

A Reforming Faith

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United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston

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Reformation Sunday

Romans 3:21-30
Matthew 23:1-12

On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed *Ninety-Five Theses of Protest* to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. It was All Hallows' Eve, the day before the great All Saints' Day observance. But it was a moment and a message that changed the church from that day to this, with profound effects on Western civilization for centuries. We've come to call it the Protestant Reformation.

What exactly was Luther protesting? Generally, it was the message of the Roman Catholic Church---the only church in Europe at that time---that salvation could be gained only by accumulating enough spiritual merit to earn a believer's way into heaven. The Church taught that only those who observed the seven sacraments and faithfully performed all their religious obligations could stand any hope of avoiding the fires of hell.

Since concern for the next life was the main preoccupation of the people of the Middle Ages---death was so much with them that earthly life was often cruel and fleeting---where you would spend eternity was everything. And, since the Church was the dispenser of salvation, you had to stay in its good graces to have any hope of finding your way to through the pearly gates.

Specifically, Luther was protesting the sale of indulgences as the means by which one literally purchased salvation. The good Christian went to confession as required and the priest would then assign a good work for penitents to perform to show their remorse and to fortify their faith. Good works would result in merit, which would lead to heaven.

The sale of indulgences was a distorted extension of the penance system. Certain sins would cost you not good works, but money. As a bonus, you could purchase the merits of saints and other good people to help you on Judgment Day as you stood before God. And you could also buy some years off of your stay in purgatory or for the soul of your dearly departed Aunt Sadie. As the expression went, "As a coin into the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs."

Essentially it was a form of ecclesiastical taxation. Whenever the local bishop or the Pope in Rome needed more funds, indulgence sales went up. Both were very much the case in Luther's time, and you know how people feel about taxes---especially unjust ones.

Suffice it to say that Germany was like a dry field of grass into which Luther threw a lit match. His ideas caught on like wildfire and spread across the continent so quickly that he was summoned to various church tribunals, hailed as a hero and denounced as a heretic, threatened with death, and ultimately excommunicated from the church---within three years of his original act.

Many other people took up the cause along with Luther, including John Calvin in Switzerland and John Knox in Scotland, whose reforming work led to the Presbyterian and Puritan movements, among many others. I'll let Jerry Eyster fill you in more on the history of the Reformation during Grace Connexion today.

What were those ideas that transformed the face of the Christian Church? Essentially, they were three—and you know how we Christians love things in three's.

For one, there was the concept of the “priesthood of all believers.” Official doctrine specified that the individual could gain access to God only through the Church. It was a stratified system akin to the feudal hierarchy of the time. Much as a local serf could have no hope of approaching the king without the help of an intermediary, a believer could come before God only through the mediating presence of the local priest.

Luther proclaimed that, by virtue of their baptism, all Christians were priests with full access to God. The life and death of Jesus had opened the way to the faithful taking their personal prayers to God and receiving forgiveness and grace directly from the big kahuna himself. No one could stand in the individual believer's way or hold the key to the magic door. Through his life, death and resurrection, Christ opened the door to all.

Which also meant that Christian service and vocation was not only for profession Christians, “the religious,” as they are commonly referred to in the Catholic Church. Each of us has been given gifts to use in Christ's service and a calling to use them, whether in the church or our everyday lives. As Luther said, a charwoman on her knees scrubbing the floor was doing an act as acceptable to God as the cardinal on his knees saying his prayers.

Luther based this belief on his reading of Scripture, which formed the second central tenet of the Reformation: the supremacy of the Bible over all else in matters of faith. In Latin, the term is *sola scriptura*. The Bible had been taken out of the hands of lay people—most of whom were uneducated and illiterate---and in its place was put the catechism of the Church. Want to know what to believe about God and Jesus and eternal life? Do what you're told. It was as simple as that.

Not for Luther. A man of searing intellect and great energy, he had been appointed as a biblical scholar and teacher in the local college. As he searched the Scriptures, the Word of God came alive to him, revealing a God whose words of love and grace were meant for all people. And it was *their* understanding of scripture that he valued more

than the edicts of the pope.

When he was brought up on trial before the Holy Roman Emperor himself, Luther based his defense solely on scriptural grounds. He was asked if he would recant, to which he answered:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of scripture and by clear reason, for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils...for they have often erred and contradicted themselves, I am bound by scripture and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything...Here I stand, I can do no other.

Luther was convicted of heresy and had to run for his life—though many of the local people celebrated him. He eventually left the monastery, got married and had a family. But he kept writing and spreading his understanding of the Gospel.

One author has said that Luther's stand was the beginning of the modern age, a lone person defying authority in the name of individual conscience. Whether that is true or not, it is generally agreed that the Protestant Reformation helped to give rise to an emphasis on the individual that was not known before and has since been the dominant perspective of our culture.

The priesthood of all believers. *Sola scriptura*. To that add the third and most far-reaching of all the Reformation tenets: Justification by faith. That was the idea from which everything else flowed. Luther was not only a religious scholar, he was a passionate believer. As a devout Catholic, he tried and tried to gain more intimate connection with God through his ardent piety and practice. But the more he tried, the greater gap between him and God he felt and the more deeply into despair he fell.

As he studied the scriptures, though, he came upon a follower of Christ named Paul. Paul, too, had been zealous for the Lord and, as a Jewish Pharisee, had worked himself to the bone trying to follow every jot and tittle of the law. No one was going to top Paul in becoming a super-Pharisee.

And then Paul met Jesus, who showed him that his grace was sufficient for every need. In fact, it was not through works---our attempts to be holy and pure and perfect---but through the admission of our need for God and our acceptance of God's grace that we find our salvation, our spiritual life-line, our peace. As Paul says in Romans, "We are justified before God through faith, not works."

This realization was tremendously liberating for Luther. The religious rules and requirements had placed an enormous weight on him and so many others, much like the demands the Pharisees lay on the Jewish people in Jesus's day. As Jesus told the people in today's Gospel reading, "The scribes and Pharisees tie up heavy burdens and lay them

on the backs of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to remove them.” All the rules and regulations just took the life out of the people. They were spiritual death.

No, said Jesus and Paul and the Reformers, God is all about grace. Salvation is accepting the grace given to us in Jesus. We don't have to justify or prove ourselves. We simply need to accept that we are justified through Christ. We don't have to earn it. We don't have to be worthy of it. We certainly can't buy it. It's ours, free for the having. To *sola scriptura*, then, the Reformers added, *sola fide*—faith alone. Through this faith in God's grace we are freed to love God and love our neighbors in the way of Christ.

This is the living legacy of the Protestant Reformation. Accepting our acceptance by God. Discovering our vocation as the baptized. Studying the Word. Standing on the promises of God and standing firm in what we believe. Living in the freedom and power of the Spirit to love and serve the world.

It's a legacy that has spawned many different faith traditions—hundreds more than the five we looked at in recent weeks. Traditions that have sometimes gone to extremes and needed to be corrected, which was part of the role the Methodists played when they tried to balance out the emphasis on faith with an equivalent stress on works. We may be saved by faith alone, but that faith must lead to a loving life or it's all a big sham.

Still, at the core of all of our traditions is a common commitment to Christ. Not just to the Church, its rules and its order, but to the Christ who is as alive today as ever and who calls us to meet the world where it is now. That's a tradition of which we can all be proud. A tradition in continual need of reformation and renewal. And a tradition that will take shape as we faithfully respond to the re-forming call to be Christ's living, growing, ever-evolving body in our time.