

# WHAT IS REFORMATION DAY

and why we commemorate it

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The celebration of Reformation Day

and All Saints Day

at Highfield Road Uniting Church

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# WHAT IS REFORMATION DAY?

## and Why We Commemorate It

Reformation Day is a day set aside to recognize, remember, and celebrate the Protestant Reformation. In some European countries, it is observed as an official holiday. It remembers Martin Luther and the central role he played in the reform movement that split the western Church of Rome.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries the Church of Rome was expanding and building in order to maintain its power and presence in European society.

Earlier protests by John Wycliffe (1330 – 1384 in England) and John Hus (1372 – 1415 in Bohemia) against the wealth of the Church and its misuse of power had not been very effective and the Church continued to spend its resources not on people, but on things, like buildings. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was built during the lifetime of Luther and it was the catalyst for Luther's reaction; but in what way? Rome needed money in order to build St. Peter's, and in order to raise money the Pope authorized the sale of indulgences, which were a kind of letter of forgiveness from the Pope. By purchasing an Indulgence one could assure that either oneself or a loved one were spared a long stay in Purgatory. Rome made bundles of money by the sale of these indulgences – much of it from Germany. There were even priests appointed by the Pope who acted as Indulgence salesmen.

At the same time, Luther came to believe that salvation did not depend on works but solely on God's grace. With this realization he boldly attacked the economic basis of the Roman Church because he

Christian faith today. The great sixteenth century schism that occurred in the church between Roman Catholic and Protestant branches of the Christian family remains with us. Our fractured denominations remain a major impediment to the credibility of the Church's mission in society today. Though in the last 50 years many denominations have entered into dialogue and co-operative activities that have brought us closer together, we remain a divided family.

Today we may observe Reformation Day with a sense of remembering the theological emphases of the Reformers and seeking to reinterpret them for our own age. We can learn from the Reformers how to evaluate the Church's mission in the light of the gospel to make sure we are both faithful and innovative in the proclamation of God's truth. It can be an impetus in moving us toward unity and community. It is an opportunity to repent of the sins and excesses of the past and to celebrate our common faith, even if we still cannot celebrate the Church's common meal together in many places.

Reformation today can represent healing of old ecclesiastical wounds as together churches work to overcome past differences, recognize what we hold in common, and work to build and strengthen one another in Christ's mission in the world.

## **Reformation Themes**

Luther argued that salvation could not be obtained by purchasing indulgences, through works of charity, by making a pilgrimage, or by performing other acts of piety and devotion. He argued that salvation was an act of God, given by grace through our faith in Jesus Christ. God has already provided for our salvation by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and salvation is ours to accept through faith, not to achieve through good works. A second major theme of the Reformation is the priesthood of all believers, meaning that Christians do not need an intermediary between them and God apart from Christ himself. It was the right and duty of all Christians to enter into their own personal relationship with God, to read the Bible and worship in their own language, and to pray directly to God rather than through the mediation of a priest or one of the saints.

## **Importance to Us Today**

All three denominations that formed the Uniting Church in Australia (Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational) were Reformation Churches. The UCA stands in the Protestant tradition which flowed out of the Reformation. Now, more than 500 years after the start of the Reformation, what is its significance to us? Why even observe it? After all, we are not the descendants of Luther. Our roots are deep in the English Reformation and the Anglican tradition: Both John and Charles Wesley were priests in the Church of England; John Knox was a Scottish Reformer who followed the teaching of John Calvin; Congregationalism arose by those who dissented at the established religious and secular power of the Church of England.

There are a number of reasons why we should observe the day. The themes of the Reformation remain the great themes and principles of

did not want to see his beloved countrymen robbed of their property for a religious action of no avail. So it is fair to say that the Reformation came about because of both spiritual and economic factors. Luther was, without a doubt, the most significant of the Reformers. Born on Nov. 10, 1483 at Eisleben, and frightened as a young man in a storm he made a promise to serve God. He joined the Augustinian movement at Erfurt and lived there for a short time. He studied theology after his novitiate and accepted the theological perspective of his day. He believed at that time that salvation was accomplished by the grace of God, along with human merit for good deeds. Or, in other words, salvation comes about because of faith plus works.

