

Reformation Sunday - 500th Anniversary

Various

October 29, 2017

Introduction:

Nearly 500 years ago to the day, on October 31, 1517, to be exact, Martin Luther set loose the first small pebbles of which would become an avalanche known to history as the Protestant Reformation. Walking a half mile down the road from his home to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, Luther posted a list of 95 statements that announced his intention to debate what he saw as problematic abuses within the Roman Catholic Church. This document, which would later be known as the 95 Theses, began with these words,

“Out of love for the truth and from desire to bring it to light, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

From there, Luther proceeded to list 95 grievances that he had with the church, notably regarding the sale of indulgences as pardons for sin and release from purgatory. Allow me to quote just a few samples of what Luther said,

Thesis 1: When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent,” he willed the entire life of the believers to be one of repentance.”

Thesis 32: Those who believe they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.

Thesis 52: It is vain to trust in salvation by indulgence letters, even though the indulgence commissary, or even the pope, were to offer his soul as security.

Thesis 82: Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of his holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?

By posting these 95 Theses, Luther was not intending to spark a revolution. He wrote them in Latin, intending that they would only be read by scholars with whom he hoped to debate these issues. But shortly after they were posted, they were translated into German and, with the help of Gutenberg’s printing press, widely distributed across Germany. Luther’s 95 Theses had struck a chord. Before long, Luther had become a household name, and with it came an inevitable clash with the authorities of the Roman Catholic church, including Pope Leo himself. The nailing of the 95 Theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517 opened a Pandora’s Box that has changed the face of Christianity ever since.

So today we're going to spend some time learning about Martin Luther and the revolution he sparked nearly 500 years ago. This morning will be very different from the normal message you hear from the pulpit. While we will get back to our regularly scheduled series on the book of Romans next month, I could not allow the Reformation Sunday on the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation to simply pass on by without doing something to highlight it. This past month I've tried to help us as a church dig deeper into all this through our video series on Luther and the Reformation that we've been doing on Wednesday nights, through our recent *Tolle Lege* book entitled "Rescuing the Gospel," and the recent sermon series on the five Solas of the Reformation. My hope is that today I can help you better understand what it is that Luther did, why he did it, and finally why the Reformation isn't just a historical curiosity but has on-going relevance for us today.

Historical Situation

But let's begin by briefly considering the historical situation that led up to Luther's posting of the 95 Theses. The medieval church had grown more and more corrupt over time, a corruption that many church historians would say started with the Edict of Milan in 313 when the Emperor Constantine granted Christianity legal legitimacy throughout the Roman Empire. While this had the benefit of stopping persecution against the church, it had the drawback of allowing the church to gain more and more political power, such that once Rome fell, the church became the true political power broker in Europe.

By the time we arrive at the thirteen and fourteen centuries, the Roman Catholic church was marred by corruption, immorality, wealth, and power. One historian described it like this, "At that time.... the ecclesiastical order was corrupted by so many errors that hardly anyone could be found who was truly in his proper place. Some [priests] served the pleasures of the hunt, wondering about with hounds and hawks, others were tavern-keepers and wicked overseers... almost all lived shameful lives either with wives who had been acknowledged publicly or with concubines."¹ In place of the worship of Christ and the preaching of God's Word, there was the veneration of the saints, pilgrimages to see relics, the sale of indulgences, and folk superstitions. The Mass was said in Latin which nearly nobody understood and offices in the church were for sale to the highest bidder. The church was in desperate need of a radical reformation.

Some tried to do just that before Luther came on the scene. John Wycliff lived about 150 years before Luther and sought to translate the Bible from Latin to English. This action, along with his outspoken critiques of the Mass and the Pope's authority, made him and his followers the target of extreme persecution by the Roman Church.

Wycliff's ideas eventually reached a man named John Hus in Prague, who also began to preach that the Bible should be our final authority, not the Pope or tradition. He spoke against relics and indulgences, but was eventually charged as a heretic, put on trial, and burned at the stake, nearly 100 years before Luther would post his 95 Theses. So while reforms were sought before Luther, their fires were snuffed out before they could take hold and bring about real change.

Which brings us to Luther and to a short video I would like to show. In my nearly eight years here I've never once shown a video during a sermon but I'm going to break my rule just this once because I think this short ten minute video will more effectively help you grasp what I hope to communicate to you about Luther than me trying to simply verbally explain it.

Video - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4d_7dOC-GQ

Obviously, there's much more one could say about Luther and the Protestant Reformation and I hope that those of you who've picked up the *Tolle Lege* book and have watched the videos on Wednesday nights have increased your understanding and appreciation for all that Luther and the other Reformers went through to bring the Bible back to the people and stand for the gospel. But at this point I want to move from historical considerations to the practical and ask the question...

So what?

So what? What does a guy who posted a list of 95 complaints on a door in Germany 500 years ago have to do with me living in America in the 21st century? What does it matter? Well, it has famously been said that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. History matters because it helps us understand where we've come from and gives us wisdom to learn from for challenges in the future. So with our time remaining, I want to highlight for us three reasons why remembering Martin Luther and the Reformation is important for us. So reason number one concerns...

