

Title: Reformation Part II

Today is Reformation Sunday, where we celebrate the discovery that salvation was a gift, and that God loved us. On October 31, 1517 in Wittenberg, Saxony, in what we now call Germany Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses onto the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg*. *Castle Church is also known as All Saints church*. *The full name of Luther's paper was The 95 theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* and it was addressed to the Archbishop of Mainz, the representative of the Pope. This paper criticized the teachings which had infiltrated the Church of the 16th century. In particular, Luther challenged the theological basis of the selling of indulgences, the existence of purgatory, and the authority of the pope. In the 95 theses, Luther reveals that the forgiveness of God has already been achieved by the work of Christ in the cross and is received through faith. This revelation became the spark which started the Reformation.

This afternoon we will be celebrating the Reformation in a joint service with all our sister churches at Our Savior, Arcadia. You know, our wonderful Oktoberfest, yesterday was not just a party, nor was it just a celebration of our German heritage. But in fact, it was really a celebration of our Christian heritage, in particular, our "Lutheran" heritage, a heritage which sought to keep the Gospel message at the center of the Christian's life. The story of our Lutheran heritage is an important story. It is one of political intrigue. of battle of life and death decisions. It is a story about people coming to understand, for the first time in their lives, the relationship they had with God.

The need for a Reformation began as early as the second century AD, 13 centuries before Luther. You see, by the end of the first century the last of the apostles had died. Few were the ones who had actually met an apostle. By now, the only first-hand knowledge of Jesus was through the WRITINGS of the apostles. As a result, people were free to say whatever they imagined in their heads because there were no living apostles to challenge them. For this reason all manner of heretics sprang up teaching falsehood. So, it was "church pastor's" responsibility to protect the congregation from false theology, from things which could lead them away from God... away from eternal life. The way to fight heresy, was to focus on scripture, for as Paul said all scripture was God-breathed. So, in the early church much time was spent on studying, preaching and singing the word of God. The word of God, was the soul of a congregation. So far... so good.

Then in the fourth century, something major happened. The Emperor of the entire Western world, Emperor Constantine, becomes a Christian. Why is that

important? Well, up until then, the Christian faith was persecuted. You were a Christian precisely because “You were a Christian!” that is... “You had faith in Christ.” Before Constantine, there was no other good reason to be a Christian because it was dangerous to be a Christian. But when the Emperor became a Christian, all of a sudden, “being a Christian,” in particular, “being a Christian leader,” became a position of power. During this time the Holy Roman empire, not only is the absolute civil power, of the Western world. but it also becomes the absolute ecclesiastical power, the absolute church power in the western world. What is important to realize is that “the church” has become a civil power. And this is bad... And as they say, power corrupts... furthermore “absolute power” corrupts absolutely. As a result, the Church attracts and becomes infiltrated by people not interested in saving souls, but only in POWER.

A second thing happens during this time. A centralizing of spiritual POWER occurs within the church itself. The definition of “Church” changes. “The Church” is no longer “the assembly of all believers,” but now “The Church” is just “the clergy.” The name “Saints” was no longer a title given to all believers, but a title given only those who showed special signs. No longer was “the office of keys,” (i.e. the ability to announce the forgiveness of sins,) a privilege of all the saints, of all the people of God... but now the forgiveness of sins was done by the priests alone. In order to get forgiveness of sins... you had to get it from the priests. So now, as a result of this centralization of spiritual power... salvation depended on your relationship with the priesthood, rather than your relationship with God through faith in Christ.

So now this is the teaching which was bequeathed to the church of Luther’s time. Since your relationship with the earthly church was the source of your salvation, the earthly church became the judge of whether you deserved forgiveness or not, and as a result your faith had to be proven through your works so they could be sure that you were sorry for your sins. So eventually, it was not faith which saved you, but your works. This had some side effects. As a result of these two things, obedience to the mother church was all that was necessary for salvation. As a result, you didn’t need to read the bible anymore. In fact, the average person was considered too untrustworthy to be allowed to read the word of God. It was feared that if the average person read the scripture themselves they might misinterpret it, or more to the point, they might set themselves up as an authority, separate from the church. And that just wouldn’t do....

So, by the 15th century, (Luther’s time) it was understood that you earned your way into heaven by being good. Baptism did not grant full forgiveness and entry into

the family of God. Rather, when you were baptized, God gave you the power to do good works, and then it was your responsibility, to earn your way into heaven. If you didn't do enough good works, to pay for all the sins that you did after you died, you spent a few hundred thousand years, a million years in Purgatory suffering horribly until you were purged, purged of your sin debt. A million years sounds like a lot of time but compared to "eternity in heaven" that was a drop in the bucket. So that was the church in the 15th century.

