

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

OCTOBER 2017

Dear Friends,

October 31, 1517. Martin Luther nails a long list of grievances against the Catholic Church and a set of theological propositions to the doors of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany, and the Protestant Reformation begins. A dramatic moment in the history of the church—and an evident oversimplification of church history. Even more than the idea that the Reformation began on a particular day, many scholars question whether Luther actually nailed his 95 theses to a church door.

Nonetheless, much is being made of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and rightly so. We Presbyterians would not be here without it!

But it is probably more accurate to understand the Reformation as a series of events and shifts that began much earlier and stretched over several centuries – a movement that has been appropriated by various groups in different ways for numerous purposes over the years. Many scholars now make the word plural and speak of the *Reformations* of the 16th century. To that point, SFTS Professor of Church History Christopher Ocker has teamed up with Kirsi Stjerna, Professor of Lutheran History and Theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, to organize this year's Muilenburg-Koenig History of Religion workshop, entitled *Luther out of Germany*. The workshop will bring together a distinguished set of scholars from Berkeley, Princeton, Beijing, and Mexico City to discuss perceptions of Luther and his influence in Latin America, the United States, India, China, as well as Catholic-Protestant relations today.

And yet, many of us who call ourselves “Protestant” still hold that moment 500 years ago as a defining and significant one for us now. But why? What truly is the core meaning of this event for us today? Is it a tried and true set of doctrines? Is it the necessity to test doctrine against fresh revelations of scripture? Is it certain kind of polity? An imperative to hold the powerful accountable? Is it the importance of holding the political, social, economic, scientific, and spiritual together? A desire to close the gap between clergy and laity? The desire to open the church to new understandings of itself? The embrace of continuous change to keep the church in sync with the times and with God's work in the world? Is it simply an openness to the Spirit of Christ in any age? It's important for us to ask these questions without feeling obliged to bow to the answers provided 500 years ago, or even 50 years ago.

A recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center¹ noted that 53 percent of Protestants could not identify Martin Luther as the man who started the Protestant Reformation. Perhaps more to the point, most American Protestants now say Catholicism and Protestantism are more similar than different, religiously. Many U.S. Protestants embrace traditionally Catholic beliefs on various issues.

For example, the survey revealed that nearly half of U.S. Protestants today (46 percent) say faith alone is needed to attain salvation. Yet, this idea—*sola fide* in Latin—was an animating belief for Protestant reformers of the 16th century. And 52 percent of U.S. Protestants hold that both good deeds and faith are needed to get into heaven, a traditionally Catholic conviction. And where did the Protestant work ethic, so famously identified by sociologist Max Weber, come from in a theology that stresses “faith alone”?

U.S. Protestants also are split on another issue that played a key role in the Reformation: 46 percent say the Bible is the sole source of religious authority for Christians – a second key tenet customarily attributed to Protestants, known as *sola scriptura*. But more than half of U.S. Protestants say Christians should look both to the Bible and to the church’s official teachings and tradition for guidance, a long-standing proposition of the Catholic Church.

When these two questions are combined, the survey showed that only three-in-ten U.S. Protestants believe in both *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. One third of Protestants affirm one but not the other, and another third do not believe in either *sola fide* or *sola scriptura*.

U.S. Catholics, on the other hand, mostly align with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Seventy-five to eighty percent of U.S. Catholics say both good deeds and faith are needed to get into heaven, and that in addition to the Bible, Christians need guidance from church teachings and tradition.

As the lead sentence in a 2010 article in the *New York Times* noted, “Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion.”² When it comes to religion, there seem to be no truths that are self-evident.

I found a recent reflection by Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, especially insightful:

“As the words of Isaac Watt’s hymn remind us, ‘Time like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our sins/sons away.’ Today’s fiercest conflicts—as bloody and violent as they continue to be—when viewed in the longer flow of history, appear less justified and less urgent than we think. There is no better time than our present celebration of the Reformation to remember this. As Christians, we are called to step back from our most fiercely held truths and ask, if they lead us to violence, are they ultimately worth it? Are they true? If our beliefs make us hate, will time bear the truth of our truths out?”

“At a time when communal acrimony across our nation cuts deeper and deeper divides between us, perhaps the most important lesson of the Reformation is the humility it teaches.”³

As we celebrate the anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, let’s not be afraid of the questions it raises, and let’s embrace our answers with humility, lest we lose the opportunity to align ourselves with the purposes and reformations of God in our time.

Grace and peace,



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald,
President and Professor of Faith and Public Life

P.S. – I welcome your feedback and perspectives on these questions and issues. We can learn from one another! You can send me an email at jmcdonald@sfts.edu or call me on my direct line (415) 451-2810. I am so grateful for your prayers and support as we create a new kind of seminary for the 21st century.



San Francisco
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In Christ. A New Creation.

1. Pew Research Center, Aug. 31, 2017, “U.S. Protestants Divided Over Reformation-Era Controversies 500 Years Later”, see www.pewresearch.org.
2. Laurie Goodstein, “Basic Religion Test Stumps Many Americans,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2010. Accessed online on October 28, 2017, at www.nytimes.com/2010/09/28/us/28religion.html
3. Serene Jones, “Reflections on the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation,” *Union Network*, Fall 2017.