

## Drawing from the source

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Today is what we call Reformation Sunday. A little over 500 years ago, in 1517, a German priest named Martin Luther made a bold decision: to make public some major problems he was seeing in the Church. And from that day, the Reformation of the church was launched, and so were the beginnings of the Protestant Church.

Now, this wasn't a simple or quick process; Luther went up against some very well-established doctrines, traditions, and beliefs. But what kept him going was the knowledge that he was also up against a false form of justification or path to salvation; he was up against a practice that didn't have Christ at its core, that didn't have God as its source.

As the story goes, Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg on the topic of *indulgences*. Indulgences were a well-established part of the medieval practice of penance. Here's how it worked: a person would go to their priest and confess their sins. The priest, acting as an earthly representative of Jesus and having been given the authority to forgive those sins, would declare that person absolved or freed from their sins. Now, this did not take away the earthly consequences related to their sins. So, say a person stole money. While confession and forgiveness may have kept them on the path to salvation, it did not bring back that missing money. So a priest would have given penalties and works of compensation to help make up for these earthly offences. Often this included prayers and charitable acts. And though these were fairly minor, there was widespread fear that a person's penalties could add up to staggering proportions. In fact, by the year 1500, many people couldn't expect to finish their penalties before the time they died and, therefore, expected to be held in purgatory, a kind of holding place in the next life where they could continue to cancel the accumulated debt of their sins. Now, there were ways to get around all these penalties, and that's where indulgences come in.

People who wanted to relieve themselves of some or all of their penalties were given the option to pay for their removal. And the money collected might go to anything from a fund to build a new basilica (as was the case with St. Peter's Basilica in Rome), to a priest's personal coffer. Indulgences abused people's trust in the Church. Hoping to gain back their salvation and avoid purgatory, people would pay for indulgences in order to not have to worry about their accumulated spiritual debt. In fact, indulgences became a real commercial enterprise. "Indulgence preachers" were commissioned to travel from town to town in order to preach about sin and the accumulation of penalties and the risk of not clearing them from your name before you die. As was aptly stated in a book I have about the Reformation, they were "skilled manipulator[s] of religious anxiety."<sup>1</sup> In fact, their manipulation reached so far as to convince people that even if their balance sheet was in the positive, their loved ones who already died may not be so lucky, and

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth G. Appold, *The Reformation: A Brief History*, 46.

by paying indulgences on their behalf, you might reduce the time those loved ones spend in purgatory.

On the surface, this could potentially be seen as a beautiful form of communal care; a way that the church shares some form of common life and seeks the best for one another in life and death. But in reality, the indulgence preachers used it as a way to stoke anxiety and get more money from the flock. One particularly influential indulgence preacher, named Johann Tetzel, had a phrase he used that became very well-known: “As soon as a coin into the box rings, a soul from purgatory to heaven springs.” The most blaring theological offence in all of this is the idea that salvation can be bought. A salvation that can be purchased with dollars and cents is not a salvation with Christ at the centre. In fact, it’s not salvation at all.

What set off Luther was the fact that, he too, had been very worried about his spiritual welfare—and not because of what indulgence preachers proclaimed, but because he was so much more familiar with the side of God who would punish and who could be destructive. Even as a priest, even as a professor of biblical theology, even as one who thought continually about how to be righteous during his time on earth, Luther worried that it wasn’t enough and that he may not measure up to God’s standards in the end. That is, until he reinterpreted the Bible’s passages about justice. The verse that is said to have put Luther on this new path is Romans 1:17: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” With this newfound interpretation, Luther realized that justice was more than something God *had*, it was something God granted to others. That, if we want to be right with God, we need only have faith in God through Jesus. God is merciful, God is full of grace, and so, God makes just, or righteous, those who are faithful. God’s justice isn’t a standard by which people are measured, rather, it is a quality God shares through faith. No need to pay for indulgences. No need to complete an unending list of penitential tasks. No need for temporal satisfaction. Rather, what you do need is faith; what you do need is to trust in the mercy of a God whose primary aim is love, not punishment.

And so, it’s clear to see why Luther disagreed with indulgences, and why he wrote his 95 theses in order to try and persuade other leaders in the Roman Catholic Church to see the problems they posed, as well. Luther saw God as the source, the person to whom we needed to turn in order to be made righteous. And priests collecting money through indulgences were not keeping God as their source, but rather, money, erroneous teachings, and personal interests. In the end, the Church at that time could not come to agree with Luther and his scriptural discoveries. Instead, Luther was declared a heretic and was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. But his desire to provide pastoral care to those who were feeling depleted in the same way he had, and his mission to teach about a life with God as the source and God’s way of making us righteous people through faith—and not through greed or trickery or erroneous teachings—brought people together in a new way and led to a new community of believers: the Protestant Church.

