

## Reformation 500: *Sola Fide*

As Martin Luther was rebuilding theology on the foundation of Scripture, Pope Leo was preparing to build a new church in Rome: St. Peter's Basilica. To fund this grand endeavor, the Pope ordered the sale of "indulgences." These were documents (which the Roman Catholic Church still uses today) that you could buy to pay off the earthly penalties of sins for yourself or for someone else. You would be considered forgiven by God, released from purgatory, and allowed to enter directly into heaven, with no confession or repentance involved.

Perhaps the boldest salesman of all these indulgences was a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel. He even had a musical jingle to promote his sales: "When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Tetzel made many other bold claims about the indulgences he was selling, and some of the people of Wittenberg went to Tetzel, bought the forgiveness of their sins (or so they were led to believe), and then went home and told their priest: Martin Luther.

Luther became very concerned about what Tetzel was saying and doing. While indulgences had been used in the church before, there was no clear teaching about what they were or what they could do. As a faithful monk and dutiful son of the church, Luther thought that Tetzel might be abusing the authority of the Pope.

As a priest, Luther was concerned for the people he served. As a professor of theology, he felt that his duty to clarify the teachings of the church. So, on October 31, 1517, Dr Luther walked the street to the Castle Church in Wittenberg. There, he posted a document on the church doors (which served as the community bulletin board). Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, or statements, were intended for a scholarly debate. Even though no one in Wittenberg wanted to debate the famous Dr Luther, the *Theses* were copied and, within two weeks, spread throughout Germany.

"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matthew 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (Thesis 1). Luther contended that repentance was not something to be escaped by an outward payment of cash. Repentance is a simple inward change of heart.

That argument began what we now know as the Lutheran Reformation. The Reformation was a return to the Scriptures, which teach that our salvation is not gained by payments in coin, nor by payments in works, but by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

This year we celebrate 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation of the church. Because of His work through the Scriptures, whose teachings were recovered by Martin Luther, we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. To God alone the thanks and to God alone be the glory!

*Sola Fide* means "Faith Alone." We don't add to what God has done and given to us. We simply trust what God has said and promised. It's right there in the Bible. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own*

*doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. And also in Romans 3:28, Paul said, For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*