

The Mouse that Roared: the Context of the Reformation

Our prayer comes from Martin Luther, from his *Small Catechism*. Luther has said a number of things about prayer. One thing he said was make the “amen” really loud. Give a good and hearty “amen” and never doubt that God hears you and says yes to your prayer. So as we pray this prayer, let us add some hearty amens. Luther also said, “Always bear in mind that you are not standing or kneeling alone, but the whole of Christendom is standing or kneeling with you.” As we pray the Lord’s Prayer, let us remember that God’s people in all times and all parts of the world have prayed these very words that we will pray. Luther also said, “It is the Word of God and His promise which makes good your prayer, not your own devotion.” It is what God says about prayer, His Word and His promise, not our devotion or the urgency that we feel when we pray that makes prayer effective. Let us join together now in prayer.

“O give thanks to the Lord for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens which cry. His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.”

*Our Father, who art in heaven;
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts; as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation;
But deliver us from evil;
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.
Amen.*

We give Thee thanks, Lord God, our Father, for all Thy benefits, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns forever. Amen.

In the little town of Wittenberg, Germany, something happened on October 31, 1517. An Augustinian monk, who was also professor of Bible at the university in Wittenberg, nailed 95 theses, which were short sentences for debate and discussion, to the door of the Castle Church. Castle Church served as the main building of the university, and the door of the Castle Church was something like the university bulletin board. So Martin Luther put his theses there, at least according to one tradition. Some people do not believe he actually nailed them to the door, but he may have, and I think he probably did. By some means, he put 95 theses on the door of the church. They were short statements about God, salvation, the pope, and the church.

B. B. Warfield said that was the first public act of the Reformation. It is certainly one of the most famous dates in history. To set that event in its history, let us look at the context, beginning with the political context. Wittenberg was a small town in the land we now call Germany, and it was in the part of Germany called Saxony. That was a small but important kingdom in Germany. In those days Germany was made up of many different cities, principalities, and kingdoms. It was not as united a country as it is today. Saxony was an important small kingdom in Germany ruled over by the “elector” of Saxony, whose name was Frederick. His people called him Frederick the Wise. He was a man who

took great concern for them, for the church, and for education. He was the one who had recently founded the new university of Wittenberg.

Saxony was part of a larger political unit, which was not Germany, but rather the Holy Roman Empire. The ruler of the Holy Roman Empire was elected rather than born into the role. The election tended to be controlled, however, by one German house, the House of Hapsburg. That house was centered in the land that we now call Austria.

In 1519 not only did the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, who was Charles V, control the territory of the empire, but he also controlled the hereditary territory of the Hapsburgs, the Netherlands, and Spain. That was because Charles V was a descendent of Hapsburg, Dutch, and Spanish rulers. Thus when Charles V became the Holy Roman Emperor, he controlled much of Europe. He was a cosmopolitan man who moved easily from one part of his domain to another. It was said of him that he spoke Italian to women, French to men, German to his horse, and Spanish to God.

The land that Charles V claimed as home was Spain. Spain had been united only recently before his reign by his grandparents, Ferdinand and Isabella. Those two rulers brought together two parts of Spain and united it. Under Ferdinand and Isabella the Muslims, or Moors, as they were called in Spain, were finally driven out. Spain once again became strongly Catholic, as it had been only in part. Not only were the Muslims defeated, but also the Jews were expelled. Spain introduced the Inquisition to be sure that Spain remained strongly Catholic. It was probably true in those days that Ferdinand, Isabella, and their descendants were more Catholic than the pope. Spain was the most Catholic country in Europe. It was also a vigorous country in terms of development and exploration. It was Spain and the grandparents of Charles V who sent Columbus out to discover the New World.

Between Spain and the Holy Roman Empire was another important kingdom that was already centralized and unified, the country of France. France was ruled by Francis I, who became king in 1515. Even though he was also a Catholic ruler, he was a thorn in the side to both the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope.

By the time Luther was affixing his theses to the church door, England was recovering from a hundred-Years War with France. That was followed by 30 more years of civil war, which is called the War of the Roses in English history. England was finally united by Henry VII, who began the reign of the House of Tudor. In 1509 the son of Henry VII, who was Henry the VIII, became king of England. Henry VIII played a large role in the history of the English Reformation.

