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The Church on October 30, 1517

Mark Ellingsen

Interdenominational Theological Center

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WEEK 2: The Church on October 30, 1517

BY DR. MARK ELLINGSEN (PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY, INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER)

TOPIC SUMMARY

Throughout the Middle Ages all of Europe suffered extremely difficult economic times. This took its toll on the church. Yet, throughout this time the church's priests, bishops, and the pope gained social and political influence. And the church continued to lead the way in education. The church was the one institution that could provide the masses with hope in the midst of their struggles, with security in the midst of the socio-cultural turmoil of the times. Western Europe in late 15th century was indeed undergoing radical transformation. Much like today, the economy was changing and the vast gap between rich and poor continued to widen. The people were in the midst of a revolution in communications (the invention of the printing press) and they were being confronted with new scientific findings that seemed to challenge faith.

With power came temptation and corruption. More and more church leadership positions were being "bought." Rich families would get younger sons and daughters who were not eligible to inherit the family fortune appointed as bishops, Cathedral priests, or heads of monasteries, even if the sons and daughters were not interested in a religious life. These practices were taking a toll on the spiritual life of monasteries, convents, and in parishes. There was a lot of perceived scandal and corruption among church leaders. In addition, the leaders of the church, including the Pope, had become political figures, concerned primarily with gaining wealth for themselves and for their parishioners. This was most evident in 1517 in the Pope's contract with a young German bishop to sell indulgences in order to raise money for the construction of St. Peter's Cathedral. The sell of indulgences took advantage of the guilt and fear of the average person. Of course, indulgences seemed like a good thing, providing comfort and security about the fate of loved ones. With just some money you could get it. But you did not need to be overly pious or spiritual or committed to Jesus to get the job done. More corruption.

The selling of indulgences was facilitated by the teaching that works needed to contribute to justification. But whereas the official Roman Catholic position was that grace made works possible, some were teaching that you had to *do* something first to qualify for grace. This created among the European masses on the eve of the Reformation a sense of uncertainty about salvation, and a belief that God was a righteous, judgmental, and wrathful God.

KEY WORDS

Indulgences: The remission by the Church of penalties due for sins committed. Indulgences qualify one for a faster release from purgatory and entrance into heaven.

Purgatory: Based on the teachings of Matthew 12:31 and 2 Maccabees 12:39-45, the Roman Catholic teachings that this is a reality where those who have died in Christ are taken, in order to get any remaining sins forgiven (to be there as long as it takes in order to get the job done) in order to qualify as the saints for entrance into heaven.

Justification (as officially taught by the Roman Catholic Church): Justification is the doctrine of salvation, how we are saved. The official Roman Catholic position is that it happens both by grace and works, though grace is prevenient (it always comes first) stimulating good works which in turn save us.

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

Romans 5:1-2 | Romans 11:6 | Galatians 2:16

WHERE DOES LUTHER STAND?

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther appeared before Johann Eck for public questioning. Upon demands by the Roman Catholic Church to recant his writings and teachings or face excommunication (and likely death), Luther famously responded: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of 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."

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- + In what ways do you see our contemporary society as similar to that of the Church in 1517? How and why?
- + The Catholic Church no longer sells indulgences, but it does still grant them. In view of the Biblical support for indulgences and purgatory cited above, is Lutheranism wrong to condemn these ideas? Why not?
- + Does it matter whether grace precedes good works? Why or why not?
- + Is the Nominalist idea that Luther confronted (that we must do works in order to merit grace) still around today? Consider the so-called Prosperity Gospel and its belief that God blesses those who give or come to Him.