

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- Reformation Day 500th Anniversary
Sunday, October 29, 2017

500th Anniversary

1. While Anglicans technically aren't Protestants, because the English Reformation was separate from the Protestant Reformation, we still owe a great debt to Martin Luther and the other reformers who stood up to Rome and rescued biblical Christianity.
2. This coming Tuesday- Halloween- marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the Cathedral Church in Wittenberg, Germany. While Luther was far from the first reformer of the Church, it was his action that seemed to light the blaze of all of the "reformation kindling" that had been being gathered all around Europe for about 150 years. It was Luther's act of bravery and conscience, particularly as he refused to recant his positions in order to make peace with the Roman Church, allowed others all over Europe to have the courage to stand up to Rome and to share their theological views as well. For hundreds of years Rome had dominated Europe, both politically and theologically, but all of that was about to change.

Abuses of the Church

1. There are several important issues addressed during the Protestant reformation. Today, we will briefly look at the three that I believe to be the most significant. The first was that Luther spoke out against the abuses of the Roman Church. My goal today isn't to paint the Roman Catholic Church out to be the great villains of history, but I am going to cover what was historically true of the time.
2. When Martin Luther wrote his 95 Theses, among his most significant concerns was the sale of indulgences by the Church as a means of buying one's way out of Purgatory and into heaven. It is important to note that the Church was not saying that you could buy your way out of hell. They did believe that only Jesus could provide that. They did teach, however, that one had to pay for their sins, even after coming to Christ. Therefore, one would have to go to a place called Purgatory to burn away those sins.
3. While we won't spend time today discussing Purgatory- other than my plain statement that it is completely unbiblical- what is important is that the Church was profiting financially off of the fears of the people about Purgatory. Because the coffers of Rome were getting low, and because Pope Leo X wanted to raise money to complete the construction of St. Peter's Basilica, the Church monetized holiness at the expense of the people in her care.
 - a. People would buy indulgences, pay money for certain prayers, and do special acts of service- with money attached to them- in order to rescue family members from the refining fires of Purgatory.
4. Martin Luther saw the great despair this caused the people, and upon his own study of scripture, found the practice to be unbiblical and unethical. His belief was that these Purgatory preachers were doing their work without the pope's knowledge. His original intention had been to bring this to the pope's attention. Once he learned that the pope was behind it, things really changed.
5. Without spending too much time on this, once Luther stood up to the abuses of Rome, others came out of the woodwork, having found the courage to do the same. Luther rubbed the lamp, and the genie was never going back into the bottle.

Justification by faith alone

1. Luther was a man troubled by his own sin. Despite being an Augustinian monk, he was haunted by the devil and lived in constant fear and torment that he wasn't free from his sins.

As Luther was studying Paul's epistle to the Romans, he stumbled upon something that set him free, and that he realized had been lost to the Church for a long, long time: justification by faith alone.

- a. There are at least 8 places in Romans that suggest justification by faith alone, which is probably why it was his study of this epistle that changed Luther so much.
 - b. Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."
 - c. Romans 10:9, "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."
2. This theological point is probably the most significant of the Reformation. It changed the struggle to please God into a life of living in God's mercy. Because of the fear of God's wrath in the middle ages, the rescuing of this doctrine was really a rescuing of the souls of the people in the Church.

The Bible in every person's language

1. The third major issue was the importance of people having the bible in their own language. This becomes an obvious issue when one realizes that the Church couldn't have gotten away with its abuses, and the heart of the gospel- justification by faith in the shed blood of Jesus- would never have been lost if people actually had the ability to read the scriptures for themselves.
2. The invention of the printing press played a central role in the reformation because once the bible was translated, against the will of the Church, it could be copied very quickly and disseminated widely. The printing press also allowed for the publication of theological writings and shorter gospel tracts. As a side effect of the reformation- or perhaps as a necessary result of it- literacy increased dramatically in Europe.
3. People had been at the mercy of those who could read- and generally who could read Latin- to explain to them what the bible said. This meant that they could be taught anything and would have no way of knowing the veracity of the teaching. Sadly, even many clergy couldn't understand Latin, and therefore didn't understand what the bible taught.
4. Once Luther read and understood Romans, he knew that it was necessary for the people to have the same opportunity. He wasn't the first to translate the bible into the language of his people, and like those before him, such as John Wycliffe almost 150 years earlier, he did so at the risk of his life.
5. Eventually in England, Henry VIII required that every church have a copy of the Tyndale bible- which he had executed William Tyndale for translating. The bibles were quite large, and were incredibly popular. They would be chained inside of churches and there would be long lines of people waiting for their opportunity to read God's word for themselves for the very first time.
6. We owe a great debt to Luther and the many other reformers. Thanks to their courage and their commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we now have access the bible in dozens or more translations just in English.
 - a. People died or lived in exile to bring us that blessing. Their courage and their suffering gave us access to the scriptures and the ability to hear and read the truth of the gospel in a common language. Not only should we be thankful, but we should show that thanksgiving by taking advantage of the legacy they left us. We should commit to reading our own bibles and studying and understanding the theology which they thought was so important for us to know.