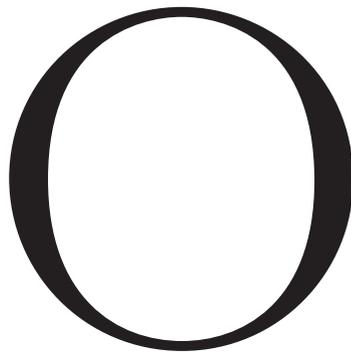


# THE REFORMATION AT FIVE HUNDRED

*Thomas Albert Howard and Mark A. Noll outline the changing ways we remember the Reformation.*



On October 25, many churches will once again observe “Reformation Sunday,” commemorating the day in 1517 when Martin Luther is said to have nailed his Ninety-Five Theses concerning theological reform on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg, Saxony. This event continues to be regarded as the birth of Protestantism. We now stand just three years out from the five-hundredth anniversary, which will be marked worldwide in 2017. Churches, institutions, and individuals shaped by what began so many centuries ago face a daunting question: How in fact ought one to commemorate the Reformation five hundred years after the fact?

---

*Thomas Albert Howard* is professor of history and director of the Center for Faith and Inquiry at Gordon College. *Mark A. Noll* is the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame.

It's not an easy question to answer. Protestantism, it should be remembered, has not only been credited for restoring Christian truth (or, on the other hand, blamed for church divisions) but has been invoked as the cause of modern liberalism, capitalism, religious wars, tolerance, democracy, individualism, subjectivism, nationalism, pluralism, freedom of conscience, modern science, secularism, and so much else. How, in fact, does one remember a historical juggernaut of such immense influence and so many contested interpretations—one that, to quote one nineteenth-century historian, “impelled the human mind to new courses”?

As one might expect, Germany, the cradle of the Reformation, has led the way. In the early 2000s, government officials, scholars, and representatives of the German Evangelical Church (EKD) came together to launch “Luther 2017: 500 Years of Reformation,” an ambitious ten-year project, which began in 2008 (Luther first arrived in Wittenberg in 1508) and will culminate in 2017, the year of the famous Ninety-Five Theses. One year was not enough to grapple with the impact of the Reformation on history, the organizers decided, and so a “Luther Decade” was initiated. Each year leading up to the anniversary has a separate theme, marking some significant aspect of the Reformation, and in 2017, a dizzying array of conferences, concerts, and symposia will take place.

Following closely on the heels of Luther Decade was Refo500, a multiyear commemorative, networking project, seated in the Netherlands. With over a hundred partners worldwide, Refo500 is self-consciously global in its scope and operates in a more scholarly idiom than “Luther Decade.” It describes its mission as helping people “make a connection between items from the time of the Reformation and our time, between then and now, between people and Reformation history.” Refo500, too, has grand plans for 2017.

The Reformation, as everyone knows, tore Western Christianity in two. It is not surprising, therefore, that in our age, after the Ecumenical Movement and the Second Vatican Council, commemorative efforts aimed at 2017 should focus on questions of Christian unity. Exactly what such a focus will mean depends on a host of institutional, denominational, and geographical factors, but pride of place goes to the joint project of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in 2013, titled “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.” Drawing

inspiration from their history-making *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of the Justification* (1999), these two imposing church bodies regard 2017 as an opportunity to deplore past divisions, engage in self-criticism for opportunities lost, and strive for greater unity in the future. The 2013 document does not mince words: “In 2017, we must confess openly that we have been guilty before Christ of damaging the unity of the church.”

Exactly what will take place in 2017, and in what spirit, remains to be seen. But to put this milestone in broader context, it is instructive to consult the past, for 2017 will mark not only the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation but the four-hundredth anniversary of attempts to commemorate it. The history of these commemorations is a curious one; each, in fact, reveals as much about the era of the commemoration as it does about the actual events of the sixteenth century.

