



11 gents gathered on a nice Saturday morning of 10 June 2017 for the monthly LCOC Men's Prayer Breakfast. They were treated to a delightful crescent roll egg, onion, green and red pepper and cheese casserole. The bounty also included a fresh fruit bowl, glazed donuts (just to balance out the meal), OJ and coffee. A great way to start the weekend for sure.

Once again, our scribe was away (this time in Minniesoda), so there's not a lot of first-hand **scuttlebutt** or **gouge** to pass along. For you landlubbers (a person who knows very little or nothing about the sea or ships: a person who is not a sailor) **scuttlebutt** in slang usage means rumor or gossip, deriving from the nautical term for the cask used to serve water. The term corresponds to the colloquial concept of a water cooler in an office setting, which at times becomes the focus of congregation and casual discussion. Water for immediate consumption on a sailing ship was conventionally stored in a scuttled butt: a butt (cask) which had been scuttled by making a hole in it so the water could be withdrawn. Since sailors exchanged gossip when they gathered at the scuttlebutt for a drink of water, scuttlebutt became Navy slang for gossip or rumors. Now as for **gouge**, Navy and Coast Guard types would know this as an informal information channel; the grapevine; the straight dope; inside information. And you thought you wouldn't learn anything useful this month!

Brian had the lesson for the day and it focused on Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*. Martin Luther, professor of moral theology at the University of Wittenberg and town preacher, wrote the *Ninety-five Theses* against the contemporary practice of the church with respect to indulgences. In the Catholic Church, practically the only Christian church in Europe at the time, indulgences were part of attaining salvation. In this system, when Christians sin and confess, they are forgiven and will no longer receive eternal punishment in hell, but may still be liable to temporal punishment. This punishment could be satisfied by performing works of mercy. If the temporal punishment is not satisfied during life, it would need to be satisfied in purgatory. With an indulgence (think of this as a "kindness"), this temporal punishment could be lessened. Under abuses of the system of indulgences, clergy benefited by selling indulgences and the pope gave official sanction in exchange for a fee. Popes were empowered to grant plenary indulgences, which provide complete satisfaction for any remaining temporal punishment due to sins, and these were purchased on behalf of people believed to be in purgatory. Political rulers had an interest in controlling indulgences because local economies suffered when the money for indulgences left a given territory.

Luther had preached as early as 1514 against the abuse of indulgences and the way they cheapened grace rather than requiring true repentance. He became especially concerned in 1517 when his parishioners who were returning from purchasing indulgences, claimed that they no longer needed to repent and change their lives in order to be forgiven of sin. After hearing about indulgences in sermons, Luther began to study the issue more carefully, and contacted experts on the subject. He preached about indulgences several times in 1517, explaining that true repentance was better than purchasing an indulgence. He taught that receiving an indulgence presupposed that the penitent had confessed and repented, otherwise it was worthless. A truly repentant sinner would also not seek an indulgence, because they loved God's righteousness and desired the inward punishment of their sin. By some accounts, it is believed Luther wrote his *Ninety-five Theses* between April and October 1517, and then posted them on the door of All Saints' in Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints' Day, the most important day of the year for the display of relics at All Saints' Church. Luther sent the Theses enclosed with a letter to Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz, on 31 October 1517, a date now considered the start of the Protestant Reformation and commemorated annually as Reformation Day. Luther's theses were intended to begin a debate among academics, not a popular revolution, but there are indications that he saw his action as prophetic and significant. The Theses were quickly reprinted, translated, and distributed throughout Germany and Europe, initiating a pamphlet war with indulgence preacher Johann Tetzel, which spread Luther's fame even further.

This action was essentially the start of the Protestant Reformation, a schism in the Catholic Church which profoundly changed Europe. They advance Luther's positions against what he saw as abusive practices by preachers selling plenary indulgences, which were certificates believed to reduce the temporal punishment for sins committed by the purchasers themselves or their loved ones in purgatory. In the Theses, Luther claimed that the repentance required by Christ in order for sins to be forgiven involves inner spiritual repentance rather than merely external sacramental confession. He argued that indulgences led Christians to avoid true repentance and sorrow for sin, believing that they can forgo it by purchasing an indulgence.

