

# Theology Matters

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## Does The Reformation Still Matter?

*“There is no question the mainline church is dead,”* he said. *“The only question now is whether Evangelicalism is the seven demons that come into the corpse.”* This was the response I got after a long period of silence to a question I had posed to my teacher, George Lindbeck, in a course on “Comparative Ecclesiology” in the fall semester, 1992, at Yale University Divinity School.

I did not like it. I considered myself an evangelical (and still do). Nor was I ready to forsake my mainstream ecclesial inheritance. Yet even then I suspected that one reason I did not like my teacher’s verdict was because there was more truth in it than I was prepared to admit.

The ecclesial landscape has changed dramatically over the last quarter century. While mainline denominations have continued their statistical death-spiral, evangelical denominations have also experienced decline. Growth comes in different forms, of course. But few American Protestant denominations, least of all in the Presbyterian family, if they are honest, have had any real growth.

Yet more disturbing than their fragmentation and numerical decline is how light, superficial, and thin the preaching, teaching, and worship often is in so many evangelical and mainline Protestant churches today, and how deeply enculturated and ideologically captive so many have become. Was Professor Lindbeck right?

Disillusioned for various reasons, many have abandoned their Protestant heritage or hold it loosely, today. Some evangelicals have tried out Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman or Anglo-Catholicism. Others have joined George Barna’s “Revolution” and ‘do church’ at home. Some think the Reformation is over or was simply a mistake. Not everyone is convinced it was a mistake, however. Nor are they ready to abandon their Protestant identity.

Many I know long for a richer, thicker, more deeply rooted understanding of the Christian life than mainline or evangelical churches have often afforded them. Many more suspect there is more to being Protestant than they were told, i.e., there is probably more at stake here than mere matters of taste or opinion, preferences or “likes.”

Hoping to bring it closer to home in this last edition of the Reformation’s 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, *Theology Matters* invited ten pastors on the front lines of parish ministry from the PCUSA, ECO, and EPC to respond to the question, “Does the Reformation still matter?”

“As a working pastor in congregational ministry,” I asked, “is there any insight you have learned from the teachings of the Reformation that might be of help to our readers who are primarily pastors, ruling elders, seminary students, Sunday School teachers, Bible study leaders, and other Christian leaders?” Please read the following essays, therefore, as dispatches from the front.

Whether Professor Lindbeck was right, John Calvin said that the history of the church is a history of a thousand resurrections. What not only *looks* dead, but *is* dead, can be raised, and demons can be exorcised when they are called by name. So let it begin and let us sow in hope, knowing that the Lord of the harvest is still in charge.

And if, as Bonhoeffer said, “God has granted American Christianity no Reformation. He has given it strong revivalist preachers, ... but no Reformation of the church of Jesus Christ by the Word of God,” then perhaps it is not that the Reformation has been tried in America and failed. Perhaps it has not yet been tried or sufficiently understood. So please join us as we seek to understand more clearly and drink more deeply from the well.

*Richard Burnett, Managing Editor*

# Three Pastoral Insights From Martin Luther

by Raymond Hylton

Like many pastors across America and the world, I encouraged our congregation to observe the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. But churches were not the only ones honoring this historic moment. Print media, television networks, BBC, NPR, social media and numerous internet outlets tried to cover the importance of Luther's nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and the revolution that he sparked.

While it is gratifying to hear popular media giving voice to the sixteenth century Reformation and Luther's role, the coverage is often narrowly focused on some of Luther's weaknesses, especially his puzzlingly antisemitic views in later life and his sometimes uncharitable words and methods used against those with whom he disagreed.

Recently, Martin Luther's name surfaced as we discussed the Presbyterian Church's connection to the Reformation in our church's new member class. Participants in the class mentioned Luther's weaknesses. I took the opportunity to remind them that in the course of biblical history and history in general, God used imperfect men and women to accomplish great things, and Luther was no exception.

I went on explain to the class that Martin Luther's most significant contributions to the Reformation were his passionate love for God's Church. Luther was also committed to Scripture as the source of true knowledge about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and his fierce defense of God's sovereign work through Christ as the only savior of sinners. Salvation does not come to sinners by good works or through the sacraments, but through faith in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

As pastor of a local congregation dealing with numerous challenges in a changing denomination and culture, I find much encouragement from Luther's life, particularly in his book *The Bondage of the Will*. He wrote this critical work as a response to the brilliant humanist Erasmus, who advocated a version of Christianity that was light on doctrine while giving credit to freedom of the human will and human self-sufficiency to find God. Erasmus understood freedom as a power of the human will by which human beings might apply themselves to those things that lead to

eternal salvation. In other words, human works and efforts are meritorious.

In their introduction to the translation of Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will*, J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston judge Luther's book as "the greatest piece of writing that came from Luther's pen." For them, Erasmus, faithful to his humanist views, elevated the goodness of sincere human aspirations over and above Scripture's grim diagnosis of the human heart before almighty God (Romans 3:23). Speaking of Erasmus, they said,

His attitude was that what one believed about the mysteries of faith does not matter; what the Church lays down may safely be accepted, whether right or wrong; for the details of a churchman's doctrine will not affect his living as a Christian in this world, nor his eventual destiny in the world to come. *Peace in the church was of more value than any doctrine* (emphasis mine).<sup>1</sup>

To modern ears, Luther's response to Erasmus could be characterized as unchristian. He called Erasmus all manner of harsh names. But Luther's zeal was motivated by love for God's church. He was concerned about the corrosive effect Erasmus' views would have on Christians. He believed that "Christian truth is in danger in many hearts," and that his silence before Europe's greatest humanist was not right—Luther knew he had to confront him. He would not allow this alien teaching to stand unopposed.

