

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
October 29, 2017

**“Here I Stand! I can do no Other!”
Romans 1:16-17**

Two days from now, on October 31, 2017, much of the world will celebrate an event that launched a movement that quite literally changed the course of human history. I'm referring, of course, to the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing of his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg. In recent years, leading up to this anniversary, historical scholars have determined that Luther probably didn't *nail* his 95 theses to the church door. More likely than not, he *mailed* them, and a church custodian of some sort glued the document to the door. But that's not important. What is crucial for us today is to understand why he did this, what happened to Luther in the aftermath, and how all our lives are different because of it.

Martin Luther was born in 1483, approximately eight years after the birth of Michelangelo and nine years before Columbus set sail on his historic journey to find the new world. If your immediate reaction is, “Who?” you aren't alone. A Wall Street Journal survey recently reported that as many as 53% of Protestants in America did not know that Luther was the man who, from a human point of view, launched the Protestant Reformation.

At the age of 18 young Martin entered the University of Erfurt and received his Bachelor of Arts in 1502 and Master of Arts in 1505. Following his father's wishes, he prepared for a career in law. However, two events changed the course of his life. First, he was shocked by the sudden death of a close friend. Second, shortly after this, on July 2, 1505, he was caught in a violent thunderstorm near Erfurt and was so frightened that he fell to the ground and cried out: **“Help, beloved Saint Anna! I will become a monk!”** Anna was the patron saint of miners and people in distress in thunderstorms. He immediately joined the Augustinian convent at Erfurt, much to his father's dismay.

Reflecting on this event some thirty-four years later, Luther said that he regretted making the vow and that many individuals tried to dissuade him from the decision during the two weeks between the vow and the time he actually entered the cloister. It is undeniably true that his father, Hans, was enraged at his son's decision as he had long envisioned a lucrative legal career for Luther.

Luther the Meticulous yet Miserable Monk

Luther proved to be far more than your average Roman Catholic monk. His zeal in religious matters drove his leaders crazy. He virtually worshipped the Virgin Mary. He undertook the most menial and humiliating duties hoping to subdue his pride. He begged in the streets, swept the floor, and subjected his body to rigorous asceticism and self-inflicted torture. He was obsessed with finding the peace of salvation but repeatedly failed. “How can anything I do,” he asked, “be enough to satisfy the righteous demands of an infinitely holy God?”

He was ordained to the priesthood on May 2, 1507, at which time he performed his first Mass. Upon being instructed by his teachers that, according to the doctrine of transubstantiation, a priest actually holds “his God” in his hands and offers him to others, Luther doubted his worthiness to perform such a task. He trembled at the altar and had to be assisted in completing the ceremony.

Luther's pastor in the monastery was a man named Johannes Staupitz, to whom Luther would later attribute many of his theological insights. Luther so often went to Staupitz for confession that the latter admonished him to stop it until he had something really sinful to confess!

His teaching career began in 1508 at Wittenberg. During the winter of 1510-11 he finally had the opportunity to go to Rome, a city then filled with enthusiasm for the Renaissance but indifferent to religion. Luther was appalled at the unbelief and immorality of the papacy, an impression that undoubtedly was instrumental in his conversion. Upon his return home he said:

“Some people took money to Rome and brought back indulgences. I, like a fool, carried onions there and brought back garlic.”

By this Luther meant “that he had carted his despair to Rome, hoping to be rid of it, but had come away with an even deeper despair” (Thompson, 390).

According to the testimony of his son, Paul (who claims to have heard it from his father in 1541), it was during his visit to Rome that Luther ascended on bended knees the 28 steps of the famous Scala Santa (allegedly the steps taken from the Judgment Hall in Jerusalem), kissing the places where Christ's blood was said to have fallen, all in order to secure for himself the indulgence attached to this ascetic performance since the days of Pope Leo IV in 850. Suddenly, struck by the futility of his actions, he arose and returned to Germany.

