



What Caused the Reformation? A Very Brief History.

October 31, 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the spark of a religious movement that swept over Renaissance Europe, with an impact that would echo around the world. The Protestant Reformation proclaimed the supremacy of God's Word in all matters secular or sacred and challenged the Church of the day to be more biblical in its teaching and practices. The Reformation remains imprinted in our understanding of the Christian faith today. But what sparked this great transformative movement?

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, an obscure priest and scholar, famously nailed [95 theses](#) to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther's actions were not unusual for his day; scholars who wished to debate an idea commonly posted their challenges to the doors of churches. Luther's theses, however, threw down the gauntlet at the feet of the Roman Catholic Church itself, calling out Church leaders for promoting a widespread practice of selling so-called *indulgences*, a kind of certificate for forgiveness of sins.

A Church in Need of Reform

Outwardly the Roman Catholic Church of 1517 seemed healthy and not vulnerable to upheaval. Ordinary Europeans were generally devout, interested in spiritual matters, and conscientious of the states of their souls. But on the eve of the Reformation, very few full copies of the Bible existed in Europe. Most were in Latin and out of the reach of common people. And perhaps because of this, the impact of God's Word had waned in the everyday life of many, even in the lives of those in positions

of leadership. All across Europe, both inside and outside the Church, a clamor arose for reform. The people's complaints were both spiritual and material. Many regarded Church leaders as greedy and corrupt. Indeed, simony—parish priesthoods sold to the highest bidder—and nepotism caused significant problems in the Church and among parishioners. Another common problem was pluralism—one clergyman might hold several positions in the Church, in order to collect their “livings,” or salaries, but be unable to meet all the responsibilities of each office. In fact, the Roman Church's response to the Protestant reform movement, the [Catholic Reformation, or Revival](#), which began around 1545, eventually confronted most of these issues. But in 1517, it was the overwhelming abuse of indulgences that cast the match upon the kindling of reform.

The Problem of Indulgences

Martin Luther's *95 Theses* confronted this practice of selling indulgences. An [indulgence](#) was a grant of remission from the pope for temporal punishment in purgatory for sins not fully absolved through absolution. An indulgence was said to borrow from the treasury of good works stored up by righteous Christians in order to reduce the time a soul would languish in purgatory before ascending into heaven. In exchange for a financial gift, one might obtain an indulgence by visiting a church or special location, or by touching a relic. Ostensibly only effective for the truly contrite, indulgences quickly became seen as a substitute for confession and penance, a pardon in exchange for payment. Kinsfolk sought them on behalf of the souls of loved ones in hopes of mitigating their purgatorial imprisonment. Cynics purchased indulgences in advance of committing willful sins.

Selling indulgences became big business. (Historian Mark Kishlansky points out that indulgences were among the first items printed on the famous Gutenberg press.) Pope Leo X launched a campaign to raise funds to build St. Peter's Basilica and authorized the giving of indulgences to those who gave a gift to the Church. Local bishops and princes competed for sales, keeping collections of relics (a twig from Moses' bush, a straw from the manger, and the like) that supposedly carried with them powerful indulgences that reduced a sentence to purgatory by hundreds of thousands of years. Many clergymen, like Luther, worried that the Church substituted a false hope that forgiveness could be purchased. Alarmed that common Christians found indulgences increasingly attractive, Luther wrote his *95 Theses* to provoke theological debate on the matter.

Martin Luther and the Spark of Reformation

For many years, Martin Luther had struggled with the assurance of his own salvation, “I thought that I had to perform good works till at last through them Jesus would become a friend and gracious to me.” Although he had not yet fully worked out all the [theology](#) for which he would soon become famous, his understanding of scripture rebelled against the idea of forgiveness by exchange. Theologian [Justin Holcomb](#) points out that Luther's concern was primarily pastoral. His *95 Theses* did not at first entirely debunk the concept of indulgences, as Luther would later do, but he warned, “Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to other good works of love” (#41). Buying a piece of paper that made a claim on a theoretical bank of good works could not be better than a good work itself. Luther's challenges touched off a firestorm, which Holcomb sums up nicely:

"Luther's Ninety-Five Theses hit a nerve in the depths of the authority structure of the medieval

church. Luther was calling the pope and those in power to repent—*on no authority but the convictions he'd gained from Scripture*—and urged the leaders of the indulgences movement to direct their gaze to Christ, the only one able to pay the penalty due for sin." (Italics are mine.)

Luther defended his theses in open debate and would refuse the Church's order to recant his views. What followed was a great renewal of Christianity, albeit a painful and messy one: whole swathes of Christendom broke from the Roman hierarchy; Protestant movements arose, flourished, and splintered; counter-reformations erupted within the Catholic church, and many princes seized the opportunity to break with the Holy Roman Empire, giving political conflicts a veneer of religiosity. But through it all, the abiding fruit of the Reformation, ignited by Luther's challenge of indulgences, was a renewed focus on the primacy of God's Word, the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice—that by faith, not works—and the sufficiency of grace for salvation. All to the glory of God alone. Of the Reformation he initiated, Martin Luther would simply say, "the Word has done and achieved everything."

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