

“Everything for the Glory of God”  
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Cor. 10:23-11:1  
Dr. Catherine Taylor  
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
October 29, 2017

Five hundred years ago this month, a monk named,  
Martin Luther, compiled a list of 95 theories about  
the Roman Catholic church and mailed it to his archbishop.  
The story about Luther posting the list  
on the door of the Castle Church in the duchy of Saxe-Wittenberg  
may only be legend, since Luther couldn't recall  
having done that when asked about it years later.<sup>i</sup>  
What *is* sure is that on October 31, 1517  
Luther sent his complaints off to his boss.  
He wanted to start a rigorous debate in the Church  
about some of its practices, especially the practice  
of selling God's forgiveness in the form of indulgences,  
pieces of paper that promised “time-out” from purgatory  
in return for donations, the money from which was often used  
to pay off debt for luxurious building projects in Rome.  
The idea was that the church possessed a treasury of merit,  
a treasury that had been banked up by the life of Jesus,  
the life of Mary and the lives of the saints.  
Originally, the church handed out these merits for free,  
but then some priests fell in to the practice of selling them  
and it spread throughout the church.  
Luther was not the first to be disgusted by the sale of indulgences.  
He was voicing a criticism that had been in the air  
among thinking people for decades.  
It was Luther's *timing* that turned out to be the key.  
Luther made his famous call for public debate,  
about eighty years after the printing press.  
And in that eighty years more and more people had become literate.  
In terms of technology 1517 was an explosion year.  
A mere ten days after Luther sent off his list,  
printed copies of the 95 Theses were available throughout Europe  
and as far away as Spain.

I have heard of the 95 Theses all my adult life,  
but had never read them until a month ago.  
They are exactly what you'd think, a list of propositions  
that sometimes contradict each other in keeping with  
the way scholars of that time and this time go about debate.  
If you would like to read them, we've put them up for you  
on the glass doors between the office and the narthex.

You can read them and decide for yourself  
if you think they are revolutionary.  
Luther certainly didn't intend them to be revolutionary,  
but after defending them he ended up receiving  
a virtual death sentence from Rome.  
He was called to come to Rome.  
He knew better than to go and on his way home  
he was kidnapped, in order to insure he wouldn't be killed,  
and protected by his prince, Frederik the Wise.  
He spent the rest of his life in Wittenberg.

On the day Luther nailed or mailed his ideas, the father of our branch  
of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin, was a motherless boy  
in France being raised by his extended family.  
He went to university to study literature, the classics.  
Later his lawyer father insisted on the law instead.,  
Twenty-six years younger than Luther,  
Calvin was a brilliant student and prolific writer.  
When his dad made him switch majors, as it were,  
he continued with both law and literature,  
staying up long hours of the night and  
wrecking his health in the bargain.  
He never studied theology, yet he would become  
one of the greatest theologians of all time.

At some point Calvin had a mysterious encounter  
with God that he mentioned but never fully described,  
It left him overwhelmed by God's sheer goodness.  
"Glory" was the word Calvin used of God again and again,  
so awed was he by what he was certain  
was a Love so healing, so profound, so sovereign over all of life,  
that he wrote about it, preached it, taught it and lived for it  
from then on.

Calvin was equally convinced that we humans, though we were created good by God,  
are wounded in every aspect of our being.

Our being so flawed is what led Calvin to build  
checks and balances into human government.

God's work is to free us from ourselves and make us whole.

Now this understanding of our frailty makes Calvin's outlook wonderfully hopeful:

Live your faith as well as you can without fear.

If you don't love your neighbor or yourself very well one day,  
get up the next morning and try again. Christ will be there to help  
and whenever you make a little progress, rejoice.

You'll mess it up again, but you will never be able

to destroy the bond that God has forged with you and for you.

Don't ever waste time worrying about God's love for you or for anyone else;  
just live for God and your neighbors with deep humility and gratitude.

Calvin's passionate defense of God's grace  
led him to be recognized as a prominent reformer,  
bringing the threat of arrest.  
With his brother, sister and a friend he had to flee from France.  
In Basil, he wrote the first version of his great work of systematic theology,  
still read and used today, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*  
("institutes" being the word of the day for "instructions").  
He thought explaining the Reformers' ideas about the church and about faith  
would surely lead to their acceptance.  
Instead, the prominence of his work made him an outcast in France;  
he spent the rest of his life in exile.  
He hoped to live a quiet life in Strasburg writing and spreading his ideas.  
But, he was pressed to put his views on faith and government  
to work in the city of Geneva,  
in the French-speaking region of Switzerland.  
In Geneva Calvin preached and taught, pastored and baptized,  
wrote and governed, admired by Protestant Reformers everywhere.  
He maintained a vigorous correspondence  
with religious and political leaders all over Europe,  
as well as writing widely circulated commentaries on the scriptures,  
including most of the Old Testament  
and every book in the New Testament except Revelation.  
Now 500 years later his commentaries still open the Word;  
preachers still turn to them for their wonderful insight.  
In 1559 Calvin founded the Geneva Academy,  
where students were trained for the ministry.  
Scottish reformer John Knox went there and called it  
'the most perfect school of Christ seen on earth  
since the days of the Apostles'<sup>ii</sup>  
Calvin himself, though, was never ordained as a minister.  
The black Geneva gown that Presbyterian ministers wear  
are patterned after the gowns worn at the University of Geneva.  
Calvin thought the dark simplicity was a good contrast to  
the flashy vestments of Catholic priests, and  
this would help congregations understand  
that though some in the church have different jobs to do,  
everyone is a minister with his or her own calling.

