

### ***What Is Truth?***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Each year on the last Sunday in October the Lutheran Church in particular (and many Protestant churches in general) celebrate the beginning of what became known as the Reformation of the Church in Western Europe. We've all heard the story about how 501 years ago, a courageous young Augustinian friar named Martin Luther nailed to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg a sheet of paper on which he had printed 95 theses or talking points directed against the sale of indulgences. He had hoped to spark an academic discussion among theologians that would eventually put an end to this corrupt tradition by which churchmen enriched themselves at the expense of gullible people who imagined they could buy time off of their sentence to Purgatory – a fictional place of suffering where the faithful are supposedly cleansed of sin before entering into the final bliss of heaven. That's what Luther hoped for: a debate based on Holy Scripture by which the truth of the matter would be established. Instead, he inadvertently ignited a powder keg as the Church of Rome moved to protect one of its most lucrative cash cows and to crush anyone who had the temerity to question its authority or its practices.

We Lutherans love the story. We delight in hearing of Luther's heroic stand for the truth of Christ's Gospel even when threatened by excommunication and a heretic's death by fire at the stake. But the Reformation isn't about Luther. It isn't about his heroism. No, the Reformation is about Jesus. It's about the central truth of the Christian faith: that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, died for sin, once for all, and that by his death and resurrection he defeated death and hell and gained eternal life for all who believe.

And the fact of the matter is that we are wrong to call it *the* Reformation as if it were the only time in history when the central truth by which people are saved was lost or obscured and needed to be recovered. Time and again throughout the storyline of Scripture, we see that God's people have a tendency to drift away, to be misled, to (sometimes with good intentions) add human traditions that distort or hide the central truth, and to subtract biblical teachings that are difficult to understand or that cause offense.

It's important that we understand this, because the strongest argument made against Luther in his time and which is still used against us to this day is that the Church can't be wrong. They say that God would never allow it to go astray. As Jesus said, "The gates of hell will not prevail against it." So if the Church is doing something, if it adopts a tradition, if it adds new teachings that go beyond the scope of Scripture – these things must be right because the Church – and especially its highest leadership – can never be wrong.

But that's demonstrably false. Recall that it was the high priest of God's people – the man who held the highest position in the faith of the one true God – together with all the leaders and brightest and best Bible scholars of the day who condemned Jesus to death. The long-awaited Christ they all so eagerly sought was standing before them, and they got it wrong. Even after his resurrection, the vast majority of them continued to get it wrong. They actively tried to stamp out the truth by which people are saved. And they did it mostly to protect their positions and the unbiblical traditions they had established.

In other words, the birth of the New Testament Church was a Reformation. Those who held to the truth, who confessed Christ and his Gospel, were thrown out of what had been up to that time the Old Testament Church. They had to make a new beginning. And by God's grace they did.

But as I said earlier, it was only one of many Reformations the Church had undergone. Today's Old Testament reading is an example of another. It describes the reforming work of King Hezekiah. During the reign of Ahaz, his father, things had really slipped in a spiritual sense. The problem was that Ahaz didn't trust the Lord. And so when two neighboring kingdoms threatened to go to war against him, he called for help not from the Lord, but from the major super power of the time: the King of the rapidly expanding Assyrian Empire. Think of them as the Nazis of that time. In exchange for voluntarily becoming a vassal kingdom to this ruthless dictator, Ahaz was promised that he would be protected from his immediate enemies. But it really was a deal with the devil. And when you deal with the devil, you lose your soul – which is what Ahaz did. To prove his loyalty to Assyria, Ahaz erected a massive altar to his new master's false gods right in the Lord's temple. He even had the Lord's altar moved to a corner to make room for it. And he encouraged the people of Judah to worship the false gods of the Assyrians – which many were happy to do because as I've explained many times the pagan religions of that time were fertility cults that involved a whole lot of fornicating.

To protect their jobs and high stations, the priests of the Lord went along with it. They told the people it was okay to worship the Assyrian gods. "No need to worry; you are still being faithful to the Lord God of Israel." And we heard how even good things the Lord had provided became corrupted. The bronze serpent that Moses erected on a pole in the wilderness to rescue the people who had been stricken by deadly snakebite on account of their rebellion – which should have been a reminder of the Lord's deliverance and forgiveness – had itself become an object of worship. People were offering sacrifices to it as if it were a god of some kind, as if *it* rather than the Lord had the power to save.