Today, practically all educated Westerners have some vague image of a German monk defiantly banging ninety-five theses to a door and thereby, unwittingly, creating a portal from the medieval to the modern world. The Ninety-Five Theses, however, played virtually no role in early Protestant historical consciousness. At first, territories in the Holy Roman Empire that had sided with the Protestant cause commemorated annually either the date their individual princes adopted Protestantism or (and in some cases along with) the birth or death dates of Luther. In the sixteenth century, in fact, the only known written mention of the Wittenberg Castle church door as the site of the iconic posting (in fact, probably done by a student, not Luther himself) came in 1546 in a brief vita of the reformer by Philip Melancthon and attached to the first collected edition of Luther's writings.

Interestingly, it was Calvinists, not Lutherans, who in 1617 first proposed a centennial marking Luther's attack on indulgences. Alarmed by an increasingly assertive Tridentine Catholic Church and lacking legal status in the Holy Roman Empire, early in that year church and royal officials in the Reformed German Palatinate proclaimed that in October they would hold a centenary “jubilee,” to remember how “the eternal, all-powerful God has looked upon us graciously and delivered us from the horrible darkness of the papacy.” The ruler of the Palatinate, Friedrich V, urged all Protestants (by which he meant Lutherans and the Reformed) to put divisions aside and offer thanksgiving between October 31 and November 2 for the recovery of “the bright light of the Gospel.”

Lutheran theologians in Saxony and elsewhere largely demurred. Instead, they saw the occasion as a chance to show the Reformed upstarts who really owned the memory of the Reformation. On April 22, 1617, Wittenberg's theological faculty wrote to the elector of Saxony, requesting that "the first Luther jubilee" be "celebrated with festive and heartfelt worship." The elector, supported by the relevant church authorities, eagerly approved. Soon an edict went out, calling on Saxony and all "pure" (read: not Calvinist) Protestant lands to observe the upcoming milestone with festivities. Wittenberg's theologians, it was made known, stood ready to supply appropriate scriptural texts and directives for homilies.

Protestants of both confessions latched on to "jubilee" as the word of choice for the occasion. Derived from the Hebrew term for a ram's horn, the word goes back to the book of Leviticus, which prescribed for the Israelites a jubilee year every fifty years. The term had been put to churchly use in 1300 when Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed that year as the first Catholic jubilee—a special year of penance, pilgrimage, and almsgiving. (The proclamation is nicely captured in a fresco by Giotto inside the Basilica of St. John Lateran.) Boniface stipulated that these jubilees were to take place every hundred years. Later, following biblical example, this was reduced to fifty years; in 1470, it was reduced to twenty-five.

In 1617, therefore, the next Catholic jubilee was not scheduled until 1625. Scandalized by the Protestant adoption of the term "jubilee," Pope Paul V decided to proclaim that the remainder of 1617 be considered an extraordinary year of Catholic jubilee. In short, 1617 was not just a Protestant commemoration but a year of dueling jubilees—and not only between Protestants and Catholics but also between Lutherans and Calvinists. Anglicans and Anabaptists? They had no stake in the matter, as their identities were tied to other sixteenth-century events. Moreover, the Calvinists, once they gained legal recognition at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, slackened in their desire to commemorate events in Lutheran Wittenberg. When 1717 came around, the jubilee was more a strictly confessional Lutheran affair than in 1617.

**T**he three-hundredth anniversary, in 1817, was the game changer. Shortly before, in 1806, Napoleon had dissolved the Holy Roman Empire, and the influence of the American and French revolutions was in ascendance. During the preceding century, the congeries of movements and ideas we call the Enlightenment had effected a steady mutation in how Europeans remembered the Reformation. For

philosophes and enlightened Protestants alike, the Reformation had become less an act of religious recovery than a catalyst toward the path of bourgeois liberties and civilizational progress. Now, Roman Catholicism was less a false church (though perhaps that too) than a historical impediment to progress, a cauldron of ignorance and superstition that vexed and oppressed the human spirit. The early stirrings of nationalism, not least in German lands, were also ominously apparent both before and during the 1817 commemorations.

