

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (10)

The Reformation Church (1517-1648) – The Word Did Everything

A. Introduction

1. As a young German monk named Martin Luther had discovered, being a Christian in the Medieval Church was exhausting.

Although the church taught that a person was saved from the penalty of sin by faith in Christ, it also taught that the righteousness of Christ they needed to be holy enough to enter heaven, was imparted to them through receiving the sacraments.

So, the faithful Medieval Christian, like Luther, had to make sure they attended enough masses, said enough prayers, did enough penance, to gain enough righteousness to get into heaven and avoid or limit time in purgatory.

The problem was that was no way of knowing whether they had done enough, so on they went with the sacraments.

That was until Luther himself made a discovery that spread across Europe and began the Protestant Reformation.

While teaching through Romans to students at Wittenberg University, he discovered in Romans 1:17 the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone – that Christ's righteousness was not imparted to the believer through the sacraments, but imputed to them by faith alone, so they could be declared fully righteous in God's sight.

"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:17)

In Luther's words, "*This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven*" and he got the assurance he was looking for, that he was right with God because salvation did not depend on whether he had done enough, but wholly on what Christ had done.

Luther's conversion in 1515 and subsequent complaint in 1517 were two key moments that set the stage for the start of the Reformation Church period of church history.

2. The Reformation Church was the period of church history between the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 and its end with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

The catalyst for it was a complaint by Luther, not about the erroneous teaching of the church about how someone was saved, but about the sale of indulgences by a man called Johann Tetzel, who, to raise money for the Pope's grand building project in Rome, was saying that all you needed to do to have your sins could be forgiven and time in purgatory for you or your loved one avoided altogether, was buy one of the indulgences he was selling.

"*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, another soul from purgatory springs*" was one of the jingles Tetzel used.

To understand why Luther was not impressed requires a basic understand of the sacrament of penance and its relationship to indulgences.

Penance was when a Christian who sinned expressed sorrow or contrition for that sin and confessed it to God through the priest, who on behalf of God would pardon them. Usually the Christian would have to do some deed as a temporal penalty to remind them that sin is costly and should not be repeated.

Indulgences were a way of avoiding doing that temporal penalty because in purchasing one (or officially, making the right donation that would coincide with receiving one), the Pope was granting that some of the merit a person needed to get into heaven could be transferred to them from a treasury of merit that contained all the spare merit of Christ and saints who had more than enough merit to enter heaven themselves.

The issue Luther had with Tetzel is that the way he was selling them meant that the person didn't need to express sorrow over their sin, confess them to a priest, or seek to live differently; and because of this he believed that he was misleading people by giving them a false assurance of their spiritual state.

3. Even though he had discovered the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, Luther still thought it was right for a Christian to do penance when they had sinned.

Because if God forgives the Christian without them doing some good works in response or feeling the financial pain to buy an indulgence, it would be easy for them to take his mercy for granted and not see sin's seriousness and the need for them to pursue holy living.

His problem was with the way Tetzel was teaching that salvation could be guaranteed by purchasing an indulgence – an abuse of the church's official teaching.

So, what were the 95 theses that kick started the Reformation?

4. On 31 October 1517, Luther nailed to the door of Castle Church (which served as a bulletin board) in Wittenberg, a list of 95 theses for fellow academics to debate at a "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences".

"Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter."

What did Luther say?

#21: *"Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved."*

#27: *"They preach man [no divine authority] who say that so soon as the penny jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out [of purgatory]."*

#32: *"They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon."*

#36: *"Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon."*

#40: *"True contrition seeks and loves penalties, but liberal pardons only relax penalties and cause them to be hated, or at least, furnish an occasion [for hating them]."*

#41: *"Apostolic pardons are to be preached with caution, lest the people may falsely think them preferable to other good works of love."*

#49: *"Christians are to be taught that the pope's pardons are useful, if they do not put their trust in them; but altogether harmful, if through them they lose their fear of God."*

The 95 theses were published in Latin, but were quickly translated into German and distributed widely.

If, when news of Luther 95 theses, reached the Pope, he had listened and corrected the abuses, Luther would have probably been satisfied and the whole matter would have blown over.

But he didn't.

In fact, within a couple of month, Tetzel had returned fire with his own theses, *"Christians should be taught that the Pope, by authority of his jurisdiction, is superior to the entire Catholic church and its councils, and that they should humbly obey his statutes."*

5. It wouldn't be long before Luther realised that the problem wasn't just the way indulgences were being abused.

The problem was the church itself and especially how the church viewed God's Word.

Having discovered in God's Word that salvation was by faith in Christ alone, Luther would come to the conviction that God's Word alone was authoritative for faith and behaviour and not the declaration of any Pope or council.

B. The Authority of the Word of God

1. Luther never got his debate about the power and efficacy of indulgences, instead he got two debates or rather interrogations about where he believed authority over the Christian lies.

In the second of these, with Johann Eck in 1519, Eck challenged Luther over which had the final say, Scripture or the Pope?