In 1505 the turning point in Luther's life took place. He became passionately interested in the study of the Bible. This interest grew over a period of many years and later came to fruition. Luther journeyed to Rome in 1510 on business for the order, and was disappointed by the great luxury which he saw among the cardinals and in the Vatican. In 1511 Luther was sent by his superior to Wittenberg to be the professor of Biblical Theology. Before he could assume this duty he was required to obtain a doctorate in theology, which he accomplished in 1512. He then assumed his duties as lecturer at the University of Wittenberg, where he would remain the rest of his life.

In 1514 Luther was appointed preacher of the City Church in Wittenberg. Thus, he combined the pulpit and the academic podium in his ministerial duties. As Luther continued to lecture on the Biblical text, he became more certain that salvation was by grace alone. His lectures on Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews show that this confidence in grace was growing slowly but surely. Especially in his lectures of 1516-1517 on Galatians one can see his growing love of grace and disdain of merits accomplished by human effort or bought from the Church in an indulgence sale.

By the time Luther began his lectures on Romans, he had completely repudiated the idea of merit as earned grace. It seems clear that it was his study of Romans that crystallized this view which was actually the development of his theology over a period of many years. The consequences of this change in theological perspective were far reaching. The popular understanding of salvation was undermined; and the power of the papacy was threatened. Rome had no choice but to respond.

The matter with Luther came to a head in 1517 when Luther sent letters to his superiors asking them to repeal the indulgence sale and along with the letter a series of 95 theses which supported his request. After he posted them on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 these theses were spread all around the country. They ignited a fire of protest by the German people against the economic and spiritual power and misdeeds of Rome. In 1519 Luther was summoned to Leipzig in order to defend his views or recant them. He presented his case with vigour, became a champion of the people and the Reformation was born in Germany.

As the Reform movement grew, the ideas of Luther spread around Germany and beyond. At the University of Wittenberg the reigning scholastic theology was replaced by Biblical languages and studies in 1518. In 1520 Luther wrote his three most significant works: "Sermon on Good Works", "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" and "The Freedom of a Christian". These works set forth the ideas that

- Salvation is the gift of God's grace alone
- Faith is the human response to God's gift
- Christian ethics arise from faith;
- Scripture and conscience shape human faith
- There are only two sacraments, the Eucharist and Baptism;
- Freedom means responsibility.

These ideas served as the foundation stones of all later Protestant thought and spread to other countries through other Reformers like

John Calvin in Geneva, Martin Bucer in Germany and England and John Knox in Scotland. Their influence continues to be felt to the present day.

### **When Is It Observed?**

Reformation Day is October 31 of every year. That is the day in 1517 when Dr. Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It was Luther's act that caused the initial furore that resulted in the Reformation. Luther chose October 31 because it was the day before All Saints' Day. The Castle Church's front door opened on a main street of the city, and it was a good place to post a notice for public viewing. Luther knew that on the next day, November 1 — All Saints' Day — the church would be filled with worshippers, many of whom were educated and literate. His act of posting his Ninety-Five Theses on the door was the equivalent of publishing a journal article, taking out a newspaper ad, or putting up an Internet website today. Reformation Day is often observed on the Sunday prior to October 31.

### **Why Did Luther Post His 95 Theses?**

There were numerous reasons identified in the theses. Luther addressed a number of objectionable teachings and doctrines, including salvation by works and the practice of selling indulgences. These were actual certificates that people could purchase from the Church that absolved them of their sins and promised their salvation and eternal life. Pope Leo X called for the sale of indulgences in Germany to help raise money to complete the construction of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome. The Pope said that those who purchased these indulgences would be absolved of all sin.