

On October 31, 1517, just about 500 years ago, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed a paper to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This action was not unusual. In those days the church door served as the town bulletin board. But the paper that Luther had written was very unusual. You could even call it dangerous.

The subject of this paper was the Roman Catholic Church's sale of indulgences. An indulgence was a certificate that allegedly freed the soul of a loved one from the holding tank of purgatory, and if that sounds strange to you—it should. The concept has no Biblical basis. But back to Luther's paper. He had 95 things to say about indulgences and hoped someone would be willing to debate them in an academic setting. With this invitation to debate, Luther set something in motion that no one could've predicted.

The Church of Luther's era had built something on top of the foundation of God's Word—a religion governed by human tradition—a religion in which forgiveness could be bought and heaven could be purchased by the consumer. Luther was bold enough to question these practices by asking where they appeared in the Bible. For him, the Bible was the only authority that really mattered. From that conviction, the Reformation movement was born.

One of the Bible passages that would come to mean so much to Luther was today's Epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. The parallels between Paul's situation and Luther's are striking. Paul was writing about his own people at the time of Christ. The religious leaders of Israel had developed a distorted picture of themselves. By thinking they could fully obey the Law of God, they had developed a pride that was destroying them.

You can't use that Law that way, Paul says. The Law shows us our sins. What we do to keep the Law will not make us right with God, because we could never do enough. And Paul also cautions his Gentile audience. No one is righteous, he says. There is no difference. All have sinned. What then becomes of pride? It is excluded. A person who is walking with God has nothing to be prideful about. We are guilty. There's no way around it. But, because He is merciful, God declares us "not guilty," and we live in the benefits of that declaration by faith.

The Church of Luther's time was declaring a different message. Pope Leo X wanted to complete St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. To generate the necessary funds, Pope Leo ruled that indulgences—those certificates of pardon—should be sold in Germany. Martin Luther protested the sale of indulgences because it demeaned the work of Jesus. As Luther wrote in the 95 Theses, # 62: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God."

The Gospel of the glory and grace of God says we are not saved by the things we do. We are saved by what Jesus has done for us. God offered His Son as a sacrifice. We have life "through faith in His blood." The work of saving belongs to Jesus, completely and exclusively. It was accomplished by his fulfillment of the law; his humiliation, suffering, and death on a cross; and his victorious resurrection. It begins, and is finished, in Him. You can have peace for your soul when you rest in His work. When Martin Luther realized this; when he comprehended the grace

of God in Jesus, he compared it to the gates of paradise opening up. This is the true treasure of the church.

Let me ask a question that seems random at first. When is the best time to repair your home? Let's say you notice a problem with a board on your porch. When should that be fixed? What will happen if you wait too long to fix it?

The Reformation was a major event because ongoing repairs to the Church had not been done. Or maybe it would be better to say that large structures had been built on loose boards and faulty materials. The foundation of the Church, the Gospel of the grace of God, had been undermined, and when you undermine the foundation, it's only a matter of time until the structure collapses. Through people like Luther, God began renovating. The tool He used was His Word. In that Word was the Law, which demolishes pride. And in that Word was the Gospel, the announcement of Jesus as the builder of a bridge between heaven and earth.

If Reformation can be compared to keeping our house in good repair, then it's worth asking of ourselves, what do we need the Word of God to fix? What does the Law need to tear out of us? What does the Gospel need to build in us?

We are no different than the people the apostle Paul wrote to. We are not "better people" than Roman Catholics, ancient or modern. We are always in danger of slipping across the boundary from confidence in what God does for us to pride in what we think we can do ourselves. There is even a type of pride we can take in being "heirs of the Reformation" that amounts to "We're smart and they're not."

But pride, of course, is excluded, according to the apostle Paul. Pride is excluded by faith. Faith builds. Faith reforms. Faith treasures what God does. Faith takes note of how the Law tears down, and how the Gospel builds up.

The Law tears down our efforts to build a tradition that glorifies ourselves. The Gospel moves us to build on Jesus Christ, the real cornerstone.

The Law tears down our efforts to "protect the church." The Gospel tells us to take risks in showing Jesus to those who don't know Him.

The Law breaks down our self-righteous attempts to make the church an exclusive club. The Gospel opens our hearts to other sinners that Jesus wants to include in his family.

The Law finds what is broken, rotten, and dead, and rips it out. The Gospel of Jesus repairs. It makes new things. It reforms you and me in the likeness of Christ.