

Reformation Day

In 1514, Albert of Mainz became the Archbishop. Being the Archbishop of Mainz made one a member of the prestigious Electoral College: a group of seven members, three ecclesiastical rulers (the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne) and four secular rulers (the king of Bohemia, the Margrave of Brandenburg, the Count Palatine of the Rhine, and the Duke of Saxony) whose responsibility it was to elect emperors.

Obtaining such a position did not come without expense, and in order to finance becoming the Archbishop, Albert borrowed 21,000 ducats from a famously rich banker. In order to pay off his debt, Albert obtained permission from Pope Leo X to collect alms in return for indulgences, provided that half of the money collected would be forwarded to the papacy in order to help finance the building of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. In 1517, Pope Leo X commissioned John Tetzel as the Commissioner of Indulgences for all of Germany.

To understand what an indulgence is, one must first understand Roman soteriology (doctrine of salvation), that is one must first understand how a Roman Catholic believes a person is justified.

Roman Catholics believe that grace is a commodity that one can accumulate through faith empowered good works, and that justification is therefore a process by which you accumulate enough "grace" through faithful works to justify yourself. Being born again, according to Roman soteriology, is a process that begins at water baptism and progresses until death, at which time you may or may not have any certainty about whether you had accumulated sufficient grace to avoid purgatory and go directly to heaven.

Purgatory, according to Rome's teaching, is the place where souls who didn't have enough grace in this life to be sufficiently cleansed from sin's stain, would suffer punishment. Even if a sin was confessed and forgiven by a priest, unless an "indulgence" was received from an ecclesiastical authority, one could expect to spend time in purgatory being punished for their sins at least until that punishment erased the guilt of their sin. Once the individual had been sufficiently punished in purgatory, his sins were purged, and he could continue on into heaven.

An indulgence therefore was a pardon or release from the expectation of punishment in purgatory, presuming of course that the sinner had been granted absolution by a priest already.

John Tetzel came to Wittenberg Germany in 1517, generating money to pay off Albert's debt, and to build up Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, but when Tetzel began to sell these indulgences to the uneducated German on masses, it struck a nerve.

Tetzel had created a chart itemizing prices for various sins, and sloganeering with such crass slogans as "As soon as the gold in the casket rings - the rescued soul to heaven springs" and even claiming that the indulgences he sold could save a soul who violated the Virgin Mary.

God was about to force the Church to examine what it had become, and to choose for itself whether to pursue God or mammon. The original reformers had no intentions to leave the mother church. But God chose to separate his sheep from the treacherous wolves dressed in royalty.

So it was that on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther wrote a letter to Albert of Mainz protesting the sale of indulgences. Included in that letter was a copy of what has come to be called the 95 Theses, the same which were so famously nailed to the Wittenberg Castle church door. The door was a regular bulletin board, being close to and facing the main road through Wittenberg. It was not intended, I believe, to be an act of defiance, but rather an open invitation for scholarly discourse on the matter. However, by the Hand of God's providence, the 95 Theses were quickly translated from Latin into German, printed, and widely copied, making the controversy one of the first in history to be aided by the printing press.

Whatever the case, the event had the effect of a catalyst - bringing to the forefront the profound need for reform in the Roman church. In his preaching and writing, Luther began to emphasize two main points: justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers.

Justification by faith means that Christians can never earn, deserve, or merit God's forgiveness. What we must do is to accept the life and atoning work of Jesus Christ as our substitute.

The priesthood of all believers means that every Christian has his or her own personal relationship with God, reading the Bible and worshiping in his or her own language, and praying directly to God without anyone's going in between.

What we think of as the Reformation, began as a bid from within the Roman Catholic church for reformation - a bid to correct what had become a radical departure from historic Christian faith, and ultimately a bid that was rejected by the papal system, in favor of their present, perversion of the gospel - a money generating, works based soteriology whereby men depend upon the church rather than Christ for salvation. Those who refused to embrace this perversion were excommunicated.

Before the 20th century, many churches celebrated Reformation Day on October 31st, regardless of which day of the week it occurred. Today, most churches that do celebrate it transfer the festival, so that it falls on the Sunday (called Reformation Sunday) on or before October 31st.

The fact that Reformation Day coincides with Halloween may not be mere coincidence. Halloween, being the Eve of All Saints' Day might have been an entirely appropriate day for Luther to post his 95 Theses against indulgences since the castle church would be open on All Saints' Day specifically for people to view a large collection of relics. The viewing of these relics was said to promise a reduction in time in purgatory similar to that of the purchase of an indulgence. Luther may have been shrewd in his choice of that day to post his theses.

This emphasis on the true gospel, justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone has been widely lost today. Luther said, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point." May God raise up a Luther today who will face down the demonic opposition of all the false religion and lift up high the name of Christ and the gospel in truth.