

“The Clarion Call of the Reformation”
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Reformation Sunday
First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
October 29, 2017
(Eph. 2:8-10)

Introduction.

Recently, I read that Playmobil, the German toy company, made unexpected headlines back in 2015 when it released a limited-edition Martin Luther figurine. Outside of how Luther’s cape makes him look a little like Darth Vader, the toy itself wasn’t especially newsworthy. However, what got everyone’s attention was how quickly it flew off the shelves. Overnight Little Luther became the fastest selling item in the company’s 40-year history. While factories scrambled to keep up with demand, consumers descended on eBay in search of the elusive toy.¹

This is not the first time Luther has been at the intersection of high demand, great expectations, and pop culture. Back in 1517, when Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door of the Wittenberg castle, he began a conversation that rocked the medieval world, and history has never been the same since. This year marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, and the day which started the whole revolution is October 31, 1517.

As we celebrate Reformation Sunday today, which is also our Anniversary Sunday and Commitment Sunday here at First Pres, we’re going to take a few moments to reflect on the life of Martin Luther and consider the importance of the doctrines of the Christian faith he helped recover. And we’ll also take a look at the impact of the Reformation in the world and what it means for you and me today.

I. The Beginning of the Reformation.

When Martin Luther wrote his 95 theses, I imagine he had little thought about how it would affect not only his life and the Roman Catholic Church of his day, but also how his actions would reverberate throughout history and actually change the world. When he started out in life, no one expected him to be someone who would change the theological landscape of Europe in the 1500s. In fact, it was a complete surprise to his family that he became a theologian in the first place.

Luther was born in 1483 in the town of Eisleben, Germany, about 120 miles southwest of modern day Berlin. And he grew up in Mansfield where his ambitious father named Hans was involved in the mining business. Hans wanted Martin to become a lawyer to help the family become upwardly mobile in society,

so he sent Martin at the age of 17 to the University of Erfurt from which he earned both his BA and then a Master's degree in philosophy. He did all this in the shortest time allowed for students, and classmates gave me the nickname "The Professor."

When he completed his Master's degree in 1505, Martin enrolled at the same university and began the study of law. Everything was going according to his father's plan until the day Martin was caught in a terrible thunderstorm on July 2nd. He was travelling back to the university from his home. In the middle of this thunderstorm, Martin was almost struck by lightning. Out of fear and in desperation, he cried out, "St. Anne, save me! I'll become a monk!"

Luther survived the lightning strike, and he fulfilled his vow. And 12 days later he sold his books and gave away all his earthly possessions and entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt without telling his family. That decision led Luther on a personal spiritual quest that at times became obsessive, but the Lord used his deep desire to be reconciled to God to help Luther recover central truths of the Christian faith which had been lost or obscured by the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. One of the key moments in Luther's quest occurred when he was studying the book of Romans.

In a wonderful article about Luther, author David Zahl encourages his reader to picture in their mind an earnest-looking monk in his mid-30s sequestered in one of the small rooms in the tower of his cloister.² He's hard at work on a fresh set of lectures for the university where he serves as a professor of theology, but the work isn't going well. He's hit a roadblock in his studies, and a passage in the first chapter of Romans specifically has been keeping him up at night: "*For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'*" (1:17).

Like everyone else who studied theology in the 1500s, Martin Luther had been trained in the scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages, which interpreted Paul's phrase in Romans 1 as shorthand for the awesome holiness of God which should cause sinners to be afraid. In the monastery Luther became notorious for spending countless hours in the confessional, trying to get right with God, but he found no comfort. The deeper he dove into the system of confession and penance, the deeper his despair of ever pleasing God became. As he would later admit, he had begun to hate a God who he felt demanded the impossible.

But this particular day was different. As he painstakingly worked through the passage in Romans 1, he received another lightning bolt. But this one was a lightning bolt of inspiration. This is how Luther later described it: "I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and the sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors to paradise."³

The rest is history. We now look back to this amazing man and his remarkable work in Germany which helped to ignite the Reformation in 1517, and it initiated a discussion about religious rights and liberties that changed the course of history. We will be forever in Luther's debt for the remarkable insights into biblical truth he provided. He was a bigger-than-life personality who has given to excess, but God used his passion, his personality, and his enormous intellect to breathe new life and the power of the Holy Spirit into a corrupt and flawed Church and also set the world on fire.

