

On October 31, 1517, 504 years ago to the day, 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 this particular *paper* was very unusual. It dared to question the practices of the Roman Catholic Church. That paper sparked the Reformation movement, which changed the face of Christianity forever.

What was in this paper? Martin Luther had a lot to say about the sale of indulgences, which allegedly shortened the amount of time souls would have to stay in purgatory. Luther posted his list, hoping someone would be willing to discuss his questions in an academic setting. He was, after all, a teaching professor at the local university.

How did this paper start a worldwide movement? What was the big deal? The big deal was that Luther used the Bible as his basis to question the practices of the Church. And in the process, he questioned the sale of indulgences, which had been a successful fundraiser. And by questioning indulgences he was questioning the authority that had okayed the fundraiser, going all the way to the top. Luther suggested being formed by the Word of God rather than by human tradition, and if a human tradition contradicted the Word of God, the tradition needed to be discarded. What seems like common sense today was controversial then—but Luther would not back down from his fundamental stance of letting God’s Word have the final say in all matters.

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 worth noting. Paul was writing about Jewish religious leaders at the time of Christ who had developed a distorted picture of themselves. By thinking they essentially obeyed the Law of God, they had developed a pride that was destroying them.

The Law, Paul says, cannot be used to justify yourself. The Law shows us our sins. What we do to keep the Law will not make us right with God. We could never do enough well enough. And Paul also cautions his non-Jewish audience. No one is righteous, he says. There is no difference. All have sinned. What then becomes of pride? It is excluded. People who are truly walking with God are no longer trying to justify themselves. We are justified, which is to be declared “not guilty,” apart from works of the Law.

The Church of Luther’s time declared a different message. Pope Leo X wanted to complete St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. A lot of money needed to be gathered before the project could be completed. Pope Leo ruled that indulgences—certificates of God’s pardon—should be sold in Germany. It was proclaimed and believed that whoever bought an indulgence not only received forgiveness of sins, but would also escape punishment in purgatory, a kind of holding tank for souls that is not mentioned in Scripture.

Luther was outraged when he finally understood what was going on. Souls for whom Jesus died were at stake! The Gospel of Jesus was being denied by the very organization that was supposed to proclaim it! Luther protested the sale of indulgences because it threatened to destroy a Christian’s relationship with God. As Luther wrote in the paper he posted: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.” You can’t purchase this treasure as a consumer good. It can only be received by faith.

Luther used what Paul wrote to demonstrate from Scripture that 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 of atonement” on the cross. We have life “through faith in His blood.” The Church of Luther’s era had become a self-preserving, inwardly focused organization. Luther used this passage and others like it to begin renovations. The Word of God itself was the demolishing and reforming force. The Law tore down. The Gospel built up. The Gospel built on the real foundation—Jesus, who came to bring reconciliation with God and

Let’s stop for a moment to consider a related question: when is the best time to repair your home? Let’s say you notice a problem with the shingles on your roof. When should that be fixed? What will happen if you wait too long to fix it?

The Reformation at the time of Luther was a major event because ongoing repairs had not been done. The foundation of the Church had been undermined. Pride in tradition grew as Christ was displaced. If reformation can be compared to keeping your house in good repair, then it is worth asking today, 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?

If we think of Reformation Day primarily as a day where it’s okay to attack Roman Catholicism, then we’ve missed the point. We are no different than the Jews and Gentiles Paul wrote to. We are not “better people” than other Christians, 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 comes close to “look how special and smart we are,” and it is not acceptable.

Why not? Because pride is excluded, according to the apostle Paul. A person is justified by faith without the works of the Law. Pride is excluded by faith. Faith builds. Faith reforms. But faith does not boast in anything except Jesus.

The Reformation was a refocusing on the life and work of Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior. That focus was gained through two lenses: The Law is one; the Gospel is the other. The Law lens shows us our sins. The Gospel lens shows us our Savior.

So we can say that the Law tears down our efforts to build a proud tradition. The grace of God points us to people who need to hear the Gospel in a way that makes sense to them. The Law tears down our efforts to “protect the church.” The Gospel sends us to be God’s ambassadors, to take risks in showing Jesus to those who are as of now estranged from Him. The Law breaks down self-justifying attempts to make the church an exclusive club. The Gospel opens our hearts to other sinners that Jesus wants to welcome. The Law finds what is broken, what is rotten, what is dead, and rips it out. The Gospel news of Jesus’ completed work makes repairs. It builds new things. It renovates hearts. It remodels us in the likeness of Jesus, as we receive His gifts by faith alone.