

Introduction

Every year on the Fourth day of the month of July, Americans celebrate. Many are able to have the day off from work. We attend parades; grill out; we go to festivals; and we share in the exhilaration of fire works. It is a celebration of our nation’s birth. The date marks the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress. So every year we join in celebrating the establishment of this amazing nation. Nobody in the United States needs to be told why we celebrate.

As great an occasion as the Fourth of July is, this year many Christians are celebrating a far more important and more fundamental historical development and one without which there probably would not have been a July Fourth celebration. I am talking about the Protestant Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation, as all history, is not primarily about man but about God. The Reformation is a remarkable work of God, however, in which he used a number of different human beings to penetrate a great wall of resistance and to shine light in the midst of great darkness. It is as though a wall of rubble had fallen before the mouth of a cave and trapped the human race inside. Yet over the course of time, men moved by the thinnest streams of light passing through the rubble began to chip away at the fragments. Progress was slow for a while, but history records a sudden breakthrough of light by which the cave became brightly illumined. People wandering in darkness saw a great light. This is the Reformation.

No single person is responsible for what God himself was doing. But the one who was removing the fragments of rubble when the light seemed to suddenly burst forth to all corners of Europe was Martin Luther. His own pilgrimage to the truth is a great story, much more than I can tell this morning. But there came a day when the error and corruption that abounded around him provoked him to propose a public discussion of his concerns. He formulated 95 statements which contended with the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church particularly relating to the sale of indulgences. Writing in Latin, he called these statements theses. On

October 31, 1517, Luther posted the theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg where he was a professor and priest. He called for a disputation of these items. The disputation never took place, but the theses were translated into German and printed and disseminated among the German populace. A ground swell of rejoicing and excitement went like a wave through the country. The light was streaming in and soon it was abounding throughout Europe. So for this reason, it is October 31, 1517 to which historians point as a date, if there must be ONE, that suits celebrating the great work of God we call the Reformation. In just two days, we will observe the 500th anniversary of that date. And it is a date worth celebrating!

Over the last several weeks in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we have drawn attention to a sad aspect of life in Judea during Jesus' earthly ministry. It is evident every time we read, "You have heard that it was said." There was a great darkness engulfing the people. They had to depend largely on the scribes and Pharisees for their understanding of the Scripture. And the scribes and Pharisees were anything but reliable. They had their own ideas and their own agenda. They lorded it over the Jews and tried to hold them subject. As Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, he took the people back to the law as it had been given by God. He had to dispel the false teaching that was being spread by the Pharisees and scribes. Matthew quoted the Old Testament to describe the situation in Galilee since Jesus came there: "the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light." And that is exactly the way it was. The Light of the world stood in their very midst, and he shone light upon them by carefully and correctly explaining to them the word of God.

In the days leading up to the Protestant Reformation it was also a time of great darkness. And the ones who had made it so dark were the ones who should have been spreading light. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ had been hijacked for power and political gain largely by a religious hierarchy. It sought to exert and protect its power by creating a gulf between the Bible and the people. The Church argued that the common man is not astute enough to read the Bible and understand it. He needs the professionals, the doctors of the church. Only the church and specifically the Pope possess authority to express it.

The truth and hope of the gospel were hidden from the people. Instead they were oppressed with lies that sought to extort from them their allegiance and funds of which they had almost none. The church played upon the fears of the people and took advantage of them at every turn. And those who stood up to challenge the church on these points paid dearly. They experienced the wrath of pope and cardinal as Jesus had experienced the anger of the scribes and Pharisees.

This morning I want to talk about 2 specific matters at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. The first is the scripture and the second is the burning question how can a person be right with God.

I. The Exclusive Authority of the Scriptures

A. The Bible's witness to itself is found in a number of scriptural texts. 2 Timothy 3:16-17. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Peter 1:20-21. No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

And Peter declares about the Scriptures, "You do well to pay attention to as to a lamp shining in a dark place."

It was when Adam and Eve refused to behave in submission to the authority of God's word that they fell into sin. When we study how Jesus responded to the temptations of the devil, we find that he cited the scripture as the authority that governed his actions. To the devil, he said, "It is written," and that settled the matter. In fact he declares that life itself is bound up in living according to what God says. "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Not the word of councils and popes and scholars but the word of God.

The question constantly before us as we come to the Bible is not what do we think? Or what does a religious leader say? But what does God say? Our hearts must be captured by the word of God.

