

Thy Strong Word

In the name of him whose thoughts and ways are higher than the heavens above our own, dear friends in Christ: Today marks the 504th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. As every Lutheran knows, it started when an Augustinian friar (who was also a catholic priest, a parish pastor, and a university professor of theology – busy guy) nailed his 95 theses against the sale of indulgences to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Saxony. It was not a protest or an act of rebellion as some have described it. It was an invitation to an honest debate. The friar, Martin Luther, in his studies of Holy Scripture, noticed a glaring difference between what the church was doing and telling people and what the Word of God actually said. He thought something's broken here. We need to fix it. So, here are 95 statements against the sale of indulgences that I am prepared to defend. Let someone who supports indulgences come forward in an open public debate and prove me wrong – on any one or all of them. We'll have the debate, and we'll see who has the better argument. It was nothing unusual. It's the way all academic theories and theological issues were resolved in those days.

But that's not how those who were enriching themselves with the vast sums indulgences raked in saw it. In their view, Luther was questioning the authority of Holy Mother Church and that of Christ's sole appointed representative on earth, the bishop of Rome. If the Church was doing something, they said, and if the Pope approved of it, well, then it couldn't be wrong. God doesn't make mistakes and he won't let his Church make one either. So, there will be no debate. Luther, withdraw your statements, sit down, shut up, and believe what we tell you. You must. You are compelled to do so under pain of excommunication and sentence of death – and not just any death, but by being burned alive at the stake.

Unfortunately for them, the cat was out of the bag. The 95 theses did not remain long where Luther posted them on what was effectively the university's bulletin board. They were taken by printers who copied them on that relatively new wonderful invention: the printing press. They had been around for about 100 years, and every city of consequence had at least one. So, when a copy of the theses came to a city, the printers there thought, "This stuff is dynamite! People will want to read this". So they recopied it. They translated into other languages. And before long practically everyone in Europe who could read had done so with the 95 theses. Many of them, not surprisingly, considered what Luther had written and thought, "Yeah. Something smells like rotten fish here. Indulgences stink."

Indeed they do. To understand why, we need to consider the erroneous theological ideas that spawned them. The basic notion was this: the medieval church in the west taught that all sins committed incurred a penalty; the bigger the sin, the bigger the penalty. Good works, on the other hand, earned merits. Merits cancelled penalties. The more good works you did, the more penalties you owed were cancelled. Christ, in his sacrifice on the cross, did not die to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. No, he died in obedience to his Father's will in order to earn merit. It was his big good work. That big work earned enough merit to save a true believer from hellfire, but it didn't save you from the penalties of the sins you commit. You still owe on those. And you must make up for those penalties with good works in this life or with suffering in a place the church made up called Purgatory in the next. Purgatory is like temporary hell: a place of torment where sins are purged away by fire. Once you pay your penalty in full, you get out of Purgatory and go to heaven.

Now, no one wants to go hell, even a temporary one. So a Christian's goal in this life is to accumulate as many merits as possible by their good works – good works that the church very narrowly defined. Being a good husband or wife, a good parent, a hard working farmer or tradesman, helping your neighbor in need, those sorts of things didn't count. No, attending mass – even if you didn't commune – that was a good work. Going on pilgrimages to sacred sites, observing the prescribed fasts, venerating the relics of saints and apostles, mindlessly repeating the prayers of the rosary, becoming a monk or nun and so dedicate yourself to a life of celibacy and constant spiritual meditation – these and other things like them were good works approved by the church that earned merits.

Take it a step further: it was assumed that the vast majority of Christians when they died would be in debt. They'd have more penalties than merits and so have to go to Purgatory to pay off the balance. That might mean thousands, tens of thousands of years of enduring hell-like torture; but hey, eventually you pay your debt and go on to glory. Ah, but there is a small group of especially good and pious people who had done so well and earned so many merits in this life that they were able to pay off their entire debt and still have a surplus of merits. They get to skip Purgatory and go directly to heaven. These are the saints. And what becomes of their excess merits, the ones they didn't need to pay off their sin debt? They go into a special account called the "Treasury of Merits". This treasury, the church claimed, was at its disposal. And we are happy to give you some of these merits—for a price. That's what an indulgence is: a draft on the Treasury of Merits. You were buying the excess merits of saints who earned them by their good works. Well, the church would deny that you were actually buying them, nothing as crass as that. No, they would say you were earning them by your good work of making a donation to the church. See? You understand the difference? I sincerely hope not.

