

# Celebrating the Reformation

The United Reformed Church



Celebrating the 500th anniversary  
of Luther's *95 theses*

This booklet is the outcome of a discussion within the faith and order committee of the United Reformed Church. The issue before us was whether we, as a denomination, should, in 2017, celebrate the 500th anniversary of Luther's publication of his *95 theses*. As we had also been considering the nature of our own identity, we found it a fruitful exercise to trace the relationship between some of the themes of Luther's early revolutionary tracts of 1520 with current URC religious views – and with the founding documents of our denomination. The booklet is intentionally short and light on scholarly referencing so that it might be easily and widely read. We hope that the questions for discussion might serve to stimulate people to engage with the matters raised and that the glossary might prove helpful to any who are unfamiliar with the historical context.

The Revd Dr Alan Spence  
On behalf of the faith and order committee  
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# Celebrating the Reformation

In 2017 it will be 500 years since Martin Luther posted 95 theses on the door of a church in Saxony, inviting all who were interested to a public discussion on papal indulgences. The sparks from his provocative act lit a fire which was soon to engulf Europe in a prolonged and bitter conflict. War raged on in different areas of the continent for a hundred years until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Across England bonfires were lit in town squares to burn alive a number of 'inflexible' Protestant leaders. Catholic martyrs were generally hanged, drawn and quartered.

The heat from the embers of this religious firestorm can still raise the temperature in some discussions today. Its divisive consequences are perhaps most clearly seen in the Western Church's ongoing inability to share bread and wine at one common table.

Are the events that gave birth to the Lutheran Church something that the United Reformed Church should be celebrating? What do such polarising debates originating in the German states of the Holy Roman Empire have to do with those of us who feel it is our calling to pray and work for the unity of Christian communities in modern secular Britain? If the concern is about affirming our historical roots, does the Reformed tradition not look to Calvin rather than to Luther for its line of descent? Further, were there not many movements of reform in Europe, and is an emphasis on Luther's role not bound to end up as a partisan reading of this contentious period of history?

Of course any interpretation of religious history is open to subjective bias, particularly if it shapes our own self-understanding. For instance, Americans tend to view the Puritans in a positive light, for it was from the Puritan community that their own Pilgrim Fathers came. Their defining conflict with the British crown makes it easy for them to identify with the deep frustration that those early Independents had with royal or state interference in their religious practices. Not so with the English. Many in England are today quite critical of a movement that went on to destroy much of the Church's visual beauty, ruthlessly executed the nation's duly appointed king and

encouraged a moral austerity which was in the habit of proscribing all sorts of innocent fun. Our personal worldview is bound to shape the way we read history and to influence the choices we make to emphasise one event rather than another in the telling of it.

## For reflection

**How does an understanding of our church history, either locally and/or nationally, help us see where God may be leading us in the future?**

If we are to evaluate the significance of Luther's legacy for the United Reformed Church it might be fruitful to focus not on the easily subverted events of history but on those elements of our own religious identity, which can be traced back to his work and ideas. Let's look at some of them.

## The priesthood of all believers

The founding document of the United Reformed Church affirms that Christian ministry is the ministry 'of the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it'.<sup>1</sup> Where did such an outspokenly egalitarian notion of Christian ministry come from? To answer this we need to go back some 500 years to a far more clerically determined society. In the third of his revolutionary tracts of 1520 Luther wrote:

“Nor are we only kings and the freest of all men but also priests for ever, a dignity far higher than kingship, because by that priesthood we are worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another mutually the things which are of God ... Here you will ask, 'If all who are in the Church are priests, by what character are those whom we now call priests to be distinguished from the laity?' I reply, By the use of these words, 'priest,' 'clergy,' 'spiritual person,' 'ecclesiastic,' an injustice has been done, since they have been transferred from the remaining

<sup>1</sup>*Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church*, paragraph 19

body of Christians to those few who are now, by hurtful custom, called ecclesiastics. For Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, except that those who are now boastfully called popes, bishops and lords, it calls ministers, servants and stewards, who are to serve the rest in the ministry of the word, for teaching the faith of Christ and the liberty of believers.<sup>2</sup>



