



The
GRACE
of
REPENTANCE

SINCLAIR FERGUSON

The Grace of Repentance

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The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals exists to call the church, amidst our dying culture, to repent of its worldliness, to recover and confess the truth of God's Word as did the Reformers, and to see that truth embodied in doctrine, worship, and life.

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THE MONK'S TALE

It was the year 1517. Europe was a Roman Catholic continent, and Leo X was Pope, a man “as elegant and as indolent as a Persian cat,” as Roland Bainton described him (*Here I Stand* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1978], p. 56). Leo needed money to complete a great building project already underway, a new St. Peter’s being built to replace its condemned predecessor. Leo needed lots of money! Huge, superabundant resources of money!

The intrigue that unfolded reads like a modern novel. Albert of Brandenburg wanted the archbishopric of Mainz and the primacy of all Germany that would come with it. So he borrowed money from the great German banking house of Fugger, paid the Pope, and in exchange was granted not only the archbishopric but the privilege of granting indulgences in his territory for eight years. Indulgences could release souls

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from the pains of purgatory for extended periods of time, perhaps forever. The deal was complex, however. Albert needed to clear his loan. But in addition, any further “profits” would be split 50/50 between St. Peter’s and Fugger’s Bank.

The new primate needed an ecclesiastical salesman to raise the money, and such a man was available in the great indulgence vendor Johannes Tetzel. Tetzel had mastered the art of communicating to sons and daughters the pleas of their dead parents to deliver them from the flames in which they languished. When he was promoted for his Doctor’s degree Tetzel had defended the thesis:

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

That had been the teaching of Pope Sixtus IV, it was Tetzel’s gospel, and by and large that was then the condition of Christianity.

In the fall of 1517, the great indulgence-monger was near enough to the parish of Wittenberg for parishioners to flock out to hear him and buy his wares. At the end of the month, on the eve of All Saints Day, a troubled and distressed thirty-three-year-old monk of the Augustinian order made his way quietly to the Castle Church and posted on the door a placard listing a series of theological points he was prepared to debate and defend. He was not a well-known or

The Monk's Tale

popular figure. He was a professor of Bible, a scholar, and a teacher. His theses were written in Latin, which the common people did not understand. He had no idea that his action would produce a spiritual revolution.

The monk's name was Martin Luther, and his placard was the now famous Ninety-Five Theses, a document that has probably been more influential in history than either the British Magna Charta or the American Declaration of Independence.

Luther's theses contained statements of church-shattering importance and led to what we call the Protestant Reformation. They are widely hailed as one of the great evangelical statements in history. Every year they are celebrated at Reformation Day Services. Still today Christians defend tough positions by an appeal to Luther's principle, "Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me."

The first of Luther's theses put the axe to the root of the tree of medieval theology:

When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "repent," he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.

Luther had been studying the new edition of the Greek New Testament published by the humanist scholar Erasmus. In these studies he had come to realize that the Latin Vulgate,

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the official church Bible, had misleadingly rendered “repent” in Matthew 4:17 by *poenitentiam agite* (“do penance”), thus completely misconstruing Jesus’ meaning. Luther saw that the Gospel called not for an act of penance but for a radical change of mind that would lead to a deep transformation of life. Later he would write to his vicar Johannes Staupitz about this glowing discovery: “I venture to say they are wrong who make more of the act in Latin than of the change of heart in Greek” (Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 67).

So began the Reformation, and at its heart lay Luther’s great discovery: Repentance is a characteristic of the whole life, not the action of a single moment. Salvation is a gift, received only in Christ, only by grace, only in faith. *But it is salvation*, and salvation means we are actually being saved. Otherwise we cannot have come to know Christ the Savior.

Is that how we think about repentance? Or do we tend to think of it as something we are glad to have behind us, never to be repeated? In today’s church we are as likely to be told not only that we can become Christians without such repentance, but can even remain Christians without it, being *carnal* to the end of our days. By contrast, our forefathers were convinced that repentance is so central to the Gospel that without it there can be no salvation. They believed this because it is the Bible’s teaching.

“When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.”

Martin Luther, 1517

Is that how we think about repentance? Or do we instead think of it as something we are glad to have behind us, never to be repeated? In today’s churches, you may find it assumed that such repentance is unnecessary for sanctification or that we can even become Christians without first repenting.

By contrast, our forefathers were convinced that repentance is so central to the gospel that without it there can be no salvation, much less a spiritual life marked by transformation. Sinclair Ferguson helps us to see how repentance can regain rightful prominence in our own lives and that of our churches, leading us ultimately to the grace found in confession.

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