When we look at our scripture today from 1 Thessalonians, we note Paul's particular tone. Paul has a message to get across to the Thessalonian church, and he does this not with statements meant to induce fear in God or God's punishments, or with pronouncements meant to build religious and spiritual anxiety about one's righteousness, but with a form of persuasion.

When we hear the word persuasion we might associate it with someone who claims to know best and wants to see things done their way. We might think about the snake in the garden of Eden who was the most crafty of all the animals and used its persuasive words to convince Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree. But persuasion isn't always about trickery or selfish desire—that's what coercion is. Persuasion is providing a sound reason for why someone should do something or believe something. And persuasion often requires a sustained effort. Which means you have to really want or believe in what you're persuading others of in order to meet your outcome. Paul really believed in what he was telling the Thessalonians, and he wanted them to truly hear what he was saying to them about his mission of sharing the gospel.

Paul could have used hierarchy and power to get his message across; after all, he has a pretty amazing conversion story, he has made it his life's work to share the gospel, and presumably he has also prayed and reflected and meditated upon God's character, upon God's word, upon the gospel message itself for far longer than anyone else in the Thessalonian church. But Paul doesn't take this angle. He instead uses persuasion as a way to emphasize equality; to show that this isn't about power or hierarchy, but about everyone meeting and discovering life in Christ together and without the burden of guilt or fear or anxiety or deceit. Paul sets himself and his companions up against those whose motives are not pure. Paul states that they have reached out to the Thessalonians not in vain, not with deceit or impure motives, not with trickery, not with greed. Their goal was not to simply flatter them or to seek praise from them, because they came not to please mortals, but to please God.

Paul outlines two ways that they could have approached the Thessalonians, two different paths of ministry they could have taken: one that uses an erroneous or impure source, where the goal is to build and move up the hierarchical ladder through trickery and flattery; or one where, as a result of their courage and faith in God and God's commissioning of them, the goal is to work to please God by gently and genuinely sharing the gospel with others. For Paul, a person's motives and approach to their work needs to be consistent with its source; and Paul's source—God—determines how and why he ministers.

So what does this mean for us today? Well, it can be easy for us to wag our fingers at those who we see as doing the unrighteous thing—that is, the deceitful thing, the showy thing that uses false words of flattery, the thing with impure motives. But when we do this we create "us" and "them." And if we think those things about other people, there are other people who most certainly think those things about us. So then, we're at a standstill.

If there's one thing we unquestionably learn from Paul, it's that being a Christian—having faith in God, and following the teachings of Christ—is not always easy. We learn this from Luther, too. But Paul refuses to give up on God, trusting that God will never give up on him. And through that trust, that faith, everything that pours out of Paul is done to the glory of God. If we erase “us” and “them” and focus instead on doing our work for God, how different might our outcomes be? If we speak like Paul does, with courage in God, and gently, like a parent caring for their own children, how might things change? The biggest mistake you can make is to claim faith in God, but only for your own sake. God does not exist for you, independent of every other person. God is a God of all nations, of all communities, of all groups and churches and people. If you were to seek God as the source of your motives and your work, but only so you can be seen as righteous in God's eyes, then you've missed the point.

When we take a closer look at Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he lists not only the deceitful things that he and companions *have not* done, but also what they *have* done and *who* motivated them. And the answer is God. But it is also the Thessalonians. “So deeply do we care for you,” Paul says, “that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also *our own selves*, because you have become very dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Paul points to their God-as-source motives as something to be shared, and not just so people might accept Christ and be justified and saved, but so that they can journey together, so they can get to know one another deeply, intimately, and become dear to one another, even if they don't get along all the time. It's not just about seeing God as your personal source, but seeing God as the source of your community, as small or as large as that may be. Paul and his companions wanted to share themselves with the Thessalonians, because they were dear to them. Luther wanted to share his knowledge and understanding with others because he cared deeply for their souls and didn't want them to be tricked anymore.

Faith isn't just about righteousness and happiness and following God's instructions. Faith is relational. And when we choose to draw from God as the source of our life and our faith, we discover deep and meaningful connections with our God and with one another. Amen.