

Always Reforming

From its earliest days the Christian Church has experienced internal differences—sometimes great conflicts, at other times diverse understandings of Scripture and the teachings of Christ. A reading of the letters of the Apostle Paul reveals his concern about people in various congregations who were leading God’s people astray or imposing unnecessary restrictions on them. Over the centuries the Church has dealt in differing ways with such struggles. At times there was something of an “agree to disagree” approach. Sometimes the differences were not seen as a threat to salvation and were allowed to exist alongside the more traditional teachings. From time to time people were forced back into compliance or put to death. And until 1517 only two major Christian traditions held center stage—the Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Eastern Orthodox churches in the east.

On October 31, 1517, a monk of the Augustinian Order of the Roman Catholic Church, posted a list of 95 concerns on the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Brother Martin Luther had been struggling for years with the growing secularism in the Church of his day, and his own sense of inadequacy before an angry God. As a priest he could barely get through his first Mass, so overwhelmed was he by his unworthiness to handle the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. He would confess the most minute sinful thought to his confessor, and sometimes return to the confessional before he left the building because he would remember something he had forgotten to confess. It was only as he was preparing to teach a class on Paul’s letter to the Romans that Luther began to understand that righteousness is not something we can earn, but is a gift given to the repentant sinner by the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ alone was able to live the sinless life, He alone was righteous, and He died and rose again in the resurrection to bestow this gift of life and salvation on those who put their trust in Him.

So profound was Luther’s realization of this truth that he wanted to debate his new understanding with other scholars. He felt that the Church had veered off course in these matters and wanted to bring changes. The Castle Church doors were the “blog spot” in Wittenberg, and on the Eve of All Saints’ Day he posted the “95 Theses” so that those attending Mass the next morning would read them. What Luther perhaps did not take into consideration was a new technology called the printing press. Someone took the statements and had them printed. Instead of some scholarly debates and a gradual reform within the Church, Luther’s action touched off, not just a reformation, but a revolution. This revolution changed the course of history—not only in the Church but in the western world.

Five hundred years later, there are still differences in the Christian Church. Some of the hard feelings from the 1500s have been forgiven and some restoration has come. Instead of two major Christian traditions there are many—and the number probably changes every day. In spite of efforts at restoring broken relationships, there is concern that the unity our Lord Jesus calls us to has been irreparably harmed. But true unity is in Christ Jesus, the Lord of the Church. Despite the different ways we understand what it means to be the Church, as we hold to one Lord and remain faithful to His Word—to love the Lord above all else and to love and forgive our neighbor (including those with whom we disagree)—we find a unity that transcends physical forms of togetherness. Jesus once said to his disciple, John, when he objected to

someone outside their group performing healings in the Lord's name, "He that is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:38-41)

In this year of 2017, as we remember the events of 500 years ago, may we give thanks for the good that has come to us from the past and seek to heal the brokenness that continues to plague the Christian Church. May we begin a reformation of our hearts, turning again and again to the Lord God and seeking His will as we move forward into a new year and a new era in the Church. May we reach out in heartfelt compassion to those around us in ways that reflect the love of Christ that calls us to be His light and life in the midst of the darkness and despair of this world.

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