

Truths of the Reformation (1) Three Biblical Reasons to Celebrate the Reformation

This morning we will begin a new series of sermons called Truths of the Reformation. I can't preach on the Reformation itself because the Reformation is church history and I can't preach church history. I have to preach the Bible. But since the Reformation was all about the recovery and exposition of biblical truths, it is possible to preach from the Bible highlighting those truths that were emphasized by the leading preachers and teachers of the Reformation. And that is what I plan to do. But I can give a bit of historical introduction.

The Reformation was a great work of God that began on October 31, 1517. That was the date when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg. Of course, as with any historical movement it did not exactly begin on one day. There were developments in general history and in the church that led up to it. But what happened on October 31, 1517 was a very significant event and that date is the traditional date for the beginning of the Reformation.

The 95 Theses which Martin Luther nailed to the church door at Wittenberg was a document that listed 95 propositions about church doctrine and practice that Martin Luther wanted to debate in a public gathering. Luther was becoming aware that certain doctrines and practices of the Church of his day were not true to the Bible. In particular he was concerned about the selling of indulgences. It was thought that when someone died they went to purgatory where they would suffer for many, many years before they would enter heaven. The Roman Catholic Church sold indulgences which were certificates that people bought to shorten the time in purgatory for loved ones who had died. That was the belief. You paid the church a certain amount of money and that would shorten the time that a loved one would spend in purgatory. Luther had become convinced that this whole practice was unbiblical and that is why he nailed his 95 Theses to the church

door. This was the beginning of many debates. Luther did a lot of study and critique of what was going on in the church in the light of the Bible. Others joined in. As a result, Luther was eventually excommunicated as well as those who accepted his teaching. They were considered heretics. The movement that came from this is what today is known as Protestantism. There are many streams within Protestantism, Lutherans, Anglicans, Anabaptists as well as Reformed and Presbyterian. Reformed and Presbyterian Protestants accept a great deal of Luther's teaching, but we are more associated with the tradition that began with John Calvin who was one of the leading theologians in the Reformation along with Martin Luther and others. That is why Reformed and Presbyterian Protestants are also called Calvinists. We think that of all of the Reformers, John Calvin did the best job of interpreting the message of the Bible.

The Reformation was a protest against error and corruption in the Catholic Church which we know today as the Roman Catholic Church. The great significance for us is the recovery of many biblical truths that had been lost or distorted in the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation leaders based their teaching on the Bible alone. The Roman Catholic Church based their doctrines on church tradition as well as the Bible. The result of going back to the Bible was the recovery of the biblical teaching of salvation and the Christian life. This is why the Reformation is so important to us. Our understanding of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ is based on the Bible, but it was the Reformers who rediscovered these truths in the Bible. The Reformation was a great work of God through men like Martin Luther and John Calvin and others. Many of the truths that we hold dear like justification by faith alone and the idea that Scripture alone is the final authority in matters of doctrine and life come to us via the Reformation.

That is just a little bit of context. What I want to do in this sermon is look at a number of biblical reasons that it is fitting and healthy to remember and celebrate what God has given to us through the Reformation.

The first reason is the importance that the Bible places on remembering and memorials especially when it comes to God great works of salvation. For instance, when God delivered his people from Egypt he instituted the Passover as a memorial. Exodus 12:14 says “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.” So, God gave this memorial to Israel so that she would remember that he had delivered her from the slavery in Egypt. We also have the Lord’s Supper in the NT. When he instituted the Lord’s Supper, Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). On the other hand, God teaches that forgetting is a form of wickedness. In Deuteronomy 4:9 God says to Israel, “Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children.” Remembering is associated with obedience and faithfulness to the Lord. Forgetting is associated with drifting away from the Lord. In the Bible God tells his people to remember the great works of salvation that he had done for them from one generation to the next. Some of the key events that are to be remembered are the Exodus, God appearing to Israel on Mount Sinai, their entrance into the land of Canaan and most importantly the death of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

By being reminded of these important events we re-appreciate their significance. In the Bible, our whole understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God is rooted in the great things that God has done for us in his great acts of salvation. By being reminded of these things on a regular basis, their significance for us is re-impressed on our minds. Godliness in the Bible means living in the light of all that God has done for us. It honors God when we remember what Jesus did for us by his life, death and resurrection and when we order our lives in the light of that great salvation. And forgetting is unthankfulness. It is minimizing the significance of what God has done. And it is neglecting the implications of all of that for our lives.

Now the Reformation is not part of the biblical history of salvation. It is not on the same level as the Exodus or the death of Jesus. But it was a mighty act of God that brought much of the church back to the biblical gospel. It is because of the Reformation that we remember the significance of the death of Christ in its true light. And in the light of the importance of remembering in the Bible, it makes sense to remember and celebrate something as important as the Reformation for the history of the church and our own history.