Fortunately young Hezekiah had received most of his religious instruction from the prophet Isaiah, a faithful man of God. So when Ahaz died and Hezekiah ascended to the throne, he started to clean things up. He removed the pagan altars from the temple and other places they had been set up. He destroyed the Asherah poles, which were phallic symbols in the groves and gardens where all that cultic fornicating went on. He even destroyed the bronze serpent so that its worship would cease. He turned the people back to the Gospel – which in those days before Christ was expressed in blood sacrifice by which the Lord God forgave the sins of his people, which in turn was the foreshadow of sacrifice to come: the sacrifice that Christ would ultimately make on the cross.

Again, the main point is that the Church as an institution can and sometimes does go astray. We should expect it: after all, it's led and supported by sinful men who can err, who can be deceived, who can sell out the truth in the hope of gaining power, prestige, and wealth. And Satan is tirelessly working to steer the Church astray. But when it does go astray, it's precisely through the process of reformation that the Lord corrects and restores his wayward Church and brings it back to the central truth upon which it is supposed to be founded: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is what happened in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation that we are celebrating. The Church as an institution had largely gone off the rails. Mind you, the kernel of the Gospel was still there, but it had become so obscured and neglected that it was difficult if not impossible for most people to find. Like the Lord's altar in the days of Ahaz, it had been shoved into a corner. Instead of seeking Christ and his forgiveness, people were directed to seek the intercession of the Virgin Mother and a multitude of saints. Instead of trusting in the Word of Absolution "Your sins are forgiven", people were told how they themselves had to atone for their sins through various acts of penance. Even the Lord's Supper had become corrupted. Instead of what it is: Christ's body and blood given for you to assure you that the sacrifice of atonement he made for

sin is yours, it was taught that it was an additional unbloody offering to God by which time was deducted from your sentence to Purgatory. Every time a priest consecrated the elements, more merit was being earned before the Lord. And so priests would be employed – paid that is – to stand at an altar and say one mass after another, as rapidly as possible, with only himself present. You want to spring Grandpa’s soul from Purgatory? Drop a bag of coins off at the chapel and a priest will go to work on it, offering Christ’s body to God over and over again. It was awful. What was meant for the highest good of God’s people had become a sacrilege, not to mention another cash cow for the Church.

The crass selling of indulgences was only one visible spot of decay on an institution that had gone rotten to the core. In asking for a theological debate about the issue, Luther hoped to end the evil practice, directing troubled souls to Christ’s full atoning sacrifice rather than to a sheet of paper that promised time off a sentence to Purgatory. To say that Luther was surprised by the response of the Church’s hierarchy would be an understatement. Instead of “Okay, there might be a problem here; let’s talk about it”, it was, “Who are you to question the Church’s practice? There will be no discussion. If the Church is doing it, it’s good and right, and you must fall in line and believe it.”

That response revealed the true nature of the larger issue at stake. In the end, it comes down to the question that Pilate asked Jesus at his trial: “What is truth?” Related to it are the questions “What is the source of truth?” and “How can the truth be known?”

Luther and the reformers insisted that Christ and his Word are the truth. The Church is established by the truth of God’s Word. That is to say, the Word is above the Church. The opposition insisted that it’s the other way around: the Church establishes the truth, and God’s Word is only one of several places to find it. The Church is above the Word.

You see the problem here: only in the first case is there an objective unchanging standard of truth that comes directly from God. If it’s the other way around, if the Church is above the Word, then it’s unmoored. It can drift this way or that in the winds of worldly philosophies, human errors, passing fads, and Satan’s deceptions.

Thus the reformers established what we call the three “Sola’s”: Sola gratia: Salvation by God’s grace alone; Sola fide: Salvation by faith in Christ alone; and Sola Scriptura: Scripture alone as the Church’s only source of truth.

By God’s grace, we are the heirs of the reformers’ work to restore the Gospel to its place of centrality in the Church’s teaching and practice, and to hold the Word of God above the Church where it belongs. It falls to us and to each succeeding generation to preserve the truth we have been given, and pass it down to our children and to their children exactly as we received it, ever vigilant lest we be led astray.

Jesus said, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Therefore may we let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in our hearts to God. And whatever we do, in word or deed, may we do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***