

GUEST EDITORIAL

In 2017, many Christians around the world—not only 72 million Lutherans but also believers in many other Protestant churches and free churches—will commemorate or even celebrate the 500th anniversary of the official beginning of the Reformation of the church on October 31, 1517. It was on that day that Martin Luther is said to have published his 95 Theses opposing the sale of indulgences and what he perceived to be clerical abuses associated with this religious practice.

That Luther himself wielded the hammer to nail those 95 Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg is very unlikely in view of research done in this field. More likely, servants of the university posted copies of the 95 Theses simultaneously on many “church doors” (i.e. bulletin boards) in Wittenberg on behalf of the scholar, a practice commonly followed by professors in that day. Luther mentioned his 95 Theses in a letter to the Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz written on October 31, 1517. However, only the letter is found there today in the archives, but unfortunately not a copy of the 95 Theses themselves which were most likely enclosed.

Nevertheless, in composing those 95 Theses, Luther's primary point was “the true treasure of the church ... the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (62nd statement). “Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it,” he wanted to “defend the following statements and to dispute on them.” Therefore he asked “that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter” (Introduction to the 95 Theses).

Looking at the historic events of those days, it seems to be a sheer miracle that from that specific day on, starting at a minor German city, far from any famous university or place of education, far from the glorious center of the Christian universe—Rome—in crude and uncivilized Germany, and far from any place of worldly powers, a reformation of Roman Catholicism could be triggered. In addition, the entire matter was initiated by a monk of a rather strict Augustinian order, a professor of theology with no significance or fame, with no reputation as a scholar or preacher. Who on earth could have imagined that a transformative reformation would emerge from that day in the fall of 1517—as it seemed to appear from nowhere—to irrevocably change the entire world?

Luther's primary intention was to debate with scholars solely regarding the sale of indulgences and associated abuses, and on the topic of the true “gospel of the glory and grace of God.” Therefore, the 95 Theses were composed in Latin for scholars to discuss, not in German for common folk to read. Luther never intended to trigger a thoroughgoing reformation. It was nothing less than a miracle that it happened nonetheless.

It is rumored that within two weeks, the 95 Theses were translated, printed, disseminated, and discussed all over Germany. And as we learn from research in the original sources, the theses were translated and spread by pious and enthusiastic

travelers all over Europe within two months. Looking back, it is apparent that these 95 Theses ignited a wildfire of Christian renewal, touching scholars, humanists, priests, authorities, and common folk alike. Luther never had expected or imagined that this would or even could happen. He merely intended to provoke a scholarly dispute out of love for the truth and because he worried about the harmful spiritual consequences of the widespread sale of indulgences for the common people. What emerged, however, was the key event for the whole of Western Christianity and civilization that is being remembered as constitutive of the self-understanding and identity of Christians of all Protestant denominations from then on.

Years, even decades, before Luther's 95 Theses, there were already several other endeavors initiated and performed by bright, pious men of that time who tried to reform and change the church in keeping with the gospel of Jesus Christ. As laudable as their efforts were, they had virtually no lasting effect. Luther's contributions in 1517, however, were different, likely because now the right words, at the right time, at prepared places among prepared people, accomplished what could not have been planned or done by men but only by God. "When the set time had fully come" (Gal 4:4), God called a weak, sinful, unknown, young German monk to perform a mission impossible, and to trigger a back-to-the-biblical-roots movement, a return to "the true treasure of the church ... the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." Rather unbelievable! But it happened.

In the months and years to come following those initial events, Luther, through his profound study of the Holy Scriptures, the true Word of God, was further led to rediscover the gospel's liberating message as the center of the emerging Reformation, a message centered on justification by faith by God's grace in Christ alone. The commemoration of this quincentenary anniversary offers therefore an excellent opportunity for all churches to reflect on the ongoing relevance of the questions that triggered the Reformation and to discern its societal impact.

I wrote "commemoration of this quincentenary anniversary"—well, a good and honorable thing to do, of course. But looking at the spiritual condition of Germany's Protestant churches today, and at the state of academic theology taught in Germany, someone might be wondering if it is even possible to trace present church practice and contemporary theological academia back to the foundations of the former reformation five hundred years ago. Please excuse the bluntness of expression, but contemporary German Protestantism seems to be a very different religion than that of the Reformers. What we often find here is no longer a faith or piety or theology grounded in the gospel of the LORD Jesus Christ and the triune God of the Bible or the four (or five) "solas" of the Reformation.

In the homeland of the Reformation, of course, there will be many celebrations during this year of 2017, religious, cultured, and professionally designed events. But I am afraid the heart of the Reformation will often be missing. The liberating message centered on justification by faith by God's grace in Christ alone is diluted by concepts of "cheap grace." Today, we are not dealing with the sale of indulgences or similar abuses anymore, but the spirituality and religious character of "doing church today" is rather removed from the blueprint designed by God for a lost but loved world, revealed through his apostles and prophets in the Scriptures.

Maybe Bonhoeffer's words from *The Cost of Discipleship* can rouse us: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Among these events and challenges in 2017, there are still Bible-believing Christians, evangelicals, and confessional conservative followers of Christ who are trying to remind people of what Luther's intentions back then truly were, what he did and taught to highlight Christ, the gospel, the cross, resurrection, grace, faith, forgiveness, freedom, joy, mercy, good works of faith, judgment, and everlasting life. Approximately two million evangelical and conservative believers are among the population of 82 million living in Germany today. Among them are only a few evangelical theologians and philosophers at some smaller evangelical seminaries and schools, in many cases not accepted as equals among the theologians and scholars of the state universities, both institutionally and personally and in their published research in the field of academic theology.

We are not called to lament this. But we in Germany and in the German-speaking countries of Europe need prayer support from abroad, from you brothers and sisters in the ETS, to face the challenges of our modern and postmodern settings as a strong minority among contemporary theologians.

We do not exactly know God's plans for Germany, Europe, and certainly not for the world. But maybe the LORD still will have mercy on us, maybe already preparing a new set of events so that we encounter again his *kairos*: "When the set time had fully come," God triggers something "new," maybe an emerging reformation once again, as he did in the fall of 1517 in a small, rural German city, performed by a nobody, expected by no one at that time. We all are motivated by love for the truth and a desire to elucidate it, in prayer, in preaching, in publishing, and in action. Who knows how and when God will come and act and take our feeble efforts to do something truly great?

While our heavenly Father's plans have not yet been fulfilled, we certainly can not expect anywhere on this planet a reformation similar to the era before Luther's 95 Theses were published opposing the spiritual aberrations of that time. Since reformation is always a miracle, it could happen at any time without any forewarning. The bulletin boards would be different than they were in 1517, and the theses published or preached would be different as well. A twenty-first-century servant of reformation as a tool in God's hands might be someone completely unknown to the public. Let us have faith in Christ that *he* might perform a new reformation of the Christian churches from the top down and within academic theology before he returns. Who knows? He can do it. His will be done.

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