

LutherFacts #40 – An Enduring Legacy

After five centuries, Martin Luther's posting of the 95 Theses remains the critical act that launched the Protestant Reformation. Earlier reformers, particularly Johann Huss, laid the basis for an eventual challenge to the medieval church's doctrine and practices. In the fall of 1517, Luther accepted that challenge, inaugurating a reform process that broadened with each succeeding decade. That effort was halted in the late 16th century as the Counter Reformation emerged to reassert the authority of the Pope. Increasingly, armed force replaced debate in Catholic-Protestant relations. In 1618, after nearly a century of gains, Catholic battlefield victories led to the overthrow of many Protestant states in Germany. In 1632, the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus rallied the Lutheran forces and led an invasion that ended in defeat for the Catholic armies at the decisive Battle of Lutzen. In 1648, after years of unsuccessful negotiations, Protestants and Catholic rulers signed the Peace of Westphalia. Martin Luther's original vision of peaceful reform had led, unfortunately, to three decades of war. In this final effort, however, the Reformation survived and Luther's legacy was preserved.