II. The Doctrines the Reformation Recovered.

In his own day, the apostle Paul sought to combat Christians who compromised the doctrine of free grace by requiring that believers observe Jewish laws and rituals such as circumcision. In their day, the Reformers like Luther also had to counter the idea of works-righteousness. This is the notion that one can earn one's way to heaven, which had become a part of Catholic theology and practice in the 16th century.

The prevailing view at the time was that at one's baptism the work of Christ removed the eternal consequences of sin, but the temporal consequences remained for sins committed after one's baptism. Therefore, it was thought that people must still pay penalties in this life and in the life to come (through purgatory) for sins that a person committed after their baptism. It was believed that by prescribing works of penance that the church could enable a person to make adequate amends his/her sins.

But the church also added that people could avoid this painful process, by means of an "indulgence" granted to them by the church in return for some special service to the church. One could also draw on the good works of holy people done in the past and have their good deeds credited to one's spiritual account vicariously. Eventually, indulgences began to be offered for sale with the guarantee that the sufferings of this life and purgatory could be curtailed or even canceled. J.J. Tetzel, a contemporary of Luther, was the one who coined the phrase which provided false words of assurance, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!"

In addition, an Aristotelian understanding that only "like" can understand "like" was a dominant perspective in the theological world of Roman Catholicism at the time. So, it was thought that humankind had to ascend to God in order to be accepted by Him. It was a theology of glory, and theologians at the time wrote about this at length. But Luther came along and studied the Scriptures, particularly the books of Romans, Colossians and Ephesians, and he began to discover that no, it isn't a matter of us ascending to glory with us raising ourselves to the level of God. Rather, it was God who descended to us in our sinful humanity through the

person of Jesus Christ in a *theology of the cross*. And because of His death on our behalf we can now understand and appropriate God's love for us in the person of Christ.

It was then that Luther began to realize that the gospel of Jesus Christ had been lost in the Catholic theology of the 16th century, and the selling of indulgences was exhibit A. All this prepared the way for the Reformation protest. The five hallmark doctrines of the Christian Faith which were eventually rediscovered and re-emphasized in the Reformation were these:

Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone is the standard;

Solus Christus – by Christ alone are we saved;

Sola gratia – salvation is by grace alone;

Sola fide – justification is through faith alone; and

Soli Deo gloria – it's all to the glory of God alone.

The passage we've read this morning capsulizes these truths. "*For is by grace that you have been saved through faith -and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -not by works, so that no one can boast*" (Ephesians 2:8,9). It's only by the grace of God in His Son's death on the cross which we've received by faith that we are saved. God's kindness, His unmerited favor and His forgiving love have been given to us in Christ freely. And no human effort can ever contribute to one's salvation; it is the free gift of God.

Have you ever tried to pay back God for your salvation? I remember as a young Christian I did. In college after I came to a fuller understanding of God's love for me in Christ and all He had done in dying for my sins, I proceeded to try to pay back God for my salvation. But I discovered it's a losing proposition. You can never pay back God enough for what He's done. All you can do is receive His free gift, His unmerited love.

I can remember a time that I heard someone speak on this topic and it crashed through into my heart and mind with a lightning bolt of my own when the speaker said these words: "Nothing you can do or say will ever make God love you more or make Him love you less than He does right now." It's by grace that you have been saved through faith, that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not the result of works. We can't earn it, so no one is in a position where they can boast.

The gospel of God's grace freely offered in Jesus Christ is good news not only to the people of Martin Luther's day but to everyone who knows they need a Savior. The Reformation matters because is represented a recovery of central doctrines of the Christian faith that had fallen into disrepair in the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. These doctrines and the people God used to restore their central place in Christian theology cannot be overstated.

