



Four Reformation Gems, Part 1

Ephesians 2:1-10

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On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenburg, Germany, inviting theological debate. Though many “reformers” preceded Luther, his action is regarded as the official beginning of the Protestant Reformation. In appreciation for the rich legacy of those who stood for doctrinal truth resulting in the Reformation, I offer the following look at four theological gems recovered and preserved by the Reformers of the Protestant Reformation.

In Part 1, we will look at some of the historical issues, doctrinal confusion, and heretical practices which served to set the stage for the Reformation. In Part 2, we will look at four essential doctrinal truths which were at the heart of the Protestant Reformation contained in Ephesians 2:1-10.

How do you fund a large building program? When you want to build a large facility, you need money. Fund-raising becomes an issue. When the Catholic church wanted to build St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, the pope faced two obstacles. First, though he had the money, he didn’t want to dip into the church coffers to fund the project.

Second, in order to raise the money, he had to find a way to get people in Germany, France, and other countries to contribute to the construction of an elaborate church building in Rome that they would likely never see or visit. People are not likely to give out of their poverty for a structure they will never see.

So, the pope embarked on a rather creative fund-

raising strategy. The pope and his cardinals met together and decided to offer to the people the one thing that they wanted more than anything else: forgiveness of sins.

The people lived under the fear of punishment in the flames of purgatory - a superstition and false teaching fostered upon the people by the Roman Catholic church. They were told that escape from such punishment was gained on the basis of works and good deeds which merited God’s favor. The church had taught that the pope had the power to grant forgiveness of sins and freedom from that punishment. Those teachings served to keep the people in a state of servitude, placing their faith in the church and the pope for salvation. They wanted forgiveness for themselves and for their loved ones whom they believed were even then suffering the tormenting fires of purging in purgatory.

The pope devised an effective means of fund-raising for St. Peter's Basilica - sell forgiveness. They offered the people letters of indulgences (pardons) for sins in exchange for contributions to the church.

With a plan in place, all the pope needed was a salesman, which he found in a plump little monk named John Tetzel. Tetzel was a loud-mouthed braggart and an excellent salesman. He went from town to town throughout Germany, proclaiming to the people that they could purchase pardon from sin for themselves and their relatives. Even those then in purgatory could be set free with the purchase of an indulgence on their behalf. He coined a memorable little couplet, “When the coin in the coffer rings, the

soul from purgatory springs.”

Tetzel was a master showman and knew how to work people's emotions and pull their heart strings. He promised a signed, sealed letter of pardon in exchange for a contribution. No repentance was necessary. He, with great fanfare, asked people to purchase paradise for their suffering children and relatives. Who could be so cold as to turn their back on their parent or grandparent, child or spouse now suffering the torments of purgatory's flames when it was within their power, for only a small contribution, to purchase their forgiveness!

Tetzel was even willing, and did, sell indulgences for *future* sins. On one occasion in the city of Leipzig, Tetzel was approached by a nobleman who asked if it were possible to purchase an indulgence for a sin he would yet commit that he had in mind. Tetzel said, “Why, of course. You have to pay me up front.” The nobleman did, and Tetzel issued a standard letter of indulgence declaring forgiveness for the future sin. As Tetzel was leaving the city, the nobleman overtook him, overpowered him, robbed him of his money, beat him bloody, and announced that that was the sin for which he had earlier purchased the indulgence!

Did this scheme to sell indulgences work? Yes. Money poured in, but news of Tetzel's activities reached the ears of a monk teaching in Wittenberg, Germany: Martin Luther. Here is how Luther described the teaching and claims of Tetzel. *“Then it was reported to me, however, that Tetzel was preaching some cruel and terrible propositions such as the following: He had grace and power from the pope to offer forgiveness even if someone had slept with the Holy Virgin Mother of God, as long as a contribution would be put into the coffer. Furthermore, he would not want to trade places in Heaven with St. Peter, for he had redeemed more souls with his indulgences than Peter had with his sermons. Furthermore, if anyone put money into the coffer for a soul in purgatory, the soul would leave purgatory for Heaven in the moment one could hear the penny hit the bottom. Also the grace of indulgences is the grace by which man is reconciled to God.”*

By this time, Luther had come to the conclusion that forgiveness of sins is by faith in Christ, not by indulgence, papal decree, works of righteousness, or any other means offered by the Church of Rome.

During a long personal struggle, in which Luther wrestled with the question, “How can a man be right (righteous) before a holy God?”, he discovered the answer while teaching through the book of Romans at the University of Wittenberg.

The answer was in the gospel, so simple to us now: **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'BUT THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.'” (Rom. 1:16-17)**

Luther finally understood what had been lost for so many years - that our righteousness before God is not on the basis of “deeds which we have done” but on the basis of faith. The righteous shall live by his faith. Salvation is a gift, not a payment for works done in righteousness.

Luther had preached against indulgences and the Roman Catholic church's works-based righteousness gospel. He began to argue that righteousness is based on faith, and not on works. When he heard about John Tetzel, he determined that enough was enough. He penned 95 theses on a large piece of paper and nailed them to the door of the University Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Posting a thesis in such a manner invited public debate. Luther welcomed all comers. He wasn't trying to break away from the Roman Catholic church. He wanted, for the sake of truth and reform, to bring some correction. He chose October 31, 1517, because it was the eve of the All Saints Day mass. Throngs of people would be coming into the church the following day for the mass, and his challenges to church tradition would be visible to everyone.

