

What the Reformation Was All About

Romans 3:21-28

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October 31 is celebrated in many Protestant churches as Reformation Day. It was on October 31, the eve of All Saints Day, in the year 1517, that a Catholic monk and professor of Bible named Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church where he was preacher the document known as the 95 Theses. That was Luther's way of protesting the practices of the Roman church. He stated his objections and called for debate. Those 95 Theses were widely circulated and became the starting point of the Protestant Reformation.

So what was the protest all about? What needed to be reformed? On one level, Luther was responding to a scandal, an abuse of power and money by the Roman church. But on another level, it was about theology. Luther was struggling with the question, "How can we be forgiven? How can we get right with God?"

First, the scandal part. The immediate reason for Luther's protest was the selling of indulgences—selling forgiveness of sins for a price. The practice was widely accepted. It was the basis of medieval church budgets. Here's an approach our Stewardship Committee could try: make people feel guilty and in danger of hell, then tell them that they can be forgiven for the price of a generous donation to the building fund.

It makes sense if you think of salvation in terms of a spiritual bank account. The theology of the day said that in order to get into heaven you had to have a certain number of merits—like points for good deeds. You could never have enough merits on your own, but God would transfer other people's merits into your account—most notably from the account of Jesus Christ. But you could also get merits from the Virgin Mary and from any of the saints.

In Wittenberg, this was big business, especially on All Saints Day. If you went to a place where they had saints' relics—bones, bits of hair, clothing, teeth—and made a contribution you could have some of that saint's merits transferred to your account, kind of like frequent flyer points toward a trip to heaven. In Wittenberg the pious nobleman who built the Castle Church had gathered a huge collection of relics. At one point they had over 19,000 bones of saints. If you came to see them and gave a donation, you could qualify for a reduction of your time spent in purgatory by 1,902,202 years and 270 days. It was the pope that gave the Wittenberg church the authority to forgive sins, and he even gave them the authority to grant full remission of all sins. That was what Luther questioned in the 95 Theses. Did the pope have the authority to grant full forgiveness for sins? If he did, why didn't he empty purgatory now? Don't you have to repent to be forgiven? Didn't Christ have enough merits in his account to do the job?

What pushed Luther over the edge in 1517 was that a new campaign was begun by the pope to raise funds for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It was an eight-year capital fund drive and the major incentive was a plenary indulgence from the pope. If you gave a large enough gift, you could have all sins forgiven, past, present, and future. A get out of jail free card. Rome sent clergy-salesmen to Germany—in Luther's view, fleecing the faithful so they could live in luxury in Rome. "Just think of your poor mother in purgatory right now. Don't you care enough to send her to heaven? Luther objected to one of their advertising jingles:

*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.*

Of course that was outrageous, and eventually even the Catholic church admitted as much and put a stop to it. But even if they had stopped the practice in 1517, Luther would not have been satisfied. For him, all the craziness with relics and indulgences were a logical result of the church's theology of salvation. The church taught that we are made right with God first by our own good works and then by grace, by which God makes up the deficit. That grace was received through the sacraments but also through the forgiving authority of the pope. And one of the problems with the whole idea of getting into heaven on the basis of merits, transferred or your own, was that you could never know what your score was. There wasn't anyone who could give you your merit score, and how it was determined was as mysterious as our credit scores today. How do you know if you are going to heaven? Answer: you can't know, and that's the way the church wants it. That way you keep trying, and keep giving.

Even though Luther was a theologian employed by the church, he wasn't willing to take the current church's word on anything. If the pope had granted him forgiveness for his sins, Luther would not have felt forgiven. What he wanted to know was whether *God* forgave him. Where do I really stand with God? He went to confession like a good Catholic. But he wouldn't just step in a booth for a couple of minutes; he would confess for hours at a time, determined to confess every wrong thought and deed so that he could be forgiven. It drove the priests crazy. Luther was able to find some self-serving motive for every good deed he did, so he concluded that he could not be in a state of grace. There was no real goodness in him. He knew he was doomed.

Luther began to hate the God who expects the impossible. Why does God set a moral standard as a requirement for salvation and then create people who are unable to meet the standard? Do you ever feel that way? You tell me to live this way and then make it impossible for me to do it. I hate myself for being so bad, and I hate you for setting things up this way.

