

Martin Luther: Bound by the Word of God

by Christopher Lensch, WRS Instructor in Church History

Selling Salvation?

In October of 1517, Martin Luther was disturbed that officials of the Roman Catholic church were selling forgiveness of sins for money. The pope needed hard cash to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and the new German archbishop needed crowd-funding to pay off the loan he incurred to buy his church office. Few people seemed scandalized by the sale of church indulgences, but Martin Luther's conscience had become enlightened—Luther had been studying the Bible, and he had come to understand the free grace of the gospel.

Dr. Luther threw down the gauntlet on the eve of All Saints Day (the "Hallowed Evening" before November 1) when he nailed to the church door his 95 Theses challenging papal indulgences. He was generous to Pope Leo in writing, *"Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burnt to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep"* (Thesis #50). But he comes to the heart of the matter in Thesis #45 in striking a blow for true Christian charity and for God's righteousness: *"Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgence, but God's wrath."*

More was at stake than the abuses of a corrupt Catholic church or of a growing "Church.INC." People's souls were at stake! Luther grieved as a shepherd of souls. What could one obscure monk do to help cure the church? Where could Luther turn for guidance and support to fight God's battle? Luther turned to God's Word.

Sufficiency of God's Word

Since God has given the Word by His Spirit, Luther recognized the Bible as the very Word of God, the only divine revelation for humankind. The Bible is relevant and thoroughly reliable for understanding God and living before Him with a clean conscience.



Are Christians to blindly follow human leaders in spiritual matters? Luther realized that popes, church councils, and venerated church fathers could and did err. They contradicted each other and often contradicted the clear teaching of the Bible. With his heart and mind taken captive by God's Word, Luther was God's timely prophet to proclaim that human authority must bend the knee

to divine authority.

Luther did not totally jettison church councils nor the fathers, but he rightly recognized them as fallible and incomplete. The pope's public sin of indulgences moved Luther to put his sole trust in the sufficient Word of God.

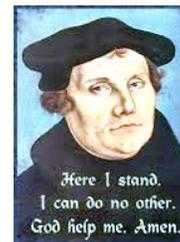
Fruit of the Reformation

With the Bible as the highest spiritual authority recognized by Protestants, liberating changes began to move the western world out of the medieval malaise.

- ❖ The truth of justification freed individuals from human bondage. One's relation to God cannot be mediated through priests nor is it established by personal merit; rather, it comes only through God's merciful provision for the sinner in Christ's sacrifice.
- ❖ Recognizing Christ as the ever-living High Priest, there is no need for a papal vicar of Christ on the earth. True Christians are themselves called priests (1Pet 2:9). The Protestant doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" rightly led to lay involvement in the church and to democracy among the nations.
- ❖ With the Reformed recognition of the equality of all people as "image-bearers" of God and of all Christians as the priesthood of God, old social structures began to be pulled down. Princes and pastors still were honored by Reformed Christians, but leaders no longer were intrinsically superior to the feudal peasant. All sinners meet at the foot of the cross! Therefore the social importance of the individual was promoted; the peasant's life and work were important in God's eyes, and personal protections began to be afforded individuals of all ranks.
- ❖ Like the Westminster Confession of Faith, Luther early argued that "God is the Lord of the conscience." Sinners cannot be compelled to enter or obey the church. They must believe freely the message of the gospel; coerced participation and lockstep conformity in the church denies the need for the gospel of grace. This truth led to greater freedom in religion while undercutting the basis of the Roman Inquisition.
- ❖ Since the Bible came to be recognized as the sole authority in Protestant churches for restraining leaders and directing church rule, it was a natural step for Protestants to move toward national constitutional government where the supreme law of the land would check ambitious political leaders, breaking the history of tyrants trampling the law.
- ❖ Luther's re-discovery of justification by faith alone brings personal peace. Because salvation is what God has done in Christ to bring us to Himself, there is nothing we can add or do to placate God. The biblical view corrected the perverted Roman notion that God "helps" us find Him by "infusing" grace within in us. The Protestant doctrine of justification frees Christians from self-incrimination and second-guessing our salvation. Christ's life and death are sufficient to bring us to God apart from our effort.

A Bound Conscience

Luther's tender conscience found hope in the pages of the Bible. Once his conscience was bound by the authority of God's Word, Luther found courage to stand before Europe's greatest princes and to testify of the exclusive beauty, truth, and power of the Bible. God used an obscure monk to reform the church, and in that Reformation came the vitality of the western world.



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