

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther wrote to his bishop, protesting the sale of indulgences. (*We'll talk more about the sale of indulgences in a minute.*)

But he enclosed in his letter to his bishop, a copy of his "*Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*", which came to be known as the *Ninety-Five Theses*.

He sent that letter to his bishop 500 years ago, to the day, this coming Tuesday.

I know that was a really long time ago and feels like ancient history.

I know that we identify as UCC and, before that, Congregationalists, and we aren't Lutheran, so we might feel like the Protestant Reformation has precious little to do with our lives today.

But it would be foolish for us to think that.

We are going to take a mental stroll through the timeline of recent Christian history, and you'll see why it's unwise to write off Luther and the other Protestant Reformers.

Without Luther, there would be no Protestantism,

which means there would have been no Anglicanism in England,

which means there would have been no Anglican Pilgrims to leave England and come to the United States,

and there would have been no Massachusetts Bay Pilgrims,
which means there would have been no Congregationalists,
which means there would be no United Church of Christ,
which means there would be no United Church of Christ,
Congregational, in Burlington, Massachusetts.

So, you can see that we are not even tangentially, but directly
connected to the courageous actions that Martin Luther took, back
in 1517, when he was an unknown professor and Augustinian
friar, living in the podunk town of Wittenberg, Germany.

So, what did he do that was so revolutionary?

Well, he made it possible for people to be Christian outside of the
Catholic faith.

If he hadn't done what he did, we would presumably all still be
Roman Catholic (or Orthodox), as those would be the only
manifestations of Christianity in existence.

But, because Luther essentially defected from the Catholic
church, that's why we have the thousands of Protestant
denominations that exist today.

Personally, I think it's important for people to have choices, so I
like the fact that people can choose the expression of Christianity
that suits them the best.

But, back to Luther, his main grievance against the Catholic
church was that he did not like the sale of indulgences.

The medieval Catholic Church sold indulgences to the people, meaning that they could give money to the church either to be absolved of prior sins or to be released from purgatory after they died.

Sort of like a life-after-death insurance policy.

I do want to emphasize that the Catholic Church no longer supports this practice.

Forty of Luther's ninety-five theses spoke about indulgences, something which he clearly felt very strongly about.

One other thing, which Luther challenged, was the notion of Sacerdotalism.

Sacerdotalism means that in order for people to be absolved of their sins, they have to confess to a priest because they are the only ones who can communicate directly with God.

It's the belief that priests are on a higher plane and can communicate with God, while others can't.

Luther didn't agree with this.

He believed in the priesthood of all believers, which meant that anyone could communicate directly with God through prayer, including being forgiven for their sins.

At the time when he wrote these ninety-five theses and sent them to his bishop, he wasn't trying to defect from the Catholic church or start a new faith.

He was just questioning the church's practices, presumably because he wanted them to change.

However, the Church didn't take kindly to his criticisms and they put him through the ringer.

Luther had to defend himself in Rome during a 3-day interrogation.

Then, during another round of questioning in a public forum, he asserted that anyone could interpret scripture, not just the Pope alone.

You can imagine how well this went over.

Finally, Pope Leo X told Luther that he had to recant 41 sentences from his writings or he'd be excommunicated.

Here's what Luther said about recanting his statements,

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone,

since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves),

I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."

So, he refused to recant anything he said and he was excommunicated in 1521.

Additionally, the distribution of Luther's writings was banned.

While he had some people who supported him, Luther's actions got him shunned from his entire community.

Shortly after this, the Emperor of Rome declared Luther an outlaw, banned his literature, and required his arrest for being a heretic.

He also made it a crime for anyone in Germany to give Luther food or shelter, because they would've been aiding and abetting a criminal.

Finally, he said it was permissible for anyone to kill Luther without any legal consequences.

Yes, this all happened 500 years ago, but it's important that we remember the courageous risks he took, which had an indelible impact on our Christian history and our existence as Christians today.

Here are a few more things that we owe to Rev. Luther...

It's because of him that you're able to have a female pastor who is allowed to get married and have a family.

And it's because of him that we sing hymns in worship today.

And it's because of Luther that we don't have to do anything during worship to be absolved of our guilt and reconciled to God.

Later in life, when he was organizing a new church, he came up with a new liturgy for the worship service.

His worship service emphasized praising God, and he made sure that the Word and the sacraments pointed the believer towards the Gospel, towards God's free gift of forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of my favorite theologians, Dr. David Lose, reminds us that the whole reformation is about freedom.

"...The whole darn Reformation-thing was intended to tell us that, in the end,

we don't need to do anything, earn anything, say anything,

accomplish anything, or buy anything to earn God's love.

That we already have it, and that most of the Church's problems – and, indeed, the world's problems –

start when we forget we already have love and worth and dignity as a gift from God and we try to earn it or take it from someone else." (...in the Meantime. www.Davidlose.net, Oct. 18, 2015.)

Luther gave us the freedom to question our faith and its leaders.

One of the slogans of the reformation is *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, which means that the church must always be reformed.

We must not think of the Reformation in the past tense, something that happened way back then, that's over and done with.

The spirit of the reformation, challenging church doctrine, challenging religious teachings, challenging religious leaders, challenging the way in which we live as Christians at any point in time, must be something that is central to our faith at all times.

As long as the church is run by humans, it needs to be subject to scrutiny by all of us.

The unfortunate truth is that humans are prone to greed and abuse of power, and so our faith is always susceptible such corruption.

It's also worth mentioning that any faith tradition, which is so fragile, that it can't stand up to scrutiny,

with religious leaders who are so authoritarian that they discourage criticism,

is no faith tradition worth being a part of.

Because it's through critique that we learn deeper truths about ourselves, our sacred scriptures, and our religious forbearers.

On a more practical note, we must be in a persistent state of re-forming, because the world is constantly changing.

Our culture, our lifestyles, our scientific knowledge of the world around us, all of this moves at such a rapid pace that we have to have the freedom to reinterpret the scriptures and the Gospel message in light of the current time that we live in.

John Robinson, on the Mayflower, said, *“I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”*

We can't discover that truth and that light if we aren't able to interrogate the scriptures and our understanding of what it means to be Christian.

Jesus lived at one point in human history, but he didn't live only for his contemporaries.

He lived for all of us, which means that we must be open to new revelations of how we can follow Jesus in our world, today, in 2017, 500 years after that radical reformer wrote his heretical ninety-five theses.

Happy reformation anniversary, may we never stop reforming. Amen.