

500 Years of Reformation

October 29, 2017

Various texts

This week marks a monumental event in the history of the church: 500 years ago this week, a German monk named Martin Luther nailed a document, 95 theses, to the door of the Wittenburg Chapel. It was intended to spark discussion about abuses he saw in the church of his day. What he intended to spark discussion within the church instead led to his expulsion from the church and to what we now call the Reformation: the formation of a new movement of churches founded on certain foundational truths: Christ alone, Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith alone. And so, today we celebrate our heritage as Protestants, as those who responded to the abuses of the day by refusing to go along and instead recommitting themselves to the core truths of the faith.

I pause to warn you that what we say today may actually be offensive to those who are most celebrating this event around us. I even learned a new term this week, “a Marty Party.” For Lutherans, the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation and the beginning of the Lutheran church is the perfect occasion for a Marty Party, a party in honor of Marty, Martin Luther, a celebration of the life of the man from whom Lutherans derive their name.

But this is where we could be offensive. You see the truth is that no human organization has everything right, and EVERY human institution over time will be tempted to stray from the truth and become caught up in the manmade traditions that have built up. And the truth of our heritage is that some 350 years after Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses, in the 1800's, our spiritual forefathers went through a very similar time in Scandinavia against the dominant church of THAT day, the state church, in this case the Lutheran church. And out of THAT time of Reformation came a new movement, a movement of FREE churches, centered around certain theological truths, that eventually migrated to the United States, becoming the Evangelical Free Church of America. So, that is why I suggest this could be offensive. We do not consider the benchmark for all churches for all time to be the Reformation church of the 1500's. It was key, it was instrumental, but it too would constantly need reforming. The truth is that the church of today is in need of reformation. It is always the case.

So, if you are here today and cherish your connection to the Catholic church, we mean you no harm even though we celebrate the Reformation, the time when we separated ourselves from you. And if you are here today and cherish your connection to the Lutheran church, we mean you no harm even though we celebrate the Reformation as a Free Church, a group which separated itself from you. The sad truth is that we too will tend toward institutionalization if we remain stagnant. We too will need people to come among us, making a stand, like Luther, as “Here I stand, I can do no other!” So, we are all in the same boat.

And yet, we are gathered here foremost of all as Christians, as those who hold dear the truths of the Christian faith. At our core IS truth, IS life, IS hope. There is at our core a set of truths that will never change, must never change, must be defended with our lives if necessary. The truth is that each generation must measure itself against the Word of God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ at its core. If we are out of line, we need reforming. We too need to be called back to our roots.

And that is my intention today. I stand here as a minister, not of Hillcrest, not of the Evangelical Free Church of America, not of the Protestant church. Rather, I stand here as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I stand here as one who holds the Word of God in my hands, THE ultimate authority by which all of humanity will be judged. I am bound to that foundation, regardless of the shifting winds of today’s world. I stand with the Reformers in each generation in calling the people of God to examine your hearts and measure them against the Word of God. Who is your Lord? What is your ultimate authority? Where is your faith? How do you intend on overcoming your sin problem? Why do you have hope? When have you or will you yield yourself to God?

Main point: The truths of the Reformation are still the major issues of our day.

In other words, the value of the Reformation is that it called us back to our foundation, it questioned the content of the core of our being. And the truths that came out of that day: Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, are just as relevant today as they were 500 years ago. We too need to

examine ourselves in these areas. And my intention this morning is to do just that.

I. Scripture alone.

There was, there is, there always will be a central issue of our final authority. Who or what is our final authority? Who or what has the authority to speak for God? Where do we go to determine God's perspective? Indeed, that is a core issue. And the truth is that our source of truth, the highest authority to which we can appeal is the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, the Bible. To say this assumes that the Bible adequately and uniquely speaks for God, that it contains precisely what He wants it to contain, that even though it is written in the words of human authors by their hand it actually comes from the mouth of God. It therefore reflects not the words of men of God over a period of 1,500 years but the thoughts of One single author, Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth. It is His book. As II Timothy 3:16 states, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

We have in our hands the very Word of God. It is not a book about God, but a book of God's own creation. It is His book. And it shows God's fingerprints, on every page. Indeed, close study of it reveals threads woven through the text from beginning to end that could only come from one mind. Details in the first book only make sense in the context of the whole book, finally explained at the very end. We have seen that in the book of Job. We have seen already how many times the text points us to Jesus and His innocent suffering even though it was written over 1,000 years before His coming. The true author of the book of Job intended to point us to Christ. We have seen it in the writings of Moses, we saw it in the Psalms, we saw it in Isaiah. Indeed, every book points us in the same direction, in ways that no individual author could have planned or even known. Every verse of Scripture assumes that you have read the entire book. You can't fully understand one single verse unless you have at your ready the entire book. It all hangs together.

Can you imagine the mess of a book if we set out to write a single book over 1,500 years by several dozen different authors in three languages, each

author writing the next chapter? Do you think such a book would hold together? But Scripture does.

