

The Ninety-Five Theses Reformation Day 2017

10.29.17

Ring the Bell of Reformation

Roland Bainton, the eminent church historian of the 20th century who wrote the definitive biography of Martin Luther, described Luther as “a man climbing in the darkness a winding staircase in the steeple of an ancient cathedral. In the blackness he reached out to steady himself, and his hand laid hold of a rope. He was startled to hear the clanging of a bell.”¹ That bell, which awakened the church from its long slumber and ignited what became known as the Protestant Reformation, began to ring 500 years ago when Luther laid hold of the rope – or, in this case, the hammer. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, setting in motion a chain of events that would lead to the recovery of the gospel of Christ and the recovery of the true church of Christ after centuries of the suffocating darkness of Roman Catholicism. One of the mottos of the Reformation was *post tenebras lux*, which is Latin for “after darkness, light.” The light which shone in the darkness was the light of the gospel, and Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* was the event that struck the match.

What was it about this event, what was it about this document, that created such a stir? How did an obscure Augustinian monk in an obscure corner of Germany shake the very foundations of Christendom and forever alter the course of western civilization? On this Reformation Day, which marks the 500th anniversary of the event, I aim to explore that question by looking at three related issues:

- The *background* of the theses – what were the circumstances in Luther’s life and in the life of the Catholic Church which precipitated Luther’s writing and posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*?
- The *content* of the theses – what is contained in this document, what arguments does Luther make?
- The *impact* of the theses – how did the *Ninety-Five Theses* ignite the Reformation, and what is their enduring effect today?

The Background of the Theses

The *Ninety-Five Theses* did not occur in vacuum. Rather, they were the result of at least two separate events, one in the life of Luther himself and one in the life of the Catholic Church, which collided on October 31, 1517. We will begin with Luther.

“The Gate to Heaven”

In last year’s Reformation Day message, I highlighted Luther’s famous trial for heresy at the Diet of Worms in April of 1521 which culminated in Luther’s legendary reply to the prosecutor’s question of whether he would recant of his writings which had attacked, among other things, the authority of the Church and of the Pope, insisting rather that Scripture alone was the final authority in all matters of faith and practice, and the sacrament of penance and thereby the entire Catholic understanding of salvation by which the justification of sinners is merited through a mixture of faith and works and mediated through the Church, insisting rather that man

¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1950), 64. Bainton’s masterful biography is the source for all historical material in this message.

is justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on the merits of Christ alone. In the presence of the large crowd which included bishops, cardinals, and the Holy Roman Emperor himself, with his life hanging in the balance, Luther responded:

“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – [for] I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”²

I then examined four crisis points in Luther’s life which had brought him to that Gethsemane moment and gave him the courage to take his stand upon the gospel, even if it cost him his life.

The first crisis point was the violent thunderstorm in July of 1505 in which a bolt of lightning struck the ground near him and threw Luther from his horse. Luther interpreted this as a sign from God, a warning of impending judgment, and so Luther did the only thing he knew would assure him salvation – he became a monk.

The second crisis point came in May of 1507, while Luther was performing his first mass as a newly ordained priest. As he took his place at the altar and began to recite the words of the mass, Luther was struck to the heart by a debilitating terror of the Holy God. Luther referred to this experience as *Anfechtung*, a word which has no English equivalent, referring to “all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man.”³ This *Anfechtung* was to become a common experience of Luther’s in the years to come. The events of that day ignited in Luther a firestorm of fear. The burning question which occupied his mind day and night was, how could a man stand in the presence of the holy God unless he were himself holy? What Luther needed more than anything, he concluded, was righteousness. And so Luther threw himself into the pursuit of righteousness with every ounce of energy he possessed. He fasted for days on end without so much as a crumb. He prayed and meditated beyond what was required even by his strict Augustinian order. He refused blankets and nearly froze to death in the bitter German winter. But nothing could assuage Luther’s feeling of guilt, nor abate his terror of God.

