

The Festival of the Reformation (transferred)
St. John 8:31-36; 95 Theses

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said, 'Repent,' willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance."

That opening thesis of the 95 on the power and efficacy of indulgences was the first pebble—grain of sand, perhaps—tossed into the pond which would be the 16th century Reformation, which would eventually birth the Lutheran Church and give rise to the various other protestant traditions around the world. Now, while these theses would be material worthy of our studies on Wednesday night, they were not intended to start a new confession or church body, and certainly not a document intended to reform the Church on earth in its entirety. Martin Luther simply wanted to talk about indulgences and if they were truly effective in releasing people from Purgatory or if they were a pious fraud being sold to ordinary Christians in order to fill the church's coffers—a singularly focused reformation, perhaps.

Fortunately for Luther and those who lived in his country, the local governments served a roll in how the church operated—there was no separation of church and state—and his prince elector did not allow the sale of indulgences in his land; nor did the neighboring prince. Unfortunately, Luther's parishioners (and likely those from neighboring parishes) would travel to where the sale was permitted, purchase an indulgence, then return to show Luther the piece of paper that proclaimed them freed from sin and no longer needing repentance. Outraged by the fact that people had paid for their forgiveness—grace that was freely theirs by right of being a son of God in Christ—Luther is said to have taken the indulgences, torn them up, and burned them, at least as I have heard it told.

"Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said, 'Repent,' willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance." "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," thesis 49.

The idea of never again needing repentance, or at the very least, not needing it even for a brief moment, carries with it a loss of the fear of God. Think about it: the Law says you are a sinner, but you carry with you a piece of paper—a simple piece of paper signed by a fellow sinner—stating that you are free from the need to repent. God says you have sinned and deserve to die for it, repent! And your reply is, "Whatever! The pope has freed me from the need to repent." God, in His righteous wrath, is justly angered by sin, yet Christians in the early 1500s laughed in His face, clutching a piece of paper for which they paid a silver coin.

How did they get there? Well, to begin with, the Romish church falsely taught, and still teaches, that repentance consists of three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The Law is proclaimed, showing a Christian his sins, for which he confesses, and then is given something to do to make satisfaction for the sins confessed (and maybe a little extra for the sins not yet remembered). You probably know satisfaction as the "10 Our Fathers and 10 Hail Marys" that a Roman Catholic must recite after coming out of the confessional booth, though there may be other works attached to these recitations. These three parts met, the repentant is said to then have merited forgiveness. With the practice of indulgences, at the simplest, they replaced the third part of repentance, satisfaction, or even the fullness of repentance, as Rome taught it.

Given the Romish doctrine of repentance, and its accompanying doctrines, indulgences were a simple means out from under the weight of sin. To illustrate, imagine a man shackled to his sins—they are like a ball and chain to him. He knows they're there; after all, every Christian was taught that they were a sinner. So, he makes confession of them. Now, still shackled to them, he must perform a good work to rid himself of them. He is expected to do good in order to make up for the good that he couldn't do in the first place, to put it most simply, while still bearing the weight and consequences of

not doing that first good—while still shackled to his sins. Consciences would be burdened with wonder: “Can I do the good I need to do?” “Can I do enough good?”

Along come indulgences which, for a few pennies, would ease the conscience of the burdened. Instead of earning forgiveness by way of works, one could now buy their way out from under the burden of sin and repentance, as Rome taught it.

Now, as Christians of the Reformation, you should be able to see the error of both ways. They squarely put the responsibility of forgiveness on the shoulders of the penitent. They make forgiveness dependent on the work of man, either in doing some good in order to make satisfaction for sin, or paying off the debt of sin by giving money to the church, which is rightly lamented by Christians of the Reformation as being error, as taught by theses 62 through 66:

- The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.
- But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first to be last.
- On the other hand, the treasure of indulgences is naturally most acceptable, for it makes the last to be first.
- Therefore the treasures of the gospel are nets with which one formerly fished for men of wealth.
- The treasures of the indulgences are nets with which one now fishes for the wealth of men.

However, the greater error of indulgences is the error of Rome’s doctrine of repentance—specifically that satisfaction must be made in order to merit forgiveness—which the selling of indulgences compounded.

“Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has part in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and this is granted him by God, even without letters of pardon,” theses 36 and 37.

These two theses are at the heart of the Lutheran doctrine of repentance. The Lutheran Confessions teach that repentance has only two parts, contrition and faith, which you can also understand to be the Law and the Gospel. “The Law reveals sin and drives us to cling to Christ alone. The Gospel, imparted by means of Word and Sacrament, comforts and soothes consciences.” This comfort and soothing comes in the most basic Gospel statement, God’s sweetness to aching consciences: “Your sins are forgiven.” There is no need for satisfaction to be made by the penitent in order to be forgiven for all sin, for it has already been made by the sacrifice of the Only-begotten Son of God on the cross. There is no need to pay with gold or silver in order to be worthy of forgiveness, for the price of your forgiveness has been paid—the holy, precious blood of Christ and His innocent suffering and death. It is done for you, it is paid for you—those little words “for you” which figure so prominently in all of Christ’s work and Lutheran teaching of God’s grace, especially as regards the Lord’s Supper, a means by which the Gospel, that comforting and soothing Word of God, is imparted to you.