Themes of liberty and progress in particular peppered the homilies and orations from 1817. As dean of the University of Berlin's theological faculty, Friedrich Schleiermacher gave an address on November 3, 1817, in which he praised the Reformation for introducing the scholarly spirit into theology, without which it would slip back into Catholic dogmatism. He also sympathized with the political aspirations of the students and ex-soldiers who had recently met for a political rally at the Wartburg castle in opposition to Napoleon—an early symptom of what was to become pan-German nationalism.

K. H. L. Pölitz of the University of Leipzig captured a broadly felt sentiment in the title of his address from October 30, 1817: "The similarity between the fight for civic and political freedom in our age and the fight for religious and ecclesiastical freedom in the age of the Reformation." The biblical scholar Wilhelm de Wette went further still, contending that the Reformation contained the seeds of practically every sort of modern freedom. "The spirit of Protestantism," de Wette argued, "necessarily brings the spirit of freedom and the independence of the people; Protestant freedom leads necessarily to political freedom."

**I**t is perhaps fitting that only in 1817 did the image of the Ninety-Five Theses being posted on the Castle church door in Wittenberg go viral, as we might say today. The image had several variations. Often the artist depicted a student proxy posting the theses while Luther and other scholars in the foreground engaged in theological discussion. But sometimes Luther himself was portrayed as posting the theses. This image appeared for the first time in 1817 in a cycle of images for Luther's life created by the artist Georg Paul Buchner. Alongside images of the reformer burning his bull of excommunication and then of defying Charles V at Worms in 1521, the image of the Ninety-Five Theses formed part of a kind of mental tryptic for the post-Enlightenment liberal spirit of the times.

To be sure, older patterns of theological confession-alism had not disappeared in 1817. Some churchmen

protested against liberal and nationalist themes in the commemorations. But that centenary stands apart from both 1617 and 1717. A narrative of general human emancipation—often combined with nationalist and liberal-bourgeois impulses—supplanted, in part or in whole, the confessional assertion of a direct correspondence between Lutheran teachings and the universal truths of Christianity. Often defining itself against Roman “superstition” and “tyranny,” the emancipatory vision of the tercentenary played no small role in quickening what Herbert Butterfield later called “the Whig interpretation of history,” a pervasive nineteenth-century interpretation of the Reformation that posited a causal link between sixteenth-century reforms and modern liberalism. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel apotheosized this sentiment: “The form of the [modern] World Spirit is the principle of the North, and, from a religious perspective, Protestantism.”

The tercentenary celebration in 1817 also set in motion what one scholar has called the nineteenth century’s “epidemic” of Reformation commemorations. In that age of historicism, the birth and death dates of key reformers were ritualistically marked throughout the century, with special tercentenary commemorations for the Augsburg Confession (1830), the Peace of Westphalia (1848), the Peace of Augsburg (1855), and the Book of Concord (1880). The foundation stone for the first statue of Martin Luther was laid in 1817, while the grandiose Reformation monument at Worms got underway in 1867 at the time of the 350th anniversary. In all these commemorative events, religious sensibilities freely blended with themes of liberalism, progress, and nationalism.

**T**he four-hundredth anniversary of Luther’s birth, in 1883, deserves particular mention. It was the first major jubilee after German national unification in 1871, and the tone was set from above. Emperor Wilhelm I issued an order on May 21, 1883, encouraging all Protestant churches in the German Empire to festively mark the anniversary of Luther’s birth. The flurry of events that followed has been described by one German historian as a belated birthday party for the German nation, with Luther wearing the mantle of national hero and patriarch.

Nowhere was this triumphalist, nationalist sentiment clearer than in an address, “Luther and the German Nation,” given by the Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke. Ruing that German Catholics, still reeling from Bismarck’s Kulturkampf, could not rightly appreciate Luther’s legacy, Treitschke

identified the Wittenberg reformer as “the pioneer of the whole German nation,” a man possessing “the power of independent thought that typifies the German character,” and as someone “with all the native energy and unquenchable fire of German defiance.” The nation, the *Volksgeist*, first became personified in his life: “Because he gave utterance to ideas already living in the soul of his nation, this poor monk . . . was able to grow and develop very rapidly, until he had become as dangerous to the new Roman universal empire as the assailing Germanic hordes were to the empire of the Caesars.”