Egalitarian ideas such as these are bound to challenge the power structures of every hierarchical establishment. In particular, the clerical domination of the common people depends on a clear value distinction between lay person and priest. Once this is dissolved everyone is, at least in principle, empowered to use the spiritual gifts that God has given them and serve as an equal in the life of the Church. It is not easy for us in the Reformed tradition to think ourselves back to a time before ‘the priesthood of all believers’ became the unchallenged truism that it is for us today. Precisely what is meant by the expression might differ somewhat among the various Protestant communions. What they share, however, is the view that all believers are called to participate in the ministry of the Church. That this is now widely accepted is almost wholly due to the seminal ideas of Martin Luther.

## For reflection

To what extent is the URC a clergy-dominated church, locally and/or nationally?

What aspects of the life of your congregation show how all believers share in ministry?

This understanding of our shared ministry has further implications.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, 1520

## The spirituality of our secular calling

It is common practice today to refer to certain types of secular employment as a 'calling'. A doctor or nurse is often said to have a calling. Teachers can still be thought of as being called to their profession. This somewhat loose understanding of calling is all that appears to remain of a very robust Lutheran idea. Luther argued that the profession of every Christian, however mean or lowly, is a calling to be considered as possessing the same dignity as a calling to preach the Word of God. He wrote:

“ We see then that just as those that we call spiritual, or priests, bishops or popes, do not differ from other Christians in any other or higher degree, but in that they are to be concerned with the word of God and the sacraments – that being their work and office – in the same way the temporal authorities hold the sword and the rod in their hands to punish the wicked and to protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant, every man has the office and function of his calling, and yet all alike are consecrated priests and bishops, and every man in his office must be useful and beneficial to the rest, that so many kinds of work may all be united into one community: just as the members of the body all serve one another.<sup>3</sup> ”



<sup>3</sup>To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation was the first of the three tracts that Luther wrote in 1520. Not only did it put forward what came to be described as 'the priesthood of all believers' but also introduced the idea of the 'two kingdoms' so influential in later German political thought.

With such arguments Luther laid the foundation for a high view of secular employment that was to permeate Protestant society. It came to be described as the Protestant work ethic. Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology, argued persuasively in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (1905) that this simple theological idea – the spiritual dignity of secular employment – was a major force in the development of capitalism in Northern Europe and so in the transformation of Western society.

The Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it. This service is given by worship, prayer, proclamation of the Gospel, and Christian witness; by mutual and outgoing care and responsibility; and by obedient discipleship in the whole of daily life, according to the gifts and opportunities given to each one.<sup>4</sup>

## For reflection

Do you see your work outside the church as an important part of your Christian service?

How often does your church pray for your work, or for other workers beyond those in caring, education and health-related professions?

## The simplicity of our style of worship

It is an integral element of our own religious understanding that divine worship can be performed by Christians anywhere, anytime, in humble simplicity and without the need for formal ceremony or time-hallowed ritual. In particular, we warm to the words of Jesus in John's Gospel, '... a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... God is Spirit and his worshippers must worship him in

<sup>4</sup>*Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church*, paragraph 9

Spirit and in truth.’ It was not always so. For centuries nearly every detail of public Christian worship was carefully prescribed by ecclesial authority and elaborated with centuries of tradition. Ritual and ceremony came to dominate every aspect of ‘the divine service’. To challenge this, the universal practice of the Church, required an act not only of great courage but deep spiritual insight. Luther had them both. In his book, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*<sup>5</sup> he argued:

... in order to grasp safely and fortunately a true and unbiased knowledge of this sacrament [Communion], we must above all else be careful to put aside whatever has been added by the zeal and devotion of men to the original, simple institution of this sacrament – such things as vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles, and the whole pageantry of outward things. We must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and to this alone, and put nothing before us but the very word of Christ by which he instituted this sacrament, made it perfect, and committed it to us. For in that word, and in that word alone reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the mass.

It is easy to understand why, in 17th century England, some of the heirs to this way of thinking were unwilling to conform and worship according to the prescriptions of the established Church. All over the country meeting houses and chapels were built where dissenting congregations could worship with the freedom and simplicity of style that they believed to be their God-given privilege and duty.

