



LUTHER'S PROTEST

From 95 Theses to Reformation

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*For Sandy, my Katherine von Bora,
Jenny, Don, Katie, Josh,
Allison, Lucas, Connor, Madelyn, Micah, and Charlotte*

PREFACE

Some suffer from historical amnesia. The past is past. Today is today. They look forward to tomorrow, but when tomorrow comes, they cannot remember yesterday accurately. If we find history interesting at all, we organize it into dates and short quotes that help us navigate its complexities. But no history is as tidy and neat as a list of dates or a few memorable quotes make it appear. Neither is it all black and white.

Perhaps the study of church history suffers from an even more severe case of amnesia. We don't know denominational lines. They seem to get in the way of our sense that everyone believes the same thing. But they don't really. Even the scant outline of church history with dates and bullet points we may have learned in some classroom reveals a different reality. A different view begins to dawn in our reflections: the church on earth had more than one controversy over its long history. Protests and differences have led to tragic events, splits, trouble, and even armed conflict.

And so we become curious. We read about the past, and we listen to those who have read more than we have. But whenever we take on the task of reading history, we should first recognize that the writer of the history might be telling a version favorable to one side at the expense of the other. Revision of history is an Olympic event involving finger-pointing and selection of favorable facts while excluding the unfavorable. Church history is no exception, and Reformation history, in particular, perpetuates differing perspectives. Views of Luther and the Reformation diverge along the fault lines of conviction—Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Reformed—and spread even beyond to politics, economics, and philosophy, among other orientations.

This effort to add another history follows the fault line of the Lutheran perspective. However, I hope it remains objective enough not to qualify as propaganda or revision. I simply want to understand my own heritage as a Lutheran Christian and confess why I believe it to be valuable. Together with Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, I share the history of the ancient Christian church we have in common. Yet I also conclude

LUTHER'S PROTEST

that over time the church became dramatically different from the primitive church of the apostles. Some of that development has been helpful and need not be discarded. For example, the rich traditions of worship that we practice into our own age are different from the church of the apostles. But a struggle for supremacy and even an understandable struggle for uniformity contributed to an erosion of the message of the apostolic church. The teachings of the church at the time of the Reformation had assumed a size and shape unrecognizable when compared with the New Testament record. In my view the Reformation was a protest against a church that had strayed from its origins. It was no less a desire to reform it and return it to its foundation—Jesus Christ. ✱



NORTH SEA

BALTIC SEA

♦ Lutterworth

England

London ♦

ENGLISH CHANNEL

Netherlands

♦ Ghent

Aachen ♦

Belgium

Luxembourg

Metz ♦

France

Switzerland

♦ Avignon

Monaco

Spain

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

■ Wittenberg

Eisleben ♦

♦ Leipzig

♦ Muhlberg

Marburg Castle ■

■ Wartburg Castle

♦ Smalcald

♦ Mainz

♦ Coburg

Czech Republic

Worms ♦

Speyer ♦

♦ Heidelberg

♦ Nuremberg

Germany

♦ Passau

♦ Augsburg

♦ Basel

♦ Constance

Liechtenstein

Austria

Slovenia

♦ La Bicocca

♦ Pavia

Italy

♦ Bologna

ADRIATIC SEA

♦ Florence

San Marino

PAPAL STATES

♦ Rome

1300

1305–1378

Papacy in Avignon, France.

Nov 10, 1483

Luther born in Eisleben.

1492

Columbus discovers America.

London ♦

ENGLISH CHANNEL

BALTIC SEA

■ Wittenberg

1502

Wittenberg University founded.

Nov 1, 1503

Julius II becomes pope.

JUL 2, 1505

Luther in thunderstorm vows to become monk.

APR 18, 1506

Julius lays foundation for new St. Peter's.

♦ Avignon

FEB 21, 1513

Julius II dies.



ADRIATIC SEA

♦ Rome

1525

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

CHAPTER ONE

ROME, ITALY

APRIL 18, 1506



Almost nothing in history suddenly appears. The Reformation certainly did not. The causes of the Reformation stretch back centuries before Luther posted his protest on the church door in Wittenberg. The Roman papacy then was different from what it is today and different from what it was before the Great Schism in 1054—the event that separated the Eastern church from the Western church. The small apostolic church that spread through the Roman Empire grew to a large and powerful organization. Differences of opinion and teaching simmered even before the Great Schism. After the Schism, Constantinople was left as the center of the Eastern, or Orthodox, church and Rome, the Western, or Catholic, church.

