

The Reformation Began with Finding Righteousness of Faith

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ACCORDING TO LEGEND, on October 31, 1517, Augustinian monk Martin Luther posted 95 theses, or arguments against the sale of indulgences, on the church door of Wittenberg Castle. The actual theses-nailing incident is not certain and may well be an assumption. In any case, Luther drew up and sent his theses to Archbishop Albrecht of Magdeburg. The Roman Pope had previously assented to eight years of indulgences, the proceeds of which would be used for the repair of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, or so it was told to the people. The other half of the funds was going to Archbishop Albrecht's debt. He had purchased a number of official posts from the Pope and was in debt to an Augsburg brokerage house. Luther did not know about the latter use of the money when he began his struggle.

Finding Righteousness of Faith

What earlier events gave rise to the battle conditions? In 1505 at the age of 21, Luther entered the monastery to find peace for his heart. However, the time in the monastery did not bring him what he sought deep inside. He describes what he felt in that state of mind: "The phrase 'God's righteousness' was like a lightning strike to my heart. For when I, as one under the Pope's authority, read Psalm 31:1: 'Deliver me in thy righteousness' and Psalm 86:11 'in thy truth,' I thought immediately that this righteousness was the punitive rage of God's wrath. Right from my heart I hated Paul when I read: 'The righteousness of God [is] revealed from faith to faith' (Rom. 1:17)."

Luther continued: "It is true that I have been a pious monk and kept my order's rules so precisely that I can say: If ever a monk, by merit of his monkhood, has made it to heaven, I, too, should have been able to get there. All my monastery comrades, who knew me, would surely testify of this. For I would have, if it would have lasted (even) longer, tortured myself to death, in watching, praying, reading and doing other work." (Weimar edition of Luther's works 38, p. 143.) Luther transferred from the monastery to Wittenberg University as a teacher and obtained his doctorate in 1512. By this time, he found faith and the righteousness of faith. He says this in the so-called table talks: "Under the Pope's authority I was a deeply struck down monk and always in the greatest distress. I finally received consolation from a certain brother, with these words only: 'He himself (Christ) has offered hope. Our salvation is faith in God; why should we not be willing to trust God, who asks for, and commands our hope of us?' With these words, he made me alive again."

Some who write of Luther's life refer to this, his own account, and see it as his conversion. This experience is connected to the so-called tower experience, of which Luther tells in the preface to his works in the Latin language. Luther's study room was in the Augustinian monastery's tower wing. In studying Scripture night and day, it became clear and opened to him "that which the gospel reveals."

Many, like Luther, have felt the same way after accepting the good news of the gospel. In like manner it happened when Paul preached in Berea, an event to which Luther refers in his writings. When the people believed God's Word, they studied the Scriptures after the fact to see whether things were so (Acts 17:11). According to his own account, Luther studied about God's grace in the Bible in the same way. In particular, he had before him Romans 1:17: "The just shall live by faith."

Luther recalls: "There I began to comprehend God's righteousness as that upon which a righteous one lives, as a gift of God, namely by faith. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God...by which the merciful God justifies us through faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.'" He felt as if he had entered the gates of Paradise.

The Holy Spirit Opened Understanding

About 20 years later, Luther recalled that phase: "The words 'God's righteousness' and 'righteous' struck my soul like lightning: If I heard them, they horrified me. If God is just, He must mete out punishment. But when once in this tower and chamber I pondered these words (Rom. 1:17) 'The just shall live by faith' and 'righteousness of God,' I soon thought about the guidance of God's grace: If the righteous are to live by faith, and if the righteousness of God is to bring salvation to everyone who believes, it cannot happen on our own merit, but by God's mercy. For God's righteousness is that we are justified and redeemed through Christ's righteousness. Now, these words became the sweetest words to me. In this tower, the Holy Spirit opened Scripture to me."

Luther's comprehension of the righteousness of faith was reflected in his lectures. In particular, his Epistle to the Romans lecture shows that he broke with the scholastic teaching of his time on faith, which relied on man's ability and free will.

Reformation Battle Begins

The question in indulgences was the buying of freedom from punishment for sins with money. Luther himself had received the forgiveness of sins through faith and been freed from the guilt of sin. His letter containing the theses to Archbishop Albrecht was polite, but the actual matter at hand was clear and stark: He asked the archbishop to annul the indulgence decree.