He received his doctorate in 1512 and began teaching the Bible. From 1513 to 1515 he taught the Psalms and from 1515 to 1517 he taught Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. During this period *his feelings of utter inadequacy before God intensified. He was haunted with the realization that a God of infinite righteousness could never be satisfied with his meager efforts at purity.* After his conversion he looked back on his years as a monk and described his struggle:

“I was a good monk, and kept my rule so strictly that I venture to say that if ever a monk could get to heaven by *monkery*, I would have gotten there. All my companions in the monastery who knew me, would bear me out in this. For if I had gone on much longer, I would have martyred myself to death, what with vigils, prayers, readings, and other works.”

“For I hoped that I might find peace of conscience with fasts, prayers, vigils, with which I miserably afflicted my body; but the more I sweated it out like this, the less peace and tranquility I knew.”

“After vigils, fasts, prayers, and other exercises of the toughest kind, with which as a monk I afflicted myself almost to death, yet the doubt was left in my mind, and I thought, *Who knows whether these things are pleasing to God?*” [The preceding quotes are taken from Bard Thompson's book, *Humanists and Reformers*, 388.]

The best evidence is that Luther was born again sometime in 1516-17 while he was studying Romans and preparing his lectures on Paul's epistle. Here is what he said about his saving encounter with God:

“Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I *hated* the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. . . At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words (Romans 1:17), namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, *He who through faith is righteous shall live.*' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered Paradise itself through open gates” (*Preface to the Latin Writings*, LW, 34:336-37).

Luther, the Sale of Indulgences, and his Break with Rome

If you are going to understand the cause of the Protestant Reformation you need to understand two doctrines of Roman Catholic theology. The first is their belief in *purgatory*. Here is what the RC Catechism says:

“All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (CC, 1030-31).

In other words, sin has a *double effect* on a person. It incurs *eternal guilt*, which if left unforgiven puts one in hell. There is also *temporal guilt*, which requires that one do acts of kindness and penance here on earth. But if one dies not having completely dealt with the temporal guilt of sin, he/she would enter purgatory to undergo additional purification to prepare one to enter heaven itself.

This leads to the second thing you need to know about RC theology. It concerns what are known as *indulgences*. Now, before I go any further, it's important for you to remember that the way in which some Roman Catholics understood indulgences in the 16th century is substantially different from how they are understood today. Most in the RCC today would be as opposed to the abuse of indulgences in the 16th century as was Luther.

In the language of Rome, an *indulgence* is a term describing amnesty or remission of punishment. As I just indicated, in Roman Catholic theology the eternal guilt of sin was forgiven by the death of Christ. However, the remission of the *temporal* (not eternal) punishment for sin was suspended on the condition that one do penance by performing specified good works and making generous financial contributions to Rome. Thus, only God can forgive the eternal punishment of sin, but the sinner must still endure the temporal punishment for sin, either in this life or in purgatory. The time and severity of one's suffering in purgatory was under the control of the papacy and priesthood. Thus, *for a price*, the church can reduce both the degree and duration of punishment in purgatory, both for you and your deceased loved ones who are already there.

In 1515 Pope Leo X authorized the sale of indulgences by Archbishop Albert of Brandenburg who, at the age of 27, was the highest ranking official in Germany. The money from the proceeds of the sale would be divided, half going to the Archbishop and half to be sent back to Rome to finance the on-going construction of St. Peter's basilica. As I said, although the guilt for sin that would lead to eternal suffering could be forgiven only by God, the temporal penalty for it must be endured in purgatory. ***An indulgence would exempt a person from suffering either all or a portion of that penalty.***

Leading the sale of indulgences in Germany was a Dominican monk, well-known for his immorality and drunkenness, by the name of Johann Tetzel. He began his trade on the border of Saxony, at Juterbog, just a few hours from Wittenberg. Tetzel was particularly crude and mercenary in his tactics. He used poetic phrases to highlight the benefit of indulgences. For example,

“When the coin in the coffer doth ring,
The soul out of purgatory doth spring.”

Here is an excerpt from one of his more notorious sermons:

“Indulgences are the most precious and the most noble of God's gifts. . . Come and I will give you letters, all properly sealed, by which even the sins that you *intend* to commit may be pardoned. . . But more than this, indulgences avail not only for the living but for the dead. . . Priest! Noble! Merchant! Wife! Youth! Maiden! Do you not hear your parents and your other friends who are dead, and who cry from the bottom of the abyss: *We are suffering horrible torments! A trifling alms would deliver us; you can give it, and you will not!*”

It was difficult for the people to resist Tetzel's ingenious appeals to both selfishness and love for one's parents. The story is told that after Tetzel made a large sum of money from the sale of indulgences in Leipzig a man approached him and asked if he could buy an indulgence for a future sin he planned on committing. Tetzel said yes, and they agreed on a price. Later the man attacked and robbed Tetzel, explaining that this was the future sin he had in mind!