Okay, take it two steps further: selling indulgences was a huge cash cow for the church and its leaders, but a couple of factors made it even more so in the sixteenth century. The first was our friend the printing press. Formerly, indulgences had to be hand written by monks holed up in some monastery. They were relatively rare, costly, and hard to get. Making use of modern technology, the church could now mass produce them and sell them for a lower price. And they did. But they could only sell so many of them. If everyone buys what was called a plenary indulgence, that is, an indulgence that was enough to cancel all the time they owed in Purgatory, they never needed to buy another. So, to solve this problem, the church came up with the idea of making it possible for you to purchase indulgences for your dead loved ones who were burning in Purgatory. You, for a comparatively small price – er, I mean "donation" – could rescue mom or dad or your beloved Uncle George from ages of sizzling torment. And boy, won't they be grateful to you when they meet you in the next life if you do.

And my did the money pour in – pour in torrents like Niagara Falls until some obscure friar in Saxony spoke up and pointed out that the Emperor (or in this case the Pope) had no clothes – by which I mean no biblical basis for teaching such things as earning merits, Purgatory, and selling indulgences. Practically overnight the river of filthy money produced by indulgences dried up to become a trickling stream. You had better believe *that* got the attention of those who had been profiting from indulgences. They went after Luther with a vengeance – which in turn caused him to question a lot of other things that the church was teaching. I mean, if those who insisted that they had all the answers were so wrong on this issue – so wrong that they weren't even willing to have an honest, open discussion about it – what else were they teaching wrong?

For Luther it all came down to a question of authority. Who speaks for God? Who determines what is true in spiritual matters? Is it the bishop of Rome, the magisterium of the church, and the practices that have become part of the church's accepted tradition? Or is it God himself speaking through his Word? What, or rather Who are you going to believe?

Recall that Luther was steeped in the church's teaching and traditions. He firmly believed in its system of penalty and merit. He tried, Lord, how he tried, to live a righteous life under that system. He found that it was an endless treadmill: no matter how far you walked on it, you never got any closer to the goal. If anything, he found himself increasingly farther away from it. It brought him to despair. But then he rediscovered the Gospel that had been hidden in plain sight in the text of Holy Scripture: the truth that God saves sinners by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, who gave himself on the cross as the sacrifice that atones for the sins of the world. When that truth sunk in, the relief he felt was immense; but he was uncertain. Could it be that simple? Could God be so gracious and forgiving for Christ's sake? He searched the Scriptures looking at it through this new lens of insight and found that it was everywhere. The system of penalty and merit the church was teaching, that is, its legalistic way of interpreting the Scripture, doesn't work. It's a dead end. The Law was not given to help us attain righteousness. It was given to show us that we can't attain righteousness by means of the Law. It's to direct us to the One who earned righteousness for us, who imputes righteousness to us through faith in his promise. Writing to the churches of Galatia, Paul says it this way: "If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."

So, here's Luther faced with a dilemma: the established religious authorities say *this* is true. *This* is what God's Word says. And the Holy Scripture – that is to say, God says – something entirely different. Luther decided that it was much safer to stick with God's actual Word. Those who claimed to speak for God weren't. They weren't saying what God says.

In their arguments against Luther, besides trying to pull rank and claiming papal infallibility, they appealed to human reason. It's a powerful argument. We are by nature legalists. We understand penalty and merit, debt and repayment, punishment and reward. It makes sense to us. It's ingrained into us. It's the way the world works. To be righteous before God, it only makes sense that we've got to work toward being righteous. We've got to repay our debts. It's not reasonable to believe that God declares righteous those who are not.

But God's thoughts aren't our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways. He operates on a much higher plane. Human reason must subject itself to his wisdom, which is at odds with the wisdom of the world. What God says trumps what mankind thinks. As we sang in the last hymn, "Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous." God declares us righteous when we believe that Jesus paid the full penalty of our sins.

Luther had hoped to restore this pure Gospel of Jesus Christ to a church that had lost its way and was obscuring its saving truth under a legalistic system of penalty and merit. For his efforts, he was rewarded by being excommunicated and placed under the ban of the Empire. If he had been caught, he would have burned. Fortunately for him he was under the protection of princes and dukes who, like Luther, believed God's Word rather than what the bishop of Rome and his minions were saying. It allowed Luther to continue his work of reforming the church, preserving those traditions and practices that conformed to God's Word, and removing those that opposed it.

We are blessed to be the spiritual heirs of Luther's lifetime of work in the Holy Scriptures, along with the many other theologians and laypersons who worked with him to restore God's Word to its proper place of authority in the church. Let God be true and every man a liar.

May the Lord in his infinite mercy keep us in his saving truth that we may live lives of repentance and fearless faith in the promises he has made to us for Christ's sake in his strong, authoritative, infallible, and Holy Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!