But why were these early chapels so simple, austere even, in their design? Did the Nonconformists have some sort of problem with visual beauty or decoration in their buildings? The answer is a theological one and is closely related to their understanding of the determining feature of Christian life – the priority of faith.

<sup>5</sup>*On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was the second of the tracts published by Luther in 1520. In it he challenges current Catholic views on the nature of the sacraments of the Church.





## For reflection

Is there such a thing as 'holy space'? Does the architecture of our buildings matter?

What is the minimum that worship requires to be true worship?

## The priority of faith

The Christian Church has always acknowledged, at least in theory, the vital role that personal faith plays on the path to salvation. In the late Middle Ages faith was generally construed in terms of the matter that was to be believed, that is, in terms of an assent to right doctrine rather than as personal trust. Further, in many circles the place of faith appeared to have been superseded in practice by 'good works' as the principal channel by which men and women reckoned that divine favour and salvation were to be secured.

Luther's study of Paul's epistles to the Romans and the Galatians shaped the way he understood the role and dignity of faith. In his tract *Concerning Christian Liberty* Luther argues:

... a right faith in Christ is an incomparable treasure, carrying with it universal salvation and preserving from all evil ...

According to him:

- Faith unites the believer to all the promises of God, which together constitute the new covenant.
- Faith 'honours with the utmost veneration and the highest reputation him in whom it believes, in as much as it holds him to be true and worthy of belief.'

## Celebrating the Reformation

- Faith 'unites the soul to Christ, as the wife to the husband... [thereby] Christ and the soul are made one flesh.' Their possessions are shared. 'Christ is full of grace, life and salvation; the soul is full of sin, death and condemnation. Let faith step in, and then sin, death and hell will belong to Christ, and grace, life and salvation to the soul.'

Luther applies this rich conception of faith to his understanding of the nature of Christian worship. Consider his explanation of the Lord's Supper or, as he called it, 'the mass'.

The mass, according to its substance, is therefore, nothing else than the words of Christ mentioned above – 'Take and eat.' It is as if He said: 'Behold, condemned, sinful man, in the pure and unmerited love with which I love you, and by the will of the Father of all mercies, I promise you in these words, even though you do not desire or deserve them, the forgiveness of all your sins and life everlasting. And, so that you may be most certainly assured of this my irrevocable promise, I give my body and shed my blood, thus by my very death confirming this promise, and leaving my body and blood to you as a sign and memorial of this same promise. As often, therefore, as you partake of them, remember me, and praise, magnify, and give thanks for my love and bounty for you.

From this you will see that nothing else is needed to have a worthy mass than a faith that confidently relies on this promise, believes these words of Christ are true, and does not doubt that these infinite blessings have been bestowed upon it.<sup>6</sup>

For Luther the essence of all Christian worship is faith. Faith receives the promises of the scriptures, properly glorifies God and unites the believer to Christ.

Why did the Dissenters build their chapels as they did? It was a testimony to their understanding of the centrality of faith in Christian worship. The seating and pulpit were positioned so that all might properly hear the word of promise, the source of faith. The simplicity of style was partly a reaction to Catholic ornamentation but also a reminder that we believe in one who cannot be seen and trust in one who speaks always through his Word.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520

The architecture of our older independent chapels and meeting houses is itself silent testimony to Luther's spiritual influence on our religious heritage.

‘The United Reformed Church confesses the faith of the Church catholic in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It acknowledges that the life of faith to which it is called is a gift of the Holy Spirit continually received in Word and Sacrament and in the common life of God's people.’

## For reflection

How do you explain your own experience of faith to non-Christian friends?

## And not by works

Papal indulgences, masses for the dead, acts of penance, the veneration of relics and merit-earning pilgrimages are not generally on the 'must have' or 'to do' list of the average member of the United Reformed Church. Why is that? Although we all find ourselves continually tempted to prove ourselves worthy before God we know in the depth of our religious beings that God's mercy is not earned by what we do, but is freely given. His favour is not to be merited even by our noblest deeds. The words of one of our old hymns 'nothing in my hand I bring,

<sup>7</sup>*Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church, paragraph 12*



simply to the cross I cling...’ appear to many of us to be self-evidently true. But of course they are not. The conviction that our best actions are unable to procure the divine favour is the fruit of a revolution in theological thought in 16th century Europe that was championed by Martin Luther. He was the one who drew attention to the inability of our good works to earn salvation.

