

REFORMATION DAY – OCTOBER 31

On the eve of All Saint's Day ("Hallowed Eve," or "Halloween," as we call it today), in 1517, a young Augustinian monk nailed ninety-five theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. This was not unusual; the castle church door was something of a community bulletin board or listserv at the time. The monk, named Martin Luther, wanted to debate corruptions he had noticed in the church. That was not an unusual move either; many people had noted problems in the church in those days and suggested ways to correct them.

But there *was* something unusual about Luther. He probed the church's troubles more deeply than others. The problems were certainly seen in immoral clergy, rampant idolatry, and the "purchasing" of salvation through indulgences. But Luther saw that the root of the problem was that the church had buried Christ out of sight. Rather than offering Christ to the people of God in Word and sacrament – the means through which Christ promised to be with his people – the church was pointing people to relics, pilgrimages, and humanly devised rituals like penance as a way of finding God. Ultimately, people were unable to *know* the love of God because they didn't know if they were good enough.

Luther proved to be the right man at the right time – the consummate "man for the hour." He sought to unearth Christ, and as he did so, he rediscovered the teaching of the Apostle Paul: God accepts us not because we are becoming better people through our own efforts, or because we adhere to church traditions that are only tenuously related to Scripture. Rather, God accepts (or justifies) sinners freely and graciously because Jesus has died for our sins and rose again on the third day. Luther declared that salvation is found in Christ alone, and received by faith alone. God's righteousness is not simply the standard by which he judges us; it is the gift of his own covenant faithfulness to his people, through the death and resurrection of Christ. We are not saved by our works; rather, we do good works because God's Spirit is *already* at work in us, applying Christ's finished salvation to us. At the center of the Reformation was a recovery of the biblical gospel, and with it a biblical understanding of the church and the means of grace. The Reformers encapsulated their teaching with the well-known *solas*: *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solus Deo Gloria*, *sola Scriptura*, and *sola ecclesia*. Salvation is based solely on Christ's person and work as God-incarnate, our Lord and Redeemer. Salvation is entirely a work of God's grace alone. We are justified (or forgiven) through faith alone, apart from meritorious works. All of life should aim at glorifying God out of gratitude for the gospel. The Bible is our highest norm, a sufficient guide for faith and practice and the judge of all truth. And, finally, salvation is ordinarily found in the church, through the preached Word and the administration of the sacraments, because the church is the body, bride, temple and kingdom of Christ.

Other "reformers" before Luther had tried to restore the church's purity, but none of them had reached for so radical a solution. None of them saw so clearly into the basic issues. Luther's views caught wind and began to spread over Europe like wildfire. Soon, Reformational churches were popping up all over. Cities and rulers began to declare their allegiance to be the Reformed movement. As the Reformation began to spread, it became apparent that God was doing a mighty work of renewal amongst his people. A new era was dawning.

The Reformers returned to the Bible, stripping away the accretions of false traditions, accumulated over the centuries, as the church drifted from her biblical moorings. They were not opposed to tradition as such, but declared that Scripture must be our highest authority because it is our *only* infallible authority. No council or even the Pope could speak on par with the Word of God. The Reformers restored the priesthood of the baptized community. No longer would people gather as spectators, to watch the priest do a "magic trick," transubstantiating the bread and

wine. Rather, they would gather to enter God's presence and worship him together. The people would now be engaged in the work of worship, praying, singing, and communing together at the table. The lost art of preaching was recovered, as the Reformers insisted that God's Word be taught with fervor and depth. Images were smashed, the sacraments were restored, and the pastoral office reclaimed.

Luther was essentially excommunicated by the Roman church for his views. His famous "Here I stand!" speech at the Diet of Worms was a bold act of faith and put him in great danger, as a heretic and outlaw. But thanks to help from the German nobility, Luther would live to a ripe old age. However, other Reformers would not be so fortunate. They would spend their days fleeing from one place to another, enduring exile or imprisonment, and even getting burned at the stake. But there were pockets of places where the Reformation was free to develop – in cities such as Strasbourg and Geneva, the Reformed faith began to flourish. With the emerging nationalism, and the resultant breakup of Europe, the Reformation was able to take root in several countries, including England, Scotland, Holland, and eventually America.

The Reformation essentially transformed Western civilization, touching virtually every facet of cultural life. Because the Reformers recovered the dignity of work (as an aspect of the people's corporate priesthood), common folks were more motivated than before to develop industry and thrift. Science and trade flourished, generating technological breakthroughs and incredible wealth. Education and literacy were emphasized. As the people became more involved in church life, they also became more involved in political processes, putting checks on tyrannical governments. The Reformers and their heirs displayed a tremendous missionary zeal, and began taking the gospel to the far flung reaches of the globe in greater numbers and effectiveness than ever before. In short, the modern world was birthed from the Reformation.

This is not to say the Reformation was a totally unmixed blessing. While the reforms of men like John Calvin, Martin Bucer, John Knox, Thomas Cranmer, and others paved the way for the birth of new world order, overcoming a great deal of superstition, ignorance, and false worship, many of the good things about the older medieval civilization ("Christendom") were lost. The Reformers were anxious to maintain the visible, public, and governmental unity of the body of Christ, but their Protestant heirs were not so inclined. In many cases, subsequent overzealous reformers went too far, taking liturgical and governmental modifications much further than the early Reformers would have approved of. In many ways the Reformation came to produce a caricature of itself, seen today in our radical secularism, humanism, individualism, and egalitarianism. All of these cultural corruptions are distortions of great Protestant insights, taken to the extreme. While today's Protestants generally have a decent grasp of what was wrong with the late medieval church, and thus why the Reformation was necessary, they seem sadly unaware of the possibility of going equally wrong in the opposite direction. The way many Protestants devalue the church, the pastorate, the sacraments, liturgy, interchurch unity, and so on, show that we have fallen into the ditch on the other side. If the medieval Christians were guilty of a false materializing of the spiritual, modern Protestants are guilty of a false spiritualizing of the material.

Thus, Reformation Day should be more than a celebration of a five hundred year old event. It should also be a time of lamenting the failure of churches and nations in the Reformed stream to stay true to their heritage's deepest principles and best insights. We should not only look *back* to the early Reformers with great appreciation, praising God for the way he used them to bring renewal and revival to his church through their labors, sacrifices, and bloodshed; we should also look *forward* with eager hope and prayerful expectation, begging God to give his church yet another Reformation. The sixteenth century Reformation is not an endpoint, but a new starting point for the church.

