

“REDISCOVERING THE REFORMATION”

Ephesians 2:4-10

October 29, 2017 ~ Reformation Sunday

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The Protestant Reformation didn't really begin all of a sudden on October 31, 1517, of course. That turned out to be something of a watershed moment – a challenge to the status quo that couldn't be ignored and an unleashing of ideas that changed the way many people looked at the church and faith and society. The rapidity with which those ideas spread was made possible because of Gutenberg's media revolution: the printing press allowed that list Martin Luther's to be reproduced in large numbers and disseminated far more widely than would have been possible a hundred years earlier.

But those ideas didn't just spring up in 1517. More than a hundred years before Martin Luther, there was Jan Hus, a Czech, who was concerned about corruption in the church. Even earlier, there was John Wycliffe in England, who advocated a Bible in the language of the people. There were the Waldensians, in Italy in the 12th century. And there were others in the 16th century besides Martin Luther who were asking the same questions and trying to envision a Christianity more faithful to the Bible.

Nor was the Reformation accomplished with the 95 theses (whether they were nailed to the cathedral door as tradition has it or sent to the bishop in some other way!)

Martin Luther – and others – not only had to be bold and take risks and struggle for change and resist the powerful leaders of their church and society. They also – when it became clear that there would be a separation from the established church – had to work out what that new church would look like. What would its theology and worship and organization and practice of Christianity look like?

In different places, different reformers took the movement in different directions, with their own emphases and practices. There was John Calvin, of course, out of whose theology and leadership our own Presbyterian and Reformed traditions developed. In the Netherlands, there was Menno Simons, whose teachings formed the Mennonites and also influenced Baptist traditions. And there were many others.

These people were far from perfect. John Calvin allowed at least one person deemed a heretic to be burned at the stake. Martin Luther supported the brutal repression of a peasant revolt and developed some ugly anti-Jewish attitudes which had long-lasting consequences. The early reformers also had many disagreements with each other on numerous issues (the Lord's Supper, for example). The word "heretic" was used a lot; repression of dissent could be harsh; wars were occasionally fought. They took their theology seriously in those days!

But the churches that emerged continued – thankfully – to learn and change. And we continue to do so because we are still far from perfect. That’s why we Presbyterians are fond of saying that we are “Reformed.... and always reforming.”

Those key ideas that sparked the Reformation changed the church and the world. They continue to shape how we think of ourselves and the church and the Christian faith and the society we live in.

Those ideas weren’t new with the Reformation; in fact, they are mostly right there in the passage we read from Ephesians this morning. But the Reformation was a movement of rediscovering and recommitting to those ideas, especially to the centrality of grace and faith. A similar rediscovery and recommitment is not a bad idea for us, too.

So let’s take another look at some of them, and consider how they continue to shape us:

Sola gratia. Only grace. Not our knowledge or our deserving or our resume or anything else about us makes God care for us. God’s love was there first. “It is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8) We may think we seek God, but God sought us first. Forgiveness, transformation, all that is good in our lives – in fact our very lives themselves – are gifts of God’s amazing and all-encompassing grace.

A big idea that is related to grace (and particularly important to us Presbyterians!) is the sovereignty of God. That all-encompassing grace means that no part of our world, no part of our human life is outside the realm of God’s concern. So we draw no line between what is “sacred” and what is “secular.” And we try to work and act in the world in all kinds of ways as God calls us, trusting that God’s will eventually will be done and that our stewardship of God’s good gifts matters.

Sola Fide. Only faith. It’s not good deeds, generous donations, belonging to a church, believing the right list of doctrines, saying the right prayers, getting baptized, having communion or any other ritual that enables us to receive God’s grace. It isn’t that those things have no value, but none of them can substitute for faith in Jesus.

“Only faith” declares that the Christian life is meant to be a life of freedom. We are not meant to spend our lives worrying about whether we have done enough of the right things in the right way, or whether we’ve done too many of the wrong things and haven’t atoned adequately. Faith releases us from all that, and, somewhat paradoxically, enables us to pray, give, be part of the community, serve, be ourselves and use our gifts because we are glad and grateful.

Sola Scriptura. Only scripture. Nothing else is to us as Christians what the Bible is. . In our ordination vows, we say that the scriptures are the “unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church” and God’s word to us. No church doctrines, no scholarly writings, no pronouncements from pulpits, no folk wisdom is to be regarded as having the same authority.

From this 'sola' comes the Reformation notion that the Bible should be available to all people in their own language, and the historic Presbyterian commitment to universal public education ... so that everyone can read the Bible. This principle is also the reason that in most Presbyterian worship services you'll notice that "the word" has the central place, and everything else revolves around it.

Sola Christus. Only Christ. Nobody but Jesus is our Savior, and we need nobody else – no saints, no clergy, nobody gifted with a special ability to communicate with God – to speak to God on our behalf or forgive our sins. Jesus does this. And because Jesus has become God-with-us and lived among us and made God known... we can know that God hears us.

From this 'sola' we get also a very important Protestant principle: the priesthood of all believers, which emphasizes the equality of all believers before God and in the church. Even if we have different callings and tasks, no one is more important than another, everyone is invited to the table, all have a voice, and praying is everyone's job.

Soli Deo Gloria. For the glory of God alone. Nobody and nothing else gets our worship or our undivided loyalty. And we live our lives not for personal aggrandizement or enrichment or power, and not even for the advancement of the church, but for God's glory.

This 'sola' hints at the truth that we human beings are perpetually tempted to idolatry in its various forms – and that we need to be constantly recalled from that temptation. Composers used to often write those words across their music manuscripts – maybe we should write them on all our projects and accomplishments as well.

The Reformation is not over. The church still struggles with some of the same issues that prompted the call to reformation 500 years ago:

Will we trust in Christ or put our trust in something else?

Will we make our church-y practices and rules more important than scripture?

Will we perpetuate – again – the notion that Christianity is about being nice people and good citizens who do a lot of volunteer work?

Will we work harder to make sure every individual has a voice in church and society?

Will we have the courage to resist idolatry in all its forms, even the popular ones?

Will we live like people who believe in a God of love and grace?

Will God be glorified?