This brings us to the third crisis point. In 1510, Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome, hoping to find at last in the Eternal City the answers he needed and the righteousness he lacked. Due to its impressive collection of holy relics, no city on earth offered greater opportunity for obtaining salvation. But all Luther found in Rome was more disillusionment. He found a Roman priesthood that was ignorant, irreverent, and utterly debauched, and a system of indulgences absolutely devoid of any power to remit sin or attain to righteousness. When Luther visited the *Scala Sancta* (the “Holy Steps”), reportedly the very steps which once stood in front of Pilate’s palace in Jerusalem which Christ had ascended for his trial, he climbed the stairs on his hands and knees, kissing each step and repeating the *Pater Noster* (“Our Father”) at each one. But upon reaching the top, all he could say was, “Who knows whether it is so?” Luther came to Rome as a last hope of attaining the righteousness which God required, and departed the city with no faith left in the system of merit prescribed by the Church. If becoming a monk could not cleanse his soul, if all of his labors, prayers, vigils, and confessions could not rid himself of unrighteousness, if Rome with all its relics offered no peace with God, what hope was there? Luther left for home in utter despair.

² Ibid., 144.

³ Ibid., 31.

When Luther returned to Rome, he was informed that he was being transferred from the monastery in Erfurt to one in Wittenberg, where he was to become a professor in the city's newly formed university. But the change of venue did nothing to assuage the torment of his soul. Finally, his superior at the monastery, a man named Johann von Staupitz, not knowing what else to do for Luther, determined the best course was for Luther to immerse himself in the Bible. Let him wrestle with God in the pages of God's own book, Staupitz thought. He ordered Luther to study for his doctorate in theology, to begin preaching in the church, and to teach the Bible at the university. Amazingly, in all his prior studies and preparation for the priesthood, the Bible had not been a staple of his theological education. Luther had hardly read it. But now, for the first time, Martin Luther was confronted with the God of the Bible.

Luther threw himself with fervor into this new work of learning and expounding the Scriptures. On August 1, 1513, he began his university lectures on the Psalms. In the fall of 1515 he began to lecture on Romans. In 1516-1517 he taught through Galatians. In the words of Bainton, "These studies proved to be for Luther the Damascus Road."⁴ It began when Luther found these opening words of the 22nd Psalm – "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" These words were spoken by Christ from the cross. So Jesus had not died in serene, impassible tranquility, like the Christ on the Catholic crucifix. He had died in utter anguish of soul. Evidently, Christ had felt himself forsaken, abandoned by God, deserted. Luther knew that feeling well. He had a word for it – *Anfechtung*. Jesus, whom Luther knew only as the fearful judge, had entered into Luther's own despair and alienation from God. But why? Why did the Son of God suffer such alienation and torment? Luther knew perfectly well why he was alienated from God – he was unrighteous. But Jesus was the Righteous One. So why was He forsaken? The answer must be that Christ suffered *for* our unrighteousness. He took the sin of man upon Himself, and suffered the wrath of God in our place. What's more, the Father *sent* Christ to the cross. It was the love of God that crucified the Son of God to satisfy the wrath of God on behalf of the children of God. The cross completely altered Luther's conception of God, both the Father and the Son.

It was in the midst of these soul-shattering discoveries that everything converged one night in the tower of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. Luther was laboring over the text of Romans 1:17, which says that in the gospel "*the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'*" The last fortress to fall in Luther's mind was the problem of the justice/righteousness of God. How could God justify the unrighteous, and yet remain righteous Himself? Luther knew that God would not, *could* not, act in unrighteousness. God would cease to be God, and the created universe would dissolve in an instant. Yet, the gospel declared that God justifies the ungodly. But the law student in Luther knew that it was unjust for a judge to declare the unrighteous to be righteous. No judge could be considered just who declared the guilty to be innocent. How could this be? Luther wrestled with Paul; he beat his head against the text day and night. How does Paul's gospel reveal the righteousness/justice of God? Then, suddenly, the darkness of his soul blazed with divine light, and he saw it. In Luther's own words:

"I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would

⁴ Ibid., 46.

assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...”⁵

Luther finally understood the gospel. The righteousness which God requires, God gives “through grace and sheer mercy” and received by faith alone. It is not our own righteousness by which we are saved. It is, as Luther said, a righteousness *extra nos* – outside of us. And this accords with God’s righteousness because of the cross of Christ. God’s righteousness first requires the penalty of death and infinite wrath for the sins of men. Yet the gospel declares that this penalty Christ paid in full at the cross, suffering the infinite wrath of God in our place. And God’s righteousness secondly requires perfect obedience from those who would merit eternal life. Yet the gospel declares that this perfect obedience Christ achieved in His perfect life and completed in His perfect death on the cross. Therefore, the gospel is indeed the revelation of the righteousness of God, for the righteousness which God requires in propitiation and perfect obedience, God gives to sinners through the cross of Christ. And this gift of righteousness, this *justification*, is received – not by confession, not by penance, not by indulgences, not by works of any kind, but by faith alone. A sinner is justified – counted righteous – before God not by the attainment of righteousness through their own works, but by the imputation of righteousness through faith in the works of Christ. After ten years of terror and anguish, Luther found the righteousness he had been looking for, and he was finally at peace with God.