Brian then walked the group through the Theses. Some of the highlights of that discussion included:

- The **first thesis** has become famous. It states, "*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*" In the first few theses Luther develops the idea of repentance as the Christian's inner struggle with sin rather than the external system of sacramental confession.
- **Theses 5-7 (PENANCE)** Theses 5–7 state that the pope can only release people from the punishments he has administered himself or through the church's system of penance, not the guilt of sin. The pope can only announce God's forgiveness of the guilt of sin in his name.
- **Theses 14-29 (PURGATORY)** challenged common beliefs about purgatory, suffering, punishment, and human power over people in purgatory.
- **Theses 30–34 (Letters of Indulgence)** deal with the false certainty Luther believed the indulgence preachers offered Christians. Since no one knows if a person is truly repentant, a letter assuring a person of forgiveness is dangerous.
- **Theses 35 and 36** attack the idea that an indulgence makes repentance unnecessary. Luther concluded that the truly repentant person, who alone may benefit from the indulgence, has already received the only benefit the indulgence provides. To Luther, repentant Christians have already been forgiven of the penalty as well as the guilt of sin.
- **Theses 37 and 38** states that indulgences are not necessary for Christians to receive benefits provided by Christ.
- **Theses 39 and 40** argue that indulgences make true repentance more difficult. True repentance desires God's punishment of sin, but indulgences teach one to avoid punishment, the purpose for purchasing the indulgence.
- **Theses 41–47** criticize indulgences on the basis that they discourage works of mercy by those who purchase them. Here he begins to use the phrase, "Christians are to be taught..." to state how he thinks people should be instructed, such as giving to the poor is more important than buying indulgences, buying an indulgence rather than giving to the poor invites God's wrath, and that doing good works makes a person better while buying indulgences does not.
- **Theses 48–52** take the side of the pope, saying that if the pope knew what was being preached in his name he would rather St. Peter's Basilica be burned down than "built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep."
- **Theses 53–55** complain about restrictions on preaching while an indulgence was being offered. Luther criticizes the doctrine of the treasury of merit on which indulgences are based. He states that everyday Christians do not understand the doctrine and are being misled. For Luther, the true treasure of the church is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This treasure tends to be hated because it makes "*the first last*", in the words of **Matthew 19:30** and **20:16**.
- **Theses 67–80** discuss further the problems with the way indulgences are being preached, such as indulgences are the greatest of the graces available from the church, but actually only promote greed. He then attacks the belief that the indulgence could forgive one who had violated the Virgin Mary. Luther states that indulgences cannot take away the guilt of even the lightest of venial sins. He labels several other alleged statements of the indulgence preachers as blasphemy: that Saint Peter could not have granted a greater indulgence than the current one, and that the indulgence cross with the papal arms is as worthy as the cross of Christ.
- **Theses 81–91** present laypeople criticisms of indulgences (in lieu of his own) and how these are difficult objections his congregants are bringing rather than his own criticisms. How should he answer why the pope does not simply empty purgatory if it is in his power, or why anniversary masses for the dead, which were for the sake of those in purgatory, continued for those who had been redeemed by an indulgence? Luther claimed that it seemed strange to some that pious people in purgatory could be redeemed by living impious people. Luther claims that ignoring these questions risks allowing people to ridicule the pope.
- Luther closes the Theses by exhorting Christians to imitate Christ even if it brings pain and suffering. Enduring punishment and entering heaven is preferable to false security.

Luther's ecclesiastical superiors had him tried for heresy, which culminated in his excommunication in 1521. Though the Theses were the start of the Protestant Reformation, Luther did not consider indulgences to be as important as other theological matters which would divide the church, such as justification by faith and the bondage of the will. His breakthrough on these issues would come later, and he did not see the writing of the Theses as the point at which his beliefs diverged from those of Rome.

Our next LCOC Men's Prayer Breakfast is Saturday, 8 July 2017. We hope that some new gents will join the old guard in partaking in wonderful food, lively *scuttlebutt* or passing along the *gouge* (see definitions above) and fellowship, and enjoy a nice lesson to boot.