

Always Being Reformed

Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Oct. 31, 2004

On this very day, almost 500 years ago, a young monk names Martin Luther, nailed 95 theses on the door of a church in Wittenburg Germany. He didn't know it then, but his bold act lit the fires of the Protestant Reformation.

It was not the reformation he'd hoped for--he'd hoped that the whole Catholic Church would change. (Eventually it did. It's important for us to remember that the Catholic Church we have today is not at all the corrupt organization Luther was dealing with.) But at the time, the church structure was interested only in quelling dissent, so Luther and his followers were in for some very difficult times.

We need to ask first what it was that motivated Luther--what happened to him that made it so important to try to show the church and its leaders the error of their ways? Luther, like us, wanted to be right with God. Luther, like us, knew he was sinful, that he was not worthy of God's love or God's forgiveness. But he tried--how he tried, to become worthy. He was studying law. He gave that up to become a monk, but that wasn't enough. He watched as the church sold indulgences that were supposed to help people buy their way into heaven, but he knew there wasn't enough money in the world to accomplish that. He prayed and prayed and studied and studied, and then one day he came across the passage from Romans that we read today:

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.

What a relief, what joy! Luther now knew, in the words of the Gospel of John, the truth of the gospel and this truth made him free.

And so he wrote his 95 theses, trying to show the church that our salvation comes, not through works, not through the authority of the church, not through buying indulgences, but our salvation is a free gift of God to all who believe in Jesus.

He was trying to show, too, that the Bible alone, not the church, was the final authority in matters of faith and practice, that all believers were priests, that only God

is sovereign, that God is to be obeyed over any human authority. As one writer said, “these ideas were not simply opening the window and let a little fresh air in. This was more like opening the door, and letting a hurricane come in.”

The Catholic church wasn't ready to listen, but many, many others were. Priests left the church, nuns ran away from their convents, ordinary folk listened gladly to this good news, and the reformation spread like wildfire.

One of those who was transformed by this message was a young priest in Scotland named John Knox. Knox became friends with two reformers named Wishart and Bacon. His friend Bacon was burned at stake for his beliefs. Shortly after that Knox was arrested and made a galley slave for 19 months. Imagine what it must have been like, chained all day in dank darkness inside a ship, forced to row until his muscles cried in agony--all the time longing for the sight of the green hills of Scotland and the moving songs of bagpipes. It would have been enough to make a lesser man change his mind about this reformation--it only made John Knox trust more and more in God. When he was free he served churches in England. For a while he was chaplain Henry VIII's young son Edward. Then he traveled to Geneva to study and learn under John Calvin, who was helping make that Swiss city a model of the reformation.

When Knox returned to Scotland, he discovered that there had been an underground Reform movement, and that he had come to have legendary status during his long exile from Scotland. Legend has it that horsemen rode quickly, shouting to all who would hear, fishing boats putting about to call each other, shepherds crossing mountains to pass it on: "John Knox is come!"

When he returned to Scotland, Mary Queen of Scots--a staunch Catholic, was on the throne. He had personal interviews with her, trying, in his words, to “bring her heart to Jesus.” Mary said of him, “I fear the prayers of John Knox more than the assembled armies of Europe.” But Mary rejected Knox's teachings. He, in turn declared obedience to God was more important than obedience to any queen. Mary eventually was forced to flee to England.

When John Knox was born, Scotland was the nation of Europe most

sunk in ignorance and superstition and the absence of the gospel. When John Knox died, , Scotland had become totally transformed and had become a model of Christian knowledge and virtue. One writer summed it up this way: "It is probably accurate to say that never in history has one man so altered the life of a nation as did John Knox in Scotland." It was immigrants from this transformed nation who brought their faith to the New World and founded the Presbyterian Church.

God used men like Luther and Calvin and Knox to reform the Church. God used former nuns like Luther's wife Kathrina and others-- God even used simple ordinary people in this important work. They stood courageously together--against the power of the Catholic Church, against the power of kings and princes--and declared: "God alone is sovereign, our allegiance is to God above anyone and our faith is in God alone." and "We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone. We don't depend on our good works, or the Church for our salvation."

Now, it would be very easy to say, "We thank God that the Reformation happened and we're glad it's over and done with." But it isn't over. It isn't done with. The reformers were very clear. "We are always reformed," they said, "and we are always to be reformed." God isn't done with us yet. Unfortunately, though we are forgiven, we Christians are still sinners. The church still wanders from the freeing truth of the gospel.

Let me just mention three ways this has happened.

First, as Reformed Christians we believe in scripture. And scripture tells us to love our neighbor. Yet we refuse to love even fellow Christians, much less all of God's other children. We need to be reformed!

Second. The church still wanders from her dependence on God and her allegiance to God and gives ultimate allegiance to presidents and governments or to money and status rather than God. Some of us become fearful because we fail to trust God. In our fear we turn to armies and homeland security. At the beginning we sang, "A Mighty Fortress is our God, but we don't believe it! We need to be reformed!"

Third. We still forget the freeing grace of Jesus. Some of us fall back on and are proud of our good works, Some of us know our sins and shortcomings and despair because we forget our Lord's saving power. We need to have the knowledge and assurance and certainty that God loves us.

We need to know that by the grace of God through Jesus Christ we are forgiven and made children of God. We need to be reformed!

Brothers and sisters, the good news is that the same God who called and saved and freed Luther and Calvin and Knox, the same God who turned them into courageous heroes of the faith, the same God who reformed and transformed their church, is still at work, calling us, freeing us, saving us, reforming and transforming our church as well.

Thanks be to God!