## How Luther Helps Me Pastor God's Church

D. A. Carson, New Testament professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, accurately depicts some of the challenges pastors face:

Pastors devoted to their ministry have so many things to do. Apart from the careful preparation week by week of fresh sermons and Bible studies, hours set aside for counseling, care in developing excellent relationships, careful and thoughtful (and time-consuming!) evangelism, the mentoring of another generation coming along behind, the incessant demands of administration and oversight, not to mention the nurturing of one's own soul, there is the regular array of family priorities, including care for aging parents and precious grandchildren and an ill spouse (or any number of permutations of such responsibilities), and, for

some, energy levels declining in inverse proportion to advancing years. So, why should I set aside valuable hours to read up on the Reformation, usually thought to have kicked off about 500 years ago? True, the Reformers lived in rapidly changing times, but how many of them gave serious thought to postmodern epistemology, transgenderism, and the new (in)tolerance? If we are to learn from forebears, wouldn't we be wise to choose more recent ones? Not necessarily.<sup>2</sup>

Luther's response to Erasmus is refreshingly helpful and relevant to my calling to shepherd God's people. Pastors, elders and all congregational leaders would do well to go back to the past as they seek to move their churches forward into the future. Speaking through Jeremiah, the Lord said, "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6: 16).

Luther takes the modern reader back to God's ancient truths and painstakingly shows from the Scriptures how sinful human beings are saved. And in doing this, leaders will rediscover that God's power surpasses anything we can do in our strength to change people's lives; and that the wisdom of God and the purposes of God, though seemingly foolish before our eyes is wiser than all the wisdom of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Five hundred years after the Reformation, Martin Luther is helping me teach and serve God's people with a keen awareness of the following:

### **We are Sinful and Broken**

Luther, in accord with Scripture, believed that as human beings, we are powerless within ourselves to please God. We are unable to do anything but continue to sin. Salvation, therefore, must be wholly of divine grace, for we contribute nothing to our salvation. And so, any formulation of the gospel which amounts to saying that God shows grace, not in saving sinful humanity, but in making it possible for us to save ourselves, is to be rejected as a lie. The whole work of salvation from first to last, is God's. Therefore, all the glory for the salvation of sinful and broken human beings must be God's also.

Tim Keller says the good news of the gospel is:

We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is

marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us.<sup>4</sup>

### **Maintain Fidelity to God's Word**

In 1521, at the Diet of Worms, Luther stood before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The emperor, with the weight of his office, tried to pressure Luther into recanting his views. Reading Luther's memorable response to the emperor will undoubtedly stiffen the spine and resolve of all beleaguered leaders who are tempted to capitulate under the pressures of ministry:

*Since then your serene majesties and your lordships seek a simple answer: I will give it in this manner, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust in the Pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.<sup>5</sup>*

In *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict*, Scott Hendrix claims: "Luther asserted that his conscience was captive to the Word of God and that he could not go against conscience." According to Hendrix, this was not, however, a modern plea for the supremacy of the individual conscience or for religious freedom. "Though already excommunicated by Rome, Luther saw himself as a sworn teacher of Scripture who must advocate the right of all Christians to hear and live by the gospel."<sup>6</sup>

At the cost of reputation, job security and even pension, am I prepared to stand with boldness for biblical faithfulness as Luther did?

### **Doctrine Matters**

It is important to remember that Luther's conflict with the Catholic Church was not based on economic or political issues, but on matters of doctrine and moral purity. In his passionate letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, Luther was not bemoaning politics, issues of economics or picayune ecclesiastical matters. Luther was bewailing the fact that "the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters, they are then assured of their salvation. They are likewise convinced that souls escape from purgatory as soon as they have placed a contribution into the chest."<sup>7</sup>

For Luther, the eternal destiny of human beings was no small matter. I believe that the power behind Luther's prolific writing, preaching, and teaching, was his

concern that people know the truth found only in Christ. Five hundred years after the Reformation, doctrine still matters even in a time when our churches and culture eschew the particularities of the gospel. If Luther were to visit the average Evangelical worship service in America today and hear the "practical," utilitarian based sermons designed to make everyone feel good, how would he respond?

In our congregation, we try to encourage everyone to read through Scripture as the foundation for discipleship and spiritual formation. We preach through whole books of the Bible, from both the Old and New Testaments to encourage faith and obedience toward Christ. We desire to pattern our commitment to sound doctrine after Luther who referred to Scripture as food for the church where we "seize and taste the clear, pure word of God itself and hold to it."<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

The legacy of the Reformation and Luther's life in particular, has much to offer to Presbyterian Christians. The depressing reports of declining and dying churches, church leaders craving relevance instead of a deep relationship with Christ, is causing some to succumb to fads and broken cisterns that carry no water. Instead of looking for simple, or quick fixes, Luther's courage to engage with his culture and

challenge aberrant teachings empowers me in my faith to believe that God is still able to bring a new Reformation to the Presbyterian Church. Let us not lose hope or lose heart in the power of God's word.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnson (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1997), 48.

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, "Should Pastors Today Care about the Reformation?" *The 9Marks Journal*, Fall 2017. Accessed 11/1/2017: <https://www.9marks.org/journal/the-reformation-and-your-church/editors-note/>.

<sup>3</sup> This is Paul's argument in I Cor. 1:18-31, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

<sup>4</sup> Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2011), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther* (New York: Viking Press, 2017), 235.

<sup>6</sup> Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1981), 147.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Gaebler, *The Courage of Faith: Martin Luther and the Theonomous Self* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 168.

<sup>8</sup> Mansch, Larry D and Peters, Curtis. *Martin Luther: The Life and the Lessons*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Publishers, 2016, 148.

# Calvin's Way of Preaching in a Digital Age

by Richard Gibbons

Today as churches around the world continue to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation the question uppermost in my mind is: Does the preaching model provided by our reforming forefathers have anything relevant to say to a generation dominated by the ubiquitous convenience of a digital playground? It could well be argued that this generation's identity is defined by access to smart phones, tablets, Hulu, Netflix, Instagram, and Facebook.