What did the 95 Theses say? I'll offer you a sample. Number 21: *“Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty and saved.”* Number 32 said, *“They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.”* Number 52 said, *“The assurance of salvation by letters of pardon is vain, even though the commissary, nay, even the pope himself, were to stake his soul upon it.”* Number 82: *“Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the*

dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?"

It was difficult to argue with Luther's logic. Why indeed, if the pope had the power by his own decree to free people from the flames of purgatory, would he not for the sake of his own love free them *apart* from a financial contribution. Is the pope not moved by the suffering of countless souls in purgatory? Why would he not by a simple decree remit their sins and absolve them from that punishment? Why hinge such remission on a financial contribution to the church's already laden treasury?

Luther was incensed that the pope should lead people to trust in anything other than the grace of God in Christ for their salvation, forgiveness, and righteousness.

It is not difficult to see how these challenges would quickly enrage church officials. Luther had challenged the authority, wisdom, and integrity of the pope. If the Catholic church were to stand by their decrees and doctrines as promulgated by Tetzel, then they would be at irreconcilable odds with Luther. If they were to concede Luther's points, they would, by necessity, be admitting that they had fostered and promoted a false gospel. Either way, someone was a heretic - either Luther or the pope. For if one teaches that a man is justified by works and another teaches that a man is justified by grace, they cannot both be right. Those two doctrines are mutually exclusive.

If Luther was right, then the pope had spread a damnable lie and led untold thousands into a Christless eternity, having encouraged them to put their faith in something other than Christ and Christ alone for their salvation. Further, the pope was guilty of prostituting forgiveness by selling it, or at least the hope of it.

If the pope was right, then Luther was a heretic and a false teacher. Furthermore, his excommunication from Rome would result in his own damnation and the damnation of millions who had followed him who have likewise denied that the church is the source of salvation.

Much was at stake!

The 95 Theses got into the wrong hands, at least as far as the pope was concerned. By the providence of

God, it just so happened that a rather remarkable thing had just been invented, a machine without which there would have never been a Reformation: the printing press. Within weeks, Luther's 95 Theses had been mass-produced and put into the hands of thousands. It lit Germany on fire. Everyone was talking about Doctor Martin Luther and his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*.

There was no turning back. Martin Luther, quite innocently, had launched the Protestant Reformation.

I wish I had space to tell of his stand at the Imperial Diet of Worms, when he was asked by Dr. Eck if he would recant his writings. Boldly he proclaimed his position: "*Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other-- my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.*"

I wish I had space to tell how Luther was kidnapped by friends and taken to a castle where he lived secretly and in seclusion, since he was a hunted man. During his time there, he was anything but idle. With a copy of a Hebrew Old Testament, a Greek New Testament, and a Latin translation of the Scriptures, he translated the Bible into German in only 10 months. The New Testament he completed in 11 weeks.

Luther believed that the Bible is the only standard for faith and practice, the only revelation of the knowledge of salvation, and the only tool able to equip believers for life and service. Consequently, he also believed that it should not just be the possession of priests who only read certain parts to the people. He believed it should be available to all.

The Protestant emphasis on the Word of God alone being the standard for faith and practice led to an explosion of translations of the Bible into the language of the people. The Roman Catholic church had kept the Bible in Latin and away from the masses, fearing that the ignorant and unlearned study of the masses would only result in confusion and doctrinal error. Oh, the irony!

The key to discovery of any truth is the conviction that Scripture and Scripture alone is sufficient for all life, faith, and practice. It is Scripture and Scripture

alone—not popes, cardinals, priests, bishops, councils, creeds, confessions, visions, dreams, prophets, additional revelation, burnings in the bosom, voices of God in my head, traditions, dogmas, or personal interpretations. “Scripture and Scripture alone” was the guiding principle of the Reformation.

A Great Debt

What was the Reformation? It was the rediscovery of God’s truth of the gospel of grace in a time when it had been lost beneath the traditions of men, the dogma of the church, and the power of a corrupt and immoral papacy.

The Bible was printed and put in the hands of the common men in the common language. People were taught that salvation was by grace through faith in Christ alone. The light of the Word of God was uncovered and allowed to shine into the hearts of men. It dispelled the myths, superstitions, dogmas, and traditions of the corrupt Church of Rome. Preaching of the Word, which had not been heard for nearly 1000 years, was given its rightful place in the church. This launched a revival of faith in Christ like the world had never seen.

Rather than locking people in darkness as the leaders of the Catholic church had feared, having the Bible in their own language and having unfettered access to it brought freedom, light, and intellectual progress, and most important, eternal life to countless millions.

Luther was not alone. There were other men who labored tirelessly to bring the church back to the compass of the Word of God: John Calvin, John Knox, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wycliff, John Huss, and many others too numerous to list. We see clearly today because we stand on the shoulders of great men who have gone before and, at great personal cost, have handed down to us the faith once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

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