

500 years later and there's still a lot of reforming left to do



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This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The year 1517 was the historic moment when a German monk named Martin Luther pounded his debatable demands on the heavy wooden doors of the Wittenberg Cathedral.

But, you may ask, other than Lutherans, who cares? I think his story can still stir honest debate in the spiritual and secular communities today.

Luther (1483-1546) studied law before deciding to become a monk. One account says he made this decision when a violent thunderstorm scared him so much he vowed to join a monastery if he survived. (He should have experienced a Carolina storm.)

His father wasn't happy because Martin was giving up a promising career in law. After studying theology and scripture at the university, he received his doctorate in 1512.

As the famous story goes, Luther became angry when he heard that a Dominican monk was selling "indulgences" (forgiveness of sins). Among other things that irritated him about the Church, this one tipped the scales. He sent copies of his Ninety-Five Theses to Church leaders to stir up academic debate and (possibly) posted them on the cathedral blog — that is, the front door.

He expected honest debate. His bullet points begin with an open invitation: "Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther ... intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them ... Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter."

His protest included affirmations of the Bible as the only source of authority and salvation by grace alone, not



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Chris Highland titled this photograph, "Old Roots and Branches of Reformation?"

works. He was not against the pope, just the nonsensical abuses of "authorities."

In 1521 the agitated professor was excommunicated as a heretic. In a dramatic scene he was told to repudiate his writings yet courageously stated, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." (Standing up to orthodoxy is also a main element of the Freethought tradition.)

Luther spent the next years hiding out, then agitating even more, marrying a former nun and getting himself in deeper theses. In 1530 his followers presented a statement of protesting beliefs in Augsburg that became the standard for Lutheranism for centuries.

We didn't study the Augsburg Confession in seminary. We were proudly "Reformed" (Presbyterian) rather than

"Protestant" (Lutheran), though all linked with the historical Reformation breaking away from the Catholic Church. The Book of Confessions we studied doesn't include the Augsburg Confession.

Strange as it seems, one of the most divisive elements of the whole history of Christianity is how to understand what's happening with "The Elements" — the bread and wine of the Eucharist, Communion, the Lord's Supper.

The holy meal is supposed to be all about unity yet continues to divide not just Catholic and Protestant but Lutheran and Presbyterian and others. Luther couldn't get along with other reformers like the Swiss Zwingli and the French "General of Geneva," Calvin. None of them could agree whether the bread was "really" the body of Christ or a figure of speech or the "presence" of

Christ.

There could be no peace over pieces of the Prince of Peace.

Of course, people need bread. There are hungry people and also people hungry to see some unity and love in the world. While theological debates drone on and "irrelevant" becomes graffiti on heavy, locked and well-defended church doors, the world moves on.

Though "Reformed, always Reforming" was a mantra we repeated in seminary, the "real presence" of that is sometimes hard to see (for example, it only took about 450 years for Protestants to ordain women).

My grandmother Emma, my mother's mother, was a German Lutheran. I still have her "Gesangbuch fur Kirche, Schule und Haus" ("Songbook for Church, School and House") given to her in 1907. I never met her, but I'm told she spoke to my Scottish grandpa with a German accent.

One of the only photos I have of Emma shows a beautiful young woman with a high, embroidered collar — looking very prim and pious.

Her songbook is also a prayerbook and contains the Augsburg Confession — all in German. I wonder what Emma would think of the continual squabbles among the "reformed" and their splintered denominations. I think she would find some comfort in ecumenical coalitions. But I sense she might be disappointed, as I have been, at the divisions over dogmas, doctrines and distracting trivialities.

There are few Luthers left (Martin Luther King Jr. was one). Few dare to risk being outed as heretics by posting disturbing truth. Perhaps we'd rather look back to honor Reformers than do some serious reforming in our day?

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