Several years ago as part of a major writing project, I explored the preaching of the Reformers and how it impacted a Europe seeking to come to terms with major unrest and radical change in politics, religion, and economics amidst social and intellectual upheaval.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) had embarked upon and championed a recovery of expository preaching. Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), aroused and inspired by Chrysostom's example, began to preach

exegetically through the Gospel of Matthew. Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531) followed Chrysostom's homiletical approach of a grammatical-historical exegesis, abandoning the popular allegorical interpretation of the Middle Ages. Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) brought a robust potency to the preaching task and preached almost through the entire Bible between 1549 and 1565. In Protestant Europe the preaching of "the Word" dethroned the liturgical straitjacket of the Mass as the ministry of biblical preaching became the primary task of the Reformed Church. Yet in the midst of my research, it was Calvin who captured my imagination and helped me articulate an approach that shapes and molds my preaching in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

Over the centuries, the name and theology of John Calvin (1509-1564) have aroused intense feelings and lively reactions, "No tyrant of our own times was more

terribly the master of men's lives than was this cold, thin-faced little man."<sup>1</sup>

Timothy George, on a similar note, writes, "The common caricature of Calvin is that of the 'grand inquisitor of Protestantism,' the cruel tyrant of Geneva, a morose, bitter, and utterly inhuman figure."<sup>2</sup> For others, however, Calvin is known primarily as a biblical commentator and theologian, "He was, like Luther, a creative genius, but his genius was not to be found in imaginative flashes of insight, but in his systematic working out of the basic theology of the Reformation."<sup>3</sup>

Yet Willem van't Spijker, in looking at the merits of studying Calvin, suggests that "it is in the sermons that Calvin must have been most himself: in this direct, eye-to-eye contact with a congregation... here he is pastoral, moved with a subdued passion."<sup>4</sup> R. S. Wallace also suggests that for Calvin "the task of regularly preaching the word brought him at last into the heart of the reformation movement... for it was more through his preaching than any other aspect of his work that he exercised the extraordinary influence everyone has acknowledged him to have had."<sup>5</sup>

In assessing Calvin's preaching style, Hughes Oliphant Old writes, "Calvin was primarily an expository preacher,"<sup>6</sup> which Haddon Robinson helpfully defines as "the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers."<sup>7</sup>

For Calvin, the task of the preacher was to expound the Bible in the midst of a worshiping community, while preaching with the expectancy that God will cause such preaching to become a Word that proceeds from God Himself, with all the power and efficacy of the Creator and Redeemer. Steven Lawson summarizes Calvin's understanding of divine presence in preaching: "Not surprisingly, this belief in God's powerful presence in preaching had a profound influence on Calvin's view of the pulpit... A life-transforming pulpit ministry, for Calvin, required the divine presence in power."<sup>8</sup>

It must also be emphasized, however, that for Calvin the words of the expositor can only become the Word of God through a sovereign and free act of the Holy Spirit, through whose power alone preaching becomes effective. There is no doubt in Calvin's mind that the work of the Spirit interacts with and operates through the Word of God.

Calvin's main purpose in preaching was to render transparent the text of Scripture itself. This he did in a lively, didactic, practical manner, recognizing that the explication and application of Scripture was paramount. He brought to his preaching the practice of the ancient church in the form of Antiochean exegesis and interpretation, while using all the skills of a humanist scholar in terms of returning to the biblical sources as the content of his preaching.

Today we have a great deal to learn from Calvin, especially his stress on the importance of clear exegesis and application of the Scriptures in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Yet Calvin's approach to preaching cannot be merely copied or repeated. We live in a different cultural context, a context in which a digital world promises so much yet provides so little. We live amidst a people who suspect there is more to life than a digital existence, yet do not know where to find the resources that will allow them to thrive in a world where mass shootings, domestic violence, human trafficking, drug and alcohol addiction, and fractured family relationships are tragically all too common. Such behavior reminds us that we consistently underestimate the power, magnitude, and significance of sin, while also underestimating the power, magnitude, and significance of the grace of God in Christ.

Clear exegesis and application of Scripture in a warm, accessible manner continue to speak life and transformation into our world in a unique manner. Calvin's preaching model certainly has a great deal to teach those of us who exist in a digital age and know that there is more to life than Facebook, Instagram and Youtube.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Reformation* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1957), 254.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy George, *Introduction to John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of The Scriptures in The Worship of The Christian Church: The Age of The Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ??), 91.

<sup>4</sup> W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker/Apollos, 1993), 7.

<sup>5</sup> R. S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and The Reformation* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Old, *The Age of The Reformation*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Expository Preaching, Principles and Practice* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin* (Lake Mary, Florida: Reformation Trust, 2007), 29.

# No Substitute for the Word

by Patricia Crout Gwinn

The word proclaimed is central to Reformed worship. If and when it is neglected the body can no longer stand with any real integrity and uprightness. The priority of preaching in worship and as worship is one of the contributions of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition to the larger ecumenical community. So does the Reformation still matter? Yes, more than ever, and particularly as regards the word of God preached.

Yet, sadly, somewhere along the way it seems we have lost the joy, the sheer joy, of what it means to be a Presbyterian in this vital sense of the word. We have too readily yielded the field. We need to shave a few minutes off of worship to receive an update from a committee, or present announcements, or even to include longer musical responses in the Lord's Supper liturgy, so... "Preacher, shorten that sermon! Can't you make it a homily instead?" However, as people of the Reformed tradition, we know ourselves as ones marked, claimed, commanded out of the waters of baptism *and* we know ourselves as a people gathered and renewed for that claim and command by the power of the Spirit present in the preached word. Presbyterians sit before the word and together *we think*.

Placed before the word we are called to put our minds into the service of God, to engage our best wits and our noblest selves to ponder the One who is above and beyond us. The heart has a significant and enduring place within the life of one's faith. The heart is "at the heart of it" so to speak. Emotionalism not so much. But the mind, and the mind must not be ignored. This was one reason Luther and Calvin spent time translating the Bible, the word of God for the people of God, so that by the Spirit's power, they could hear and understand.

