

Dear Friends in Christ:

October can bring to mind many things. It is the month of harvest and pumpkins and Halloween. It is the month of longer crisper nights and pleasant days. The trees start to store their chlorophyll which is a mechanistic way of saying they explode into dazzling Fall colors.

For us, October is the month of Reformation. Martin Luther published his 95 Theses on Indulgences on the Eve of All Saints' Day, which is the 31st of October. We translate that day to the last Sunday in October which this year is October 25.

The Christian culture of the late middle ages was obsessed with the coming judgment of God and how it portended death, hell and damnation for sinners. The fear was palpable and ubiquitous. If a merciful God who sought to forgive sin could be found, that god would be embraced by the people. As it was, the just God would judge and condemn sinners and the best that sinners in the church could hope for was to accumulate supernatural grace over many thousands of years in purgatory and then, finally, salvation.

How could one mitigate the years spent in purgatory? The church's primary answer was through participation in the church's sacramental system and through the purchasing of indulgences. While this was financially beneficial to the church, it proved to be a complete corruption of the Gospel of salvation in Christ. Luther pointed out that the only payment that did of us any good and removed us from the list of those rightfully condemned, was the holy and precious blood and innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ. This was his point in publishing the 95 Theses. They are sentences that seek to overturn the whole business model of the medieval church by contrasting contemporary practices with the witness of holy Scripture.

If Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans was correct in his understanding of how the Gospel works: "16For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith," then the sale of indulgences does nothing to save souls. In fact, the sale of indulgences misleads sinners in search of a merciful God, selling them something useless. Purchasing indulgences to get time off of purgatory can give one a false confidence when one instead ought to be led to forgiveness of sins and life everlasting through baptism, confession, absolution, and communion. To be in Christ through participation in his church is all the confidence one needs in life and in the hour of death.

Some have argued that it was not the ideas, but the tone of the 95 Theses that caused such a stir. Here are a couple of the sentences:

87. Again, "What does the pope remit or grant to those who by perfect contrition already have a right to full remission and blessings?" 88. Again, "What greater blessing could come to the church than if the pope were to bestow these remissions and blessings on every believer a hundred times a day, as he now does but once?"

On October 25, we celebrate the Reformation of the Church as the recovery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who paid a debt he did not owe for us who have a debt we cannot pay. No further price can be extracted after this act of amazing grace by which we are saved.

Yours in Christ,

John Shepherd McKenzie