

Reformation Reflections

REPENTANCE



On October 31st, 1517, Martin Luther sent 95 *Theses* to **Albert of Brandenburg**, the Archbishop of Mainz, inviting scholars to participate in a theological discussion. The *Theses*, in Latin, were also nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

They were quickly translated into German (purportedly by some of Luther's students), printed, and widely distributed. They had broad reaching appeal and consequences; in the language of today, they went viral.

This is why October 31st, 1517, is now celebrated as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

The chief issue among many for Dr. Luther was the sale of indulgences. An indulgence is a grant, given or sold, on the authority of the Pope which gives remission of the temporal punishment in purgatory still due for sins after absolution.



Luther argued that if forgiveness can be purchased then Jesus did not need to die on the cross for the sins of the world. Also, if any sins remain after Jesus absolves us, then His words, **"It is finished"** (John 19:30), along with the rest of Scripture, are not true.

Indulgences lead Christians away from true repentance and sorrow for their sins, away from Christ and His free and complete justification by grace through faith, and therefore away from the only hope for a troubled conscience.

Luther's concern for troubled consciences is clear from his very first thesis, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Luther here refers to Jesus' first publicly preached words, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"** (Matthew 4:17).



God's Kingdom comes with the preaching of repentance so that the conscience might be convicted of sin and thus prepared to hear the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus has come to save you from your sins. The law says that you have a debt for your sins. The Gospel says that Jesus paid

the *entire* price. **"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:23).

The whole concept of indulgences is a complete confounding of law and Gospel. You cannot earn or buy forgiveness or eternal life, **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"** (Ephesians 2:8-9). True repentance and living faith are only worked by the Holy Spirit through the application of God's law and Gospel.

The granting of indulgences (which the Roman church still does to this day) is not Biblical, it does not comfort consciences, and it leads us away from reliance on Jesus alone. That is why Luther opposed the practice and those who sold this false hope. For his trouble of being concerned about consciences, for preaching, teaching, and discussing the Biblical means of life and salvation in Jesus Christ alone, Dr. Luther was excommunicated from the Roman church in 1521. But the truth of God's Word cannot be silenced.

Looking back, we see that Luther's 95 *Theses* were, as one scholar put it, "a protest against bad pastoral care." He knew repentance and trust in Christ alone are the very heart of the life of a believer. To claim otherwise is not just unbiblical but unchristian.

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