



Pastor's Note

Reformed, and Ever Reforming, According to the Word of God

This month, we have the privilege of celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation – a series of events which gave birth to our Protestant family of churches. While there were many events which led up to this movement, we generally date the beginning of the Reformation to October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his famous “95 Theses” to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther wasn’t trying to start a new Church – he simply wanted to debate these 95 points in the hopes of bringing about reform. Eventually, his protests (hence, the word “Protestant”) led to him being excommunicated, and for a long period he had to go into hiding – but his ideas could not be squelched. In many ways, and for many reasons, today’s Church – both Roman Catholic and Protestant alike – owes a great debt of gratitude to Luther.

This month, as we celebrate the Reformation, and especially as we celebrate the passion and conviction of the men and women who risked their lives to bring it about, here are a few points for us to ponder:

1.) **It all started because Martin Luther was seeking assurance.** Luther was a colorful character. He drank a lot of beer. He married an ex-nun. He threw an inkpot at the devil. But one gift he gave to the Church was to recover a sense of the assurance of pardon from God. In the medieval Church which Luther eventually protested against, that assurance is hard to come by. Common, accepted teaching was that if you wanted to be saved, you had to do as much good as you could do, and you had to participate in the sacraments. Luther did all this and more – he became a monk, he took a degree in theology, and he spent so much time in confession that his confessor eventually told him to stop coming until he had committed some real sins! Nevertheless, Luther could not escape one reality: God was a just and holy God, while he himself was a sinner. No matter how much good he did, he knew it was never enough to earn salvation.

And then, one day as he was reading Paul’s letter to the Romans, he came across this verse: “For in (the Gospel), the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:17, quoting from Habakkuk 2:4, ESV). As he read this, he had an amazing breakthrough: what if, contrary to everything he had been taught, this “righteousness of God” was not righteousness that we had to *earn*, but rather, was a *gift given to us through Jesus Christ* – a gift we received by faith, *and by faith alone*? What if the Scriptures were teaching something that the Church had forgotten – that salvation was by *grace, and by grace alone* – which is received through that faith? For if salvation is a gift to be received, and if it is something that God has done *for us*, then we can have complete confidence that “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6, ESV). In other words, we can have *assurance* – assurance of God’s love, and assurance of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Hallelujah!

2.) **The Reformation was all about going back “to the fountains”.** This breakthrough, therefore, sent Luther back to the Scriptures – or, as he put it, “back to the fountains” from which the streams of living water flow. He saw that, over the centuries, a thick layer of tradition had obscured – and at times, corrupted – the teaching found in the Word. He wanted to reclaim that teaching – the Good News of the Gospel – for God’s people, even if it meant threatening quite a few of the Church’s sacred cows. Eventually, this led to one of Luther’s most famous quotes:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason. . . I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand; I can do no other. May God help me. Amen”

Along with “Grace alone” and “faith alone”, “Scripture alone” became one of the rallying cries of the Reformation – and because Luther and the other Reformers believed this so passionately, they insisted that the Bible be translated into German, English, French, and a host of other languages so that God’s people could also learn the Word, and learn the faith. We still insist on this today!

3.) **The Reformation continues even today.** Indeed, the Church today is one “reformed, and ever reforming, according to the Word of God.” We recognize that we still have not “gotten it right” – we continue to need reformation. But we also recognize that not all change is good. Many quote that phrase “reformed, and ever reforming,” but leave off “according to the Word of God.” That’s dangerous – for we must always keep going “back to the fountains” – back to the Scriptures, back to the Gospel we find there.

We also must rejoice that our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ have also recognized this need for reform. Following the Protestant Reformation movement came the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and eventually in the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council which implemented some of the Reformers’ ideas – including conducting worship and reading Scripture in the language of the worshippers. In fact, some of my Roman Catholic friends have told me that they now even sing Luther’s great Reformation hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” in worship!

So, this month, let us be sure to give thanks to God for the brave men and women, many of whom risked their very lives, who worked so hard to reform our beloved Church. Let us also keep praying that we have the wisdom and courage to keep standing up for our own reform according to God’s Word – even if it means persecution and pain! And be sure to join us on Reformation Sunday, October 29, as we praise God for the assurance of our salvation! Hallelujah! To Him alone be the glory!

In Christ’s Love,

Joshua