romans, he also began to comprehend that it is not what a person does that enables him to gain God's favor. It is, instead, God's grace, a gift, that brings us into a right relationship. *Acceptance* of that gift through faith was, *IS*, in fact, the only way to salvation.

Luther had not yet fully wrapped his mind around that concept (grace through faith) when a particular practice of the Church (Roman Catholic/Western Christian) headquartered in Rome began to trouble him. Raising money for the building of St. Peter's Basilica, high church officials had gained the support of electors in the various states of the distant regions, particularly those in German-speaking areas, to assist in their campaign by permitting the sale of indulgences. This practice, in essence, meant that people could buy down their terms in Purgatory (holding area between Hell and Heaven). If they paid enough, they could get a certificate verifying forgiveness. Furthermore, they could even help their loved ones who had already died to gain some favor. To illiterate and superstitious populations, this seemed a good thing. As Luther looked at it, though, while this practice decidedly could raise money, it definitely was *not* Biblical. So, Dr. Luther decided to challenge some folks to a debate, a common practice at that time. As he made his list of discussion points, it continued to grow until it had reached ninety-five. This list he posted on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, the community bulletin board. The date was All Saints Eve, (October 31) in 1517.

The debate Luther sought certainly did not materialize in the way he expected. The fallout resulted in what we know as the **Reformation**, a process that in many ways broke the church apart and changed history in more ways than we can count. Now we celebrate the 505th anniversary of the Reformation. In 2016 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in assembly in New Orleans, announced "Declaration on the Way," an ecumenical statement in which Lutherans and Roman Catholics have achieved agreement on 32 issues, declaring that these are no longer a church dividing, but a church uniting. Fifty years of dialogue in the U. S. and around the world have led to this point. Reformation can also mean *renewal*, and that, too, is part of the history. And the common thread remains *grace through faith*.