“As Soon As the Coin in the Coffer Rings, the Soul from Purgatory Springs”

At the same time that Luther was finding life and righteousness and peace through the gospel, a crisis was emerging in Rome. Pope Leo X, whom Bainton describes as “elegant and indolent as a Persian cat”⁶, needed funds to finish the construction of the ostentatious new Basilica of St. Peter, the purported final resting place of both the apostles Peter and Paul, but he had squandered all of the Church’s money on various wars and on his own decadent lifestyle. Conveniently, however, the Roman Catholic Church has a doctrine known as the “treasury of merit.” While the vast majority of mankind lacks the righteousness required to enter heaven, there are a few superstars of the faith – the saints – who accumulated so much merit that they actually had more than what they themselves needed to enter into glory. These are called “works of supererogation.” This excess merit of the saints is thus placed in a heavenly treasury to which the Church, and in particular the pope, holds the keys. Jesus Christ Himself had filled the heavenly treasury with an infinite store of excess righteousness. Now, if you are the pope and you hold the keys to treasury of merit by which lackluster Christians can enter into heaven, and you need the funds to build St. Peter’s Basilica, what do you do? Why, you sell salvation to

⁵ Ibid., 49-50.

⁶ Ibid., 56.

those with sufficient funds to pay! This transfer of merit from the heavenly treasury to the account of a sinner is called an “indulgence.”

And so Pope Leo X offered a plenary indulgence in order to defray the cost of building St. Peter’s, and granted the right to administrate this indulgence in Germany to Albert of Brandenburg. Unbeknownst to the rest of Germany, Albert and Leo had entered into a secret agreement. Albert agreed to pay the pope 10,000 ducats (gold coins) in order to become the Archbishop of Mainz, making him the primate of Germany. And Leo allowed Albert to offer this plenary indulgence throughout Germany, with half of the proceeds going toward reimbursing Albert and the other half going toward the construction of St. Peter’s. To sell these indulgences, Albert employed vendors who travelled throughout Germany hawking salvation. Those purchasing an indulgence for themselves would receive plenary and perfect remission of all sins, thus being restored to the state of innocence they had enjoyed at their baptism, and would be spared all the pains of purgatory. In addition, one could also purchase an indulgence on behalf of loved ones already dead and in purgatory, immediately securing their release and entrance into heaven. If purchasing an indulgence for yourself, you needed to be contrite and make confession of sins. If purchasing an indulgence for the dead, no contrition or confession was needed. A sliding scale, depending upon one’s means, determined the price of salvation. Kings and queens, princes, archbishops and bishops, were expected to pay twenty-five gold florins. Abbots, cathedral prelates, counts, barons, and other nobles and their wives were required to pay twenty florins. Lower nobility owed six; merchants owed three; all others one. The poor were allowed to contribute only prayers and fastings.

The chief vendor in Germany was a Dominican priest by the name of Johann Tetzel, who had a patenting way of procuring the people’s money. As he approached a town, he expected the village dignitaries to come out and meet him, and together they made a solemn procession to the town square preceded by a cross bearing the papal arms, and the pope’s proclamation of indulgence held aloft upon a gold-embroidered velvet cushion. When they arrived in the center of town, the cross was stationed, and Tetzel would begin his sermon:

“Listen now, God and St. Peter call you. Consider the salvation of your souls and those of your loved ones departed. You priest, you noble, you merchant, you virgin, you matron, you youth, you old man, enter now into your church, which is the Church of St. Peter. Visit the most holy cross erected before you and ever imploring you. Have you considered that you are lashed in a furious tempest amid the temptations and dangers of the world, and that you do not know whether you can reach the haven, not of your mortal body, but of your immortal soul? Consider that all who are contrite and have confessed and made contribution will receive complete remission of all their sins. Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends, beseeching you and saying, ‘Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance.’ Do you not wish to? Open your ears. Hear the father saying to his son, the mother to her daughter, ‘We bore you, nourished you, brought you up, left you our fortunes, and you are so cruel and hard that now you are not willing for so little to set us free. Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory?’ Remember that you are able to release them, for