1883 also witnessed the launch of the monumental project, begun at Weimar, to produce a critical edition of Luther’s multitudinous writings. That project, which eventually involved hundreds of dedicated scholars, was completed only in 2009, with 121 massive volumes and 80,000 pages now available in print and online.

**B**eyond Germany’s borders, Luther’s birth year was commemorated, without German nationalism, in many other Protestant countries. In the United States, the four-hundredth anniversary was marked in a manner that significantly contrasted with its neglect there in 1817, when it had been remembered mainly by immigrants from Lutheran countries, with limited ecumenical outreach to other Protestants. But by 1883, Luther had gone from being an acceptable but little-noticed ancestor to an icon venerated and worshipped by almost all Protestants. Many factors contributed to this shift, but a pan-Protestant, nativist ideology directed against Catholic immigration is a salient one. It was also relevant that by the 1880s, many leading lights of American Protestantism had studied in German universities and absorbed there the historicist ethos of commemoration.

Not only did seminaries and churches get into the act, but nonreligious organizations did so as well. The oldest historical society in the United States, the Massachusetts Historical Society, held a special event to mark the anniversary. The keynote address was delivered by the Unitarian minister Frederic H. Hedge, arguably the foremost scholar of German literature in America and translator of the most widely published English version of Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” For Hedge, interpreting Luther as a religious reformer was largely beside the point: “Such significance attaches to the name of Luther, one of that select band of providential men who stand conspicuous among their contemporaries as makers of history. For the Protestant Reformation which he inaugurated is very imperfectly apprehended if

construed solely as . . . a new departure in religion. In a larger view, it was our modern world.” Hedge concluded that Luther’s “theology is outgrown, a thing of the past, but the spirit which he wrought is immortal; that spirit is evermore the renewer and saviour of the world.”

**T**wentieth-century commemorations have had their own twists and turns. What Abraham Lincoln said in his second inaugural address about the American North and South applied to countries such as the United States and Germany at the widely marked four-hundredth anniversary in 1917: “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.” Ironically, at the same time that nationalist interpretations of Luther reached a high point, the scholar Karl Holl called for more-careful historical scholarship, paving the way for what came to be called the “Luther Renaissance” in twentieth-century scholarship.

After the “Great War” had passed, and even more so after the rise of the Nazis, Anglo-American scholars began to spotlight putative deficiencies in Luther’s political thought, charging that it led to political obtuseness, servile quietism, and malevolent anti-Semitism. This line of reasoning bore fruit in such over-the-top titles as William McGovern’s *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Philosophy* (1941) and Peter Weiner’s *Martin Luther: Hitler’s Spiritual Ancestor* (1945). And in 1960, William Shirer’s wildly influential *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* popularized the “Luther to Hitler” thesis, a canard that serious Lutheran thinkers have had to confront ever since.

A particularly arresting example of the fate of Luther’s memory in the twentieth century comes from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Between the four-hundredth anniversary of Luther’s death in 1946 and the five-hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1983, his image in East Germany, his geographical homeland, underwent a remarkable metamorphosis. In the early Cold War, Luther was viewed through the lens of strict Marxist orthodoxy as a “servant of the princes” (*Fürstenknecht*), a term coined by Friedrich Engels, and the true hero of the Reformation was declared to have been Thomas Müntzer, the fiery, apocalyptic leader of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1524–25, whom Luther had colorfully condemned. In good Marxist fashion, the East Germans depicted the entire Reformation as an “early bourgeois revolution” (*frühbürgerliche Revolution*)—a category endlessly debated and discussed not only in Soviet-influenced historiography

but in the West as well, given the sway of Marxism in the Western academy.