According to Roman Catholic tradition, the bishop of Rome was a continuous succession of bishops who traced their origin to Peter's presence in Rome. Along with that assertion, Roman Catholics claim that the bishop of Rome always was the primary and universal head of western Christianity, even of all Christianity, including the Eastern church. Yes, a Christian bishop has existed in Rome or Avignon for centuries down to our own age. Yet differences of opinion continue to exist over the Roman pope's claim to primacy, in spite of Rome's persistent assertions.

The Rise of the Papacy

In the first centuries of the Christian church, the bishop of Rome was one of several important leaders in the church. When Constantine shifted the capitol of the Roman Empire to Constantinople, the affairs of the empire went with it. Rome remained important in the west as a cultural and religious center and even as a political center. Constantinople became important in

the East as the new seat of the empire. It would also grow to be a cultural and religious center and rival of Rome. At the time that the empire moved eastward, Rome shared its importance as a Christian center with Jerusalem, Caesarea, Alexandria, and Antioch. Early councils of the church at Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) convened in the east, and bishops from most Christian centers attended in order to decide important matters. Roman Catholic historians will naturally have a slightly different version of these events.

But dark clouds arose in the east. The storm of Islamic armies advanced from the desert to challenge Christian dominance. They conquered Alexandria (634), Jerusalem (637), Antioch (637), and Caesarea (638). The Christian light that came from these early Christian centers suddenly went dark. The Muslim advance continued across northern Africa and invaded Spain. Charles Martel stopped the Islamic armies at Tours in France (732). Islamic forces remained in Spain and also continued to challenge Christians in the east. They made their way toward Constantinople, but it stood against the Islamic armies for another 700 years.

These events had consequences. When Constantine moved his government to the East, a power vacuum plagued Europe. And then when the eastern Christian centers disappeared, Rome stood almost alone as a Christian center—alone certainly in Europe. It was quite natural for the bishop of Rome to assume leadership in the West. The rise of Christian Rome was a natural and necessary step. In many ways the presence of Roman spiritual and political power provided stability for the west. Sadly, over the next centuries, the Eastern and Western churches grew apart. In 1054 the patriarch of the Eastern church and the bishop of Rome excommunicated each other. Where there was once one Christian church with two great centers, there were now two separate churches—the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The Great Schism has remained a reality of history ever since.

At the time of the Schism, the bishop of Rome claimed universal supremacy over the entire church and asserted papal sovereignty and infallibility. But power corrupts, and the church is not immune to the principle. Good and dedicated leaders in the Western church occupied the papacy in earlier centuries, but eventually money, power, and pride corrupted the leadership of the church. The visible leader of the church ceased to be like Christ and his apostles. Instead the papacy became a wealthy political entity exercising great power. Even if one agrees with the claim that the pope can trace his origin to Peter, the pope was dramatically different from the simple fish-

erman of Galilee. The Vicar of Christ, living in luxury and extravagance, became more like Caesar than Christ. In fact, the papacy claimed that it was supreme even over kings and princes.

The Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy

As might be expected, because of the pope's temporal power and influence, the papacy was drawn into conflict with political leaders. Those leaders desired to control or to influence the papacy for their own agendas. In 1305 Clement V, a Frenchman, was elected pope. He chose not to move to Rome but to remain in France and moved his residence to Avignon. For about 70 years the papacy remained in Avignon. The popes during this time were all French and were influenced by the French crown. Rome was abandoned as the papal residence and lost its prestige. History calls this period the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy because it lasted about 70 years, the same length of time the Babylonians held the Jews in captivity in the sixth century B.C.

Yet there is another dark chapter in the history of the papacy. After 70 years, tension between those who wished the papacy to remain in French territory and those who wanted it to return to Rome resulted in another schism. Beginning in 1378 and lasting for 40 more years, the church had two popes. One was in Avignon supported by the French and the other in Rome supported by the city-states of Italy, England, and others.

The scandal of two popes caused sincere and devout Christians to seek a solution. Many protested. Eventually these Christians concluded that only a council of the church could provide a solution. Three church councils were called to reform the church and heal the breach—the councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basel. Near the end of the schism, a third pope was the result of their efforts to solve the division. Eventually the councils succeeded. At the Council of Constance in 1417, Martin V was finally elected as pope to heal the schism. One of the rival popes resigned, and successors of the other faded away into history. The schism had been healed.

