



October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World

By Martin E. Marty



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In this commemorative year, the Reformation is the subject of movies such as the American Public Television series *The Reformation: This Changed Everything*, museum exhibits and events sponsored by the *Evangelical Lutheran Church of America*, the Luther 500 Festival, Luther Country and many other churches and organizations.

Martin Marty answers the question: Why is the Reformation relevant today?

Rather than a historical narrative of Reformation events, he explains in this accessible book the issues that led to Luther's posting of the 95 Theses, their implications for the Church and world . . . and most importantly, how this impacts us devotionally as Christians of any denomination. As one of the world's preeminent Luther scholars, Martin Marty also explores the concept of repentance as a central theme of the Theses. In a foreword, James Martin, SJ, offers context and a shared vision.

This year began with the joint ecumenical commemoration in Lund, Sweden, on October 31, 2016, attended by Pope Francis and members of the Lutheran World Federation and other Christian churches. Martin Marty explains how this event, and indeed all ecumenical dialogue that has happened over the past few hundred years and will happen in this coming year, represents a change of heart.



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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #71747 in Books
- Published on: 2016-05-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.50" h x .38" w x 5.00" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 128 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

This book has a lot packed in it for such a short volume (90 pages and then an appendix of Luther's 95 Thesis), and I found it very informative and thought provoking, especially Marty's beautiful examination of what repentance really means. Rather than being for or against Luther, as the Reformation debate often dwells upon, Martin Marty traces Luther's influence on the church, as well as history at large, and shows where Catholics and Lutherans have sought unity in more recent times. He closes with thoughts on how this unity can be developed further. Both Catholics, Lutherans, and all the denominations in between will learn something from this little book and be convicted towards the kind of whole-life-encompassing, inside-out repentance that Luther advocated as it relates to being one bride of Christ. Well-researched and graceful, Marty has a great perspective on a potentially explosive topic. —**Amanda Rogozinski**

The date that entitles this brief quincennial prologue may not be immediately recognizable, but it is momentous. On it, Martin Luther posted 95 theses about Christian faith on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Saxony, and launched the Protestant Reformation. While directly prompted by the selling of indulgences, whereby the buyer reduced suffering for sins, the document was fundamentally about salvation through Christ. Luther asserted that salvation was effected by God's grace alone, approached by faith alone. Faith was manifested by repentance: "the whole life of believers should be penitence," says the first thesis. Marty, the dean of American Lutheran church historians, argues that, eventually, Luther's stance, from the beginning acknowledged by the Catholic Church as essentially correct (disagreement's in the details), became the means of reunifying Christianity through ecumenism, a movement that became explicit and official with the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65.

This volume is small but weighty and a solid addition for all modern Christianity collections. — **Ray Olson, Booklist**

On that date [October 31, 1517], Martin Luther, angry and disappointed with the Roman Catholic Church, nailed on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, 95 theses calling for a Reformation.

This momentous moment in Christian history is captured and assessed by Martin E. Marty, the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, where he taught for 35 years. His central point is that Luther's bold act of protest was a call for repentance or a change of heart within the Catholic Church, which at the time was overrun with corruption due to the selling of indulgences. Instead, Luther emphasized justification by faith and an acceptance of the grace of God.

Other interesting topics covered in the book are the present day existence of some 40,000 Christian denominations (part of Luther's legacy), the continuing dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, and their sincere efforts to come together in common prayer and joint action. —**Living Lutheran, June 2016**

Ordained Lutheran minister and historian Martin E. Marty presents *October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the*

Day that Changed the World, a book released especially to commemorate the fateful day when Martin Luther rebelled against the excesses of the Catholic church, proposed ninety-five theses to bring humans closer to God, and initiated the Protestant Reformation, which would create a new branch of Christianity. Martin Luther's 95 Theses are included in this erudite and thoughtful look back at a turbulent time, when Martin Luther's words about the need for "repentance" were a clarion call. Thoroughly accessible to readers of all backgrounds, *October 31, 1517* is a welcome addition to church library collections. —**Andrea Kay, Midwest Book Review**

Marty begins by observing that some of the best books, some of the classic smaller books are about "one thing." Examples are *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Little Women*, and even possibly Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*! No matter the number of various themes woven into the narrative, there is in these "good ones" one integrating theme. And that precisely, Marty informs us, is the design of this little book: it is about one thing. That one thing he announces at the outset is "repentance." At this point, before reading further, veteran Lutherans might cock their heads and wonder why this entry into the observance of the coming 500th anniversary of the Reformation would choose repentance instead of "grace" or "faith," not to mention "justification." Well, of course, things do get around to justification by grace through faith without much delay. Nonetheless, the integrating focus remains repentance.