Italy was a mess at that time. It was not united. There were five different major regions in unending conflict with each other. They suffered repeated invasions by France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire. Those five major regions were Venice, Milan, Florence, the Papal States, and Naples. Across the center of Italy was territory owned and controlled by the pope. The pope had spiritual jurisdiction everywhere, and he also had temporal control over part of central Italy.

In 1517 the pope was Leo X. He was one of the so-called "Renaissance Six." Those six popes, from Sixtus IV to Clement VII, according to Barbara Tuckman in her book *The March of Folly*, "Possessed no sense of spiritual mission, provided no meaningful religious guidance, performed no moral service for the Christian world." That is rather strong language, but it is not too strong. Catholic historians, Protestant historians, and everybody else admit that it was a low point in the history of the papacy. Those popes were far more concerned about their control and their power than they were about spiritual ministry. The Fifth Lateran Council ended during Leo's pontificate. It was the last of the reforming

councils that took place in the history of the church before the Reformation broke asunder the unity of the church. The Fifth Lateran Council proposed some good things, but since the pope himself was engaged in all of the practices that the council condemned, not too much came of its work.

Something was taking place politically during all of this. A new phenomenon was arising that played an important role in the history of the church for a long time. The new phenomenon was what we call nationalism. Until that time people tended to think of themselves in western Europe as inhabitants of Christendom. The country in which they lived did not make much difference. Around that time, however, people began thinking of themselves as Spanish, French, German, English, or whatever country happened to be their place of origin. Luther appealed in his writings to “the Christian nobility of the German nation.” People were beginning to think about what it meant to be part of a nation. They began to develop a sense of loyalty to those individual nations.

Those were the factors of the political context of the Reformation. Now we will consider the social context. One factor was the growth of towns and cities. Wittenberg was not a very large place, being a town of only 2500 people. Cities were beginning to develop, however, and Europe was beginning to recover from the great population losses of the thirteenth century due to the loss of people by plague. Population was increasing and cities and towns were growing. Those growing cities became centers for ferment, social change, and new ideas. Cities would be very important places for Protestant ideas to circulate.

Another factor was a new money economy. Capitalism emerged. Some people have said that capitalism came with Protestantism, and particularly with Calvinism. Calvinism was already a reality, however, dating back to the Renaissance and the Lombard cities of Italy. During that time capitalism developed further so that there were new ways of making money. No longer did prestige depend entirely upon one’s name and ancestors. One’s income now played a role in status. That change produced new centers of influence, namely banks and bankers. They grew to play an important role in the history of Europe.

While it was a time of social change, it was also a time of intellectual ferment. Universities were springing up throughout Europe. The universities dated back to the ninth century. New universities, such as the one at Wittenberg founded in 1502 by Frederick the Wise, were at that time being built. Those new universities became places for discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Perhaps even more significant than the new universities was the development of printing. As we think of the revolution that computers have brought into our lives over the last several years, printing did the same thing in the sixteenth century. The printing press was developed in Mainz, Germany by Gutenberg in 1455. The famous Gutenberg Bible was printed from that press. We should acknowledge that printing had taken place for a long time before that in China, all the way back to the ninth century. Yet Gutenberg’s development of the printing press in Germany in the fifteenth century was an important aid to the spreading of ideas. Books and pamphlets could be printed and disseminated quickly. That replaced the long, tedious, and expensive practice of copying by hand. Martin Luther said, “Printing is a gift of God.” He also said, “The printing press makes it possible for a little mouse like Wittenberg to roar across Europe.” That is exactly what Luther did. He continually produced books, pamphlets, and treatises that were quickly printed, such as the *95 Theses* and many other things as well. Then those things were circulated widely. People in faraway places were reading what Luther had written in Wittenberg just a few weeks earlier. In the 1520s a third of all of the books printed and sold in Germany were by Martin Luther. He wasted no time in using that new technology and using it effectively.

Now that we have looked at the political context surrounding Wittenberg, and something of the social and intellectual developments, let us consider what was happening in the rest of the world. It was the time of the great movements in Portugal and Spain to send out ships of men to explore and discover distant places. Just two years after Luther nailed up his *95 Theses* in Wittenberg, Magellan set out with five ships to try to sail around the world. Three years later the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, had to leave the Council of Worms, where Luther was being tried, to return to Spain to receive the last of those five ships. Four of them had been destroyed and most of the men had died, including Magellan in the Philippines. One ship did return in 1522.

