

The Ongoing Reformation

Today, the last Sunday of October, Protestant Christians observe as Reformation Sunday. Reformation Sunday commemorates that moment on the 31st of October in 1517, when a young German monk, Martin Luther, nailed to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, some 95 propositions, challenging the church of his day. That bold act began to reshape and reform the church and is why we are here today in this church. That day, over 500 years ago, was the birth of the Protestant Movement.

To really understand the importance of the Reformation, one has to understand the spiritual condition of the Church of the early 16th Century. In those days, you had one church in the west, what we call today the Roman Catholic Church. The scriptures were buried under centuries of custom, tradition and hierarchy and the church took the position that only priests were allowed to read scripture and they told people what to believe. People were required to attend church or be excommunicated ,,and services were 4-6 hours long and spoken only in Latin.

The Roman Catholic Church was ruled by one man, the Bishop of Rome, whom most called the Pope. In and of itself, having someone as the head of a church body isn't a bad thing. However, the Roman church also taught that the Pope was the "Vicar of Christ" on earth, literally Christ's "stand-in" and whatever the Pope said was to be treated as if it were from Christ himself. As a result of this false teaching, problems crept into the church over time and it had become incredibly powerful and corrupt.

Another teaching that had been introduced into the Roman Catholic Church through the centuries was the idea of Purgatory. Purgatory was viewed as a "holding area" where the soul of a believer went after death to undergo a final purification of sins before it was permitted to enter into heaven. The church taught that time in purgatory could be reduced by doing enough good works in the eyes of God....or after one's death, loved ones still living could offer prayers to the saints on behalf of their deceased loved ones to implore the saints to share some of their extra merit to free the deceased's soul from purgatory.

By the early 16th century, the Pope was Leo The 10th. Leo had a vision of building a beautiful basilica named St. Peter's Church in Rome, which stands today and is one of the most famous churches in the world. Building a church of that size was going to take a lot of money. So, Leo, using his power as the "Vicar of Christ", authorized the sale of indulgences to help finance the construction of St. Peter's church. An indulgence was a monetary payment of penalty, which absolved one of past sins and/or released a loved one from purgatory after death. One of the foremost indulgence sellers was a monk named John Tetzel. Tetzel traveled from village to village, preaching in the churches,

and offering for sale a papal indulgence. People flocked from all over to hear him preach and to have the chance to buy an indulgence, either for themselves, or for a deceased loved one.

Some members of St. Mary's Church in the city of Wittenberg, Germany were among those who bought an indulgence from Tetzel. Their Pastor was a man named Martin Luther. Martin Luther was a Professor at Wittenberg College and was known as the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, but more than anything else, he was a Roman Catholic Priest. And as a Priest he had a full understanding of the practices of the church and he did not like what he saw. He was deeply troubled that the church was teaching that the remission of sins and salvation could be bought.

If there was anyone who knew what it was like to live in constant fear of the idea of an angry, vengeful God, it was Dr. Luther. Early on in his life, Luther viewed Jesus Christ as an angry judge, a vengeful God waiting to throw Luther into the depths of hell for eternity over his sins. He tried everything he possibly could to try to appease God. He confessed every single sin he could think of in the confessional, he deprived himself of food and sleep, but the harder he worked, the further he went into despair. "God is righteous, I am not. Because of that, God will judge me to eternal damnation" were Luther's thoughts of God.

That is, until he really started studying the Scriptures. In our scripture reading from Romans 3, he finally understood what that phrase "**The Righteousness of God**" truly meant. Here, he read, "**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**" He knew that all too well. But it was the part that followed that opened his eyes and inspired him to challenge the church. Paul continues in Romans: "**and (all) are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**" Luther finally understood that God's righteousness wasn't something that he, or anyone else had to earn through prayer, confession, penance, works, or indulgences, it was a GIFT from Christ for all who believe! We are justified by Christ, so that when God sees us, it is just as if we had never sinned! What great news this was! It is all about Christ and what He did for us at the cross. No wonder Luther felt he could never atone for his sins, because all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But Christ justifies us.

It wasn't our work, it was all Christ's work for us! He finally understood that this was what the Gospel is really all about. That's what Christ's life, death, and resurrection were really all about!

So, with this new-found truth of the Gospel from the Word of God, Dr. Luther now finds his parishioners coming to him, telling him that they've been buying indulgences and that the Pope said they would be saved. His reaction was to do what any theologian of

the day would do when a controversial subject came up, call for a debate based on the Scriptures on the topic of the sale of indulgences. He developed 95 theses that were supported by the scriptures, showing how the practice of indulgences was not supported by scripture, and posted them to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, which was in essence the “bulletin board” of the community. Printers got hold of them, copied them on their printing presses, and they spread like wildfire. Luther continued to preach from the pulpit that one was not saved by their own works or labors or monetary payment, but solely by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Needless to say, this didn't go over very well with the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church of his day. Luther was asked to recant, and he refused. Luther is quoted as saying **“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right or safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me.”** As a result, Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church and he was branded a heretic which led to the Holy Roman Emperor condemning him as an “outlaw”, meaning anyone could kill him at any time without penalty. Burning at the stake was the most common method of putting to death those accused of heresy, which at the time meant believing or teaching ideas other than those of the Catholic Church. To help Luther escape, a German prince, Fredrick the III of Saxony staged Luther's kidnapping and placed him at the Wartburg Castle. Luther disguised himself as a knight and spent his time translating the New Testament from Greek into German so common people could read it.