*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.*

Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul into the fatherland of paradise?”⁷

Although Tetzel never came to Wittenberg⁸, he ventured close enough to Luther’s parish to entice the parishioners from Luther’s church to make the journey to purchase their salvation. When they began to return to Wittenberg holding the proof of pardon in their hands, Luther was incensed. Armed with his newfound understanding of the gospel of justification by the free grace of God alone through faith alone on account of the righteousness of Christ alone, Luther could no longer abide the error. Luther’s anger was driven by two points. On the one hand, Luther viewed this as another example of the greed of Rome fleecing his sheep. Luther had been to Rome (in 1510), and he knew exactly why the Vatican was bankrupt, and he did not appreciate them trying to fill their coffers on the backs of his own impoverished people. And second, and far more importantly, Luther knew that salvation did not come through purchasing a piece of paper. The people in his church returning with certificates of pardon were no more forgiven than they had been when they left, yet they were convinced they were now innocent before God. To Luther’s view, the Church was damning the very people they were commissioned to save. And so, on October 31, 1517, on the eve of All Saints Day, Luther furiously wrote out ninety-five propositions against the sale of indulgences and posted them, in accordance with current practice, on the door of the Castle Church. And with that, the Reformation was born.

The Content of the Theses

Luther did not intend to spark a revolution, not at the first. He held no significant rank among the Catholic authorities. He was merely the parish priest and a professor of theology at the university. By posting these theses on the door of the church, Luther was inviting debate and response from his fellow scholars and priests. But the theses had not been posted long before they were copied down by his students, translated from Latin into German, and given to a publisher who owned a recent invention that had begun to change the world – the printing press. Soon, copies of theses were being disseminated throughout Germany and beyond. Luther did, however, send a copy to Albert of Mainz, his superior, in protest. With it, he attached a letter:

“Father in Christ and Most Illustrious Prince, forgive me that I, the scum of the earth, should dare to approach Your Sublimity. The Lord Jesus is my witness that I am well aware of my insignificance and my unworthiness. I make so bold because of the office of fidelity which I owe to Your Paternity. May Your Highness look upon this speck of dust and hear my plea for clemency from you and from the pope. . . . God on high, is this the way the souls entrusted to your care are prepared for death? It is high time that you looked into this matter. I can be silent no longer. . . . Christ did not command the preaching of indulgences but of the gospel, and what a horror it is, what a peril to a bishop, if he never gives the gospel to his people except along with the racket of indulgences...”⁹

Luther then implored Albert to consider his theses, and end the sale of indulgences in Germany. Albert forwarded the theses to Pope Leo, along with this comment: “Luther is a drunken

⁷ Bainton, 59-60.

⁸ Frederick the Wise would not consent to the sale of the new papal indulgence within Saxony, fearing that it would conflict with the annual indulgence offered on All Saints Day at Wittenberg; Bainton, 57.

⁹ Bainton, 64-65.

German. He will feel different when he is sober.”¹⁰ The first point may have been true; the second proved totally false.

So what was contained within the *Ninety-Five Theses*, and why did they change the world? First it should be said that the *Ninety-Five Theses* do not represent Luther’s mature theology. It had only been a few years since his evangelical conversion, and he was still a thoroughgoing and faithful Catholic at this point. All of that would change over the next four years as his theology and ecclesiology were worked out and refined in the fires of debate. Nevertheless, the seeds of Luther’s mature, Protestant theology are there. And even the mere seeds of Luther’s mature, Protestant theology were enough to crack the foundations of the Catholic Church and ignite the fires of the Reformation. The *Ninety-Five Theses* contain five general points of dispute, each of which was revolutionary enough to strike a major blow to Catholicism.

The Nature of Forgiveness and True Repentance

Luther’s theses begin with the nature of forgiveness and true repentance. Forgiveness of sins does not come through the sacrament of penance (confession and absolution), but through real, evangelical repentance from the heart.

Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying “Repent ye, etc.,” meant the whole life of the faithful to be an act of repentance. (Thesis 1)¹¹

This saying cannot be understood of the sacrament of penance which is administered by the priesthood. (Thesis 2)

Yet he does not mean interior repentance only; nay, interior repentance is void if it does not externally produce different kinds of mortifications of the flesh. (Thesis 3)

And so penance remains while self-hate remains; namely right up to the entrance into the kingdom of heaven. (Thesis 4)

Here, Luther disputes the Latin Vulgate’s translation of the word “repentance” (μετανοία) as “do penance.” Rather, said Luther, repentance refers to a change of heart that leads to a transformed life. Furthermore, repentance is offered unto God and forgiveness comes from God, not from the priesthood, and a person must continue in repentance all the way to the gate of the kingdom of heaven. In short, forgiveness of sins comes through true, evangelical repentance, not through acts of penance or the purchase of indulgences. These first four theses struck at the heart of the Roman Catholic system of sacramental forgiveness, offering a radically different view of salvation. These theses alone would have been enough to spark the Reformation.

The Authority of the Pope vs. the Authority of Scripture

Second, there is a distinct undercurrent throughout the *Theses* of at least questioning, if not outright denying, the authority of the pope to act outside the bounds of Scripture. This is

¹⁰ Bainton, 65.

¹¹ This version of the *Ninety-Five Theses* come from Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church, Third Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, orig. 1943), 205-212.

important because to the Catholic Church of the 16th century (and still today), the objection that indulgences cannot be found in Scripture holds no weight. Indulgences don't have to be found in Scripture, because the pope, as the head of the church and the heir of seat of St. Peter, has authority to speak for Christ, and his proclamations bear as much weight (some would say more) as Scripture itself. This Luther flatly denies.

The pope has neither the wish nor the power to remit any penalties save those which he has imposed at his own will or according to the will of the canons. (Thesis 5)

The pope has no power to remit guilt, save by declaring and confirming that it has been remitted by God; or, to be sure, by remitting the cases reserved to himself. If he neglected to observe these limitations the guilt would remain. (Thesis 6)

The same power over purgatory which the pope has in general, is possessed by every bishop and curate in his particular diocese and parish. (Thesis 25)

The pope does well in giving remission to souls, not by the power of the keys (he has no such power) but through intercession. (Thesis 26)

Although a definite affirmation would not come until a later date, one can already see in these theses the undercurrent of *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone is the authority in all matters of faith and practice.

The (In)Efficacy of Indulgences

Third, Luther flatly denies that the papal indulgences being sold throughout Germany and purchased by his parishioners are of any value whatsoever. This follows logically from the first and second point. If remission of sins comes only through true repentance, and if the pope lacks the authority to remit sins through the creation of an indulgence, then it follows that indulgences aren't worth the paper they're printed on.

Those who assert that a soul straightway flies out (of purgatory) as a coin tinkles in the collection-box, are preaching an invention of man. (Thesis 27)

It is sure that when a coin tinkles greed and avarice are increased; but the intercession of the church is in the will of God alone. (Thesis 28)

Those who think themselves sure of salvation through their letters of pardon will be damned forever along with their teachers (Thesis 32)

Those who teach that contrition is not needed to procure redemption or indulgence are preaching doctrines inconsistent with Christianity. (Thesis 35)

Every Christian who is truly contrite has plenary remission both of penance and of guilt as his due, even without a letter of pardon. (Thesis 36)

Any true Christian, living or dead, partakes of all the benefits of Christ and the Church, which is the gift of God, even without a letter of pardon. (Thesis 37)

Confidence in salvation through letters of indulgence is vain; and that even if [...] the pope himself should pledge his soul as a guarantee. (Thesis 52)

Indulgences, according to the declarations of those who preach them, are the greatest graces; but “greatest” is to be understood to refer to them as producers of revenue. (Thesis 67)

They are in fact of little account as compared with the grace of God and the piety of the cross. (Thesis 68)

“I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice”

Fourth, Luther inveighed against the Church stealing for his people in exchange for the false promise of salvation. In the *Theses*, Luther accuses Rome and the pope himself of greed and avarice. God, on the other hand, desires charity and mercy rather than money.

Christians must be taught that it is not the intention of the pope that the buying of pardons is to be regarded as comparable with works of mercy. (Thesis 42)

Christians are to be taught that to give to the poor or to lend to the needy is a better work than the purchase of pardons. (Thesis 43)

Christians are to be taught that a man who sees his brother in need and passes him by to give his money for the purchase of pardons wins for himself not the indulgences of the pope but the indignation of God. (Thesis 45)

Christians are to be taught that unless they have an abundant [surplus] of means they are bound to keep back what is needful for their own households and in no wise to squander their substance on the purchase of pardons. (Thesis 46)

Christians are to be taught that in dispensing pardons the pope has more desire (as he has more need) for devout prayer on his behalf than of ready money. (Thesis 48)

Christians must be taught that if the pope knew the exaction of the preachers of indulgences he would rather have St. Peter's basilica reduced to ashes than built with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep. (Thesis 50)

Christians are to be taught that the pope (as is his duty) would desire to give of his own substance to those poor men from many of whom certain sellers of pardons are extracting money; that to this end he would even, if need be, sell the basilica of St. Peter. (Thesis 51)

One can note Luther's biting sarcasm coming through loud and clear.