Fast-forward to the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther’s birth in 1983: Radical changes had come about. Motivated in part by a desire to bring tourists’ currency to the GDR and to shore up the Socialist Unity Party’s sagging legitimacy, party leaders sought to rehabilitate Luther’s image. No less a figure than party chairman Erich Honecker chaired the hundred-member “Martin Luther Committee of the GDR,” formed in the late 1970s and tasked to make preparations for 1983 as a special year of “Honoring Martin Luther by the German Democratic Republic.” In a speech delivered in 1980, Honecker hailed Luther as “one of the greatest sons of the German people” and made clear that the GDR planned to recognize “the historical achievement [Luther] accomplished by ushering in the Reformation (which represented a bourgeois revolution), and which contributed to social progress and world culture.”

As it turned out, 1983 marked the hundredth anniversary of Karl Marx’s death. This led to the widespread quip among East German churchmen that “Martin Luther can celebrate his five-hundredth birthday in our time, but Karl Marx is one hundred years dead.”

**M**uch has changed since 1983, and even more since the last centenary commemoration in 1917. Despite the presence of some Marxist holdouts in the university, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing retreat of Marxism have helped open the door to a richer, more nuanced historiography of the Reformation.

Any institution involved in commemorating the Reformation in 2017 will have to reckon with the far-reaching implications of the Second Vatican Council and with John Paul II’s historic encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995); with the ongoing decline of mainline Protestant denominations; with the emergence of more-robust orthodox approaches to ecumenism—such as the Evangelicals and Catholics Together initiative, begun in these pages as a challenge to the bureaucratic, least-common-denominator approach of the World Council of Churches; and with the rapid growth of Christian movements in parts of the world where sixteenth-century European history has had little direct impact. With regard to this last development, it will above all be necessary to take stock of the massive demographic shift in Protestantism from the North Atlantic to the Global South. Shortly before 1917, an estimated 11 percent of the world’s Protestant Christians lived outside Europe

or the United States; today that number stands at an astonishing 73 percent and is growing. Transformations in the global landscape of Christianity are taking place that are every bit as significant and far-reaching today as what took place in the sixteenth century. The question, then, is: How ought the Reformation be commemorated in 2017?

At the very least, it is *theologically* important to think of the Reformation in historical, not merely theological, terms. The Reformation occurred not as a checklist of doctrinal principles that dropped from the sky after 1517 but as a bewilderingly complex set of historical events. Many problems arise in looking at the Reformation strictly from a doctrinal or theological point of view: above all, the temptations to

regard Reformation-era conclusions and condemnations as timeless and above criticism, and in ways that conveniently support the credibility of one's own religious position. Appraising the contingency and the messiness of the Reformation, its unexpected sources and its ironic outcomes, will require taking a step back and seeing that its importance, while vital, is not necessarily set in stone.

"Tragic necessity" might not prove to be the final word on the Reformation. But it does seem not a bad place to start. And while conceding that ecumenical goals are notoriously difficult and elusive, we cannot free ourselves from the Gospel's injunction both to pursue truth and to serve as peacemakers—and to do neither at the expense of the other. **■**

---

## BLUE, RED, BLUE

After two clashing days—ultramarine  
 overlaid with vermilion—  
 it came to me late the third afternoon  
 that as between  
 anger and grief there's no comparison.  
 The choice is easy. Does one have a choice?

Shadows, twilight, dusk, a waterfall,  
 a brimming glance, a fold of shawl,  
 a stillness—all these are forms of flowing.  
 Where did my lost one go? And mourn its going.

While anger flushed with mad efficiency  
 cobbles a narrative together, huffing  
 and puffing, swollen with self-righteousness,  
 sweaty with fumes; packs shards of anecdote  
 into a glittering mosaic  
 too hot to touch. Spit on an iron: just  
 that smell and hiss. So no:  
 go back into the footprint left by love,  
 however long ago. The angry embers  
 lose themselves in nightfall's deepening blue.

—Rachel Hadas