Luther didn't set out to start a new church, his original hope was to Re-Form the existing church of his day. To bring them back to scriptural teaching, Only when the church made it clear that they would prefer to boast in their own works, and in the words of a man in Rome, instead of boasting in Christ and His Word, did Luther face the reality that a new church would need to be formed.

A church which would have what would come to be known as **the “three sola's” as the foundation of its beliefs:**

- **Sola Scriptura meaning “Scripture Alone”** (Scripture alone is the complete truth and authority)
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- **Sola Fide meaning “Faith Alone”** (By faith alone are we saved. Faith freely given by God that causes our eyes to be opened and us to believe)
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- **Sola Gratia meaning “Grace Alone”** (By Grace alone are we saved. The grace of God which is a gift...and by no human works are we saved)

Through my readings this week I learned that later the reformed churches added two more Solas:

Solus Christus- meaning **“Christ Alone”** (By Christ alone and no other can we find our salvation)

Soli Deo Gloria- meaning **“By Glory to God alone”** (We are to give God all the glory because He is the only deserving one)

It would be a new church that would preserve these beliefs and serve to teach the truth of the Gospel. Luther wasn't a radical, seeking to throw out everything, good and bad, and start over, he merely wanted to re-form what was already in place.

Okay, so that was 500 years ago, but what about today?

The world today doesn't want to believe in God at all, let alone that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The world today teaches that you can do whatever you want, as long as you're a good person....and what does that even mean today? What makes a good person by today's standards?

Luther once said that the Reformation of the church is ongoing. There are constant threats against her. The belief that we are saved by works and not by faith is a 2000 year old deception of the enemy that lives today in the world and in our churches. It's purpose is to draw us away from our faith in Christ as our salvation so that we are lost and fall short...the deception works to undermine faith in God in it's entirety because the enemy knows all too well the amazing power of faith.

Jesus made it clear that one's faith is the connection to God's favour. **“All things are possible to the one who believes”** (Mark 8:23).

The first recorded instance of **Jesus saying, “Your faith has healed you”** is found in Matthew 9:22 where Jesus heals the woman who had been subject to bleeding for 12 years when she said, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed”.

Jesus also says, “Your faith has made you well,” to a leper He had healed (Luke 17:19) and to a blind beggar He healed **he says “Receive your sight, your faith has healed you”** (Luke 18:42). Other times Jesus links faith and healing without using the exact words such as in Matthew 8:13 when **Jesus says to a centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would”.** **And His servant was healed at that moment.**

Other times Jesus refers to spiritual salvation being linked to a person's faith. For

example, when the prostitute washed Jesus's feet with her tears, **He told her "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."** (Luke 7:50).

When Jesus said to certain people, "**Your faith has made you well,**" He was saying that their faith (their belief in Him) had been the means of their restoration. The power of Christ was what effected the cure, but His power was applied in connection with their faith.

In the same way, salvation comes through faith:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God". (John 3:16-18)

The Reformation movement didn't begin with Martin Luther but with Jesus Christ 1500 years earlier. Throughout the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Jesus expressed frustration with the state of religious practices and the church and His desire for a church that is genuine, compassionate, and focused on faith rather than ritualistic practices. His frustrations call the church to align closer to His teachings of love and genuine faith.

Jesus often challenged the interpretation and application of the Church's laws and traditions of His time:

1. Regarding Sabbath Observance, in (Mark Chapter 2:27)**: Jesus states, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**" This teaching emphasizes the importance of mercy and humanity over rigid adherence to the Sabbath law, indicating that the law should serve people's needs.
2. In The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chapter 5:21-48)**: Jesus reinterprets various laws, such as those regarding murder, adultery, and oaths. He deepens the understanding of the law by focusing on inner attitudes and intentions rather than just external actions.
3. In Mark Chapter 7:1-23: When criticized for not following ceremonial handwashing, Jesus argues that it is not what enters a person that defiles them, but what comes out of their hearts. He emphasizes the importance of inner purity over ritual cleanliness.
4. In John Chapter 8:1-11: When brought a woman caught in adultery, Jesus challenges the accusers, stating, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a

stone.” Instead of condemning her, He tells her to “go and sin no more,” highlighting mercy over strict legalism.

5. In Matthew Chapter 22:37-40: Jesus summarizes the law into two great commandments: love God and love your neighbor. He implies that all laws should be grounded in love, offering a radical departure from the legalistic interpretations of the law.

These examples reflect Jesus’ emphasis on love, mercy, and the spirit of the law rather than mere legal compliance, challenging the religious leaders of His time to rethink their approach to faith and righteousness.

If we live by faith, then God will be served. If we live by human logic, then only man will be served and we will fall short. Let us be people of faith and PERSEVERE to the end.

Reformation Sunday is a day to be celebrated and to serve as a reminder that the Reformation began over 500 years ago because the church had strayed from teaching the scriptures, but it continues for us today. We are reminded of the constant need to look to Christ and the cross for our forgiveness, life and salvation. We are reminded not to boast in ourselves or rely on our own works but to boast about Christ.

On this Reformation Sunday, with all that is happening in the world, we need to remember that the Reformation of the Church is Ongoing, that it is centred in the message that:

BY CHRIST ALONE

WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH ALONE

BY GOD’S GRACE ALONE

AS WRITTEN IN THE SCRIPTURES ALONE

TO THE GLORY OF GOD ALONE

Amen.