This wanton preaching of pardons makes it hard even for learned men to defend the honour of the pope against calumny, or at least against the shrewd questions of the laity. (Thesis 81)

They ask: Why does not the pope empty purgatory on account of most holy charity and the great need of souls, the most righteous of causes, seeing that he redeems and infinite number of souls on account of sordid money, given for the erection of a basilica, which is a most trivial cause? (Thesis 82)

The pope's riches at this day far exceed the wealth of the richest millionaires, cannot he therefore build one single basilica of St. Peter out of his own money, rather than out of the money of the faithful poor? (Thesis 86)

Cheap Grace Is No Grace

Finally, Luther's fundamental concern in writing these theses, namely the false promise of salvation through the purchase of an indulgence, comes through in the last four statements.

And so let all those prophets depart who say to Christ's people "Peace, peace" and there is no peace. (Thesis 92)

And farewell to all those prophets who say to Christ's people "the cross, the cross" and there is no cross. (Thesis 93)

Christians are to be exhorted to endeavor to follow Christ, their head, through pains, deaths, and hells. (Thesis 94)

And so let them trust to enter heaven rather through many tribulations than through the false confidence of peace. (Thesis 95)

Luther knew these indulgences were just a piece of paper. He knew by experience that peace with God is not found through a donation to the Church's coffers, but through justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And so he hated the fact that his people had been sold a false peace through a false gospel. The grace which they had purchased was cheap, and cheap grace is no grace at all.

The Impact of the Theses

The *Ninety-Five Theses* exploded upon 16th century Europe with the force of a nuclear bomb, and the world has never been the same. Why? Several factors contributed to the immense and immediate impact of the *Ninety-Five Theses*:

- Politically, the rise of nationalism created conditions in Europe which were ripe for the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire and the political power of the Catholic Church.
- Economically, the end of feudalism and a rising middle-class created conditions ripe for the so-called "Protestant work ethic" which denied that one needed to be a priest, a monk, or a nun in order to please God, but rather that any work could bring God glory. The farmer who plows his field in faith, the blacksmith who shoes horses in faith, the mother

who raises her children in faith bring God just as much glory as the pastor who preaches his sermon in faith.

- Technologically, the invention of the printing press with moveable type enabled the mass publication and dissemination of the writings of the Reformation, not to mention the Scriptures in the vernacular languages.
- Culturally, the Enlightenment brought about conditions that valued free thought and the study of the classics, including the Scriptures in their original Hebrew and Greek.

But above all of these factors, one rises to the top. Luther had found the answer to the most pressing question of human existence – how can a sinful man be justified in the sight of a holy God? In the gospel, Luther found the solution to the guilt that plagues the human conscience. Guilt is not remitted, sin is not forgiven, the conscience is not cleansed, and man is not justified through the purchase of an indulgence or works of penance of any kind, but by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That is why Luther and his *Ninety-Five Theses* exploded upon the scene of history and forever changed the world. Luther brought the gospel of justification *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus* out of its Babylonian captivity in the Catholic Church and restored it to the true church of Christ. That is why the *Ninety-Five Theses* mattered 500 years ago and why they still matter today.

Beloved, your greatest problem is God's righteous wrath against your sin, and your only hope is God's righteous mercy offered through the death and resurrection of His righteous Son. The righteousness God requires, God gives... by grace alone... through faith alone... apart from works of the law, or works of penance. Do you have that righteousness? Have you felt yourself reborn, and walked through open doors into paradise? I hope you have. If you haven't, then why not embrace God's free gift of mercy? Why not wrap yourself by faith in Christ's righteousness which He offers freely by grace? As it was 500 years ago, so it remains today. There are only two paths which men tread in their attempt to attain to salvation – the way of faith, and the way of works. But only one ends in life, as it is written, "*The righteous shall live by faith*" (Rom. 1:17).