III. The Impact of the Reformation.

We Presbyterians in America have a special affinity with our Reformation forbears, especially those who were in Scotland. As they came to the shores of this country in the 17th and 18th centuries, they brought with them the spirit of the Reformation which had touched and transformed their own lives and their nation. They also brought with them principles of morality, a Presbyterian system of government, the Protestant work ethic, and a pervasive sense of independence which helped to plant the seeds of our own struggle for freedom during the American Revolution.

Just before the first shots were fired at Concord, Massachusetts, in 1775, a member of the British parliament stood up and announced that, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian pastor!" He was talking about John Witherspoon, a Scottish Presbyterian who had become the President of what is now Princeton University. From the floor of the Continental Congress where he served and from the pulpits that he preached, Witherspoon proclaimed that:

"A good form of government may hold the rotten materials together for some time, but beyond a certain pitch, even the best constitution will be ineffectual. However, when the manners of a nation are pure, when true religion and internal principles maintain their vigor, the attempts of the most powerful enemies to oppress them are commonly baffled and disappointed.... It is therefore your duty in this important and critical season to exert yourselves."⁴

Witherspoon's call to action ignited the colonies and brought him to the table where he signed the Declaration of Independence. He was the only pastor to sign it. But Witherspoon also had an even greater and more far-reaching influence upon this nation. James Madison was one of his students.

According to historian James Smylie, Madison entered the College of New Jersey, as Princeton was called then, a year after Witherspoon became president. He graduated in 1771, and then returned in 1772 to study theology and ethics under the president's supervision. In all likelihood, Witherspoon first introduced Madison to the political ideas of the period and impressed Madison with a view of human nature rooted in Scripture. Relying upon his theological orientation as a Presbyterian, Madison translated the views of Witherspoon into a political instrument.⁵

That "political instrument" we now call the U.S. Constitution. James Madison planned and prepared the system of checks and balances that now regulate our legislative, executive and judicial branches of government, which had its roots in Presbyterianism. The Reformation which swept across Germany, Switzerland and Scotland in the 15th and 16th centuries had a major impact on the formation of this nation in the 17th and 18th centuries. And our Presbyterian form of government

helped to shape our country's Constitution.

Conclusion.

Our forebears of the Reformation laid a foundation which has lasted for 500 years. First Presbyterian Church in Winston-Salem itself was founded in 1862, and the gospel of Jesus Christ has been proclaimed here in this church on the corner of Third and Cherry Streets for over 150 years. Believers had the foresight back then to lay a foundation of faith and witness that has continued for these many years.

What legacy of faith will we leave? In our church? In our children? For our community? 150 years from now, 25 years from now, what will the witness of this church for Christ be? What will your witness be? What kind of legacy are you leaving for your children and grandchildren? For what will you be remembered?

Having buried my late wife Lorie last year has brought a new awareness of my own mortality. Not one of us knows when God will call us home to heaven. We don't know how many years we have left to be a witness for Christ. Life is more fragile than any of us realize. I leave you with this challenge. The Christian Faith is one that has deep roots in the past while it looks forward to the future.

Our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
the God of Paul, Peter and Priscilla,
the God of Irenaeus, Origen and Augustine,
the God of Aquinas, Francis and Anselm,
the God of Luther, Calvin and Knox,
and the God of George Mauze, Julian Lake and David Burr.

You and I build on a foundation that was laid by great men and women of the past who faithfully followed the Lord Jesus Christ and sought to be His people in their day and time. The clarion call of the Reformation is applicable to us today. We are the church reformed always reforming, always seeking to be the best Christ wants to give us by His grace, and always building the Body of Christ into a community of love and compassion and truth and justice. It was true 500 years ago at the Reformation. It's still true today. To God be the glory! Amen.

¹ Taken from an article written by David Zahl, "Justify Yourself," *Christianity Today*, February 2017, p. 36.

² Zahl, pp. 36ff.

³ Zahl, p. 37.

⁴ Excerpt from a sermon by David B. Waltermulder, "Our Nation's Religious Heritage." Witherspoon said this on June 9, 1776.

⁵ James Smylie, *Princeton University Library Chronicle*.