

**Amazing Grace**  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
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According to Timothy Wengert, one of the leading Luther scholars of our time whom I had the good fortune to meet a couple of years ago when he was in Omaha, “the heart of [Martin] Luther’s concern [in posting the 95 Theses that launched the Reformation was]: bad preaching and theology and what it does to the faithful.”

Luther wanted to “instruct, admonish, and comfort laypeople whom he thought misled by the bad theology of the indulgence preachers.”

So, the Pope wanted to build a new, bigger, and better St. Peter’s basilica at the Vatican in Rome. And he did a pretty good job. I think St. Peter’s is the most beautiful room I’ve ever entered. But every time, I am reminded that its construction led to centuries of schism in the Christian church.

For the fundraising campaign the pope decided to offer indulgences. By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century indulgences had become a way for people to buy themselves or their family members out of some time in purgatory. Now, that’s not what they had originally been, and Luther would point that out, but that’s what they had become.

Consequently, special indulgence preachers were appointed, including one who worked in the region near Martin Luther. That preacher was named Johann Tetzel. And according to all the bad press Tetzel’s received the last 500 years, he was a piece of work, using all sorts of questionable theology and methods to entice people into buying an indulgence. According to Luther, Tetzel proclaimed that “as soon as a coin thrown into the money chest clinks, a soul flies out of purgatory.”

It was primarily Tetzel’s bad preaching that angered Martin Luther. He had already begun to question the theology of indulgences and to research their historical meaning. Luther was among that new generation of scholars who employed new research methods—in his case an historical examination of old documents—to arrive at the truth.

What he discovered was that the current approach to indulgences violated traditional theology. So, bad, deceptive preaching and bad theology.

He also didn’t care much about fundraising for St. Peter’s. He advised giving money to your local poor instead. That was not likely to endear him to Rome.

Luther was angry. But he was also a good academic. And part of academic practice at that time was to call for a public debate and you did that by posting theses. Which is what Luther did on October 31, 1517. He posted on the church door at Wittenberg his 95 theses, disputing the theology of indulgences and the bad preaching of Tetzel.

And the rest is history. World altering history, which is why we are commemorating its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary this autumn.

But Luther's action was not itself the moment of schism when Protestants broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. The actual Reformation was a many decades process that of course ended in a century of war and violence. Which is why this world-wide event is being called a commemoration and not a celebration.

Nor did the 95 Theses express all the elements we might now consider essential to Protestant or even Lutheran theology. Luther wasn't even questioning papal authority directly at this point. As Timothy Wengert writes, Luther's concern was primarily pastoral. And his concerns in 1517 were very focused on the saving grace of God.

Thesis number 36 says, "Any truly remorseful Christian has a right to full remission of guilt and penalty, even without indulgence letters." People didn't need to spend money to experience the grace of God. The indulgence preachers were promoting a "mutilated grace"—a grace that you needed to earn, purchase even. But that's not grace.

God's grace is freely given to us. That's what makes it grace. That it is the free love of God offered to us for our salvation.

The winter after he launched the controversy, Luther preached a sermon in which he more fully explained his view of God's grace. That sermon was printed and sold and was the primary vehicle for spreading Luther's message to the masses. It also happens to be the very first best seller in the history of the printed word. Oh, the day when a sermon might be a best seller!

Here's what Luther proclaimed:

It is a tremendous error when people imagine that they can make satisfaction for their sins, which God instead always forgives gratis out of immeasurable grace while desiring nothing for this grace except that one live well from then on.

There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace. We do not need to buy it. It is freely given by a good and loving God. And once it is received, grace should call us to lead good and faithful lives.

This last point was Luther's other main objection to the selling of indulgences. Luther was worried that people might come to believe that all they had to do was give a little money. Give a little money so that you could avoid the difficult work of developing Christian character. The difficult work of eliminating sin from your life.

God has forgiven you but if you want to experience the fullness of life, then you must let God's grace work to transform you into a new and better person.

In thesis 44 he wrote "love grows through works of love and a person is made better; but through indulgences one is not made better." Luther thought indulgences were for lazy people, but that a true believer will show the works of love that result from true contrition for sins.

So bad theology and deceptive preaching were leading the people astray and away from both God's grace and the true work of Christian discipleship.

Luther expected the theologians and the magisterium to embrace his arguments, but they did not. And soon the larger debates erupted over scripture and authority and ministry and communion and all the many disagreements that divided European Christendom for the last half-millennium.

Five hundred years later, when indulgences and the fundraising for St. Peter's basilica are no longer our issues, we remain concerned with how to live a good and abundant life, with how God's grace saves us.

In our worship series this fall, we are being guided by the idea that the church is always reformed and always reforming. God is still at work in us and through us, speaking and guiding us to a fuller understanding.

And so this week I didn't only review the old history, I also turned to contemporary theologians, influenced by this tradition, for their thoughts on grace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In her book *The Grace of Sophia* the theologian Grace Ji-Sun Kim develops a theology rooted in the experience of Korean women living as immigrants in North America. She is troubled by systemic evils of sexism and racism and marginalization that have robbed these women of the opportunity to live full and thriving lives. Like Luther she is concerned about bad, harmful theology.

And so she turns to the grace of God which she says is "an experiential reality" that heals and strengthens our ordinary lives. God's grace is not simply forgiveness of our sins, but it heals us and empowers us. It heals the broken body and soul but also gives strength to confront injustice. She writes that grace is "the unconditional love that is poured into the wounded lives of hurting women" enabling self-worth and transformation.

In his book *From Sin to Amazing Grace* theologian Patrick Cheng wants to recover grace for queer people long marginalized and harmed by the Christian church. Grace, he writes, is "a free gift from God that reunites us with God." He adds, "God's superabundant grace can be described as an outpouring of love that is obscenely promiscuous!"

Cheng agrees with Luther and Bonhoeffer that grace demands something of us—our transformation. "Grace requires us to cooperate with God," Cheng writes. Grace is God's work through Jesus to bring us into the fullness of life. And so grace connects us intimately with other people. It gives us courage to live honestly and with integrity. And the willingness to challenge injustice.

Grace teaches us to transgress the false boundaries and divisions that society has a tendency to erect. It affirms our intrinsic value and our interdependence on one another. And grace "delights in multiplicities, intersections, and interstitial places."

And so these contemporary teachers of the Christian faith remind us to be concerned about what is good for people. To avoid what harms and misleads and deceives us. And instead to proclaim what saves us, what makes us better.

God desires us to live abundantly. Therefore God has freely given us the power that can transform our lives by forgiving our sins, growing our love, healing our wounds, and empowering us. We cannot buy it, we cannot earn it, it is simply ours, if we but receive it. This is good news. This is Amazing Grace.

O, how sweet the sound  
For it saved a wretch like me,  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind but now I see.