It is important to appreciate what God gave to us through the Reformers. It is important that the truths that they recovered and brought to light from the Word of God be vital truths in our hearts and lives. It is important that we express thanksgiving for what God has given to us through the Reformation. It is important that we do not forget, because the key truths of the Reformation are the heart of the biblical gospel.

The second biblical reason for remembering and celebrating the Reformation is the importance that the Bible places on learning from the past. The main text that shows this is the whole Bible. The Bible is about the past and the future. The message of the Bible includes hope for the future and promises having to do with the future. It also addresses the present because each generation of God's people is called to live godly lives in their own present. But there is a lot in the Bible about the past. It speaks a lot about things that happened in the past. And each generation is expected to learn from and appreciate things that happened long ago. The Bible itself is an ancient book.

But there are also individual passages which make this point. In Jeremiah 6:16 we read, "Thus says the LORD: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.'" It is the term "ancient paths" that is part of the biblical basis for the point that I am making. God tells us to ask for the ancient paths. We have a similar verse in Deuteronomy 32:7. "Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you."

Now it may seem that this is the same as the last point about remembering, but it is not. The point about remembering has to do with the importance of remembering God's great works of salvation described in the Bible and then by implications his great works of grace in the history of the church beyond the Bible. The point that I am making now has to do with the importance of learning from the past.

This is important because in our society there is not a lot of appreciation for the past. Terms like "out of date" and "old fashioned" describe the common attitude towards the past. And terms like "cutting edge" and "progress" and "new and improved" and "the right side of history" convey an attitude that sees the present and the future as superior to the past. This is not an absolute distinction of course, but it is very common in our society to see the past as out of date and the present and the future as improvements over the past.

The reason that this kind of thinking is so pervasive is that it is true in some areas – especially in science and technology. We are grateful that the field of medicine is much more advanced today than it was one hundred years ago. In some areas, the present is superior to the past. The trouble comes when what is true for technology is applied to things like morality and values and wisdom. When it comes to deeper questions of what is important in life and how to live life there is a lot of wisdom and insight to be learned from past generations.

This is taught in the two passages that I just quoted. Through Jeremiah, God told his people to ask for ancient paths. He is talking about the ancient paths of the writings of Moses in the first 5 books of the Bible. These books were old, but they were not out of date. They were old, but they were also crucial for living life as it was meant to be lived. The passage in Deuteronomy is more about the past in general. "Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you." There is a lot that is old that is very valuable and full of insight for living in the present. The Bible itself is the most important example of this, but it is not the only one.

The generations that came before us have learned from their experience of life. There is a lot of thinking that has been preserved in books that is insightful and wise. While someone who lived in the 1500s will not have anything useful to say about smartphones, he may have much wisdom to offer about the importance of character and how to live a good life.

And this is particularly the case when it comes to our relationship with God and the Christian life in general. This is particularly the case when it comes to understanding and applying the Bible. And this is where this point applies to remembering and appreciating the Reformation. Some of what the Reformers wrote was time-bound, but much of it is timeless. There are incredible riches in the writings of the Reformers. Not only did they recover biblical truths that had been lost or horribly distorted and mixed with error, they did a lot of working out the implications of those truths.

We have a very rich tradition as Reformed and Presbyterian people. That tradition has been shaped by more than the Reformation. It is rooted in the Bible itself. The Reformers' insights shed a lot of light on the meaning of the Bible. The work that has been done since the Reformation has contributed its share of wisdom and insight. Many modern developments have contributed to the richness of the Reformed tradition. The fact is there is much of great value that has come to us from the past. And it is a biblical perspective that we should appreciate the insights that God has given us through bible teachers and theologians who have prayerfully studied and expounded the biblical text in earlier generations. We see this perspective reflected in Hebrews 13:7 which says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."

This is not to say that there is nothing good in the present. Much of what is written and taught today that takes into account all that our forefathers have learned is very valuable as well. To argue that there is much good in what has come to us from the past is not to say that everything written in the present is worthless. It all depends on how faithful it is to the Word of God. But the point

that I am making is that the Bible teaches that we must learn from those who have gone before us and the contributions of the Reformation are a particularly rich deposit of biblical wisdom and insight and instruction.

The Bible also teaches that there is bad in the past as well as good. Job 22:15 speaks of “the old way that wicked men have trod.” In Matthew 23 Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of his day of being “sons of those who murdered the prophets.” Every generation has its godless people as well as godly people. Just because something is old, does not mean that it is automatically good. But by telling us to “ask for the ancient paths” God is telling not to neglect the wisdom of the godly in the generations that have preceded our own.