How did Martin Luther get himself out of this hole? Remember, he was a professor. It was the classes he taught on the writings of Paul that turned his life around. First he taught a course on Galatians, but it was when he taught the letter to the Romans that the light really came on. He said that when he came to understand what Paul meant by "the righteousness of God" he felt like he had been born again. His whole view of God was changed. And the passage Luther called the very heart of the gospel is the section we read aloud together, Romans 3:21-28.

Paul says that in the gospel—the story of Jesus' death and resurrection—the righteousness of God has been revealed. Like most Catholics, Luther grew up thinking of the righteousness of God as God's justice, as it was translated in Latin. God's justice was the very thing Luther feared. Who wants to deal with a God who always rewards the good and punishes the wicked, who is completely pure himself and can have nothing to do with sin? The righteousness of God seems like the aspect of God's nature that makes him demand the impossible. So, Luther wondered, how can it be that the cross reveals that righteousness? And why does Paul say that the righteous live by faith?

But as he pondered Romans, Luther saw that he had been reading it all wrong. God's righteousness is not just God's moral purity but his faithfulness to the covenant he made with Abraham and with all people. God's righteousness is revealed in the cross because it shows that God is willing to do whatever it takes to remain in covenant with sinful people and to bless the world. God's righteousness is not something opposed to his love. God's righteousness *is* God's compassion and grace. It is not a judging righteousness, but a saving righteousness in which God declares us not guilty. God's righteousness is, as the New Living translates it, "a way to be made right with him." The good news of Jesus' death and resurrection has the power to save us—if we

respond in faith. Faith, to Paul, means trusting that the gospel is true, believing that Jesus really died for our sins and rose again. Faith is not something we *do* in order to be saved; it is simply accepting the fact that God has already done everything necessary for us to be restored to a right relationship with himself. Luther saw that for Paul being justified, being made right with God was not the *goal* of the Christian life, as it had been for Luther. Instead, justification was the starting point of the Christian life. We begin with the truth that God has already made us right with himself through what he did in Jesus Christ, and we live out our lives in a covenant relationship with the God who saves us.

Romans 3:21 says, “It has nothing to do with the law.” Luther understood this to mean not only the Jewish law but church law as well. Being made right with God has nothing to do with earning merits or being good enough. Being made right with God is a *gift*! Luther had been struggling all his life ferociously to get to a point where he would know he was OK with God, and as he read Romans carefully he realized that the church had missed the good news that he was already OK with God.

We are saved through the instrument of faith, but faith is not a precondition for our forgiveness—if it were, it would be just one more good deed plugged into the old system. Faith is rather the realization that we have already been put right with God by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ on the cross. God’s way of putting us right with himself—the cross—simply doesn’t work if we don’t believe it. If you still believe that God hates you, or that you can somehow earn your way into a friendship with him, then God can’t save you. The only way he can save you from being separated from his love forever is for you to believe that he loves you and has made you right with himself—by his own action and none of your own.

Most of us know Romans 3:23, which says that all have sinned and fall short of being the glorious creatures God intended us to be. But we may not remember how Paul continues the sentence: “Since all have sinned...they are now justified by his grace as a gift” through what God has done in Christ.

That’s what brought Martin Luther out of his depression and gave him the assurance of salvation that he had craved. His tradition had told him that assurance was a bad thing, that it was prideful. He was told that he could never be good enough, that he had to keep striving. But Luther finally understood what Paul had been saying all along, that if we believe that God was reconciling the world to himself in the cross we then have peace with God. He finally experienced the cross as good news of a definitive kind, not just potentially good news. That recognition became the center of Luther’s theology. What we celebrate on Reformation Day is nothing less than the recovery of the gospel.

There are a lot of things that Luther was wrong about—for one thing, he tried to exterminate the Anabaptists who went further than he did. And there were certainly good things in the Catholic church he rebelled against—and recently the Catholic church has insisted it now agrees with Luther about justification.

But for me the core issue remains the one that Luther identified: are we made right with God by something we do? Or have we already been made right with God by something God did in the cross and resurrection? Even in a day when people minimize sin, I think people long to be forgiven and to be close to God. Luther found his answer in God’s action on the cross, the free gift of grace which is realized through faith. That answer is still available to you.