Those explorations and discoveries also opened up new avenues for the spread of Christianity. We might say that, humanly speaking, those discoveries happened just in time. In one important part of the world Christianity was not expanding, but declining. For various reasons, which I will describe later, Christianity had disastrously declined in Asia, beyond the Euphrates. There were only two small centers of survival. Nearly all the Christians who remained in Asia at the time were found in the northern hills of eastern Syria and a small area on the Malabar Coast of India. That represented the same extent of Christian presence that had been in Asia a millennium before. It was a tragic history that I will spend more time talking about in another lesson.

World exploration and the discovery of the Americas probably did not mean much to the people of Wittenberg. Most people in the old Roman Empire knew nothing about it. Most of Europe went on as though such exploration was not happening. Neither was the decline of Christianity in Asia big news. People did not know it was happening. Something else was happening on the world scene, however, that was of great concern to the people of Europe. The Ottoman Turks had conquered Constantinople about 75 years before Luther's theses. They had pushed their empire into the Balkans and as far as Hungary. Thus Luther in Wittenberg was not far away from the advance of Islam into Europe. People like Luther and others were concerned about that development. The Ottoman Turks had turned thousand-year-old churches into Sunnite mosques. Even though the Turks had been successful there, they continued their movement into Eastern Europe about the time that the Moors were being pushed out of Spain into North Africa. The threat to Europe from that fierce and militaristic people was quite real.

All of that meant, according to Kenneth Scott Latourette, that the prospects for Christianity were not very encouraging. Most of Asia had been lost. Islam was pushing into the heart of Europe from the East. Latourette points out that the church was not only facing those external problems, but it was also facing serious internal problems. There was no help from the authorities of the church because the popes were not interested. They were interested in making money and keeping their power. One Italian said, "Now in God's church, everything is going wrong."

Let me read a brief passage from *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. I want to do this so you will not think I am exaggerating as a Protestant and making things sound worse than they really were in order to glorify the Protestant Reformation. It says in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "There were, on the eve of the Reformation, grave shortcomings in the practice of the church, both in preaching the Word of God and in administering the sacraments—especially the Eucharist—that indicated a general tone of fatigue and apathy. A deplorable manifestation of the secular spirit was penetrating every level of ecclesiastical life. The great body of bishops had abdicated their teaching office, not in theory but in practice. Some were incapable of teaching as the least of their uneducated clergy." That puts in more elegant language the same truth of the Italian observer that everything was upside down.

By the time of the Reformation the church appeared to have become a vast money-making machine. One cardinal in Rome quipped that "God does not desire the death of sinners, but that they should pay

and live.” Practically everything that happened in the church came at a price. Money went to church officials and to support the pope’s armies and to build Saint Peter’s in Rome and to other projects that the Catholic Church was engaged in. Relics were very important at that time. Every church collected relics, such as bones of saints and apostles and parts of the “true cross.” John Calvin, in one of his satirical writings, pointed out that there were fifteen skulls of John the Baptist and enough wood to make a cross so high that nobody could see the top of it. That did not seem to disturb the faithful. They would come to observe the relics, pay the money, and gain whatever spiritual profit they could from the relics. Yet benefit was especially believed to be in the indulgences. For the release of oneself from purgatory after death, and eventually for the release of loved ones from purgatory immediately, indulgences that would give that spiritual freedom could be purchased for a small amount of money. When Luther nailed up his theses, the immediate occasion for it was a Dominican who was just across the river from Wittenberg in the neighboring province who was selling indulgences. The Dominican was Johann Tetzel, and he was very good at it. He not only sold the indulgences, but he also had a little band that came with him to play music, and he had advertising jingles that he wrote. The most famous of his jingles is “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” He was doing great business not only with the people across the river, but also with the people from Saxony, who were also crossing the river to buy the indulgences.

Those activities were too much for Luther, which is why he posted his *95 Theses*. The system of the Roman Catholic Church was a system without real answers. A Catholic catechism put it this way, “There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy: the first troubles my spirit because I will have to die; the second troubles my heart more because I do not know when; the third troubles me above all; I do not know where I will go.” Catholics were saying that and there was no true peace for the people. An old woman asked the Franciscan friar, Brother Heinrich, “How can I find peace of conscience? I suffer so much in my heart, and I find no release from my suffering and anxiety in confession, prayer, the Mass, pilgrimages, or penance—in no work under the sun.” Martin Luther’s *95 Theses* was an attempt to provide a better answer to the question, “How can I be right with God?” Luther himself had tried very sincerely and very earnestly to make the Catholic system work, but he found no real answers, no true peace, until he came to an understanding of justification by faith.

