

BLEST HALLOWEEN

It was no coincidence that Martin Luther chose October 31 as the day to nail his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

If you live in the USA, October means cooler weather, raking leaves, and, at the end of the month, celebrating Halloween. Halloween might not be celebrated as much here in Australia, but it is getting more and more popular. But for Lutherans, October includes the commemoration of Reformation Day - the day Martin Luther is said to have nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

It may seem strange that a day so preoccupied with the devil and death is also Reformation Day. But Luther chose this date with a purpose. His theses (academic statements for discussion and debate) were on the topic of indulgences, and Luther chose the eve of All Saints Day - when the church commemorates the faithful departed - as the date to make them public.

Penance and Indulgences

By the time they are confirmed, Lutherans know that the public outcry that fuelled the Reformation of the church started with Luther's posting of the 95 Theses. They also know that Luther's theses had to do with the selling of indulgences. However, today's Lutherans do not always understand exactly what indulgences are and why Luther protested their sale.

Indulgences have to do with the Roman Catholic Church's practice surrounding the Sacrament of Penance that developed during the Middle Ages. Penance is the fourth of the seven Roman Catholic sacraments.

Basically, sinners, fallen from the grace they originally received in Baptism, may, by God's moving and by certain acts (contrition, confession, and satisfaction), recover the lost grace. Sinners are absolved only after displaying sorrow through prescribed acts of penance, such as praying, taking a pilgrimage, or giving alms. In other words, doing works, as well as having faith in the mercy of God, are necessary for full forgiveness.

But what especially alarmed Luther were the outright payments in connection with indulgences. For money (and sometimes even goods like fowl and dairy products), a person could buy an indulgence that claimed to offer the merits of the saints - and even of Christ - on behalf of the owner, and, in that way, sins were forgiven and a place was secured in heaven.

Defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, an indulgence is "the remissions before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven." According to the Catholic teaching, indulgences offer forgiveness for the penalties that come with sin, even though Christ paid for those sins. A Christian can acquire an indulgence in a number of ways through the Church, which has authority over the "treasury" of Christ and the saints. In other words, indulgences either transfer or reduce penitential acts and punishment for sin. An indulgence is considered partial if it removes part of the temporal punishment due to sin and plenary if it removes all punishment.

Indulgences have been around for about one thousand years. In 1096, Pope Urban II offered plenary (meaning complete) indulgences in connection with the first crusade.

The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224-74) fully developed indulgence theory, allowing for the possibility of indulgences to be applied to souls in purgatory. For the sinner who does not make complete satisfaction in this life, there is purgatory - an intermediate state between heaven and hell. The soul that departs this life and is not immediately judged to heaven or hell is purified for a time in purgatory until released to heaven.

The result was that by the time of Luther, Christians cared more about avoiding purgatory than living and dying a Christian life and death. And indulgence claims were inflated beyond the original idea of release simply from temporal punishment imposed by a priest.

In 1530, the Augsburg Confession rejected the medieval errors concerning penance by declaring: “Rejected ... are those who teach that forgiveness of sin is not obtained through faith but through the satisfaction made by man” (Augsburg Confession, Article XII).

95 Theses

Martin Luther (born Nov. 10, 1483), was the son of Hans Luder, a mine and foundry owner in Mansfeld, Germany. He originally began his studies to become a lawyer, but in July 1505, everything changed when during a terrible thunderstorm - and fearing for his life - he promised St. Anna that if she would spare his life he would become a monk.

Luther survived the storm and kept his promise, promptly quitting his university studies and joining the Augustinians in Erfurt. Taking his vows seriously, he soon experienced great spiritual conflicts over the forgiveness-of-sins-through-good-works system of monastery, which he came to realise was a completely inadequate way to be forgiven. In order to save the young monk from spiritual ruin, his superior, Johann Staupitz, directed Brother Martin to Scripture.

Luther began his studies again - only this time in biblical theology. By 1508, he was lecturing. In 1512, he earned his doctorate. Upon completing a trip to Rome (from the fall of 1510 until the spring of 1511), Luther may well have begun to question the medieval penitential system, especially in light of what he saw in the “holy” city, but he said nothing publicly at the moment. More would happen to shape his insights.

At the same time, Luther was transferred permanently to Wittenberg, to eventually take the place of Father Staupitz as professor of biblical theology. It was in Scripture that he was to find the answers that troubled his soul.

Luther describes what happened at Wittenberg: “At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is revealed by the Gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 34, page 337, Concordia Publishing House).

It was as a preacher, rather than professor, that Luther encountered the abuses of indulgences. Against the wishes of Luther’s prince, Frederick the Wise of electoral Saxony, indulgences were hawked to the people of his land, albeit in neighbouring ducal Saxony. They needed only to cross the border to purchase them. To make matters worse, the indulgence-salesman and friar John Tetzel told Luther’s parishioners they could even purchase indulgences from him for sins they had not yet committed.

It was no coincidence that Martin Luther chose what we know as Halloween as the day to put forth his 95 Theses, mailing them to the archbishop in charge so something might be done, and, as the story goes, nailing them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In Wittenberg, Luther’s own prince offered the pious the opportunity of indulgence through his enormous collection of relics in the Castle Church on the Day of All Saints, Nov. 1.

Luther took advantage of the occasion. Luther himself never told the story, but after his death, co-worker Philipp Melanchthon described the scene.

On the Eve of All Saints, Oct. 31, 1517, Luther posted on the door of the Castle Church (in a manner customary at the university) the 95 Theses, which called into question and for discussion the abuses associated with indulgences. The posting of the theses became the spark that ignited the Reformation.

A poem written long ago to commemorate the Reformation praises Halloween with the words:
Blest Halloween that struck the hour

*When Luther's hammer rose and fell
At Wittenberg in heaven-born power
And rang dark popery's funeral-knell,
When long and cruel night was gone
And smiling rose the promised dawn!*