Our life together has been born of this Word read and spoken. As John Leith writes in his *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*:

The Reformed tradition has been a very verbal religion with great confidence in spoken and written words to communicate thought, emotion, and intention. Critics of contemporary culture have warned of the declining power of words and have emphasized the effectiveness of new forms of communication in television, in the arts, and in personal relationships ... There is not convincing evidence that words, either written or spoken have lost their power. Language still ranks as one of the

highest and most significant human achievements. It may be supplemented, but it cannot be supplanted without impoverishing the human spirit (227).

No one wants a diminished human spirit. We want our human spirit to bump up against God's Holy One. Despite the beauty of dance, the soul stirring of art, the loveliness of song and hymnody, the pageantry of worship, the sheer power of the meal, without the proclamation of the Word these moments of splendor would not be intelligible to us. Presbyterian ministers are ordained as ministers of "Word and Sacrament." The sequence of Word and Sacrament is not arbitrary. The Word is necessary to understand the Sacraments. To receive the Sacraments in faith we must first hear the Word, for "faith comes by hearing" (Rom. 10:17). We want to taste and see, but to do so we must understand. To understand we must listen, and there must be something worth listening to. And there is.

The word proclaimed must be captive to the word of God (*sola scriptura*) or it will hold no one captive. The word proclaimed must be more than mere words, it must be the Word (*solus Christus*). Proclamation must look to what is beyond us (*solis Deo gloria*) by way of a love that is steadfast and merciful (*sola gratia*). The Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit produces faith (*sola fide*). Faith is not only born of the Word, but lives by the Word. This is why preaching the Word is such a serious matter. It is a matter of life and death.

The pulpit afire with the Word is the desk of the pastor-theologian. The pulpit is a working place, the place of the last stand against those slinging prosperity gospel pap, those of the finger wagging crowd promising wrath and damnation, and the worst of it all, the speakers of the great apathy that pervades society. To stand and speak of God, week in and week out, in the face of the onslaught of this world, to a people who are sometimes only half-listening, is nothing short of a high wire act. Perhaps from this fear alone is why the sermon is sometimes marginalized. The understanding that the preaching of the word of God *is* the word of God (Second Helvetic Confession) and the need to handle it correctly can be unnerving to the one called to walk upon the air. This is not an excuse, but it is the truth. The congregation that rightly understands this truth—preaching as the dangerous conversational act it is, the dialogue between God and community as it is meant to be, will enter into the spoken word trembling

as well—for the Word we meet is a Good so good he is called holy.

At times silence is enough, and the “act of presence” all that is necessary. But more often than not, a word of gospel is that which makes the difference. This word of gospel is what the Reformed tradition celebrates on this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is not so much about Luther and Calvin and all the rest. A hurting and confused world is

as desperate today as it was 500 years ago for the one Word alone. So, step up preachers and speak. People of God, hear. Together may we carry this Word into the world proclaiming the wide mercy of the God of heaven and earth and a good hope for all.

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## The Bible’s Church

by Timothy P. McConnell

Does the Bible belong to the church or does the church belong to the Bible? We tend to lose track of the profound influences that formed the world in which we live and shaped the way we do the things. Christians are so accustomed today to having access to the Bible we fail to realize that this access was hard won. The Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* altered the course of the church, and arguably the course of western civilization. It is still contested to this day.

It is unfair to accuse the medieval church of hiding the Scriptures from the people. Prior to the invention of the printing press, a full collection of the books of the Bible was an enormous investment. Only the most-resourced churches could afford a Bible and it had to be guarded. But the best leaders worked hard to push as much content from the Word of God to the people as they could through sermons, catechisms, schooling and often by distributing topical collections of key verses for memorization. Still, something new emerged when believers gained their own copy of the text.

When the Augustinian monk Martin Luther became disaffected with the grueling demands of personal salvation through the means of grace as he understood them, his abbot sent him off to study the Scriptures themselves. Luther began to find threads of meaning lost between the Greek New Testament and the Latin Vulgate. Not meaningless considerations, but deep misunderstandings of the text promoted confusion in the church over how one is saved through Christ. His earnest desire to correct misunderstanding and free the Gospel from inaccurate accretions launched a revolution and split the church. But personal salvation by grace through faith in the singular atoning work of Jesus Christ was once again clearly articulated. The key was that the Bible had the authority to correct the church.

Famously, Luther declared at the Diet of Worms in 1521, “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.” Authorities countered that the Bible is the church’s book, the product and possession of the Church, and that its interpretation belonged to the ecclesial structures and authorities in office, the bishops, cardinals and the Pope. The Bible is our book, they said. But if the church must be corrected, to what authority can we appeal? Is the church of higher authority than the Word? Luther continued, “I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

The authority and inspiration of Scripture continued to rise in the course of the Reformation. When challenged with logistical concerns like the difficulty of printing and distributing the Bible, reformers overcame the hurdles. When charged that the people were too illiterate and simple to understand the Bible, reformers pressed for universal education and translation into colloquial languages. Luther’s *German New Testament* in 1522 offered the Erasmus Greek text in the vernacular German. *The Tyndale Bible* followed in 1525 bringing the New Testament to English. Each congregation and believer soon had their own text by which to measure the doctrine they heard proclaimed against the holy Word of God. Early Protestants adopted the slogan *Verbum Domini manet in aeternum* from 1 Peter 1:25: “The Word of the Lord endures forever.” They wore the letters VDMA embroidered on their robes and shirts. They carved the letters into wood and stone. Church leaders may mislead us, church councils could just get it wrong, but the Word of the Lord will endure and set us free again.

