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## From the Editor

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# From the Editor

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther famously offered for debate 95 pithy protests against the sale of plenary indulgences, publicly posting the theses (at least by legend) to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church. The history of offering indulgences goes back to the Crusades. Christian soldiers marching into battle were extended an indulgence, literally a "leniency" or "generosity," that would free them from making full satisfaction for sins incurred in battle. By the sixteenth century, however, indulgences became extracted from the sacrament of penance altogether. Also, one could now buy them to offset penance owed in purgatory as well as on earth. What is more, the indulgence was made transferable—you could use it for yourself or apply it to a loved one. Finally, the indulgences were now considered "plenary," that is, able to forgive the *entire* debt of the soul. Having become purchasable, extractable, transferable, and a damn good deal, the indulgences hawked throughout Germany quickly became a hot commodity.

Many assume that Luther critiqued these practices of the church for demanding too much of its parishioners, for confusing simple faith and trust with arduous "works righteousness." While this side of the critique is true, Luther frames the 95 Theses by showing how the commodification of indulgences curtail *not only* God's grace, *but also* human striving; it makes *both* into quantifiable goods that can be exchanged, transferred, or withdrawn. The first thesis announces that "when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt 4:17, translated in the vulgate as "do penance"], he willed *the entire life of believers* to be one of repentance." Uncoupling Christ's command from a codified system of exchange demands a whole life of turning around.

Luther here critiques any closed economy of salvation that presumes to balance countable human works against a treasury of God's graces. Such spiritual book-keeping errs not in valuing human efforts or God's grace too

highly or too little, but in the very assumption that they can be measured. Such accountings offer false security—the security of assumed objectivity, of faith as eternal life insurance.

Fast-forward 500 years and we still find more than a little spiritual bartering and moral book-keeping. Just last week, awaiting a diagnosis from doctors about my son's acute leg pain, I found myself half-consciously bartering with God: "If only you'll heal him, I'll..." Perhaps many of us fall back into deal-making with God and score-keeping with spouses, colleagues, and students. Our American meritocracy—where at least the privileged presume to get what they deserve—denies the giftedness of life no less than sixteenth-century church practices. Might we still embody the freedom that comes when we cease to keep score? Might we work *from* a sense of being gifted and graced rather than trying to earn recognition, embark on careers, and otherwise make something of ourselves? Or more institutionally, might not Lutheran colleges and universities remain or become places where the gifts of employees, students, and the organization itself are recognized and used *as gifts*, rather than resources or even human "capital"?

By the time of this publication, there will have been countless celebrations of the 500 year anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in churches around the world. Certainly colleges have celebrated and commemorated as well, but their approach to the Reformation anniversary also includes careful assessment and creative re-appropriation of this 500 year-old tradition. The essays that follow will spark and sustain that consideration. Please be in touch about how you might continue it.



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