And it speaks with authority. It asserts its own authority. It speaks authoritatively about human history. It puts things in terms of “must,” “shall not,” “This is the Word of God!”

And yet, there will be the temptation in each generation to neglect, add to, to subtract from, to put our own twist on the Word of God. Mankind will always be tempted to stand over the Word of God rather than allow it to stand over us. Right? I have the distinct honor and responsibility to stand before you each week and declare, “Thus says the LORD,” or “This is the Word of God.” But I hope by now that you notice I seek only to do so when I am on solid ground FROM THE WORD OF GOD. I am very confident doing so when I simply read it. I am always careful when I draw points from the text. And yet, I boldly end each almost each sermon with, “If this is the Word of God, then what ought to be different about our lives? I do that to emphasize the authority it has. I preach it as the ultimate authority! Sola Scriptura! Scripture only! This is not only the battle cry of the Reformation during Luther’s day, but the motto of the early Free Church movement in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden of the 1800’s. “Where stands it written?” is our battle cry as well. Show it to me in the text and I will believe it, but you have to back it up with Scripture. Truly, this is Reformation language worth hanging on to, for all generations.

II. Christ alone.

It is no coincidence that John starts his gospel with a powerful introduction to the life of Jesus as the Word, the Word made flesh. The author of Hebrews begins his book with the same thought. One and only one person in all of history can rightfully claim the title, “Word of God.” He Himself speaks authoritatively for God, He personally says and does things only God can do. He is this unique person with two natures: human and divine, He is Son of Man and Son of God. He was right there at the beginning, creating all that has been created, and yet He was born of a virgin at the fullness of time. There is no one else like Him. He is beyond our ability to comprehend.

Yes, a crucial and distinct truth of the Reformation is the uniqueness of the person of Jesus Christ. As Luke writes in Acts 4:12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” The only hope you have of overcoming your sin problem is the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, when your trust is in Him, you receive His identity, you are clothed with Him, the Scriptures tell us that you die and that “you” no longer live, but Christ lives in you. The Scriptures tell us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Him.

Your hope, your future, your identity is bound together with the person of Jesus Christ and Him alone. Your status before God is determined by what you have done with Him. You will not be able to claim any goodness in yourself, no defense by your heritage, your church, your pastor, your good works. The only defense you will have is your Advocate and High Priest, Jesus Christ. He will either claim you as His own, or He will not claim you and His Father will say to you, “Depart from Me, I never knew you.” The Scriptures promise us that if you have Him, you have life, that if you do not have Him you do not have life. There is life in no one else.

Moses cannot testify on your behalf. David will not be able to do so. Peter will not be able to vouch for you. Neither will the long list of good things, religious things you have done. None of that will count. The only thing that will count is what Jesus says about you. He will either claim you as His own, “This one’s mine!” or He will not. Nothing else will matter. You will not be disqualified by any bad thing you have done, nor qualified by any good thing you have done. You will get no credit for the church you attend or how faithful to that church you were. The only thing that matters will be Jesus’ perspective on you.

This past week, our college group studied the parable of the Ten Mina in Luke 19. There, these chilling words from Jesus’ lips are found, “But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me.” I don’t know about you, but these words have weight with me. There are way, way too many people today (as there were in the 1500’s) who are hoping these words are not true. They are putting their hope in things other than Jesus, people other than Jesus, Saviors other than Jesus.

There are many who are putting their trust in other things, but there are also far too many who are putting their trust in Jesus PLUS other things. You might call it, “covering all your bases.” As was true 500 years ago and just as true today, too many who would claim Jesus as their Lord also want to add to that other things, like religious rituals or ceremonies or offerings (in Luther’s day it was the selling of indulgences), but also good works, that God will recognize and value our good works. And the Reformers correctly cried out, “No, no, a thousand times NO!” The truth is there is nothing you can do to add to what Christ has done. You need nothing more than Him. He is your lone defender. He is your lone advocate. He is all you will need to be acceptable before God.

Do you believe that? If so, you have believed correctly. If not, you are in need of a Reformation! Sola Christw! In Christ alone!

III. Grace alone.

A third major truth to come out of the Reformation was the essential role of grace in our salvation. To make sure that we understand the term properly, I pause to remind that grace is the receiving of a good thing that you did nothing to deserve. You do not deserve it, but you receive it regardless. That is grace. Think of it as a gift. If you receive a gift, by definition it means you did nothing to deserve it. And the context for this is our understanding of salvation. The concept then is that our salvation comes to us as grace, as a gift.

We see that most clearly in our theme verse for this morning, Ephesians 2:8-9, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” If there is one verse that can encapsulate the revolutionary truth of the Reformation, it would be this one: salvation comes to us by grace. We do absolutely nothing to earn it. Salvation comes to us as a gracious act of God’s will, not our will, His action not our action, out of the goodness of His heart, not our heart.

