

Reformation still divisive, 500 years on

Was the Reformation a mistake? Forget Halloween – tomorrow marks 500 years since one of the biggest events in history: Martin Luther triggering the split between Catholics and Protestants.



Hammered home: The door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg served as a university bulletin board.

Five hundred years later, no one is 100% certain whether the frustrated German monk actually did nail his 95 arguments against Catholicism to the door of his local church. But the story went down in history anyway, and tomorrow its **anniversary** will be marked around the world.

That monk was Martin Luther, and his **95 Theses** sparked a revolution still being felt today.

In 1517, the Catholic Church was the dominant power in Europe, including in Luther's home country of Germany. But he felt that it had become greedy and corrupt. He was particularly angered by "indulgences", payments to the church that would supposedly help people get to heaven. This contradicted the idea that it is your faith, not your wealth, that make you a good Christian.

Thanks to the invention of the printing press, Luther's idea spread through Europe like wildfire. He initially wanted to reform Catholicism, not start a new religion. But soon

he was **excommunicated**, which only fueled his supporters. In 1534, he published a translation of the Bible in German, while Henry VIII was breaking England from Rome.

The consequences of all this were enormous. In the 17th century, the **Thirty Years War** devastated Europe; up to 12m people are thought to have died. Three centuries later, another 30-year conflict between Catholics and Protestants cost thousands of lives in **Ireland**. It took until last year for the two churches to talk seriously about healing "this wound in the body of Christ".

But the Reformation also launched a wave of creativity. Access to a **vernacular** Bible taught many ordinary people to read and think for themselves.

This spirit of free-thinking eventually led to the **enlightenment**, which promoted reason, science and individualism. Protestants colonised and shaped North America as we know it today. The "Protestant work ethic" may even have helped the industrial revolution.

Was all the bloodshed worth it?

I got 95 problems

Of course, say some. The Reformation's effects were not always pretty, but it led to the world we live in today. It had a hand in everything from the founding of the USA to the spread of democracy. Without it, the Catholic church would have had too much power over Europe, and may never have faced up to its more unsavoury practices. Tomorrow should be a day of celebration.

For many Christians, it is not so simple. The Bible says that Jesus's followers should be "completely one", and yet Christianity now has countless denominations. Some historians even say that the industrial revolution could have happened sooner under Catholicism, without decades of religious wars getting in the way. Tomorrow should be a time to reflect on how to heal the remaining wounds.



Q: What do we know?

A: Tomorrow, "Reformation Day" will be a national holiday in Germany. Last year, Pope Francis met with Lutheran leaders and said that he hoped the churches could move "beyond the controversies and disagreements

that have often prevented us from understanding one another". Soon after, the Archbishop of Canterbury apologised for violence that occurred in Britain in the name of the Reformation.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Whether the talk about reuniting the churches will ever come to fruition. There are

still many disagreements over issues like contraception and the role of women in the church, as well as theological arguments about the Eucharist, the pope, and whether the Bible is the only authority on God's word. Both churches are divided amongst themselves over same-sex couples.

YOU DECIDE

1. Was the Reformation a mistake?
2. How would the world be different if the Reformation had not happened?

ACTIVITIES

1. As a class, list as many differences between Catholicism and Protestantism as you can think of. Then discuss: will the two sides ever be reconciled?
2. Speculating about how the world might have turned out differently is called counterfactual, or alternative, history. It has inspired many books, films, and arguments. Write your own short story set in a counterfactual world where Martin Luther did not exist.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"To go against conscience is neither right nor safe."

Martin Luther

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Anniversary – The 95 theses were (supposedly) hammered to the church door at 2pm on October 31st 1517. However, this story was only reported after Luther's death.

95 Theses – The document also included Luther's argument that the Bible, not traditions or the pope, should be the main authority on Christianity.

Excommunicated – Banished from the

Catholic church. This happened in January 1521.

Thirty Years War – 1618-1648, beginning with the Holy Roman Empire trying to reassert Catholic authority. Actually a series of wars which changed the political make up of most of Europe.

Ireland – "The Troubles", 1968-1998, were not an official war, but a bloody conflict between the mostly Protestant loyalists, who wanted Northern Ireland to stay in the UK, and mostly Catholic republicans, who wanted

Ireland to be one country.

Vernacular – The language of the ordinary people in a country. Until the Reformation, the Bible was only published in Latin, which was the language of the educated and ruling classes.

Enlightenment – An intellectual movement stimulated by philosophers of the late 17th and the 18th centuries.

BECOME AN EXPERT

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 Notes