B. The days leading up to the Reformation were dark indeed. Paul tells Timothy that the church is to be the pillar and support of the truth, but the church had become the pillar and support of its own inventions. One of the errors was the idea that the final authority for belief and practice was dual. It was the scriptures AND the traditions of the church and pronouncements of the popes. Guido Terreni, leader in the 14th century church straightforwardly asserted, "the whole authority of Scripture depends upon the Church." The reformers saw this error and confronted it directly. As they were charged with heresy, their challenge to the ones before whom they stood on trial was constantly this, if you will show me by the scriptures that what I am saying is in error, then I will gladly recant. I will gladly take back what I have said that contradicts the scripture, but I can in no wise recant what the Bible clearly reveals to be true.

John Wyclif is referred to as the morning star of the Reformation. Born in 1329 in England and schooled at Oxford, Wyclif asserted that the Bible is "one perfect word, proceeding from the mouth of God," and is "the basis for every [universal] opinion." Wyclif also claimed that "All law, all philosophy, all logic and all ethics are in Holy Scripture," and to "ignore Scripture is to ignore Christ."

Jon Hus lived from 1369-1415 in the present day Czech republic. In those days it was called Bohemia. He was influenced by the writings and influence of John Wyclif. He served as a priest in an ancient mega-church in Prague. The Bethlehem Chapel in Prague seated 3000 persons. And wonder of wonders the Bible was read and the sermons were preached in the native tongue of the people. He dared to form his beliefs and teaching on the Scripture. Hus is known for this quote: "Seek the truth, Listen to the truth; teach the truth; love the truth; abide by the truth; and defend the truth unto death." He did. Hus was eventually burned as a heretic. He was called by officials of the church to recant his views. This was his reply: "If you can show me from the Scriptures my error, I will immediately recant. If you cannot, I will not." They could not. And he did not.

Martin Luther was called to stand trial before the Diet (or international Assembly) of Worms. They accused him of heresy. He responded resolutely. "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the

Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I cannot and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience...Here I stand, I can not do otherwise."

I will point finally to John Calvin who lived from 1509-1564. He did not stand trial but wrote plainly in his Institutes of the Christian Religion. There he says, "God bestows the actual knowledge of himself upon us only in the Scriptures. [Scripture] is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, . . . opens his most hollowed lips." Calvin calls it a "pernicious error," the idea that the authority of the Scripture depends on the consent of the church. Calvin scoffs, "As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men!" (I. VII.1.) He continues, "It is utterly vain . . . to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent." The scriptures do not need the Church's approval for confirmation. Rather it is the church by recognizing scripture to be true that demonstrates it has a proper estimation of its value.

We are blessed so much by God who raised up men like these. We owe a great debt to these men who unswervingly declared the truth of the exclusive sufficiency and authority of scripture. It is the word of God. That word does not come from councils, diets, or popes. Nor does it come from the whims and experiences of individuals. It is the authority. We do not give it legitimacy. We do not confer on it a seal that lends credibility to it. No the word of God is what lends or removes credibility from people and institutions. What is written is the word of God and every doctrine, every practice, and every action will be tested and stands or falls by it.

C. Because of their convictions about the authority and power of the word of God, the Reformers were convinced that every human being should have access to the Bible. The ages were indeed dark. If you had lived 600-700 years ago, you would have had to have a university education or be in the ministry to understand the language of the official version of the Bible. It was the Latin Vulgate. It had been translated from the original languages,

Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic by Jerome in 405. Jerome's intent was to make the scriptures more accessible. But over the centuries the church exercised domination of the common person by keeping the scriptures unto itself, its priests and professors, not allowing it to be interpreted into the common languages of the people. With few exceptions, Bible reading and preaching were also done in Latin. Making the scriptures available in the common tongue was seen as casting pearls before swine.

John Wyclif surveyed the sad conditions of his day. The Church was awash with hypocrisy, greed, sexual immorality, and biblical illiteracy. The common people were left to suffer hopelessly with fear for their souls and under grossly impoverishment. Wyclif was convinced that it was because of a lack of the availability of the word of God. He assembled a team to translate the Latin Vulgate into English so the common man could read it.

One of Luther's great works was the translation of the New Testament into German. The 10-year project began in 1521. By 1525 William Tyndale had produced a translation of the New Testament into English from the Greek. And by his death he had completed about half the Old Testament. When the king of England gave in and commissioned the Authorized version, the translators consulted Tyndale's version and 80% of the time they concluded that Tyndale had worded the text best. Tyndale was captured and kept imprisoned for over a year before being strangled and burned for his heresies.