The *Theses* were Luther’s ideas, the expressed outcome of his new views, contrasting what he thought the Bible teaches with what the church required. If you have never read the *Theses* before, you may be somewhat disappointed when you do read them. They might sound too Catholic to you. His ideas were not very clear yet. Philip Schaff, the church historian, does view Luther’s *Theses* simply as a complaint against the abuse of indulgences. I think B. B. Warfield has a better understanding of the *Theses*, however, as he sees them as revolutionary, although only an early step along Luther’s pilgrimage to a clearer and better understanding of justification by faith. Luther proclaims the Gospel in the *95 Theses*. Salvation is the gift of God. It is received by faith alone. That is what the Bible teaches, and that is ultimately what we must believe. That conviction, more than anything else I described in this lesson, is what produced the Protestant Reformation.

People liked to draw cartoons in the sixteenth century. One cartoon pictures the pope sitting at his table counting money. Then it shows some of his servants shearing, slaughtering, and skinning the sheep in order to make the money to give to the pope. Then it shows kings, princes, emperors, and rulers of various kinds with their hands in front of their faces so they would not see what the pope was doing. They did not want to go to war with him or face his disapproval. The caption to the cartoon has the pope saying, “Unfortunately there are some people in Germany who very sadly have taken up Luther’s teaching and are vowing never to be sheared again.”

Sometimes people wonder what the purpose of the pope's army was. Nobody bothered the Ottomans except the people who were immediately in contact with them. The various kingdoms, including mainly the pope, the Holy Roman Empire, and France, tended to fight with one another. They would only make peace with each other when there was a threat from the Ottomans, in order to try to unite against them. Even that was not altogether effective. While they were all-Catholic countries, they were also all in opposition to one another for various reasons. The pope's army was largely mercenary and almost entirely from Switzerland. The pope paid those soldiers, as we will see in the lesson on Zwingli, who was at one time involved in that mercenary army and then later turned against it. That change was one factor that led Zwingli from Catholicism to Protestantism.

Another common question is about the origin of the doctrine of purgatory. The doctrine of purgatory precedes the sale of indulgences, but it did not take long for the church to link those two. The doctrine of indulgences is not, strictly speaking, about buying salvation. When a person purchased an indulgence that person was technically giving alms. It was considered the good work of almsgiving because the money was going to the church. Consequently there was credit to that person for doing a good deed. It was stated that God forgives sins. The idea was, however, that there are temporal punishments from God that a person has to do something about. One cannot simply accept God's forgiveness and not make right the wrong that has been done. The indulgences helped to make right of a wrong, as did a pilgrimage, viewing a relic, or going to Mass. Those things helped a person in this lifetime. Yet as the doctrine of purgatory became more common, people became more concerned about that. So the indulgence was tied very quickly to purgatory. In the end, the matter was not influenced by a theological history but rather by a financial history. It was an effective means of raising money. People like Tetzel, who was actually working for one of the banks of the Holy Roman Empire from which the pope had borrowed a significant amount of money, could work the system. There was a particular indulgence Tetzel sold that was supposed to be a special indulgence, a jubilee indulgence for the remission of all sins. If you bought an indulgence from him on a given day, your whole future could be secure. So it was no wonder that Luther became upset.

Some people wonder why Charles V did not deal sharply with Luther. One reason is that Frederick the Wise, the elector of Saxony, was an important man. Even though we are not sure of Frederick's religious convictions, he was certainly proud of his seminary professor. He did not want anybody meddling with Luther. So Charles V could not do anything about Luther without running the risk of infuriating Frederick. With the Ottomans so close to the empire, Charles needed everybody to be united behind him in order to protect the eastern border from the Muslim onslaught.

There were two centers of Christianity that remained in the East. Those groups did not blend with the culture. They remained very distinct. After all, they were in Muslim and Hindu worlds. The Syrian Christians were Jacobite Christians, which meant that they were monophysites. As monophysites, according to both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic teaching, they were heretical. The Malabar Christians, sometimes called the Mar Toma church, had some connection with the Syrian group. It also may have been monophysite. Apart from that, they were Orthodox Christian groups that courageously maintained themselves, but only as small isolated islands of faith in a vast ocean of other religions. Those groups are still there today.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).