Luther's response, *"A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or council without it. As for the pope's decretal on indulgences I say that neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and councils."*

2. Following these two debates, Luther was convinced that the Bible alone was the supreme authority, wrote three pamphlets which challenged the traditions of the church. These were written in the German of the people, so that the ordinary folk could read and understand them.

The Address to the German Nobility called on the State to clean up the abuses of the church including the idea that only the Pope can interpret Scripture and that only a Pope could summon a council. As long as the Pope had authority over the church, Luther believed, the church would never be reformed.

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church attacked the way the church had been using the sacraments to control people and withhold salvation and any assurance of salvation from them. Whereas the Pope said there were seven sacraments, the Bible said there were two (Baptism and the Lord's Supper).

The Freedom of a Christian was about the relationship between salvation and good works. He wrote that good works were not the means of salvation but the fruit of salvation.

3. The Church, threatened by Luther and the increasing popularity of what he was teaching, responded by issuing a Papal Bull.

A Papal Bull was a decree authenticated by the stamp of the Pope's own bulla or seal.

This Bull outlined 41 errors contained in the 95 Theses, which Luther needed to recant or face excommunication.

No attempt was made to show from Scripture where Luther was wrong. This was about trying to silence him.

"Now therefore we give Martin sixty days in which to submit, dating from the time of the publication of this bull in his district. Anyone who presumes to infringe our excommunication and anathema will stand under the wrath of Almighty God and the apostles Peter and Paul."

Luther's response was *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist* in which he writes:

"It is better that I should die a thousand times than that I should retract one syllable of the condemned articles. And as they excommunicated me for the sacrilege of heresy, so I excommunicate them in the name of the sacred truth of God. Christ will judge whose excommunication will stand. Amen."

The people of Wittenberg burnt their bull to show their support of Luther and defiance of the church.

4. In 1521, Luther was summoned by the Emperor Charles V to renounce or reaffirm his beliefs at the Diet of Worms.

Luther believed that he was going to his death.

As the Emperor presided over this assembly, Luther was examined by Eck, who confronted him with a pile of his books.

He asked Luther whether the books were his. Luther replied, "Yes".

He asked whether Luther was willing to defend them all. Luther answered by saying that if his books were shown to disagree with what the Bible taught, he would be the first to throw them into the fire.

No evidence was forthcoming. Instead Eck responded by saying, "*I ask you, Martin – answer candidly and without horns – do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?*"

Luther then replied with those famous words: "*Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – 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 can do no other, may God help me. Amen.*"

Through the debates and diets, books and bull, the big thing that comes through is Luther's clear conviction that God's Word alone has supreme authority over the church and the Christian.

5. The Emperor pronounced Luther a heretic and issued an Edict outlawing Luther and his writings.

The plan was then to put Luther to death.

Why didn't he die?

For the simple reason that Frederick the Wise had him kidnapped, and then hid him at Wartburg Castles, when Luther became known for the next 10 months as Sir George.

And from Wartburg Castle the Word of God was unleashed upon Germany.

C. The Unleashing of the Word of God

1. Luther's time at Wartburg Castle was difficult but highly productive.

Amid doubts and depression and insomnia, he wrote books and tracts.

The most important thing Luther did was to translate Erasmus's Greek New Testament into German, so that the people could read the Bible in their own language. In doing so he discovered in Matthew 4:17, that God did not demand penance but repentance.

2. When eventually he returned to Wittenberg he sought to bring about further reformation through simple and clear preaching of God's Word.

This required a change to the service.

No longer was it in Latin instead it was in German. No longer was the Mass central instead it was the sermon.

Luther didn't stop there.

Hymn singing using the tunes of the tavern was introduced to educate the people.

He wrote basic explanations of the faith (catechisms) to be memorised.

And he got rid of bishops because he found no warrant for them in Scripture, and abolished the requirement of celibacy for priests.

3. Lutheranism had arrived and was spreading throughout Germany and would take root in Scandinavia as well.

Eventually it would be given equal legal recognition with the Roman Catholic Church in 1555, following a process that began at the first Diet of Speyer in 1526.

It was during this process that the term Protestant was first used to describe those who protested against a decision made by the second Diet of Speyer in 1529 that gave freedom to Catholics in Lutheran lands to continue to be Catholics but not Lutherans in Catholic lands who were forced to move.

4. Luther by his death in 1546 was according to the biographer Roland Bainton, *"an irascible old man, petulant, unrestrained, and at times positively coarse."*

He was far from perfect, but God used him to play an important role in rediscovering the gospel found in God's Word that had been lost and to begin reforming a church according God's Word.

Luther however would not take any of the credit for this.

In his own words: *"I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word... And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it. I did nothing, the Word did everything."*

D. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. Do we recognise the authority of the Word in our day?

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The question of authority is still the most pressing issue facing the church.

Will the church submit to the authority of God's Word, even if it puts us out of step with the mainstream?

e.g. Issues such as women in church leadership or acceptance of same-sex relationships/marriage.

2. Do we trust the Word will do everything in our day?

"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

Do we believe God will use His Word to save and to change?

If we do, we will unleash it.

The preaching of the Word will be central to our gatherings and to our evangelism.