AWWOP Wednesday

God’s Commandments—“The Shoe of Love”

We do because we have become.

By Hans Heinz

The Christian world on the eve of the Reformation was a world of busy and vigorous religiosity. Most people at the time were pious and faithful to the church. However, their piety was largely misled. This is acknowledged even by Catholic historiography: “Prayer, life, and teachings were far removed from Scripture and the apostolic ideal.”1

Religious life was frequently marked by formalism and routine. In Cologne, Germany, alone hundreds of Masses were officiated every day, but no single prayer service was offered in the local vernacular, and no instruction was given to youth. People flocked to the monasteries to find secular and spiritual security. Germany then had perhaps 20 million inhabitants, 1.5 million of whom were priests and monks. Believers were not encouraged to read the Holy Scriptures, but rather to undertake arduous pilgrimages (such as the journey to the “Holy Robe of Christ” in Trèves, Germany) or to marvel at the numerous collections of relics. Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, the sovereign who reigned over the region where Luther lived, possessed a collection of more than 19,000 relics,2 which included “hay from Jesus’ manger,” a “twig from the burning bush,” and “milk drops from Mother Mary.” The authenticity of these artifacts was never questioned.

The Battle Over Indulgences

Jesus’ demand to do “good works” (Matt. 5:16) was distorted in a way completely foreign to the gospel. When Jesus forgave people their sins (Mark 2:5; John 8:11), He did not burden them with further punishment, but sent them off in peace. Medieval theologians, however, turned Jesus’ mercy into a complex legal and works-oriented system. It was said that one could get the remission of guilt from the priest during confession, but then one still needed to provide the works of the penitent to make up for the sin. Fortunately, one could also be exempted from these works of penance. Consequently, the doctrine of indulgences from temporal sin punishments was developed. Beginning in the Middle Ages such indulgences could be bought for the dead who were (supposedly) in purgatory. Aside from the discontinuation of the sale of indulgences after the Reformation, the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences is still in existence today.3

The Reformation arose because of the struggle over the legitimacy of such works of penance and the sale of indulgences. Popes at the time needed funding for the construction of St. Peter’s Dome in Rome, so they promoted the sale of indulgences. A “scandalous money business”4 began to spread, writes Catholic Church historian Joseph Lortz. One of the most prominent preachers of indulgences was the Dominican priest Johann Tetzel, who promised believers: “As soon as the gold in the casket rings; the rescued soul to heaven springs.”5

This aroused the anger of the young theology professor Martin Luther in Wittenberg. In a letter to the archbishop Albrecht of Mainz he protested this deformation of Christian doctrine: “Christ has nowhere commanded the preaching of indulgences, but with all emphasis the preaching of the gospel.”6

Based on the account of his friend, Philipp Melanchthon, Luther wrote these lines on October 31, 1517, and nailed 95 theses concerning indulgences and works of penance to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The first thesis hit like a bombshell: works do not represent punishment for sin; repentance is the constant manner of the Christian’s life: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”7

“Keep the Commandments!”

In the “Treatise on Good Works” (written in 1520), the Reformer expounded what the intended works of Christians should be. Good works are only those that God requires and not those that people demand. If one wants to know what these works are, one should listen to Christ speaking to the rich young ruler: “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:17).

These commandments are the Ten Commandments, not ecclesiastic canons or traditions. To keep these commandments, God-given faith is needed, which provides the necessary power. Without Christ, works are dead.8 Without works as a consequence, faith is only an appearance of faith: “Combine faith and good works, so that the sum of all Christian life is contained in both.”9 Good works are “sign and seal” that faith is true.10 Faith manifests itself in love and love in following the commandments.11

Thus, Christians live “under the law, but without the law.”12 “Without the law” because believers in Christ may not be condemned by the law; “under the law” because it remains valid even for born-again Christians. The law is needed to recognize sin (Rom. 3:20) and to reorient oneself—enlightened and motivated by the Holy Spirit—toward the will of God (Rom. 8:4; Heb. 8:10).

Ellen White similarly writes that the law indeed is not able to save but that, when God impresses it upon the heart, the Christian should and could fulfill it.13

Struggling with “antinomians,” “opponents of the law” from within his own ranks, the Reformer at the time deplored that many of his followers would only indulge the “sweet gospel,” where the justification of sin is more important than the justification of the sinner. He suspected that there would come a time that people would be living according to their own discretion and saying that there is no God.14

God has called Advent people to warn of this danger and plead for faithfulness toward God’s commandments. He has given us a “special message,” a Reformation message to restore, preserve, and follow the “law of God.” Ellen White described it as the “last message of warning to the world.”15

PULLQUOTE:

The Christian lives “under the law, but without the law.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING:

1. Why is it important for Christians to know their norm of conduct?

2. What significance do the commandments of God have in our lives? How do we experience the “freedom from the law” and the “freedom for the law”?

3. What was Luther afraid of already during his time? Did his premonitions come true? What is the purpose of the Advent people for our time?

1 Joseph Lortz and Erwin Iserloh, *Kleine Reformationsgeschichte* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1969), p. 25.

2 Roland Bainton, *Martin Luther*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), pp. 54, 55.

3 *Katechismus der katholischen Kirche* (Munich: 1993), § 1494-1498.

4 Lortz and Iserloh, p. 41.

5 Martin Luther, 27th thesis, quoted from Ingetraut Ludolphy, *Die 95 Thesen Martin Luthers* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1976), p. 23.

6 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Briefe* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002), vol. 1, p. 111.

7 Ludolphy, p. 20.

8 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 6, pp. 204, 205. Unfortunately, Luther himself went back to ecclesiastic tradition, when he thought to have discovered elements in the Ten Commandments that were dependent on the time they were given, describing the Sabbath as Jewish, which, however, originated in the order of Creation (Gen. 2:2, 3). At the same time, he had to admit that Sunday worship finds its origin in ecclesiastic tradition (*Der große Katechismus* [Munich: Siebenstern, 1964], pp. 37, 38).

9 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 12, p. 289.

10 *Ibid*., vol. 10/III, pp. 225, 226.

11 Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel Verlag, 1983), p. 179.

12 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), vol. 39/I, p. 433.

13 Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1890), p. 373.

14 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Deutsche Bibel* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 11/II, p 117.

15 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 225.