It was a sad chapter in the history of the Western church. Not only was there a struggle for dominance by rival popes, but other abuses also arose. The morals of the church officials and even many of the popes became notorious. The church that was centered in Avignon was extravagant, greedy, and corrupt. Financially, the Avignon papal court sought revenue in new ways that some considered excessive and oppressive. Selling church offices and indulgences were two of the strategies for raising the necessary funds to feed the appetites of Avignon. Sadly, these abuses did not disappear once the schism was healed. They continued even after the papacy was restored to Rome.

The second reform council, the Council of Constance (1414–1418), was the most important of the three councils for more reasons than the healing of the schism. Together with the councils of Pisa and Basel, it asserted power over the papacy. These councils claimed that the pope was subject to a council of the church and that the council of assembled Christians was superior to the pope and may even depose a pope for cause—revolutionary thoughts at the time. The question of whether popes could be wrong, and whether even councils could be wrong, became a part of the Reformation protest 100 years later when Luther posted his *95 Theses* and defended them against Roman papal claims.

The three reform councils were not only charged with healing the schism but also with instituting reforms to curb the other abuses of the hierarchy and papacy. The Council of Constance decided to postpone reform until the election of a new pope. Once that happened, the issue of reforms dropped down to unfinished business and received little official attention. It became old business at Basel with the same result. Finally, in spite of efforts to institute changes, the councils were not effective in curbing the financial or moral excesses of the papacy and the Roman curia.

Criticism and Protests

Already before the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy, a resident of Florence raised his pen to write his protest in Italian, not Latin. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) wrote *The Divine Comedy*, and within its Italian verses he included his own protest of the greed of the papacy. The *Comedy* tells the story of Dante's travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven. Dante is pictured as a visitor to hell and purgatory, guided by Virgil. Since Virgil was not a Christian, he could not serve as his guide in heaven. But as they traveled through hell, Dante and Virgil met former popes. These popes suffered hell for "buying and selling holy office." Hell also awaited the pope who was living in Dante's time. Dante's verses lament, "This avarice of yours grieves all the world, tramples the virtuous, and exalts the evil" (*Inferno* XIX, 98,99). Dante had been expelled from Florence and held a grudge against the pope, so one might excuse his comments as personal vendetta. Yet his condemnation of the papacy expressed the sentiments of his age.

Dante identified another of the problems that needed correction. In *Purgatory*, Dante depicts Marco, a Lombard who is paying for his faults. Marco comments on the papacy's political power. He says, "Tell the world this: The church of Rome, which fused two powers into one, has sunk in muck, defiling both herself and her true role" (XVI, 127-129). The two powers

he identifies are the political power of the sword and the spiritual power of the cross.

In England, Chaucer (1340–1400) criticized the greed and hypocrisy of the clergy. The pardoner of the *Canterbury Tales* says boldly and without remorse, “My aim is all for gain and not at all for correction of sin.” At the end of his tale, the pardoner pitches forgiveness, “My holy pardon will cure you all, provided that you offer nobles and others sterling coin, or else silver rings, brooches, spoons. . . . See, I enter your name here in my roll; you shall enter into heaven’s bliss; I absolve you by my high power, you that will make offerings . . .” The pardoner’s practice reminds anyone familiar with the Reformation of the sale of indulgences by John Tetzel in Germany.

Pope Julius II

After the Council of Constance resolved the schism by electing Pope Martin V, the issue of papal authority was not completely settled. Even the issue of who was the legitimate pope did not disappear. Reform was still on many agendas.

Martin V reluctantly called a council to address the needed reforms. The third council was to meet at Basel, but it did not convene until the year of Martin’s death (1431). As feared by the pope, the Council of Basel asserted its authority over the papacy, requiring the pope to take an oath acknowledging the rights of the council, but Martin’s successor, Eugene IV, tried to dissolve it and convene another rival council. That council excommunicated the prelates assembled at Basel. But the original Basel council responded by electing a rival pope, Felix V, who took the oath required by the council. He eventually resigned. The Council of Basel accomplished no significant reforms and adjourned in 1439. But Eugene sidestepped the issue of papal supremacy by his maneuvers and the failure of the Council of Basel.

From this point onward the popes continued to assert the superiority of the papacy over the councils. They chose to ignore the decrees of the reform councils, denounce them as heretical, or annul them. Several succeeding popes initiated reforms, but the needed reforms never came in sufficient strength. The abuses and corruption remained.