“ Thus a Christian, being consecrated by his faith, does good works; but he is not by these works made a more sacred person, or more of a Christian. That is the effect of faith alone; nay, unless he were previously a believer and a Christian, none of his works would have any value at all ...<sup>8</sup> ”

We see then that the opposition of faith to good works goes far deeper than the rejection of certain superstitions and rituals. All the good we do, our acts of justice and kindness, love and compassion, the buying of Fair Trade products and our care for the planet are considered by Luther as aspects of our active righteousness. They are a vital part of faithful Christian living, but in themselves they have absolutely no saving value. Our salvation is to be found in our passive righteousness, the righteousness that comes from God and is to be experienced in Christ. It is from outside of ourselves and is given freely by God. The life of faith is consequently one in which we put no confidence at all in our own virtuous deeds or good works. Our only comfort or assurance is in the divine gift of righteousness, which Luther describes as our passive righteousness.

“ This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world doth not know, yea, Christians themselves do not thoroughly understand it, and can hardly take hold of it in their temptations. Therefore it must be diligently taught and continually practised...For there is no comfort of conscience so firm and so sure, as this passive righteousness is.<sup>9</sup> ”

We believe that, by the Holy Spirit, this glorious Gospel is made effective so that through faith we receive the forgiveness of sins, newness of life as children of God and strength in this present world to do his will.<sup>10</sup>

Members of the United Reformed Church associated in a locality for worship witness and service shall together comprise a local church.<sup>11</sup> ”

<sup>8</sup>Martin Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, 1520

<sup>9</sup>Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 1535

<sup>10</sup>*Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church*, paragraph 17

<sup>11</sup>*The Structure of the United Reformed Church* 1.(1) (a)

## For reflection

Do you regard particular good actions as an essential part of being Christian? If so, which actions and why?

We may not venerate relics in the URC, but does your congregation treat particular items of church furniture or aspects of church life as particularly holy? If so, which and why?

## The Reformation continues

An important element of the United Reformed Church's self-understanding is that its theological views are open to ongoing modification. In its Basis of Union it affirms: 'The United Reformed Church nevertheless reserves its right and declares its readiness at any time to alter, add to, modify or supersede this Basis so that its life may accord more nearly with the mind of Christ.'

The Latin expression underlying this idea – *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the church is always being reformed) – first appeared in Calvinistic theology at the beginning of the 17th century. But the genesis of this concept of ongoing reformation can helpfully be traced back to a public debate in Leipzig in 1519 between Martin Luther and the Catholic theologian Johann Eck. Luther believed that both the Councils of the Church and the Scriptures supported his views. But in the debate Eck skilfully showed that Luther's position on the authority of the papacy was identical to that of the Bohemian religious leader Jan Huss. Huss had been condemned as a heretic by the Council of Constance. Luther was forced into a corner. It became clear to him that the Councils of the Church could sometimes be in error. This was a momentous step forward in his theological development. He recognised that the Scriptures alone had final authority in matters of faith and before them the decisions and formulations of the Church at every level were to be tested and if need be reformed. Luther's position was made clear in his famous words of defence before the Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521:

“ Since then your serene Majesty and your Lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. 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 retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience ... May God help me. Amen.<sup>12</sup> ”

Luther spoke and wrote with a style that was bold and blunt, yet passionate and full of pastoral concern. He was often dismissive of the place of reason in theology and was quite willing on occasion to use paradox quite shamelessly to make his point.

“ Thus a Christian man is both righteous and a sinner, holy and profane, an enemy of God and yet a child of God. These contraries no sophisters will admit, for they know not the true manner of justification.<sup>13</sup> ”

The blossoming humanism of the age, however, placed high value on the use of reason in all reflective thought. And so it was left to Luther's colleague, Philipp Melanchthon, and most famously to the young French lawyer, John Calvin, to bring shape, system and rational coherence to his ideas. It was mainly through Calvin's work that Britain was introduced to Protestant thought. It would, however, be very small-minded of us not to recognise throughout Calvin's writing the pioneering influence of Martin Luther.