The archbishop acknowledged receiving the arrogant Wittenberg monk's tract. He sent the theses on to Rome, apparently due to the fact that the theses had received widespread public attention in Germany. A contemporary wrote: "Within two weeks the theses spread throughout all Christendom, just as if the angels themselves would have been the messengers."

A lot of fumbling is still apparent in the theses, but we can clearly see the main principles on the key issues. The main thesis is the criticism of the practice where a person tries to reconcile his sins with money. The preceding theses already were the lead-in for it:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent", he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.
27. They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.
32. Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.
37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.
42. Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy.
43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.
49. Christians are to be taught that papal indulgences are useful only if they do not put their trust in them, but very harmful if they lose their fear of God because of them.
62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

In the theses there was still much that Luther later wished to forget. He was still the Roman Pope's faithful servant. Nevertheless, his folksy presentation and the main principles of faith he put forth garnered unusually broad support throughout Germany. When he summed up the teaching of the theses in his published tract, his comprehension of the righteousness of faith was already therein: "If anyone thinks himself able to make recompense for his sins, he is badly mistaken: After all, God always forgives sins for free of His infinite, precious grace and wants nothing in payment for them other than that man would thence- forth live a proper life."

Luther's relationship with the Pope and the Church's teaching changed. In his battle writings on the Babylonian captivity of the Church, he returns to these [Reformation] phases: "I wrote about indulgences two years ago, but in such a way that now publishing the entire booklet comes back to haunt me. At the time, I was, in fact, still under the power of the Roman tyranny's superstitious worship....Indulgences are the heinous invention of the Roman pacifiers."

Alone by Faith, Alone by Grace, Alone for Christ's Sake

Before the papal court reacted to the theses, a debate was held in Heidelberg on April 25, 1518. Johan von Staupitz, chief inspector of Augustine monasteries, offered Luther an opportunity to defend his doctrine.

At the debate Luther presented the doctrine of faith that human deeds do not lead to righteousness, even though they might seem good. Attempting this, man adds sin upon sin and becomes twice as guilty. Man is free only to commit sin. The point was aimed at the Church's view of human abilities, goodness, and honor. It was also reflected on the pursuit of earthly honor and power. The righteousness of faith means rejecting one's own road for the sake of Christ's merits and the way of the cross. Only through that will one come to know God. Luther never relinquished this theology of the cross.

The Scripture Principle Arises

It was demanded that Luther come to Rome for a hearing in August 1518. Making that happen was delayed, however, in that the Pope needed the consent of the Duke Frederick, Elector of Saxony, who protected the Wittenberg University teacher. Luther's renown had risen, and it benefited the newly established university.

Nevertheless, Luther was forced to appear for inter-rogation before Cardinal Cajetan at the Diet of Augsburg in October 1518. In announcing this to the Elector of Saxony, the Pope also insisted that this "child of corruption, brother Martin Luther" be handed over to the Holy See. The situation was difficult.

In Augsburg three interviews were held. One phrase was required of Luther: I recant. It did not come. A key question was of the cache of merits which Christ had earned, which the popes had used as the basis for their power of the keys. The Pope could release Christians even from sin's temporal punishments (indulgences). Another contentious issue was the Pope's position of being exclusively authorized to interpret Scripture. The Augsburg discussions were fruitless. Upon learning that Rome intended to use violence against him, Luther left the city in the night at the Elector's exhortation.

In January 1519, the Pope's notary made an attempt at reconciliation in the Elector's Wittenberg castle. Luther was to give a conciliatory statement and ask forgiveness for his zealotry and then remain silent, at which point his opponents would also become silent.

Luther was ready for this. He still felt himself to be a faithful servant of the Church. His opponents, however, did not leave him in peace. In the summer of the same year, he, with Professor Eck, attended a debate in Leipzig where he announced his adherence to the Scripture-only foundation. The formal principle of the Reformation had been publicly spoken aloud.

The Scripture Principle, which Luther proclaimed, became the Reformation's abiding principle. Luther did not try to establish a new church, but rather to return to the teachings of apostolic times by removing deviations and interpretations that had come later. These had taken [the Church's teachings] away from the core of Scripture. From this emerged an intensely contentious question, both in the debate with Eck and in later stages. What is surprising is the great amount of interpretation and use of Scripture in Luther's works.