The selling of indulgences, indeed the entire doctrine of repentance as Rome taught, is contrary to this, contrary to the Word of God, and blasphemously seeks to set up a means equal to or even better than that set up by God for the forgiveness of sins, as stated in thesis 79: “To say that the cross, emblazoned with the papal arms, which is set up [by the preachers of indulgences], is of equal worth with the Cross of Christ, is blasphemy.”

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” Jesus said. It is in that Word of God where you learn of this two-parted repentance. For the Word of God plainly states, even as Rome taught, that God is a just God, who in righteous wrath, is angered by sin. That Word of God plainly states that sin keeps you in bondage; that is to say, that by your sin, you are unable to work your way out from under it—as even Jesus says in today’s Gospel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,” and a slave has no means to free himself. That Word of God plainly states that the Son of God took on human flesh in order to take upon Himself your sin and bear for you the full wrath of God, in order to free you from your sin. This is the Law and the Gospel—the Law which says that you are a sinner in need of a savior, and the Gospel which

declares to you that Jesus, the Son of God, is your Savior who has set you free from sin. That law brings about contrition in the repentant, who by faith receives the forgiveness that Christ won. "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Now, have things changed? Yes and no.

First, with regard to the Papish church, indulgences are no longer sold. That may be considered a good thing. The Council of Trent in the mid-1500s condemned and abolished the financial abuses tied to indulgences. Furthermore, Pope Paul in his 1967 decree *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* reinforced the reform from Trent. That said, indulgences can still be earned through what may be called spiritual actions—specific prayers, pilgrimages, acts of charity, etc. So, while they may have removed the easy route of buying an indulgence, there is still a transaction that must take place in order to obtain an indulgence, which is may be classified as little more than a semantic difference.

Second, Christians of the Reformation might consider themselves better than Rome for having abandoned the false teaching of repentance. Ironically, however, many still cling to it. Remember thesis 1: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said, 'Repent,' willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance." Though justified by God's grace, you still sin—you live your temporal lives *simul justus et peccator*, at the same time justified and sinner. God is still angered by sin, and that anger is still to be feared. Therefore, Jesus says, "Repent"—confess your sins in contrition, and hear again and receive by faith the wonderful, good news of sins forgiven for Christ's sake.

Still, there exists, even among Christians of the Reformation, those who lack a proper fear of God. While you may not have letters of pardon to put your trust in, and thereby lose the fear of God, there are certainly other items in which to trust and lose a proper fear of God. In fact, some of them may be papers, such as the baptismal certificate or confirmation certificate stuffed in a sock drawer. These, like indulgences, are worthless before God, not even worth the paper or stock they are printed on. They are certainly useful if no trust is put in them, useful as reminders that you have been baptized into Christ and that you reiterated the confession of faith made at your baptism, reminders that you have been washed clean in a most blessed flood and given faith to trust this, and that you promised to remain in that faith and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it. But to hold those up before God as licenses that free you from the life of repentance that Jesus called you to hold no water and Word before the throne of God; the ball and chain are still shackled to your ankle.

For others, it is enough for them that they "belong" to a certain fellowship, that they are members of a Lutheran congregation. In their minds, they are a part of something that believes, teaches, and confesses rightly, whether or not they believe, teach, or confess the same, or even regularly and often participate in the believing, teaching, and confessing (read: worship). For them, that's conscience comforting and soothing, for by believing that by being in with the right crowd, they believe that they are in with God. But to hold one's membership in an organization up as a means of grace show a complete and utter lack of fear of God; the ball and chain are still shackled to your ankle.

These are but two crass examples showing a lack of fear of God. Rightly said, anything in which you trust which is other than God and His Christ for your forgiveness, life, and salvation, demonstrates a lack of fear, love, and trust in God. These are faithless, and they are sin. Indeed, they are all a trust in no one else than yourself. In fact, every sin is a demonstration of a lack of fear, love, and trust in God, as so taught by the Ten Commandments and Luther's explanation of the same.

Therefore, abide in God's Word. Returning to it now, we hear this Word from Christ: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15) Repent of your lack of trust in God and trust in yourself, and believe in the gospel which declares to you the grace of God for you. Thanks be to God that with the command to repent comes the grace and faith to do so, and with the command to believe in the gospel comes the grace and faith to trust in God and receive these words: you are forgiven for all of your sins—no letter of pardon necessary!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.