A number of Luther's ideas had of course already appeared in the work of earlier reformers such as Jan Huss and John Wycliffe. But this does not in any way undermine the significance of Luther's own decisive contribution to the Protestant Reformation.

Some will point out that many of the excesses and abuses in the Church that had been highlighted by Luther have long since been dealt with in the Catholic Church by the Council of Trent and other later reforming

<sup>12</sup>Diet of Worms: an assembly of the Holy Roman Empire held in the German town of Worms in 1521

<sup>13</sup>Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 1535

councils. This is undoubtedly true and is an indication of just how indebted Roman Catholics also are to Luther's spiritual challenge to the state of Church in his day.

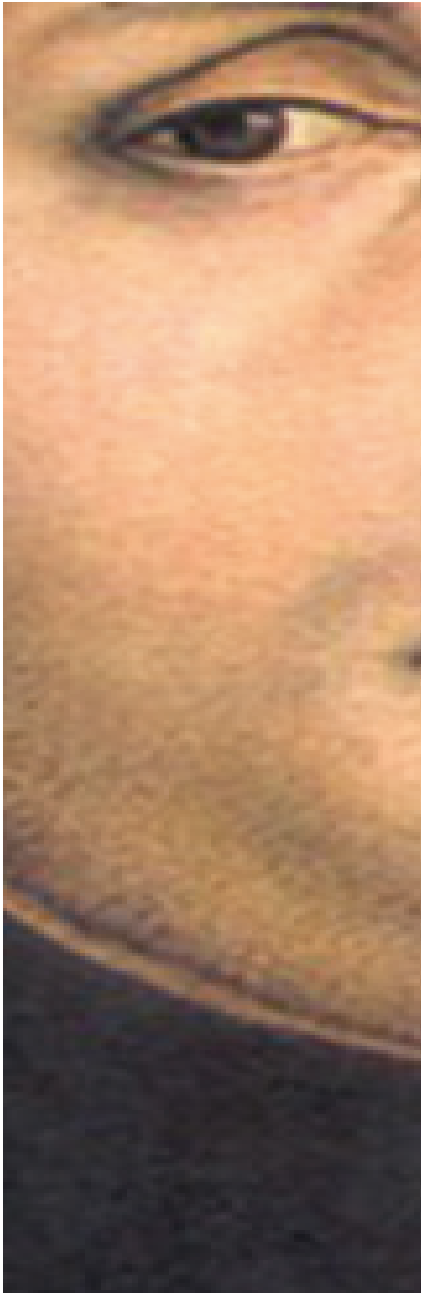
In summary, our somewhat subjective audit of the collective religious consciousness of the United Reformed Church suggests that we too are greatly indebted to the imaginative, spiritual genius that was Martin Luther. This view finds support in the testimony of a certain John Bunyan.

... one day, a book of Martin Luther; it was his comment on the Galatians ... had fallen into my hands, the which, when I had but a little way perused, I found my condition, in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart... I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy Bible, before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience.<sup>14</sup>

Now if the United Reformed Church, along with other like-minded communions, is indebted to Luther's radical theological challenge to the medieval Church, it suggests that Protestants in general can take a measure of ownership for his actions of 1517 and beyond. Our celebration of the posting of the *95 theses* could then serve as a celebration not just of the Lutheran Reformation but of the birth of the Protestant Church and the reformation of Western Christianity in the 16th Century.

Of course we are all aware of some of the darker aspects of those years of religious, social and political turmoil. We also recognise that the reformation of the Church is far from complete while Christian communions remain divided on significant matters of faith and church order and are unable to share bread and wine together at one common table. It is our prayer that by the grace of God the reformation of the Church will go on – *ecclesia semper reformanda est*.