This important truth is perhaps the most in jeopardy in every generation. The natural bent of man is to think religiously. By this I mean to live in such a

“religious” sort of way that God will respond to our good living and grant us salvation. That is the whole framework for religion, all religions. That is by nature how we think. You and I by nature think this way: God sees all and notices what we say and do. If we do well He is pleased. If we do wrong, He is displeased. If we increase our good and decrease our bad, we increase our status before Him. This is natural for us and every “religious” system man has created.

But the truth of Christianity is that it is by grace that we have been saved. The truth is that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and there is nothing I can do to make Him love me any less. The truth is that where sin increases, grace increases all the more. The truth is that salvation cannot be earned. The truth is there is not one person who lives in such a way to increase his status before God by one iota. The truth is that best of our righteousness, the most impressive of our deeds of good quality are as filthy rags. The truth is that not one of us deserves salvation, not one little bit.

The truth is that all sinners who receive salvation only receive it by God’s grace. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

As I have argued, this correction was needed in Luther’s day because it is needed in every generation. The truth is that we are list makers and want a list to check off to know we have eternal life. We are legalists, who love to make our own selective lists to make sure we are above the cut. But the truth of Scripture is that salvation is not earned, it comes to us by His grace, His goodness not our goodness.

Do you believe this? Do you think you have been good enough to make the cut of salvation? If you believe you have been good enough, then you need a Reformation. The truth is that you have not come even close to being good enough for God to save you. The truth is your only hope is the grace of God offered through Jesus Christ. Grace alone! Always has been, always will be.

IV. Faith alone.

I know there are more doctrines that came out of the Reformation than these 4, but I stop at this point for the sake of time. This last “sola” is “sola fide” or faith alone. By this we mean that salvation comes to us from Christ as a gift on

the basis of faith. “For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith.” Not by works! Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” He later adds “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Faith is essential and faith is living in a way consistent with the truth even if we cannot see it. God requires faith. Salvation is received by faith. The righteous person lives by faith.

Indeed, the verses that turned it all around for Luther were Romans 1:16-17, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” This last sentence was key to Luther. The person right before God lives not by fear, but by faith. Before then, he spent many, many hours in a confessional booth, trying to remember and confess all of his sins so he might be forgiven, so he might have confidence of eternal life. I have been to the stairway in Rome where he and so many others still climb on their knees, hoping that God would see such dedication and effort, and pronounce them forgiven.

Instead, it is faith, a from the heart conviction that the promise of God is true. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His One and only Son, that whoever believes (that’s faith) in Him, should not perish but have eternal life. Again, religion says, “Do all these things and hope it is enough.” Faith says, “Accept what Christ has done for you.” Live with the confidence of what God has promised.

But as a result of this truth, “The righteous will live by faith,” Luther realized that living in fear or uncertainty is not how God wanted him to live. We live by faith, not fear. Our faith in Christ sets us free, we are no longer slaves to fear. The life of the Christian is faith from first to last, at every step. Faith is essential.

Now, this centrality of faith brings up a difficult issue. Where does such saving faith come from? Does it come from within us, or does it come to us as a gift as well? Scripture teaches that no one naturally comes to the Father, that our natural direction is away from God, straying from God. We only come to Him because He draws us, He gives us faith. But this is where we have not all agreed. Some hold that it is our faith in Him that saves. Others say that it is His faith instilled in us that saves. And of this later group, some associate the

instilling of this faith with certain acts, certain sacred acts of the Church. On this day of celebration of that which we hold in common, I do not seek to spoil it by dividing us. I'm not going to solve this one today. I do remember the day long ago I playfully pointed my finger in the face of a Lutheran pastor friend and told him, "You know, you Lutherans are going to have to choose. You are either saved by faith or saved by baptism, it can't be both!" Needless to say, he didn't agreed with my assessment.

I'm not going to solve this issue of how faith goes from God to us here and now and whether it comes through sacraments, but I bring it up to make the point that further Reformation is always needed. We can never rest from Reformation. We cannot think that all issues are settled. I still remember the "not so friendly" conversation I had with a fellow pastor who proclaimed to me, "By God's grace, WE are the closest thing on earth to the true Church. We are the closest thing to the New Testament Church." Now there's someone who does not think he needs reforming! But my answer to him went like this. I asked, "The closest thing to the New Testament church. Really! Which one? Which New Testament church? Corinth where sexual sin was rampant? Or Ephesus, where they were divided between Jewish and Gentile believers? Or the Colossian church where they worshipped angels? Or the Thessalonian church where they believed the 2nd coming had already taken place? Exactly which New Testament church are you most like?

I hope you see my point. Even the New Testament church needed reforming. That's how we got Paul's letters. We must not think we have it all right. The truth is every church needs reforming!

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will continually examine ourselves in light of Scripture.
- 2) We will resist the temptation to think we have everything right.
- 3) We will resist the temptation to just go along with the flow of everyone around us.

4) We will honor those who risked their lives for the truths we hold dear.

5) We will not look to some glorious time in the past when the people got everything right.

6) We will cherish the core truths of the faith like, Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone! Thank you God for the Reformation!