

Reformation Day 2010

This is the Sunday we celebrate our heritage as Lutheran Christians. It was on the eve of All Saints Sunday (Oct. 31st) in the year 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Thesis to the door of the church in Wittenberg. These 95 thesis or propositions were intended for theological debate. They dealt with issues of repentance, faith and in particular, the issue of indulgences. An indulgence was used by the Roman Catholic Church of Luther's time as a fund raising technique. People believed that if they bought an indulgence their sins would be forgiven. Luther reacted to this. He knew that noone can buy forgiveness. Luther saw the church taking advantage of innocent people by turning the free grace of God into a commodity to be sold.

So, Luther posted his 95 Thesis on the door of the church in Wittenberg challenging this system of indulgences. Luther's writings ignited a firestorm of reaction. Within weeks the whole of Germany was talking about Luther and the reformation took off. People read what Luther wrote and it struck a cord with them.

Luther answered 4 questions that were central to the man or woman on the street in 16th century Germany. His answers to these 4 basis questions were diametrically opposed to what the Roman Catholic Church taught. The 4 questions Luther answered were: (from the Age of Reformation by E. Harris Harbison, Cornell University Press, 1955, p. 53)

1. How is a person saved?
2. Where does religious authority lie?
3. What is the church?
4. What is the essence of Xian living?

Let's take these questions one at a time.

1. How is a person saved? Luther answered, "A person is saved by grace alone through faith alone and not by works." You can't buy God off by your good works. There is no "surplus of merit" that belongs to the church which the church can disperse or sell to people. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone. This "new" teaching of Luther was as old as St. Paul who wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9 **"For we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not by works lest anyone may boast."**

2. Where does religious authority lie? Luther answered, “Religious authority comes not from the visible institution of the Church but in the Word of God, the Bible.” The Roman Catholic Church believed that the church as institution, headquartered in Rome, held authority in its hand alone. There was no right of individual interpretation. Only the church could determine correct doctrine. It is true that there is danger in individual interpretation of scripture. Luther taught that a simple layman, armed with the scripture had more authority than the pope or church councils without scripture. Luther gave the Bible back to the laity, both in his translation of the Bible into the language of the people and in his insistence on the Bible as the sole authority for church doctrine.

3. What is the church? Luther answered, “The community of Christian believers is the church and each Xian is a priest who must be a Christ to his neighbor.” This is the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” The reformation freed the people from the stranglehold the clergy had on their throat. Luther held that the ministry belonged to the people of God who could call out from the membership of the church, pastors who would lead the church in teaching and the administration of the sacraments. The Reformation gave the church back to the people.

4. What is the essence of Xian living? Luther answered, “Serve God in your place, in your calling, whether that be secular work or church work. All callings are equally sacred in the eyes of God.” The reformation “de-mystified” the office of clergy. Pastors are no closer to God than any layman. Luther insisted that any layperson served God well by faithfully living and working as a Xian in their everyday life. You didn’t have to become a priest or monk in order to please God.

These were the four central beliefs behind the Protestant Reformation, 1) salvation by grace alone through faith alone, 2) the Bible as the highest authority in the church, 3) the priesthood of all believers, and 4) the service of God in secular as well as clerical callings.

These 4 teachings changed the church and the culture of Europe. (Confirmants taking notes please note these 3 “Rs”). Luther himself and his followers thought of these changes as a “**RESTORATION**” of Biblical Christianity. “The reformers believed that the church had become

overloaded with doctrines and practices which had nothing to do with its essence and which came close to obliterating the Gospel revealed to the early church. The reformers believed that “it was imperative to go back to Paul and the Gospels, back to the practices and insights of the Apostolic Age, in order to recapture Christian truth.” (ibid. p. 54). Luther wanted to RESTORE the ancient teaching of the church.

Of course the Roman Catholic Church had a quite different opinion of what Luther and his colleagues were doing. To the Pope “Protestantism was essentially a **REVOLUTION**. To deny that Christ had founded his church on Peter and that the popes were Peter’s successors, to question the divine institution of the seven sacraments, to say that all believers are equally priests, was heresy... to loyal believers of the mediaeval church. Luther was considered the “anti-Christ” – the “wild boar” which was ravaging God’s vineyards.” (ibid. p. 54).

The pope considered Luther and his colleagues to be revolutionaries who were destroying the UNITY of the Christian Church. It is interesting to note that institutional “unity” was the most important issue to the medieval church. That sounds very familiar to modern ears. When “unity” became the highest goal of the church, then the church became focused on its institutional survival. It became self-focused instead of Christ focused. This of course, led to abuses in the church to which Luther reacted. This will always be the case when the church becomes self-focused instead of Christ-focused.

In our time institutional unity is once again being held up by some as the highest goal of the church. We must be aware, however, of the dangers that come with taking our eyes off the prize. The power of the church is not based in its institutional solidarity. The power of the church is based in its faithfulness to Christ. The unity of the church is not found in its ecumenical agreements between denominations. The unity of the church is found in its oneness in Christ which is God’s gift in baptism. The revolutionary gift of the reformation was to give the church back to the ordinary people of God who displayed the unity of the church in everyday discipleship as baptized Xians.

Today we use the term “**REFORMATION**” to describe what Luther and his colleagues did. The term “reformation” describes a “reformulating” of Christian tradition. In attacking the thinking and theology of Rome Luther

was a revolutionary to be sure. The church doesn't excommunicate those who "go along and don't rock the boat". Luther was a threat to the hierarchy. But Luther was also a conservative revolutionary. By that I mean he went back in order to move forward. He went back to scripture in order to conserve the truth of the gospel and to reform the church. Other reformers were much more radical than Luther. Roland Bainton, reformation scholar and author, points out that "the left wing of the reformation included a bewildering variety of sects and individuals with a baffling variety of beliefs, often incompatible. They ranged all the way from individualistic mystics and rationalistic Unitarians to evangelical pietists, Biblical literalists, and fanatical millennialists." (ibid. p. 68). The reformation caused division in the church. The church became much more fragmented and pluralistic. Some say this was a bad thing and that we should work for reunification in the church. There is a movement in the protestant denominations that would take all churches "home to Rome". I believe that the Spirit of God was at work in Martin Luther and the other reformers and that the Spirit of God is working today in every denomination to bring people to Christ. Just as the Spirit worked on the day of Pentecost to empower the disciples to speak in different languages in order to tell the story of Jesus, so today different denominations speak to the bewildering array of people who need to hear the gospel spoken in a language they can hear and understand. Each denomination has its own unique language and, in its own way, each church is used by the Spirit of God to reach different people. The reformation fragmented the church in order to multiply its effectiveness for ministry.

We often want our church to be successful, to be strong and powerful. And to accomplish that we think it is up to us to make the church a success in the world like any other successful institution. But note well how God works. God uses weakness, lowliness, failure and death to bring about strength, honor, victory and life. God uses the cross and death to give the world life.

We are called as Xians to love our church but to love God more than we love the church and to always be prepared to keep our church faithful to the gospel. As Lutheran Christians we have a particularly unique heritage. It is a heritage based not on the worship of Martin Luther but a heritage based upon the clear witness of Luther to the power and truth of the gospel. The central teachings of the Reformation can help us stay focused on our calling. To preach and teach that we are:

1) saved by grace alone through faith alone,

- 2) that the authority of the Bible is the highest authority in the church,
- 3) that the priesthood of all believers means that God uses each of us in a unique way to build up His church.

May God continue to bless our church and keep us faithful to Christ and the gospel in our time. Amen.