Again and again the temptation arises among the authorities and powers of the contemporary church to proclaim again: “This book is our book and we will tell you what it means.” The church returns to its medieval posture, declaring that the plain meaning is not the true meaning, the prior interpretation is not the current interpretation, the Bible cannot possibly be applied without the intervention of the sophisticates and experts...they treat the Word of God as if it is the church’s Bible. But a church removed from the authority of Bible is no church at all.

Later, the Westminster Confession declared, “Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments...all which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.” Continuing, “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.” The Bible is not the church’s book; the church belongs to the Word of God. Reflecting that pivotal stand taken by Martin Luther before the Diet of Worms, Westminster explains that synods and councils will gather occasionally “for the better government and further edification” of the community of faith, but never forget

that “all synods and councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred.” The church once reformed must stand prepared to be reformed, corrected over and again in accordance with the Word of God.

Synods and councils may err. Some may even claim authority higher than or alternative to the clear dictates of Holy Scripture. The authority of the Word of God endures forever to correct error and keep the Gospel free. As I train elders I teach them the inheritance of the Reformation—the church is the Bible’s church. I tell our elders that their primary responsibility is to come with their own Bible open on their own lap, to listen to my preaching, to listen to the teaching of others, to read the statements made, to scan the annual stewardship brochure, and to approach every argument of faith and practice constantly asking one question: Does it accord with the Word of God? The Bible in the hands of the individual believer has authority to correct even popes and kings. This is the principle that frees the church from error and keeps our course toward Jesus.

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## **Worship Matters**

**by Walter L. Taylor**

Throughout the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther has been the principal character for reflection. At the center of Luther’s personal quest, which led to the important role he played in the Reformation, was a question: How is one made right (justified) before God? In answering the question of whether the Reformation still matters, one must decide whether the question that motivated Luther matters today. No doubt, there are those for whom such a question is out-of-date or even a bit “passé”, theologically. Perhaps that fact in itself shows us that the Reformation still matters more than ever!

However, Luther’s question was not the only question of the Reformation. For John Calvin there was a question that was prior to Luther’s: “How is God rightly worshipped?” Calvin saw this question as even more important than the question of justification, because Calvin understood that salvation is for the purpose of worship. We are justified (“saved”) by God so that we

might serve him to his glory. Salvation is for worship. It is the end and goal of our justification. The importance of this question for the Reformed (something that was true well before Calvin enunciated it) is why the Reformed cities of Strasbourg and Zurich reformed their worship (as well as putting it into the language of people) before Luther himself did.

The Reformation was the reformation of the church, and the reformation of the church meant nothing less than the reformation of worship. Thus, to answer the question of whether the Reformation still matters, we must ask whether the church matters and whether the church’s worship matters.

Even among Reformed Protestants in America today, many would find the question of Calvin strange. It assumes that we are not free to worship God in whatever way we might like. It assumes that God may well prefer one form of worship over another. It



assumes that not all ostensibly Christian worship services are equal. In much American Protestant worship today, the overwhelming sense is that we are free to worship God however we please, as long as we are “sincere” in doing it. Many see the differences in the way worship takes form today as matters of “preference” or “taste.” Given how shaped we are today by the pervasive entertainment culture around us, many people come to worship expecting to see something little different than a concert performance by musicians followed by a religious “TED Talk.” While others may prefer a choir and a hymnbook, these differences rate as simply matters of preference and taste. Indeed, an appeal to preference perhaps is a way of keeping peace in the midst of the “worship wars.”

Before insisting that worship is not worth arguing over, one should take note of the fact that one way of reading the Bible is through the lens of worship. The Bible itself chronicles a “worship war” that stretches as far back as Cain and Abel when God accepted the worship of one and not the other. Israel’s history is that of one great worship war, centered around the themes of the first two commandments: *whom* were they to worship (the first commandment) and *how* they were to worship? Against all the temptations to worship God according to tastes and personal preferences, the prophets constantly called the people of God back to what God himself had revealed to those who would worship him. Both the message and the medium of worship matter. In the Old Testament, worship is at the heart of the struggle of God’s people to live and be God’s people.

Likewise, in the New Testament, we see this same concern. When Jesus addresses the woman at the well in

Samaria, the two of them discuss worship. Jesus states to her, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). God is seeking people to worship him, Jesus says. This was true when God redeemed Israel out of Egypt. God told Moses to tell Pharaoh to let his people go, “that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness” (Ex. 5:1), “that they may serve me” (Ex. 8:1). This is the language of worship. God is still seeking people to worship him, not in “any ol’ way,” but “in spirit and truth.”

Given the confusion and chaos that characterize worship in congregations today (even, perhaps especially, in Presbyterian and Reformed churches), Calvin’s Reformation question is as relevant as it was in the sixteenth century. How do we worship God rightly? How do we worship God not simply according to our tastes and preferences, but according to his desires and will for us, “in spirit and in truth”? As the Reformers put it, “How do we worship God according to his Word? In congregations that take their lead from the “liturgical renewal movement” (and the rediscovery of the so-called “church calendar”) as well as congregations that follow the patterns of worship that flow from the “charismatic movement”, there is a widespread neglect of the principal Reformation concern of Calvin. Yes, the Reformation still matters.

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## Doing Life Together: A Priesthood of All Believers

by Nancy A. Duff

Fifty million American adults attend faith-based small groups regularly, according to a 2016 survey of the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>1</sup> Yet just over 500 years ago, this common faith practice would have been seen as dangerous and displeasing to God. Although small groups are not a direct outcome of the Reformation, they are part of its legacy: The Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has shaped how the body of Christ functions together today.

While it seems natural today for believers to study the Bible and pray together, it would have seemed extraordinary in the Middle Ages. Laity were second class Christians, dependent on clergy. Clergy mediated between the people and God through sacraments and the authoritative interpretation of Scripture. Luther and Calvin argued that the Roman Church’s entrenched clericalism was antithetical to the church of Scripture (See, for example, Luther’s “Appeal to the German Nobility” and Calvin’s *Institutes* IV.5.1-19).

