

# “Can the Church Be Reformed?”

a sermon by

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**Text: “For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the results of works, so that none may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)**

On October 31, 1517 an obscure Augustinian Monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed 95 theses or propositions on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. These theses challenged many of the practices of the late medieval church that Luther found to be contrary to Scripture and offensive to common sense. These included the practices of selling indulgences as well as other abuses that Luther felt were repugnant to the faith.

The result of Luther’s work led to the formation of the Protestant church that today includes Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Methodists. All of the so called “mainline protestant denominations” form a major body within Christianity, along with Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

## I.

Today, we find ourselves in a very difficult situation. The so called mainline denominations find themselves facing great struggles. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example, is a church that has moved from 4.2 million members in 1965 to a church today of 2.0 million members, a loss of two million members in the past 45 years. At the present rate of membership loss, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will not survive the next three decades.

In addition, the mainline denominations, which once exercised great influence in American life and thought, find themselves struggling to maintain an influence that once was taken for granted. Moreover, the churches today find themselves bitterly divided over social and moral issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and a host of other issues that confront our culture.

In the context of the present situation it is certainly appropriate to ask ourselves the question: “Can the church be reformed?”

## II.

The passage of Scripture from which I have read today is certainly one that has great significance for us. In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus he speaks to the heart of the Christian gospel: "For by grace you are saved by faith and it is not your own doing; it is a gift of God – not the results of works lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:9)

Throughout its history the church has experienced renewal and reformation by recovering its past. The Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was a recovery of the Scriptural basis of the church. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian instituted a movement called "neo-orthodoxy or neo-Reformation." For Barth the recovery of the church was tied to his discovery of Scripture. Barth was a pastor in a small church in Safenwil, Switzerland. He studied the book of Romans and wrote a brief commentary on Romans. Barth compared the reaction of people to the publication of his commentary to a man who was in a church at night and was struggling to find a way out in the dark. The man felt a rope, grabbed it, and lo and behold, the church bell rang and wakened the entire village. That was the reaction of Barth's publication of his commentary on Romans. He pointed an entire generation to what he called "The strange world of the Bible."

If the church in our day is to be reformed, there are three essential ingredients which were central to the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

## III.

The first is the recovery of Scripture. One of the battle cries of the Reformation was the Latin expression "Sola Scriptura" – or "Scripture alone."

Today, there is a certain embarrassment and reluctance about Scripture. Thirty years ago there was a better Biblical literacy in Presbyterian congregations than one finds today.

Allen Bloom, in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, relates his experience as a professor at the University of Chicago. Bloom notes two trends that he finds disturbing. The first is the information explosion that has made tradition superfluous. Bloom notes that at one time the Bible was the organizing center of our culture. It provided the moral vision for families, churches and communities. It was also a key to understanding most of Western art as well as the best of our musical traditions. Today, he notes that the place of the Bible in our churches, homes, and society is greatly diminished.

Bloom notes a second trend with regard to Scripture. In most of our colleges and universities the Bible is taught as part of the humanities. It is simply one book among others. Even in our seminaries the teaching of the Old Testament has become the teaching of "Hebrew Narrative." The emphasis today is to understand the Bible as history and literature but not as "revelation," which is what it claims to be.

It is hard to understand how the church can be renewed in our time without a concerted effort to understand the Old and New Testaments – on their own terms.

#### IV.

A second rallying cry in the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was the Latin expression “Sola Gratia” or “grace alone.” Martin Luther, after a careful study of Romans, Galatians, and the Psalms concluded that the central aspect of the gospel was the belief that God’s love for us comes not by what we do, but as God’s gift to us through Jesus Christ.

Thesis # 62 of the 95 theses that Martin Luther nailed to the castle church door at Wittenberg contained these words: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God.”

For Martin Luther the great question that he faced was the problem of how does a sinful person stand in the presence of a righteous God. Luther tried every available avenue offered to him by the medieval church. He became a monk. He confessed his sins endlessly. He fasted for weeks at a time, at some points risking his life and health. But it was never enough. He could also imagine more.

It was only at the point that he realized that he could not earn God’s favor that he found his peace. “The just,” he declared, “shall live by grace.”

There are not many people today who share Martin Luther’s concern about his own sinfulness. But the same question haunts us in other ways. Many people that I talk to today feel guilty. They feel guilty because they do not think they have been good parents. They feel guilty because they don’t think they have been as successful as they should have been. Even in the church there is a pervasive feeling that we have not done all that we could have and should have done to make the world a better place.

The recovery of the notion of God’s grace does two very important things for us. First of all, it allows us to see the world in a way that allows us a sense of compassion. Reinhold Niebuhr in his work *The Irony of American History* notes several elements at work in human life. Some things involve an element of pathos, such as a child that is injured or killed. Other elements are tragic, such as instances in which we have to deny one loyalty for the sake of another, or when we have to do evil for the sake of good. There is also an element of irony as when a person’s strength becomes their great weakness or when we find flaws in our best deeds as well as our worst.

The upshot of this is that one cannot simply separate the world into the “good” and the “bad.” The gospel is always hidden from those who in their self-righteousness cannot see the sorrow and tragedy in the worst life, or that success for some people with a very poor biochemical inheritance is not even a possibility.

Another dimension to the understanding of God’s grace is that the gospel enables us to do our work and to leave the rest to God. As Christians, we live under the command of Christ “To be perfect as God is perfect.” And yet we know that perfection is not possible. That is why the commandment to be perfect must also be set aside the words of Jesus “Your sins are forgiven.”

## V.

The third rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was contained in the Latin expression “Sola Christus” – “Christ alone.” One of the things that the Reformation sought to do was to place the primary authority for our faith on Christ and on Scripture and not the church. For Luther and Calvin, the Word of God was Jesus Christ and the Word of God was Scripture.

Once again, I sense a certain embarrassment about Christ in the church. In the kind of pluralistic world in which we live, we are quite aware that there are other religious figures that command people’s allegiance: Moses, Mohammed, Confucius, the Buddha – just to name a few. And there are many people who are convinced that all religions are the same. Often people speak of religions as different paths to the same goal – like different trails up the same mountain.

But Christianity has always insisted that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ was a decisive revelation. C.S. Lewis in his little book *Mere Christianity* has a section he calls “The shocking alternative.” In that section he notes that many people want to make Jesus respectable. We admire him as a wonderful teacher or a very compassionate man.

Lewis speaks of Jesus as this “shocking alternative.” Suddenly we encounter a man who goes about talking as if he was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says he has always existed. Furthermore, he tells his disciples that one day he will come to judge the sins of the world.

Lewis says we cannot escape the “scandal” of Jesus. Lewis wants to prevent people from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus – that they are ready to accept him as a great moral teacher, but they are not willing to accept his claim to be God. But as Lewis points out, people who tell lies about themselves are not great moral teachers. A person who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would, according to Lewis, either be a lunatic or else the Devil of Hell. And that is the choice that Jesus puts before us. Either he is the Son of God, as he claims to be, or he is a madman or something worse.

Lewis goes on to say that “You can shut Him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon. Or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

The occasion of Reformation Sunday and Dedication Sunday leaves us today with an important decision. What kind of church do we want to be? Are we willing to live in light of the great heritage that established this church and has guided it for almost two hundred years or do we want to be something else?

If the church is to be reformed, it will gladly recover and claim its great heritage: Sola Scripture, Sola Gratia, and Sola Christus.

Amen!