Marty takes his clue from the first of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance." Marty and I talked about his view of the significance and paramount importance of this first thesis. He related that he has always been almost obsessed with the first thesis. In his judgement, if we understand it correctly, "it says it all." To appreciate the force of this thesis, he says we need to get away from the common images of repentance as merely gloomy and penitential.

This book is a little book with a big message: a message of repentance as change of heart, the message of 1517 that Marty is able to show has manifold implications for church and world. It is worthy of careful attention in the commemorations to come. Because of its size and accessibility to a broad readership, this book is an excellent resource for use in congregations as well as classrooms. It can introduce readers to the heartbeat of the Reformation. An extra benefit is the inclusion of the full text of the Ninety-Five Theses. Readers who may never have had an occasion to read them will now have them ready at hand as they read about their world-changing significance.

—**James M. Childs, Jr.** is Joseph A. Sittler Professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Book Review Editor of the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, angry and disappointed with the corruption of the wealthy Catholic church, nailed on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, 95 theses calling for a Reformation. This momentous moment in Christian history is captured and assessed by Martin E. Marty, the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, where he taught for 35 years. The author of more than 60 books, he has participated in Christian ecumenical programs and is, according to Catholic theologian James Martin in the foreword, "a peerless scholar and superb writer."

The central point of Luther's bold act of protest was a call for repentance or a change of heart within the Catholic Church which at the time was overrun with corruption due to the selling of indulgences. Instead, Luther emphasized justification by faith and an acceptance of the grace of God.

Marty mentions that in 1983, the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, there was talk that more books in the

Western world had been written about this reformer than anyone else except Abraham Lincoln and Napoleon. Other interesting topics covered in the book are the present day existence of some 40,000 Christian denominations (part of Luther's legacy), the continuing dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, and their sincere efforts to come together in common prayer and joint action. —**Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, Spirituality & Practice, Resources for Spiritual Journeys**

Review

"Martin Marty is the most widely respected historian of Christianity in the United States today. In this little book he with clarity, compassion, and a good dose of common sense shows how Luther's story is meaningful today." —**Rev. John O'Malley, S.J.**, University Professor, Georgetown University

"Martin Marty's attention to October 31, 1517, the day that Martin Luther promulgated his 95 Theses, provides valuable insights for the past, the present, and the future--why Luther's articulation of "repentance" meant so much then, why his commitment to "justification" has now built a bridge for Catholics and Lutherans to work with each other, and why this great event of 500 years ago might herald a hopeful future for Christian believers and all others. There is an awful lot packed readably into this one small book." —**Mark Noll**, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame

"I would not dream of preparing my mind and heart for the celebration of Luther's role in the Reformation without finding out what Martin Marty has to say on the subject. And he says it here in this wonderful little book. The gifted historian that he is, Marty gives us much solid information. But he also writes eloquently about how best to prepare our souls for the kind of commemoration that also includes some prayers of repentance." —**Richard Mouw**

"This pithy book offers valuable insight on how Luther's 95 theses have had a profound influence on the ecumenical movement, and can help Christians today understand what it means to be a member of a truly 'catholic' church." —**Kathleen Norris**

About the Author

Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, where he taught for 35 years. An ordained Lutheran minister since 1952 and an historian, he has written on Christian history, Reformation era topics - including a biography of Martin Luther, American religion, and world religions in recent times. The author of over sixty books, he is a National Book Award winner and was honored with the National Medal of Humanities. His passion is to stress how Christianity relates both to public life and to the classic personal themes of faith and hope and love. He has participated in Christian ecumenical programs and reported on the Second Vatican Council and other events involving Catholics and Protestants.

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