Both Luther and Calvin connected Hebrews 7 with 1 Peter 2:9 to argue that Christ is the Great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Through him, the former priesthood ended and all believers have become “a royal priesthood.” Since Christ is our High Priest and sole Mediator, we have no need for further priestly mediation. Since Christ is the sacrifice and every believer is to offer spiritual sacrifices of prayer and praise, no priest is needed to offer a sacrificial mass. Every believer is obliged to participate in the task of interpreting Scripture and may not simply leave it to others. Every believer is to pray for others, confess their sins to one another, and proclaim the Word to one another. Every believer is a priest as they live out their ordinary vocations; all represent Christ to the world.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers did not eliminate the need for clergy. Luther and Calvin saw the need for educated preachers to teach and administer the sacraments. But they are called by the congregation and have a different office, not a higher spiritual status.

Luther may have tempered his vision for how this doctrine might have been realized due in part to the Radical Reformation. But studying the Bible in the original languages and other academic preparation also inhibited implementation. In practice, “the scholarly authority of the Reformation clergy replaced the priestly authority of the medieval clergy,” and a significant divide between clergy and laity remains.<sup>2</sup>

On this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation we stand in a different place. Over the last 50 years there has been significant effort to recover a more biblical understanding of the laity’s role. A place where this shift is most evident is in small groups. When I started training small group leaders in 1980, there were few published training materials or discussion guides. The 1990s saw an explosion of such resources. Books shared strategies to structure the local church around small groups for spiritual formation and mission.<sup>3</sup> Sociologists and anthropologists such as Robert Wuthnow and James Bielo have shown how these groups function and what roles they play in our broader culture. Small groups are an integral part of the faith and life of millions of Christians today.

While each church and group is unique, my church is illustrative: We currently have 40 small groups and support groups meeting in living rooms and on our church campus. Some form around a particular demographic, like young couples, women, or retirees, while others span generations. Groups study different topics using sermon discussion guides, DVD studies, or other materials. While diverse, our small groups have key commonalities: all are led by laity; all expect

to encounter God and grow spiritually together; and all—to some degree—forge bonds of care.

When our small groups meet, members perform many “priestly” roles using their spiritual gifts: they teach one another and interpret Scripture; they pray for one another; they speak God’s love and forgiveness to one another; and they minister through acts of compassion and care. They also serve as priests to the world—praying for family members, friends, and strangers; serving together in Jesus’ name; and in other ways representing the living God to his world. Whether or not they realize it, as they do all these things, our small group members are living out the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

We still have work ahead: many members still have a general sense that pastors are different than other Christians, and only about 45% are in small groups. But we are laying a strong foundation. As the associate pastor for small group ministries, my call is to equip small group leaders and their groups—a different task than most pastors even a generation ago. I also oversee our care ministries, which we have realigned to undergird the support that happens naturally in small groups. Meanwhile, I have been a member—not the leader—of a small group in my congregation for over a decade, another sign of our commitment to mutuality between clergy and laity in practice.

Recently, a woman in our church shared her testimony. She described growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, where her parish priest mediated between herself and God. When she joined our Mothers Of Preschoolers program, she was surprised to see ordinary women talking about their faith and praying for one another. She had tears in her eyes as she described how that group changed her life. Those young moms embody the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This is the legacy of the Reformation.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. 2016. [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=PEP\\_2016\\_PEPANNRES&src=pt](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=PEP_2016_PEPANNRES&src=pt).

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Bird & Carl George, *The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1994); Bill Donahue & Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Darrell Guder & George Hunsberger, *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), et al.

# Living by Grace Alone

by Helen Harrison Coker

She sat across from me, imprisoned in pain because she doubted her self-worth and questioned her identity. As her pastor, I tried to reassure her that she was a beloved child of God, so loved in fact that Jesus voluntarily died for her and lavished His amazing grace upon her. But she had been bound for years by chains of lies, lies that had led her to this place of pain. She struggled to break free from those shackles. What more could I do to help her? What did I learn in all those seminary classes that would make a difference in her reality? Does the Reformation even matter to her?

The woman I tried to comfort is not a member of my church. She is like most women I meet. Men also struggle with their identity. We all struggle with truly believing whether what we have done or not done will undo us from the loving grip of God's unconditional grace. Even when we are successful, "our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin" (A.62). Whether they struggle with abusive relationships or mental illness, agonizing addictions, crippling financial debt, or self-inflicted and destructive manipulation of their physical bodies, many women today struggle with accepting that God's grace alone is all they need for to be saved and justified, to be accepted by the Lord God Almighty.

As a minister, I am not exempt from the self-loathing that leeches into women's souls today. When I see seminary classmates post on Facebook the news of having their first book published, adding more initials before or after their name, or accepting a new call where 'Senior' will be the first word in their title, then the internal whispers begin. I struggle if I am good enough. I worry if I have done enough. I fear if I am successful enough to be loved and counted worthy.

But hear the good news! The only one who can rightfully declare whether we are enough is the only one that died to be enough for us. Christ saves us by His grace alone. To Luther the doctrine of justification was the heart of the matter: "This is the reason why our theology is certain. It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive" (Luther, Galatians, 1535).

So we continue stand in the storm of insecurity and we continue to sing radical songs that proclaim the good news of grace alone. Despite our doubts we confess that we "belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil" (Heidelberg Catechism, A.1)

As Keith and Kristyn Getty sing: "My worth is not in what I own/Not in the strength of flesh and bone/But in the costly wounds of love ... My worth is not in skill or name/In win or lose, in pride or shame/But in the blood of Christ that flowed/At the cross" (Kendrick, 2014).

We find our worth at the cross of Christ. As Paul explains to Titus, "*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life*" (Titus 3:3-7).