Luther lost his patience when a stumbling drunkard handed him a certificate of indulgence as warrant for his inebriated condition.

Indulgences could also be obtained by viewing or venerating certain *religious relics*. Luther's prince, Frederick the Wise, owned one of the largest relic collections in the area, over 19,000 pieces, worth more than 1,900,000 days' indulgence. Frederick's collection included a piece of the burning bush, soot from the fiery furnace, milk from Mary's breast, and a piece of Jesus' crib, just to name a few. Cardinal Albrecht's collection of relics was worth 39,245,120 days' indulgence!

The 95 Theses

Many misunderstand what Luther intended by posting his 95 theses on the church door. He wasn't denying the reality of indulgences. He still very much believed in purgatory and the RC remedy for suffering there. He was still very devoted and loyal to the Pope. All he wanted was to put an end to the flagrant selling of indulgences. Luther's posting

of his theses, therefore, was simply an invitation to debate the subject of indulgences and their abuse. He never intended for it to be an act that would lead to his break from Rome.

As time passed, the subject of indulgences faded into the background and never again served as the primary point of contention between Luther and Rome. The controversy instead swirled around the issue of papal authority: *was the Pope the final, interpretive authority over all Christians, infallible in his decrees, or was the Bible the ultimate standard and only inerrant authority over the conscience and behavior of Christians?* Luther's strident advocacy for *sola scriptura* was the central dispute in the reformation from that point, even until today.

There was little initial response, but rapid circulation of the theses (entitled "Disputation to explain the Virtue of Indulgences") was certain to stir things up. Once again, remember that Luther wasn't protesting against the Roman Catholic Church nor against the Pope, not even against the legitimacy of indulgences. It was the *selling* of indulgences that infuriated Luther. In one of the 95 theses Luther suggested that surely the Pope himself would rather see St. Peter's Basilica in ashes than have it built on the flesh and blood of his sheep (Th. 50).

Far more significant than the 95 Theses in launching the Protestant Reformation was a debate that Luther had in 1519 with a prominent RC theologian by the name of John Eck. The primary point of discussion was Luther's admission that both the Pope and the RC Church had made mistakes and theological errors, whereas Scripture is alone infallible.

Over the next few years Luther published several pamphlets that set forth his theology in greater detail. In one of these pamphlets he criticized the concept of priestly celibacy. Said Luther: the pope has no more power to command celibacy than "he has to forbid eating, drinking, the natural movement of the bowels, or growing fat."

It all reached a climax when, in 1520, the Pope issued a decree excommunicating Martin Luther from the RC Church. Luther responded by throwing the document into the fire (Dec. 10, 1520), as he spoke these words: "As thou [the Pope] hast vexed the Holy One of the Lord, may the eternal fire vex thee!"

Luther was then summoned to the *Diet of Worms in 1521*. He appeared before the diet on April 17 at 4:00 p.m., where he was to defend himself before Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (then only 19 years old). Said Charles: "It is preposterous that a single monk should be right in his opinion and that the whole of Christianity should be in error a thousand years or more."

Luther was asked two questions. First, did he acknowledge that the books on the table before him were his? And secondly, would he stand by them or retract what he had written? Luther asked for time to reflect and pray before answering and was granted 24 hours. I thought it would be helpful for you to see a portrayal of Luther's response, rather than me simply telling you what happened.

Film clip . . .

Luther left Worms immediately, and the next day was denounced by the Emperor as "a notorious heretic" who must be silenced. Luther was called a criminal who had committed high treason and, in effect, received a death sentence. On May 26th, 1521, the Emperor issued this decree:

"We enjoin you all not to take the aforementioned Martin Luther into your houses, not to receive him at court, to give him neither food nor drink, not to hide him, to afford him no help, following, support, or encouragement, either clandestinely or publicly, through words or works. Where you can get him, seize him and overpower him, you should capture him and send him to us under tightest security."