The history that played out over the next 100 years is an ongoing story of strong personalities, conflict, and intrigue filled with moral failings at the highest levels of the church, military alliances, and counter alliances. The rise of the Borgia family and Alexander VI (1492–1503) represent a stain on the papacy, a reality admitted by most even today. The struggle for dominance

and the corruption left in its wake represent a disturbing chapter. Perhaps because of the corruption, many wanted reform even more desperately.

Julius II became pope after the shortest conclave in history—only a few hours—on October 31, 1503. In protest for the corrupt papacy of Alexander VI and refused to enter them. Julius was an energetic, courageous leader whose focus was on reestablishing the political power of the papal states and on adding to the grandeur of Rome. He has been called the Warrior Pope, because he wore armor as he led papal armies against whatever enemy opposed his desire to consolidate the territory of the papal states. He is also called “terrible” because of his fierce determination, exacting nature, and violent temper.

When the papacy returned to Rome from Avignon, the city needed restoration. Buildings had deteriorated after the long history of neglect. So in spite of the corruption, the popes funded many improvements to Rome's churches, palaces, bridges, and other public buildings. The old St. Peter's Basilica built by Constantine was one of those churches in drastic need of repair. Rome had no church building to rival St. Mark's in Venice or St. Sophia in Constantinople. A few of the earlier popes had considered the renovation of Constantine's church in Rome. Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455) pulled down part of the ancient basilica and stored 2,522 cartloads of marble from the Coliseum for future construction.

However, it was up to Julius to take the dramatic step of removing the old St. Peter's Basilica completely and planning for a new one. On April 18, 1506, he laid the foundation stone for a new St. Peter's where the 1,000-year-old basilica of Constantine had once stood. What would rise from this event would be the largest and perhaps the most impressive church in the Christian world. That was the vision of Julius, but the rebuilding of St. Peter's would not be finished in his lifetime. It was finally consecrated on November 18, 1626, at enormous costs, spread out over those 120 years. In the process, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Bernini were among those who labored to make it what we see today. Both Raphael's work in the Vatican and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling trace their origin back to Julius.

But another series of events would arise from the decision to rebuild St. Peter's—the Reformation. Julius wanted St. Peter's to be the centerpiece of a new Rome. Of course, the massive building project required money. Julius asked for large contributions from European kings and instituted the sale of indulgences to pay for the building project. The decision to issue these indulgences was not difficult, nor was it an unusual strategy for raising

money; indulgences had a long history for the papacy. They had been used already during the Crusades to encourage soldiers to fight against the Muslims and to raise money for their campaigns. St Peter's rose with the help of the money raised from the indulgences Julius authorized. Leo X, the successor of Julius, renewed the indulgences, and the appeal for funds spread to Germany, creating the spark for Luther's protest.

One more interesting series of events bring together Julius II, indulgences, and Frederick the Wise of Saxony. Elector Ernst of Saxony, Frederick's father, died as a result of a hunting accident in 1486, making Frederick the new elector. In these early days Frederick became deeply involved in imperial politics and for a time served as an imperial governor under Emperor Maximilian. But he left Maximilian and turned his attention to his home in Saxony. He founded the University of Wittenberg in 1502 and included the Castle Church (All Saints) in his building plans in Saxony. Frederick spent more than a little effort on the collection of an impressive array of relics. In 1507 Julius II appealed to the imperial estates to bequeath their relics to Frederick. Some of the relics were always on display. All of Frederick's 5,005 relics were on display on the Monday after Misericordias Domini Sunday—two weeks after Easter. Those who came received indulgences for their pilgrimage. On April 8, 1510, Julius issued two papal bulls for All Saints Church that would even increase the indulgences pilgrims could acquire by coming to Wittenberg to view the relics (Wellman 130-1). ✨

1000

NORTH
SEA

BALTIC
SEA

1184

Peter Waldo excommunicated.

DEC 31, 1384

John Wycliffe dies.

JUL 6, 1415

Jan Hus burned at the stake,
executed for heresy by the
Council of Constance.



■ Wittenberg

MAY 23, 1498

Savonarola executed in Florence.

1512

Michelangelo
finishes Sistine
Chapel ceiling.

◆ Basel

◆ Constance

MAR 1, 1516

Erasmus publishes
Greek New Testament.
Humanist scholar,
supported Reformation
at first.



◆ Florence

ADRIATIC
SEA

1524

Erasmus publishes *On Free Will*.

◆ Rome

1525

MEDITERRANEAN
SEA

◆ Lutterworth

◆ London

ENGLISH
CHANNEL