Does the Reformation still matter to American women like me after 500 years? Yes! It matters because we human beings are still sinners. We need to be convicted when we have strayed and wandered from the truth of God. We need to be reminded that God's Word is the inspired and sole authority in our lives, rather than human "wisdom" and reasoning. We need to be corrected when we manipulate and distort God's Holy Word, corrupting His Church and ourselves. We need to remember what is rightly taught in Scripture and has been confessed by the Church throughout the ages: that we are saved by faith alone in God's amazing grace alone, instead of anything we could do ourselves. The Reformation still matters because all of us still need the hope that is found in Christ's grace alone.

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# How the Reformation Shapes our Life Together

by Edwin Hurley

Last Spring I was planting vegetables and noticed printed on the plastic wrapper around one tomato plant the slogan, “Deep roots produce abundant fruits.” As I reflected on this claim, I thought about how this applies to my own understanding of ministry and how it shapes the life of the church I serve. I thought about the deep roots of our Reformation heritage and how grateful we should be for this heritage, how it has shaped us in the past, continues to bear fruit in the present, and gives us reason to look ahead in hope to future harvests.

Five hundred years ago Martin Luther nailed a series of objections to church abuses on the castle church door at Wittenberg, sparking a movement that spread across Europe. This act eventually served to renew the church and recover the original forms of the church’s ministry and missional purposes as set forth in Holy Scripture and practiced by the Early Church.

The Medieval Church had neglected the Bible. Most church members were illiterate. For those who could read, the Bible was not available. Luther himself, though well educated, had not seriously encountered the Bible until he entered the monastery. Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular and insisted that ministers preach sermons based on Scripture, and not on whatever happened to come into their heads. This required that ministers be trained. Such training transformed the way ministers preached. Such preaching transformed congregations. Such congregations transformed society.

The Reformation helped to renew the entire church. Regrettably, divisions followed. Protestants like Luther were excommunicated and forced to form their own communities. Later, some groups formed merely because they sought greener pastures or a purer church. I grieve the divisions all too evident among Protestants today, and not least in our own Presbyterian family. This is why I want to remain faithful to the vows I took at my ordination to promote “the peace, purity, and unity” of the church.

We are heirs of Luther and Calvin and other Protestant Reformers, as well as 20th century Protestants such as Barth and Bonhoeffer. But we are also heirs of an older tradition that can be traced from Augustine to Anselm, and runs through Erasmus to Pascal, to G.K. Chesterton. We may not be *Roman* Catholics, but we

are *catholic* and we confess that we believe in “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church,” and are united as one body by one Spirit to one Lord, Jesus Christ, through one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and in and through all. We Presbyterians are part of God’s one, holy, catholic church that is being reformed continually by God’s Word, which makes us part of a vast company that spans the ages.

How has the Reformation shaped our life together? We confess that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone and not by works, however good we may think them to be. This is evident in the way we go about our work and live our daily lives. Rather than trying to earn our salvation or justify ourselves, we live lives of grateful service because of what Christ has done for us.

The Reformation recognized the importance of the Christian home and sought to encourage families. This is why we seek to encourage husbands and wives to be better Christians, better mothers and fathers, and to help them fulfill their baptismal vows to raise their children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

The Reformation also emphasized the priesthood of all believers. We are members of one body and united in one hope, and each of us has been given gifts to use and duties to perform. Each of us is called to one type of service or another. The priesthood of all believers does not mean full-time ministers are unnecessary or that I can be my own priest. Rather it means the task of ministry is shared. Deacons care. Elders lead. Ministers preach, teach, and provide pastoral care. Yet every Christian is, in one way or another, called to minister.

The Reformation did not teach Christians to focus primarily on their own interior lives but rather led them to focus outwardly in service to God and others. Each of the exit doors in the church I serve has on it a sign, “You Are Entering The Mission Field.” We are coming to understand this more and more. Like Calvin who transformed the city of Geneva, we seek to transform Birmingham, Alabama. We seek to have a Christ-caring spirit of welcome and hospitality. This is why we engage in weekly outreach to the mentally ill, do job training with Christian teaching, care daily for a large number of pre-school children and senior adults with Alzheimer’s, distribute food, provide utility

assistance, all in the name of Jesus, trying to answer the question the lawyer asked Him, “And who is my neighbor?”

Certainly the Reformation called us to be “a people of the Book,” which is why we are led into worship with an Open Book. We are called and gathered by the Word to hear God’s Word and to respond in joyful obedience. This is why we gather in small groups throughout the week to study the Bible. The Word of God creates the church, again and again, and so long as the Bible remains open and we remain open to the Bible, and seek to hear and obey its message, we have God’s promise that we will be transformed and renewed.

After 36 years of ministry, witnessing, and sometimes experimenting with all sorts of innovative, smart, and, frankly, stupid techniques, I have seen a lot come and go. From stiff, formal worship services to loose, informal contemporary services, from dabbling in positive, ‘feel-good,’ ‘nothing-negative’ Christianity to intensive catechetical training and memorizing of the Children’s Catechism, I have come full circle and stand in agreement with the great Presbyterian teacher,

John Leith. In one of his final volumes, *From Generation To Generation*, delivered as the Warfield Lectures at Princeton Seminary, he calls us to “The Renewal of the Church According to Its Own Theology and Practice.” Among the gems in this book is Leith’s claim:

The church lives, not by organization and techniques, but by the passionate conviction that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, that in his death on the cross our sins are forgiven, that God raised him from the dead for our salvation. No technique, skill, or wisdom can substitute for this passionate conviction.

The Reformation reminds us today that tons of clever techniques are not worth one ounce of truth. And the truth is: Jesus Christ builds the church. And He has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against her, and if we are rooted in Him, we will produce abundant fruit to the glory of God alone.

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# The Call to Reformation

by Peter Barnes

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, 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.

His ambitious father, Hans, was involved in the mining business. He 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 where he earned both his B.A. and then a M.A. degree in philosophy. He did all this in the shortest time allowed for students, and classmates gave me the nickname “The Professor.”

