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The Reformation: Then and Now

Reformation Sunday

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‘Today we are celebrating Reformation Sunday.’ It is one of my favorite Sundays in all the year.’ It is a time to look back and remember those who have gone before us and the legacy they have entrusted to us.’ **The Reformation has been called ‘the hinge on which all modern history turns.’** (James Froude, 19th century historian) ‘As is often the case, those who were making the Reformation happen had no idea it would have such a profound impact on history.’ One of the worthy opponents of the Reformation, a man by the name of Erasmus, wrote: *‘I perceive a certain fatal change in human affairs.’* What Erasmus couldn’t see was the enormous vitality the Reformation would bring to the church, a vitality that drove the church to explode with energy and passion.’ Though many people down through the years have attributed various benefits to the Reformation, the Reformers themselves would have said they restored the Christian truths that had been forgotten or only half remembered.’ I firmly believe that if we restored these same truths to the church, we would experience tremendous energy and passion as well.

‘**What were those truths the Reformers were willing to give their lives to restore?**’ The **first truth** they restored was **the sovereignty of God**. God is in control of all things.’ The **second truth** they restored was **the graciousness of God**. ‘God is full of grace and compassion toward us.’ They believed Jesus Christ was sent into the world to redeem fallen humanity.’ They believed that all people were estranged from God, separated from God, by sin.’ They believed in the power of Christ to bring us into a right relationship with God through our faith in what God accomplished through Christ on the cross.’ They believed the Bible is God’s Word to all people, inspired by the Holy Spirit and that it is the highest authority on earth.’ They believed in the freedom that comes from confessing our sins and receiving God’s forgiveness with confidence, not in ourselves, but in a gracious God.

‘The Reformers worked to restore the pure teaching of these truths against the false accretions of tradition and an erring papacy.’ An accretion is a growth or something added on and attached to something else that doesn’t belong there.’ The church had become so filled with these additional

demands on the people, making it impossible for them to know with assurance that they were saved from God's wrath.'The people suffered under a heavy burden of uncertainty about their salvation at a time when the people most needed the support and encouragement the church had to offer.'Martin Luther came along and began writing about the truths of the faith at a time when the people were desperate to hear them.'His books were not just selling, but as one observer wrote, they were being snatched out of the hands of the booksellers.'

'Within a month of posting his ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg, declaring the things he wanted to debate, they had been printed and carried into all parts of Europe.'That may not sound like much in the age of internet and email, but it was a huge deal back then.'You can see why Luther looked at the printing press as the ultimate gift from God to be used to spread the gospel throughout the world.'People were desperate for the truth of the gospel.'They faced death constantly, either from the Black Plague or from the warring Turks.'They were searching for truth so they could move beyond being a gullible and superstitious people.'They wanted to know with certainty that when they died they'd be welcomed into God's presence for eternity rather than suffer in hell for eternity.

'What were the circumstances that brought about the Reformation?'The simplest answer is the abuses of the church at the time.'The church was selling things called indulgences.'You paid so much money and you were promised so many years off of your time in purgatory, which was a place in between heaven and hell, where Christians could work off their sins if they hadn't done such a good job of it in this life.'All this was a fabrication of the church, not something based on Scripture, but on tradition.'The church promised to use the extra income from the sale of indulgences to fund the crusade against the Turks and to build new churches.'But, instead, the money was used to pay off the debts of clergy high up in the church in Rome.'It is estimated that two-fifths of the income of all of Germany was siphoned off to Rome.'The money collected from the German people certainly didn't go toward paying for the local priests who were serving the people.'The social status of the common parish priest was depressingly low.'They were poorly educated and poorly paid.'The morale of the parish priest was so low on the eve of the Reformation which helps to explain why thousands of them joined the movement.'Literally thousands of evangelical preachers and teachers were recruited from the ranks of monks, friars, and hermits.'Luther, himself, was only the first of many to protest.'The Reformation was one massive grassroots movement to reform the church.'They cried out for change but the church hierarchy turned a deaf ear to the Protestors and refused to consider their cries for change.'And so the church split.

‘In 1522 the earnest Dutch pope Adrian VI instructed his legate to the Diet of Nuremberg to confess: *‘God has let this persecution of His church to occur because of men and especially because of the sins of the priests and relates.’The Holy Scriptures loudly proclaim that the sins of the people have their origin in the sins of the religious leaders.*’Unfortunately, the pope’s confession was too little, too late and it only served to encourage the Reformers by affirming the truth of their allegations against Rome.

‘Martin Luther went on to become the spokesperson for the German people.’He gave voice to all their pent-up feelings of frustration, moral indignation, and downright anger toward the Roman hierarchy, from the pope to the exploiting clergy and ignorant monks.’He confronted the evils straight on.’Even more important was his tremendous faith and commitment to Christ.’He was a religious genius of profound faith and theological insight.’He understood the depths of the gospel more than anyone else since the apostle Paul.’He articulated that faith in a way that reached the heart of the people who were longing for purity and spiritual renewal.