He wrote and we shared it on Wednesday. My Paraphrase. "Do not let it cause you despair or discouragement, O Reader, that you are forbidden to read the Bible. You might suffer loss of property or life. You might be charged with treason against the King. The Bible is God's word and your soul's health. And if God is for us, it matters not who is against us whether bishops, cardinals, or popes."

Brothers and sisters, I hope these words from men who gave their lives for the sake of the word of God stir your hearts to gratitude for the fact that you can hold a copy of that word in your hands this morning in your own language, that you can press an icon on your phone and read any verse of any chapter in the word of God in a split second. It is a great shame that

we take for granted that for which so many languished for so many centuries. We should also bear in mind that there are many people groups in the world still who do not have the Bible in their language. They are without hope and without God and without a stream of light shining into their lives. Wycliffe translators is one group whose mission it is to make translations available in their languages. In fact Melissa has a cousin who is working on one of these translations.

But I urge you to prize the word of God. Prize the fact that you have it. Prize it by saturating your mind and heart with. How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly nor stand in the path of sinners nor sit in the seat of scorers, but his delight is in the law of God and in his law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does he prospers. The wicked are not so.

II. The Exclusive Way a Person Can Be Right With God

A. Like the hearts of these reformers, once your heart has been captured by the scriptures and it is firmly established with you that they are the exclusive authority, it will exert an inexorable effect on everything you believe. When you start asking, "what does the scripture say?" in stead of "what makes sense to me?" or "what does the pope say?" you have broken free from the chains of darkness and are on your way to being set free. You shall know the truth, says Jesus, and the truth shall set you free.

The scriptures tell us the way things are. They tell us what is what. They tells us who God is. They tell us what is important to him. They tells us how husbands and wives should treat each other. They tell us how children should respond to their parents. They tell us how the church should operate. They answer every one of the most important questions we have. And no question that we have is more important than this: "how can a person be right with God?" Understanding that every human being is a sinner against God, how can a human being be reconciled with God?

B. The medieval church averred that one must be baptized and must go to confession and do penance in order to minimize time that would be spent after death in purgatory. In purgatory one would pay for their sins. They

would then proceed to heaven once they received sufficient punishment for their sins.

C. Martin Luther suffered greatly under this understanding. For years he lived as a monk constantly confessing his sins, doing penance and deprive himself of a healthy diet. He said of himself, "I tormented myself to death to procure peace with God for my troubled heart and my agitated conscience; but I was surrounded by horrible darkness, and could find peace nowhere."

D. At long lang last, Luther found peace with God through His word. It was as he was studying Paul's epistle to the Romans. Chapter 1:16-17 is where Paul sums up the contents of this rich theological letter. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, "the just shall live by faith." Luther later wrote of his experience: "There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith."

The passive righteousness of which he speaks is the righteousness of God which is given to those who come to faith in Christ. They are granted as a gift the very righteousness they need to be reconciled with Holy God.

This is the teaching of the Scriptures. Paul writes to the Ephesians (2:8-10): For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your doing: it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Paul speaks in Romans 4 of Abraham, our forefather, not in a physical sense but in a spiritual sense. He says, "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness." . . . And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." Paul writes then in Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we also have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

This is the glorious teaching of the scriptures. Sinners can be reconciled with God! Sinners can rejoice in hope of the glory of God! But it is not by what the church taught back in Luther's day and that same thing that same church teaches today. It is not by being baptized. It is not by confessing to a priest and doing penance. And it is not by doing time in purgatory to pay for your sins.

The only way a person can be right with God is by the gift of God. This way was achieved by the Lord Jesus Christ when he suffered and died for our sins once for all, the just for the unjust. And the Bible is completely clear. The manner in which God gives the gift of eternal life is through faith. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

Conclusion

These truths are at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. And they still matter today. There are still falsehoods and false gospels abounding today. The same church still teaches a wrong doctrine of justification. That same church has anathematized the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which we see here is taught by the scripture.

We must stand fast grounded in the word of God. And we must stand fast for what it says. Like Hus said, we must "Seek the truth, Listen to the truth; teach the truth; love the truth; abide by the truth; and defend the truth unto death." Captured by the Holy Scriptures, we are blessed to be able to say as Luther is said to have stated before the Diet of Worms: "My conscience is captive to the word of God. Here I stand. I can do no other."

And not only can we do no other, we can do no better.

Believers, rejoice this day in Christ and in his great salvation. To those of you who have yet to believe in Christ, I say, wait no longer. Quit believing that you are good enough on your own or that you can do enough to satisfy God for your sins. You can't. The only way to be right with God is through faith. Believe on Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.