

October 9 and 16 Adult Spiritual Growth Class Synopsis

Let There Be Light: A Study of FPC Stained-Glass Windows – Martin Luther Medallion

The stained-glass window medallion of Martin Luther portrays the posting of his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517, which is considered the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's document, *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, was a collection of 95 ideas about Christianity that he posted for debate. His ideas were controversial because they directly contradicted the Catholic Church's teachings, particular to the selling of indulgences, the extent of the Pope's authority and the accuracy of the doctrine of purgatory. Luther's successful challenges to church doctrine and practice were advanced by public access to his ideas through the development and use of the printing press and propagated through his personal protection from papal persecution granted by Frederick the Wise, the prince of Saxony. Luther was preceded by theologians with similar ideas, but who met their demise for heresy, such as Jan Hus 100 years prior, who was burned at the stake for publicly denouncing church abuses, including the sale of indulgences to raise money for a war between two rival popes seeking power at the time.

The state of the Roman Catholic Church leadership by the time of Luther was one of worldly power and corruption and far removed from that expressed in Ephesians 1:9-10: *God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.*

In 1517, Pope Leo X was like many of his papal predecessors of the previous 500 years of the western church since the Great Schism of 1054, i.e., business, worldly and self-centered as opposed to God-centered, and who was known for his infamous quote: "God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it." Pope Leo X was tasked with the raising of revenue for the new construction of St. Peter's Basilica. Archbishop Albert of Mainz, who bought his position through borrowed money still owed, colluded with Leo X in the sale of indulgences to be split 50-50. These indulgences were expanded to apply also to those who had died but resided in purgatory and were hawked by Johannes Tetzel, who was given the post of Commissioner of Indulgences by Albert. Tetzel's selling slogan was "As soon as the gold in the coffer rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs."

For perspective, the medieval indulgence was a writ offered by the Church, for money, guaranteeing the remission of sin, and its abuse was the spark that inspired Luther. Indulgences dated to the 11th century and were based on the concept of the 'treasury of the Church', which held that the merits of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints, and others who had led exemplary lives, could be drawn on by laypersons to lessen their time – or that of a loved one – in purgatory or remit the penalty of sin in this life. Purgatory was considered by the catholic church as the state of those who die in God's friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who still have need of purification to enter the happiness of heaven. Initially, the sale of an indulgence carried with it the expectation that the buyer would perform penitential acts but, by Martin Luther's time, paying money for the writ was frequently considered enough.

It is in this context that Martin Luther challenged the church in his 95 Theses but unknowing of the explicit authorization and personal involvement of Pope Leo X in the sale of indulgences. Luther's 95 Theses raised the pope's ire and eventually led to Luther's ex-communication and trial at the Diet of Worms in 1521.

Luther did not originally set out to start his own church, but was committed to seeking discussion and change within the church. As a monk, Luther personally struggled to understand his relationship to God and felt unworthy of God's attention, possibly driven in part by his abusive relationship with his parents when growing up. His eventual conclusion was that he was not worthy of approaching God. Martin Luther's personal break-through came in early 1517 in revelation of the true meaning of Romans 1:17, exclaiming, "And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'Righteousness of God'. Thus, that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to Paradise." For Luther, any understanding, and especially salvation, was not deserved or earned in any way, but was purely a gift of grace from God. Luther emphasized the doctrine of justification by grace through faith preached by the Apostle Paul. This emphasis on "faith alone" was a significant shift in perspective with Scripture being the basis of his challenge to the church authority in his 95 Theses, which include the following as examples:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believer to be one of repentance.
5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.
16. Hell, purgatory and heaven seem to differ the same as despair, fear and assurance of salvation.
37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.

Interestingly, one month prior to the posting of his 95 Theses, Martin Luther issued 97 Theses, which were considered more radical, attacking the whole theological system of the Church including the rejection of Scholastic Theology in which Aristotle teachings were embedded. However, no papal attention or rebuttal was given to these ideas, signifying no interest in true Christian doctrine or understanding but only the selfish interests of the Pope himself such as with the monies from the sale of indulgences.

Based on the precepts of scripture alone and faith alone as a means of knowing God's will, Luther published his 97 Theses, speaking to the will and condition of man and God's righteousness and grace with examples as follows:

5. It is false to state that man's inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites. Indeed, the inclination is not free, but captive.
17. Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God.
29. The best and infallible preparation for grace and the sole disposition toward grace is the eternal election and predestination of God.
40. We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds.
84. The good law and that in which one lives is the love of God, spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Luther was a prolific writer, who translated the Bible into his native German language and in such a way that it became the core of the common German language today. His preface to the Book of Romans translation was instrumental to the conversion of John Wesley who brought about the great Methodist revival of the 18th century in the Church of England. In it he writes: *Faith is a divine work in us, which changes us anew of God...Faith is a living, daring confidence on God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times... It is impossible to separate works from faith,*

quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire. In “*On the Bondage of the Will*”, Luther argues that people can only achieve salvation or redemption through God and could not choose between good and evil through their own will power. He writes: *As for me, I firmly confess that if it were possible, I would not wish to be given free will or to have anything left in my power by which I could endeavor to be saved... for no matter how long I should live, and do works, my conscience would never be certain and sure how much it had to do to satisfy God.*

Luther loved music, writing more than 30 hymns including a *Mighty Fortress is Our God*, and gave us the modern form of worship that incorporates music. He writes, *Music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching... I have no use for cranks who despise music because it is a gift of God. Music drives away the Devil and makes people gay; they forget thereby all wrath, unchastity, arrogance and the like. Next after theology I give to music the highest place and greatest honor....Experience proves that next to the Word of God only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart.*

A song to reflect and pray on:

[\(962\) On Faith Alone - YouTube](#)

Documentaries on Martin Luther:

[\(962\) PBS - Martin Luther – Complete documentary. \(Parts 1 & 2\) - YouTube](#)

[\(962\) Martin Luther and the 95 Theses - YouTube](#)

Looking ahead – Sunday October 23

Second Window on Left Facing Chancel (Upper Medallion) – Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:46)