‘It was not without a price.’Luther was summonsed before the Diet of Worms to answer for his opposition to the church.’The historian, Lewis Spitz, wrote, *‘About six o’clock in the evening of April 18, 1521, the imperial herald led a pale and inwardly fearful and trembling Augustinian brother into the crowded torch lit Episcopal hall next to the towering Romanesque cathedral of Worms in Germany.’There Martin Luther stood before Emperor Charles V, the princes and estates of the diet, the cardinals and the powers of this world, to attest to his otherworldly faith.’It was hardly a fair trial, for he had been cited to recant publically, or, as Luther put it, to ‘recant or sing a new song.’*

‘When the emperor’s spokesman demanded a simple answer from Luther as to whether he would recant or not, here is what Luther said, *‘Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either the pope of the councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted 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.’I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me.’Amen’*

‘When Luther left the hearing that night he held his hand above his head like the victor in a tourney and cried out, *‘I am finished!’*The hall was lined with German soldiers muttering their approval, but the

Spanish horsemen waiting outside on the street shouted, *'Into the fire!'* Luther thought it was the end of him and his cause, but it was only the beginning. Through the help of friends he escaped by a side gate and was taken to a hideaway in the Wartburg Castle. On May 26, 1521, Emperor Charles the IV signed an edict excommunicating Luther and making him an outlaw who could be seized at will. But that edict was never enforced because of the overwhelming support Luther enjoyed from the German people. He had become a national hero. Charles became more preoccupied with his wars against the French, the pope, than with Luther and so the Reformation flourished.

'Luther was truly an amazing man.' He dominated his age as few other men have done and yet there was an unaffected naturalism about him. He was open and frank, and displayed his innermost feelings for all to see. He was what we would call today a transparent Christian. His passion for God and for the truth flowed from the depths of his being for the entire world to see. Reclaiming the truth of the gospel was something he was willing to die for. Fortunately God had other plans for Luther, plans to change the course of human history and bring purity and renewal to the church.

'Today the church is in desperate need of a reformation. Our denomination is in desperate need of reform and spiritual renewal. Our denomination has steadily drifted away from the *solas* of the Reformation 'those truths Luther was willing to die for.' Our denomination is being controlled by individuals, who do not hold that Scripture is the highest source of authority for all of life and faith. They do not believe that Scripture alone proclaims to us the true righteousness of God in the law and the only announcement of saving truth in the gospel. Nor are they willing to subordinate their opinions and desires to Scripture.'

'Luther warned, *'Set the Word out of sight, and there is no counsel nor help remaining.'* But this is precisely what we have done in our denomination and I fear in our own lives. We have set the Word of God out of sight. How many of us read our Bibles daily? How many of us could turn to a passage in the Bible that would answer someone's question about salvation? How many of us could turn to a passage in the Bible that would give guidance to someone struggling with a temptation? How many of us would even think to use the Bible for our own guidance when making decisions? At least the people back in Luther's day had a valid excuse for not knowing the Bible. Back then the Bibles were all written in Latin and chained to a stand in the church or library. Only trained scholars could read the Bible. The people were Biblically ignorant. One of the most important things Luther ever did was to translate the Bible into the German language and then use the printing press to get them into the hands of the people so they could read the Bible for themselves.'

‘What is our excuse for being Biblically ignorant?’ Are we just too busy?’ The truth is ‘we take time for what we think is really important.’ Or have we begun to think as the liberals, that the Bible is out of date for our times.’ Luther warned, ***‘Set the Word out of sight, and there is no counsel nor help remaining.’***

‘Today we are just as in need of a reformation as was the church in Luther’s day.’ We have strayed so far from the Christian truths for which he was willing to give his life.’ As a result, we don’t look any different than our non-Christian neighbor in the way we think or act.’ We’ve lost our ability to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.’ Our influence as Christians is virtually non-existent.’ We have accepted a role of insignificance in the secular culture that dominates our land.’ What will it take to bring about a reformation that will restore the Christian truths to our churches, to our lives and to our nation?’ What will it take to make us once again ‘people of the Book.’

‘I don’t know all the answers to these questions, but I do know one thing ‘it will begin with you and me, anchoring ourselves in God’s Word, just as it did for the first Reformers.’ We must recover the Christian truths that have all but been extinguished in our churches today.’ And it begins with anchoring ourselves in God’s Word, and subordinating our opinions and desires to the authority of Scripture.

‘Rick Warren says, ***‘Compared with other centuries, life has never been easier for much of the Western world.’ We are constantly entertained, amused, and catered to. ‘With all the fascinating attractions, mesmerizing media, and enjoyable experiences available today, it’s easy to forget that the pursuit of happiness is not what life is all about.’*** No, life is about honoring God and striving to live our lives under the authority of God and for his glory.’ It’s about experiencing God’s presence in our lives and allowing that presence to transform us and reform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.’ Only then will we be able to live transparent lives, unashamed of the gospel, willing to stand for the cause of Christ, reform our churches and influence the secular culture around us.