Of what importance was the Diet of Worms? One author answers:

"The Diet of Worms, Luther's appearance there on the 17th of April, 1521, may be considered as the greatest scene in modern European history; the point, indeed, from which the whole subsequent history of civilization takes its rise. The world's pomp and power sit there, on this hand; on that, stands up for God's truth one man, the poor miner Hans Luther's son. Our petition – the petition of the whole world to him was: *Free us; it rests with thee; desert us not*. Luther did not desert us. It is, as we say, the greatest moment in the modern history of men – English Puritanism, England and its Parliaments, America's vast work these two centuries; [the]

French Revolution; Europe and its work everywhere at present -- the germ of it all lay there. Had Luther in that moment done other, it [would have] all been otherwise” (Thomas Carlyle as quoted in P. C. Croll, ed., *Tributes to the Memory of Martin Luther* [Philadelphia: G. W. Frederick, 1884], pp. 49-50).

The Theology of Luther

Much could be said about the theology of the Protestant Reformation, but I will close with a brief comment on the two most important issues that energized and drove Luther, as well as the rest of the Protestant Reformers.

First, it was Luther's insistence on *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture *alone*, that was crucial. Neither church fathers nor papal decrees nor ecclesiastical tradition nor church councils stood on a par with the authority of the Bible. This concept of Scripture has been misunderstood. *Sola Scriptura* is not meant to suggest that there is no *other* religious authority, but that there is no *higher* religious authority. As Luther said in his speech at the Diet of Worms, we must never bind our conscience to any authority beside the Bible.

Second, Luther insisted that we are justified or declared righteous in the sight of God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Good works do not contribute to our justification. They are not its cause. They are, however, its effect or its fruit. But when it comes to the ground on which we are accepted by God, it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us or reckoned to us by faith alone. In order to be saved we must look outside of ourselves to another, to the person and work of Jesus. As stated in the old hymn, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” To say that we embrace *sola fide*, or salvation by faith alone, is simply to declare that human works cannot accomplish salvation. Only God can. It is his free gift to us that we receive by faith alone.

I do need to say something about *an inexcusable sin* in Luther's life. In addition to the Roman Catholic Church, Luther had an extraordinary disdain for both Turks (Muslims) and Jews, not for racial or ethnic reasons but entirely due to their resistance to the gospel of Christ. Although early in his life he had recommended that the Jews be treated with kindness, his attitude hardened as time passed. Without in any way excusing his inexcusable opposition to the Jews, we must remember that “Luther was a prisoner of his age and its prejudices” (Scott Hendrix, 276). The notion of “religious toleration” was simply not entertained in the 16th century, either by the Roman Catholic Church or the leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

Scholars continue to debate why Luther, toward the end of his life, turned against the Jews with such hatred and vile language. Some point to the collective weight Luther carried on his shoulders as leader of the Reformation. Others ascribe it to the wide array of physical afflictions from which he suffered. To be honest, there is no good explanation. All sin is, after all, irrational. And Luther must be held accountable for his colossal failure in this regard.

The Eucharist

It is only fitting that we should conclude today with the celebration of the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. Whereas all the protestant reformers repudiated transubstantiation as well as the belief that in the eucharist there was a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ for both the living and dead, they could not agree on the nature of Christ's *presence* in the elements.

The RC Church argued that through a miracle of God's Spirit the physical elements of bread and wine were transformed into the literal body and blood of Jesus. This is known as *transubstantiation*. Luther rejected this, and argued that whereas the elements of bread and wine remain as such, there is in, under, around, and through the elements the physical presence of Christ's body and blood. This was known as *consubstantiation*. Huldreich Zwingli, another great Reformer, argued that there was no physical presence at all. The elements are entirely symbolic and serve as a *memorial* of the body and blood of Jesus.

John Calvin, on the other hand, while rejecting the physical presence of the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist, argued that there is *an extraordinary and unique and powerful spiritual presence* when the elements of bread and wine are received in faith. I concur with Calvin.

And so, as we reflect on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let us partake of the elements in faith, to the glory of Christ and to the building up and strengthening of his people.