So, we have seen the importance of remembering and memorials in the Bible and we have considered the importance that the Bible places on learning from the wisdom of past generations. A third biblical theme that supports the idea of celebrating the Reformation is the importance that the Bible places on preserving and passing on the truth of the Word of God.

Psalms 78:5-6 is a beautiful expression of the importance of passing on the truth of God’s word from one generation to the next. "5He [God] established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, 6that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children...." 2 Timothy 1:13-14, "13Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you."

It is God’s will that his truth be passed on from one generation to the next through time. Paul tells Timothy to “follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me” and “to guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” In the OT, there are warnings against false prophets who say peace, peace when there is no peace. In the NT, there are warnings against false teachers. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:13 “For such men are false apostles,

deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.” Peter in 2 Peter 2:1 warns his readers and us, “[T]here will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies...”

The Reformation was about rescuing the church from false teaching that was destructive to the souls of the people. The church had become corrupt. Much of the teaching was false teaching. The biblical teaching of salvation in Christ had been distorted into a form of works righteousness and externalism. Many souls were lost because of this false teaching. What the Reformers were doing was evaluating the accepted teaching of the church in the light of the Bible and where there was error they were rejecting it and expounding the truth in its place. So, the Reformers were doing what the Bible instructs church leaders to do. They were exposing false teaching and they were passing on the deposit of teaching that is found in the Bible.

By God’s grace that truth has been passed on to us. 500 years have passed and those key biblical truths recovered during the Reformation have been passed down to us. Whether we think of the continental Reformed tradition or the Scottish/North American Presbyterian tradition, there is historical continuity between us and the time of the Reformation. Along the way the work of exposing and rejecting false teaching has continued in every generation. The Reformed Confessions have been important tools in that process. The confessions are accurate summaries of the teaching of the Reformers which accurately reflect the Word of God. We are heirs of the tradition that flows from John Calvin and others like John Knox and Zacharias Ursinus and Casper Olevianus. Those men and others sought to expound the teaching of the Bible faithfully. They distinguished truth from error and passed on the good deposit to the next generation. And by God’s grace we have inherited the same truths and it is our task to pass them on in our generation.

All of this is God’s blessing on the preachers and teachers and parents that he raised up through the centuries to guard the good deposit entrusted to them, to pass on the biblical tradition from

parents to children and to expose and reject false teaching. We have seen from the Bible the emphasis it places on preserving and passing on the truth and exposing and rejecting false teaching. That is what the Reformation was all about and by celebrating their God-enabled achievements and by keeping those same biblical truths alive in our own hearts and minds and families and churches we seek to continue the great biblical calling of the church to preserve the truth, reject the error and pass the truth on to the next generation.

These are a few biblical reasons to remember and celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The biblical call to remembering God's great acts of salvation history gives us reason to remember God's great act of renewal in the Reformation which directed us back to the way of salvation taught in the Bible. The biblical teaching on the importance of learning from the past especially when it comes to understanding and applying the Word of God. And thirdly the emphasis that the Bible places on preserving the good deposit and passing it on. The Reformation was a great example of God raising up his people to do that and by us celebrating the biblical truths that they rediscovered in God's word we take part in the same task in our generation.

In the weeks to come we will consider truths like justification by faith alone, Scripture alone, and the priority of the glory of God. These are truths that are taught in the Word of God and which shape our understanding and experience of salvation and the Christian life. May God bless these truths to us in such a way that that we may be refreshed in our Christian walk and give glory to God which is the great point of biblical and therefore also Reformation teaching.

Lord's Supper Meditation

The great focus of the Bible is Jesus Christ and him crucified and that was also the great focus of the Reformation. The Five Solas of the Reformation include "by faith alone," "by grace alone," and "Christ alone." We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

We are saved by the grace of God alone. Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Saviour and King. These are some of the truths highlighted in the Lord's Supper.

The focus of the Lord's Supper is on Jesus Christ alone. He is the ultimately the one who serves. And what he serves symbolizes his broken body and shed blood. And we receive him as our Saviour through faith alone and that emphasizes that salvation is by grace alone.

And Jesus tells us to remember. "This do in remembrance of me." Jesus wants us to remember – to appreciate afresh the significance of his death and to receive it afresh by faith. It is the ultimate celebration. Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead are the foundation of our life and our hope. And Jesus Christ himself is the focus of our love and our gratitude together with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

So, let us remember. Let us savor Jesus' presence with us. Let us acknowledge our sin and unworthiness. And let us receive by faith what the symbols represent, Jesus Christ himself, as the one who gave his life for sinful and unworthy people that they might be forgiven and renewed and accepted and adopted by the God whom to know and love is eternal life.