



The Reformation – Martin Luther and the world's most powerful message

The Reformation shows just how radically people can change themselves and their environments when they open themselves up to God. After all, 500 years ago on 31 October 1517, a monk called Dr. Martin Luther radically impacted Germany and Europe.

Luther actually only wanted to discuss what needed to be changed or reformed in his Church. But the discussion had a much bigger impact than he expected – and his ideas are still shaping the way people think today. A new Church emerged as well. To remind us of these events, Reformation Day – 31 October – is a public holiday in some parts of Germany.



Luther's problem with the Church

In Luther's day, the Christian Church claimed your sins could be forgiven by paying a certain amount of money, a process known as indulgence. This made Luther really mad because in his experience he had really struggled with the sense he could never get right with God. It didn't matter what he did or forced himself to do, he could not work for or simply buy redemption from his guilt.



He found the solution to this problem in the Bible – in chapter five of Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Since we are justified by faith, we now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." That means that a person can only be saved and live with God in eternal life if Jesus serves as their advocate before God. For Luther it became perfectly clear that Jesus Christ had paid off the guilt or, as Christians say, sin that separates us humans from God.

That is why we humans can come to God – but only by God's grace. All we have to do is turn to Jesus and believe that he gives us this forgiveness from sin, i.e. have faith in him. The basis for this is the Christian Bible, in which we can read a lot about Jesus. The Christian term for this is gospel, which means good news. Luther's decisive insight can be summarised quite simply: Only the Bible, only by faith, only by grace, only through Jesus Christ.



The Bible in German

Luther translated the Bible into understandable German so that every German speaker was able to read and understand it. Some German translations of the Bible existed before his, but nearly all the Bibles in use were in Latin. Church services were also held in Latin, a language few people understood. Luther thought it was important for people to be able to read and understand for themselves what God wants from them.

Luther's translation of the Bible made that possible: Every German speaker could make up their own mind about Jesus Christ and read the Bible, God's word, in their own language. Besides, Luther's Bible was to have a huge influence on the development of the German language as such.



Impact of the Reformation

The Reformation not only rediscovered the basics of the Christian faith; it also paved the way for the Germany we know today. People can obtain information and form their own opinion. The foundations of the 18th-century Enlightenment in Europe can also be seen in the Reformation. This made free speech and social freedoms possible. And incidentally, other religions are also thinking about initiating their own "reformation", e.g. by translating sacred books so that every believer can read and form their own opinion about them.

A new Church emerged in the course of the Reformation. This was never Luther's intention but the result is that there are now two main Christian Churches in Germany: the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. Over the past 500 years, rather a lot has happened in this respect as well. In the course of time, the Protestant Church itself seemed to be in need of a new "reformation" and various free churches or communities within the Protestant Church were consequently set up. That is why there is such a broad variety of Christian Churches in Germany today.

In Germany around half of the Christians are Protestants and half Catholic. The Reformation in Germany also had a huge impact on the rest of Europe, particularly in the countries of Northern Europe – Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark – which had their own Lutheran Reformation.



Halloween

A very different festival has now become a firm feature of Reformation Day on 31 October: Halloween. It has its roots in the USA and is essentially a complete contradiction of what the Reformation stands for. Whereas what mattered to Luther was that people are given a good new life, Halloween is all about evil spirits. Pumpkins are hollowed out, children dress up and go round ringing doorbells to ask for sweets. Nowadays, lots of schools and nurseries celebrate Halloween. For more details of this festivity, see this link (in German): www.derweg.org/feste/kultur/halloween-2/