1. Our history

There are three major branches of Christianity: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. You and I, by virtue of being members of Grace Fellowship Church, trace our lineage through the Protestant branch of the tree. When we learn about men like Martin Luther and John Calvin and others, we are learning about those who stood up for and sometimes fought and die for the things we believe in today. We stand on the shoulders of giants and we are indebted to them for their courage and bravery to fight for the things we so easily take for granted today, such as a Bible we can read in our own language and the recovery of the gospel message of faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone.

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German so that the common peasant could read it, he unleashed a revolution because now everyone could go straight to the source and examine for themselves what it said. And for some groups who came after Luther, they opened their Bibles, studied it, and came to the conclusion that Luther hadn't always gone far enough in his Reformation. In particular, they read of the ways baptism was administered throughout the NT and concluded that baptizing infants was a misuse of baptism. They became convicted that baptism was an ordinance to be give only to those who were old enough to profess faith in Christ for themselves. As a result, they began to be re-baptized as adult believers since they no longer regarded their baptism as infants to be valid. This group

became known as the Anabaptists (meaning “re-baptism) and sadly they were violently persecuted by both Catholics and fellow Protestants alike, who viewed their rejection of infant baptism as radical and subversive to the civil order.

Our church’s denomination, the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Church, traces its lineage to a group of Anabaptists who were even more radical in their view of baptism, insisting that not only was infant baptism invalid but so was baptism that involved only single-immersion. They insisted, in keeping with their understanding of Scripture, that in order for a baptism to be valid, the believer needed to be immersed three times, once in the name of the Father, once in the name of the Son, and once in the name of the Holy Spirit. So if the Baptists were considered radical, then the Brethren were the radicals of the radicals! But all that to say, there would be no Anabaptists, whether it be Southern Baptist or Grace Brethren or Mennonite or Amish, if it weren’t for the Reformation challenging the Roman Church and placing the Bible in the hands of common folks who could read it in their own language. So while we may believe that Luther didn’t go far enough in his break with the Roman Catholic Church, nevertheless it was his courage and conviction that allowed for our church, both denominationally and our church here on the corner of Williston and Minnesota, to be here today.

Second, this is important for us because of...

2. Our doctrine

Luther recovered biblical doctrines that had been buried under centuries of dogma and tradition. As he read the Scriptures and let them convict him, he uncovered the glories of the gospel. We are not saved by works we do, but by faith alone. We can contribute nothing to our salvation, nor can the saints or Mary or the Pope add to it: we saved by grace alone. Christ alone is the only redeemer of mankind and he fully paid for our sin so that we need not purchase indulgences or make pilgrimages to see relics. Throwing off tradition and claims of Papal authority, he called us back to Scripture alone as our sole authority for matters of faith and practice. And all of this was for God’s glory alone, not to the glory of any man’s wisdom, wealth, or power. Those five Solas of the Reformation that we talked about over the past three weeks are still ours to affirm today. We have inherited the doctrinal commitments of those Reformers and proclaim them to this very day.

Grace Fellowship Church is a Protestant church and so we hold to these doctrines in solidarity with other Protestants throughout the globe, both now and in the past. We ought to know what they are and why they are important so we can faithfully pass them down to those who come after us, which then brings us to our third and final point, which concerns...

3. Our need

While the historical movement known as the Reformation (With a capital “R”) ended over 400 years ago, the need for reformation (lower case “r”) in the church is still an

ongoing process. Let me highlight two ways that reformation is still a necessary part of what it is to follow Christ even today in the 21st century.

First, many of the concerns Luther and the other Reformers had are still present today with the Roman Catholic Church. Things like the veneration of Mary, prayers to the saints, relic, indulgences, papal infallibility, purgatory, placing church tradition on par with Scripture - these things remain part of the official teaching of Catholicism. While there certainly have been improvements, such that the Mass is no longer said in Latin and Catholics are now encouraged to read the Bible in their own language, but the main issues still remain. Salvation in Roman Catholic theology is still taught to be a combination of faith and works. Christ is important, but not sufficient. Grace is available, but only through the sacraments, and that many not be enough to save you should you die committing a mortal sin. So the Reformation ended, but in terms of accomplishing its goal of reforming the Catholic Church, there is still much work to be done. So then we must continue to stand for the biblical Protestant commitments to Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, for the glory of God alone because they are as necessary today as they were 500 years ago.

Second, every church, including Protestant churches such as Grace Fellowship, must always strive to be reforming because they can get caught up in tradition and unbiblical ways of thinking. Every generation is blind to their own shortcomings, to the cultural pressures that influence them more than Scripture, to traditions and ways of doing things that eventually become enshrined as if they were the very commands of God himself. No church is exempt from this, including ours. We here at Grace Fellowship can become bound by our tradition and find it difficult to let Scripture challenge us to look afresh and correct errors of the past.

Conclusion:

So then, let me close by saying that we too must always be seeking to be reformed, to go back to the Word of God again and again and again, striving to keep ourselves in line with Scripture and not be blown around by cultural winds or made hardened and inflexible by tradition. The Reformation was desperately needed 500 years ago and is still needed today, both because the doctrinal issues they confronted remain and due to the tendency we all have, Protestant or otherwise, to allow precious gospel truths to be clouded by our cultural baggage or traditions. May we at Grace Fellowship Church be both reformed and always reforming, to the glory of our God! Let's pray.

Endnotes:

1. Lutzer, Erwin W. Reclaiming the Gospel. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 2016.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.