<sup>14</sup>John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 1666



“ The United Reformed Church testifies to its faith, and orders its life, according to this Basis of Union, believing it to embody the essential notes of the Church catholic and reformed. The United Reformed Church nevertheless reserves its right and declares its readiness at any time to alter, add to, modify or supersede this Basis so that its life may accord more nearly with the mind of Christ.<sup>15</sup> ”

## For reflection

**How has Luther’s thought affected the way your congregation lives out its Christianity?**

**Which of Martin Luther’s ideas described above, if any, is particularly important for your own Christian life?**

<sup>15</sup> *Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church*, paragraph 9



# Glossary

**95 theses:** a document written by Martin Luther in 95 points of argument (theses) which questioned the theological validity of papal indulgences and, in particular, the public sale of them. It is believed that on 31 October 1517 Luther posted the theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg and so initiated the Protestant Reformation

**Acts of penance:** duties given by a priest to a repentant believer on confession of their sins so that they might show that their repentance was real, for example saying particular prayers or apologising to someone they had wronged

**Calvin (John):** a French lawyer influenced by Luther's writings who led the Reformed church in Geneva. He influenced John Knox who in turn introduced the Protestant Reformation to Scotland

**Councils of the Church:** formal meetings of the bishops of the Church to decide upon important theological questions of the day

**Diet of Worms:** an assembly of the Holy Roman Empire held in the German town of Worms in 1521 at which Luther was condemned as a heretic

**Dissenters:** English Christians including Puritans who violated the Act of Uniformity 1559 (which made the use of the Book of Common Prayer compulsory)

**Holy Roman Empire:** a network of territories in central Europe formed during the Early Middle Ages and continued until its dissolution in 1806

**Independents:** see Dissenters

**Lutheran Church:** the communion of Protestant churches identifying with Martin Luther's theology

**Masses for the dead:** services of Holy Communion offering prayers for the dead to shorten their time in purgatory (a realm of punishment after death). See also **papal indulgences**

**Nonconformists:** Protestant Christians who did not conform to the governance and usages of the established Church of England after the Act of Uniformity (1662) and were therefore expelled from the Church of England (the Great Ejection)

**Papal indulgence:** the Pope's promise to shorten the temporal punishment in purgatory of a sinner, generally made to those who have given a particular service to the Church

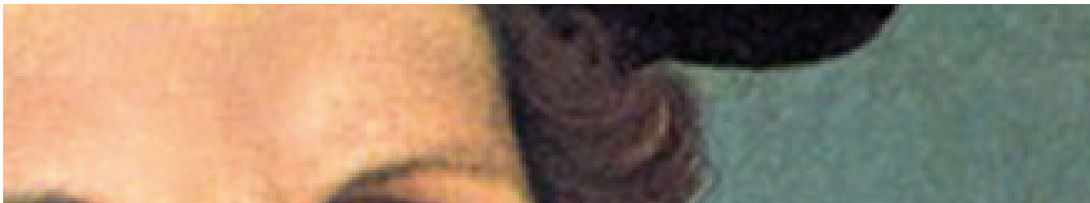
**Protestant work ethic:** term coined by the sociologist Max Weber expressing the idea that Protestant theology encouraged hard work and frugality

**Puritans:** English Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries, including English Calvinists. They formed, and identified with, various religious groups advocating greater purity of worship and doctrine as well as personal and group piety

**Reformed Church:** the Protestant churches identifying with John Calvin's theology

**Secular:** those parts of life separate from religion

**Veneration of relics:** the use in worship of items linked to the saints or parts of their bodies



# Further Reading

Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520


Martin Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, 1520

Martin Luther, *The Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520

John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, 1958

Martin Luther, *Galatians: Selections from Martin Luther's Commentary*, 1535

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=File:Martin\\_Luther\\_by\\_Cranach-restoration.tif&page=1](https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=File:Martin_Luther_by_Cranach-restoration.tif&page=1)

A portrait of Martin Luther, a key figure in the Protestant Reformation, wearing a black cap and a dark robe. The background is a muted greenish-blue.

2017 marks the 500th anniversary of a key starting point for the Reformation – the nailing of Luther’s 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. This started a tumultuous period for the Church across Europe, and led to the formation of both Lutheran and Reformed Churches.

The United Reformed Church is contributing this study booklet to the range of commemorations being offered in 2017. The aim of the booklet is to help United Reformed congregations, including those who share in ecumenical partnerships, to reflect on the inheritance of this anniversary for the Church today.