About this time a young monk and doctor of Theology, named Martin Luther, as part of his studies, translated the bible. As a result of his study, the church's teaching on "how salvation was imparted" started to bug Luther. You see the Pope would sell things called "indulgences" which were more or less "get out of purgatory free" cards. Now it was understood, at the time, that the money would be used for good works. Indulgences, were sold to build the wonderful St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. So those buying indulgences were doing good work, Therefore, they told the buyers of indulgences that they were granted some time off from Purgatory, for their good work. But after studying the bible, that started to bug Luther. What bugged Luther was that, if purgatory was really that horrible, and if the Pope had the power to forgive people their time in purgatory, "Why didn't he forgive and release everyone who was stuck in Purgatory, just out of sheer mercy?" Just out of compassion. Something just didn't seem right. But that was the theological world of the 15th century. You got to heaven by earning your way into heaven, and suffering for the rest that you failed to earn. And because the Church didn't trust you with Scripture, you had to depend on priests for whatever salvation was offered.

Now as Luther began translating the bible he soon discovered something quite different. When Luther first started translating the book of Romans he got caught in a struggle with a particular word. The word which caught him was "righteousness" In Rom 1:17 it said "For in the Gospel, a righteousness of God has been revealed" In one sense "righteousness" meant "the perfection of God," "his virtue of being good." Under this definition this is what separated us from God. God was righteous, we were not. We were sinful and He was not. But Luther thought to himself. This is not good news. In revealing the "righteousness of God" then all it does is remind me that I am sinful and worthy of damnation. The "righteous" cannot abide with the "unrighteous." God cannot love us. And that's not a comfort. Not only that but there was nothing we could do about it. For righteousness would always be out of our reach... for our works could never be good enough to be considered "righteous." We were unworthy of God and there

was nothing that would ever change that. How was that supposed to be good news?

But after much study he discovered something astounding. He found out that “the righteousness of God” meant something else. In Romans 1:17 it says Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law. Rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. – For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But now a “righteousness from God”, apart from law, has been made known. This “righteousness from God” comes through faith in Jesus Christ. In studying Romans, Luther began to realize that the righteousness of God was not a description of God not just a reminder of our own sinfulness... but it was a gift. The righteousness from God was not a thing which separated us from God, but rather it made it possible for us to be with God. It was a gift. That, in fact, was the whole reason for the Reformation “God’s righteousness” was a gift given to us, bought with the blood of Christ. Through faith in Christ, we receive His righteousness.... we wear His righteousness. That was the Reformation. Righteousness was a gift from God. and as a result “Salvation was a gift from God.”

This realization of the Reformation, was very important... is still very important. Because even today there are still those who forget that salvation is a gift. There are those who see Christ as a role-model for humans. They see Christ’s command “Follow me,” not as a command to have a relationship with him, but rather they see it as a command to be “like” him, to imitate him. You see, the problem is that... if imitation becomes our primary focus,... then the things WE do become the center of our lives... and works-righteousness creeps in In fact, when we focus on Jesus as a role model we miss the entire divine work which he came to earth to do. God became a man who suffered death on the cross, to pay for the death which we deserved as sinful humans. Jesus died and rose again as proof of his victory over death and Satan. These are divine things which no human can imitate. Jesus was NOT primarily a role-model for humans. He was God. If you think that doing what Jesus did is the whole counsel of God you can lose the comfort of the Gospel. You can lose the joy of being a Christian. For example, What do you do if you fail to do what Jesus did? What do you do after you commit a sin? Jesus can’t be a role model for overcoming sin.... because he never sinned. What if I don’t want to do what Jesus did? Jesus always did the righteous thing. Jesus went off to pray for long hours by himself regularly. I can’t. Jesus hung out with the outcasts, the nerds, the socially unfit, the boring, the sick, the weak, the poor. How often do I find myself desiring the company of some and not of others?

If Jesus came to be a role model, that I am to follow, then I am lost. Praise to God THAT is not the Gospel message.

The real problem with works-righteousness.... in fact, the sin which accompanies “works righteousness,” is that, it forces us to focus the on OUR actions rather than on Christ's. The truth of the matter is... Jesus did not come to be a good example of a God-pleasing life, (even though he did live a God-pleasing life.) Jesus is God, and his work was divine. And this truth, finally, is the focus of the Reformation.... Jesus came here to die on a cross to suffer the punishment for all of our sins. By Jesus’ work our relationship with God is restored. Our salvation, our restored relationship with God, is not dependent at all on OUR actions but on Jesus’ In particular, God’s LOVE for us is not dependent at all on whether we sin or not, or whether we feel like doing God's will or not. It is a gift. Because it is a gift, when we fail to do what Jesus did, our relationship with God is not necessarily in question, and this is a great comfort. That is the power of the Gospel. That was the purpose of the Reformation. When I am bad, God still loves me. When we fail to do what Jesus did, we do not fear punishment. for the Gospel says that when we confess our sins to God, he will forgive us. And we remain Children of God.

This was the comfort which the leaders of the Reformation wished for us to have. These are the gifts which God has given us, His children. May you always live in the love of Christ which is the gift of God. Amen