Completing his M.A. degree in 1505, Martin enrolled at the same university and began to study law. Everything was going according to his father’s plan

until July 2, the day he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm. Travelling back to the university from his home, he was caught in a thunderstorm and almost stuck by lightning. Out of fear and desperation, he cried out, “St. Anne, save me! I’ll become a monk!”

Luther survived the lightning strike and fulfilled his vow. Twelve days later he sold his books and gave all his earthly possessions away and entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt without telling his family. That decision led him 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 key moment in Luther’s quest occurred when he was studying the Book of Romans.

David Zahl in a wonderful article on Luther encourages us to picture in our minds an earnest-looking monk in his mid-30s sequestered in one of the small rooms in the tower of his cloister. He is hard at work on a fresh

set of lectures for the university where he serves as a professor of theology, but the work is not going well. He has hit a roadblock. The first verses of Romans have been keeping him up at night, especially v.17: *“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.’”*

Like most who studied theology in the early 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 experienced 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.”*

The rest is history. We now look back to this amazing man and his remarkable work in Germany that helped to ignite the Reformation in 1517, and 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 larger-than-life personality who was given to excess, but God used his passion, personality, and 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.

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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 (the saints) 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 itself could be curtailed or even canceled. J.J. Tetzel, a contemporary of Luther, was the one who coined the phrase that provided false words of assurance, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!"

It was thought that humankind had to ascend to God in order to be accepted by Him. But Luther began to discover that no, it is not 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 medieval church, and the selling of indulgences was exhibit A. All of this prepared the way for the Reformation.

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 was a losing proposition. You can never pay back God for what He has 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 is 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 cannot earn it, so no one is in a position where they can boast.

The gospel of God’s grace freely given in Jesus Christ is good news not only to the people of Luther’s day, but to everyone who knows they need a Savior. The

Reformation matters because it recovered central doctrines of the Christian faith that had fallen into disrepair in the Roman Church of the Middle Ages. The significance of these doctrines and their central place in Christian theology cannot be overstated.

Our forebears of the Reformation laid a foundation which has lasted for 500 years. What legacy of faith will we leave? In our church? In our children? For our community? In 150 years from now, 25 years from now, what will the witness of your 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 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 do not 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 your family and mine.

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 and always being reformed, 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 is still true today.

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## The Source of Revolution

by Gerrit Dawson

October 31, 1517 is 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a revolution. It began when a young, obscure theologian in an insignificant town in Germany rediscovered the radical grace of the gospel. It soon set the world ablaze. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed a copy of his 95 theological challenges to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. This was the crystallizing moment for a movement that had been growing around Europe. For a hundred years, the Bible had been translated into the languages everyday people could understand. Reading the Scriptures in plain language was kindling a fire in the hearts that maybe Jesus Christ is different than the medieval church had said he was. Maybe there could be some freedom from the relentless cycle of sin, confession, penance, and the purchasing of so-called indulgences to reduce one's punishment for sin.

Luther did not come to his revolutionary conclusion easily. He spent years haunted by a question, "How do you get right with God?" He knew the truth: there is a gap between God and us. There is rift between a holy God and sinful humanity. We are in a perilous condition. How can we close the gap and be made right? Luther spent years trying to close the gap by

living righteously. He tried to merit God's favor through his devotion as a monk. He confessed his sins so exhaustively, to the minutest detail, that he wore out his confessor. He followed the rule of the monastery with great devotion. Still he felt condemned. No matter how hard he worked at being good, he could not get a sense that he was loved and accepted by God. Luther wrote:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners...<sup>1</sup>

In those days, Luther meditated constantly on Romans 1:17 which says, "*He who through faith is righteous shall live.*" The verse kept haunting him because it seemed to mean that he himself had to be righteous in order to relate to God in faith. And he just was not righteous in himself. You know how it is if you think someone is always judging you: You resent them. So Luther grew to hate the righteous God who seemed to be standing always against him, always condemning him. Yet this verse also haunted him. He wanted to be

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righteous. Yet the righteous live by faith. How could he do that? One day, as he meditated on this verse, it struck him that righteousness is not something that comes from us. Righteousness is a gift from God that we receive by faith. We do not work up right standing before God. God gives us *his own* righteousness through Christ. When he grasped that, Luther felt that he was “altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”<sup>2</sup>

Luther's break-through was realizing that God gives to us *Christ's* own righteousness. We cannot make ourselves right with God. His grace comes from outside of us in Christ's life, death and resurrection. When we turn to Christ in faith, we are joined to him and receive all that Christ has. Luther called it an “alien righteousness.” It is not native to us. It's a gift. Only Jesus Christ is a man righteous before God. By faith, we rely on Jesus not ourselves. “The righteous shall live by faith” means that we receive by faith the righteousness of Christ with which God clothes us. It changed everything for Luther.

God gives us the righteousness of Christ. For no other reason than that he loves us. We do nothing to earn it, buy it, or deserve it. We just receive it by faith. The whole system of confession and penance in order to wipe out sins was a lie. The whole economics of buying credits of merit from the treasury of Christ was a lie. The whole idea that through the sacraments of the

church I might earn enough credit was a lie. Justification is credited to me by God's free gift of grace in Christ. I look away from myself to Christ alone. This was a revolution in spiritual freedom. I can stand before God when I come clothed in Christ's righteousness alone. Faith means agreeing that Christ alone is the Savior and I cannot save myself.

This is still great news. It is still revolutionary. I find freedom when I give in and admit that I am a sinner, helpless to close the gap with God. I agree with Luther that my heart is so curved in on itself that it cannot by itself ever open back towards God in love and obedience. We do not need a patch to help us be a bit better. We need a revolution in our hearts. That is what Paul was getting at when he wrote, “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not getting their trespasses against them.*” That is revolution!

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther's Works* 34, eds. Lewis Spitz and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 336-337.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 336-337.

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