

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION IN 1517: MARTIN LUTHER HAMMERS A NAIL THAT RATTLES THE WORLD

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“Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.” —Hebrews 10:38-39

Almost 500 years ago an obscure monk challenged the Roman Catholic Church’s practice of selling indulgences. For a few coins the purchase of an indulgence granted the recipient the instant forgiveness of sins with the promise of time off from the refining fires of “purgatory.” The money raised in the sale of salvation was used to pay off the debts of the German archbishop and to help build the colossal St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome.

Martin Luther was the monk who dared to challenge the archbishop and pope. Luther had been carefully studying the Psalms and the book of Romans. In the Psalms he began to understand that God forgives sinners directly out of His mercy: *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity...* (Psa 32:1,2). From his study of Romans Luther’s thinking on the gospel was sharpened. *“The gospel of Christ... is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes....”* The Christian gospel was not found in the church’s sale of salvation. No, it was only in God’s eternal Son taking human form to live and die in behalf of sinners. Through faith sinners received God’s pardon out of the abundance of divine mercy sealed in the cross of Christ (Rom 1:16,17).

Young Luther posted his arguments against the sale of indulgences on the door of the castle church in his town. He intended his “95 Theses” to be used as the basis of a debate for local churchmen. No one ever came to debate Luther, but his theses were read with glee at the thought that a German monk would challenge the pope of Rome. Thesis #82 especially captures the sentiment of the theses and the literary flair of Luther:

“Why does not the Pope empty purgatory for the sake of most holy charity and of the supreme necessity of souls, —this being the most just



of all reasons, —if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of that most fatal thing, money, to be spent on building a basilica—this being a slight reason.”

Local supporters copied the debate propositions, and, thanks to the newly invented printing press, copies of Luther’s theses were in Rome within three weeks, and in Jerusalem within three months.

But it was not the new technology in mass communication that sparked the Reformation. Rather, it was Who had prepared the times and shaped His man for the hour. Other faithful men had called for church reform, but in Martin Luther God’s truth was communicated through the combination of Luther’s exceptional gifts of piety, energy, an indomitable will, and literary genius. The Lord stood by Luther during his biggest challenges, and preserved him as a champion of the gospel after a price was placed on his head.

By God’s grace Martin Luther lived nearly 30 years beyond his 95 theses and he was able to see the growth and success of the German Reformation. What had begun as the righteous indignation of one man with a pen and a hammer grew into a strong, Bible-believing church in Germany that became the model for Protestantism. The Reformation changed the world, and Bible-believers today still can pay a small token toward our huge debt of gratitude by our annual commemoration of the Reformation that started on October 31, 1517.



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