Luther and Calvin were both men of genius.  
Of the two Luther is easier to like.  
He was beloved and loyal as a friend, he really enjoyed his beer,  
he was a great father and husband,  
And he made shockingly crude jokes, including Jesus jokes  
which he told on purpose to rattle his enemies.  
He was a fine singer and musician, he wrote the words and music to many hymns.  
We are singing his best-known hymn today, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

Luther had tremendous physical courage and conviction,  
but his refusal to compromise, ever, is also a cause  
of the divided state of Protestantism from the very start.

Calvin, by contrast, was reserved, scholarly, not given to jokes,  
and certainly never jokes about his Lord.

Very handsome when he was young. In later life he was thin and colicky,  
often in pain and ill, though it doesn't seem to have slowed him down at all.

But he, too, enjoyed life's gifts and  
inspired great love and loyalty among those who knew him.

Calvin was convinced that all forms of truth are from God,  
and that to refuse to celebrate truths that you encounter, in another  
religion, in a pagan religion, is an offense to the Holy Spirit.  
Now compare that with some modern mindsets and  
that is nothing less than breathtaking.

Calvin was also musical and played the violin,  
though he felt that it was only appropriate to sing the psalms in worship.  
Even so, the words of our first hymn this morning  
have been attributed to Calvin.

He did purge windows and images from churches,  
but as a student of literature he loved images in words,  
and replaced the mass with the sermon.

He wanted to bring what we see around us in worship into alignment  
with what we hear when we listen to the Word.

And when the two are brought together he believed  
we could see God.

Calvin married a widow with two children. He loved her greatly.

It was a tragedy when she died and he afraid he might never recover.

If your image of our founder was less warm than that of Luther,  
remember his motherless childhood, the deaths of all his children,  
and that he spent his life in exile.

Throughout it all he strove tirelessly to discern  
the ways of God in human life.

Calvin starts, always, with God's glory, God's utter, irresistible splendor.

He uses fountain images more often than any other reformer.

God's goodness gushing up,  
gifts flowing to us from a loving, caring parent,  
who chooses us before we have the ability  
to even try to earn God's love.

Word and sacrament bring Christ's presence to us,  
and the Holy Spirit helps us hear and live what is demonstrated  
in the scriptures preached and in communion and baptism.

Calvin also worried about social and economic problems.

Geneva was a banking center, and Calvin legitimized charging interest  
if—and only if—the lender would *profit* by the loan.

The poor were never charged interest.

In other words, he saw nothing wrong with putting wealth to good use  
after the poor have been cared for.

“At his death,” wrote a contemporary, “Geneva mourned the loss of a pastor,  
the university the loss of a great teacher,  
the community the loss of a loving parent,  
given to them by God himself.”

The title of this sermon as you can see comes from both Calvin and from Paul:  
Everything for the Glory of God.

Paul was writing to a congregation full of know-it-alls in Corinth,  
trying to help them realize that in all things  
they should act to strengthen the faith of those around them.

At that time pagan temples were the source of meat.

Once an animal was sacrificed to Jupiter, Athena or Apollo,  
it was not wasted; the meat was taken to marketplace and sold there.

Paul knows that meat sacrificed to an idol has no power to harm Christian faith,  
but some new Christians in Corinth were superstitious and fearful.

He wants the congregation to care about people whose faith is weak.

Eat it or not as you see best, writes Paul,

As long as you use the needs of the person you’re eating with as your guide.  
Whatever you do no matter how small,  
do everything to the glory of God.

Calvin’s greatest fear was that people would forget Paul’s advice,  
That we might become apathetic about God’s extraordinary gifts,  
both in creation and in our own lives,  
and lose the ability to be grateful.

“There is not one blade of grass,” he wrote,

“there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.”

Calvin wants us to see God’s works around us and be “ravished in astonishment”

What a wonderful goal for faith to leave us ravished in astonishment and gratitude!

The Reformation happened because people cared about the church,  
they cared about the Church’s message of love and grace.

Some of them risked everything to ensure  
that message came through. It has and will,  
and we are here today because of the commitment of those  
who came before us.

Today we share foundational Reformation principles  
with our evangelical sisters and brothers across the globe:

scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone,  
Christ alone, all to the glory of God alone,

the five *solas* as they are often called.

But the ways we promote these values can differ radically.  
Too often the graceful love of God is distorted into tribal moralisms.  
And as a result far too many people today view Christians as bigots.  
I think I told you once before when we lived in Ithaca  
about being asked to speak to a high school class about Christianity.  
Afterwards a student stopped me in the hall to say  
I was the first Christian he had ever met who did not come across to him  
as a hate-filled zealot.

Other traditions in our family of faith feel threatened today:

integrity in all things,  
mutual forbearance,  
the exercise of humility and restraint.

Beloved we are the church reformed always reforming

because we know we are flawed, ever in need of God's guiding hand.

Thus we proclaim "in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty;  
in all things, love."<sup>iii</sup>

Despite the tensions of our times, I am not afraid.

If anything I am confident that God is at work forming us  
to proclaim the gospel for the next 500 years.

Luther wrote his 95 theses at the explosion point for the age of print.

We are at the explosion point for the digital age.

It is our privilege to ensure that the message  
of God's grace and love triumphs over petty or distorted views.

In our SHIFT groups many of us have been working well

to put ourselves in a place where we can partner with God

in our current context and be open to whatever God may call us to do next.

The prayers, participation and financial support of every one of us  
is needed to ensure that the message of God's love and grace  
continues to resound.

Next week we'll bring our pledges forward during communion.

As we all consider our response, what better counsel

than to let ourselves be ravished by astonishment at God's gifts to us,  
and in return do everything for the Glory of God. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> That he couldn't recall nailing up the list is included in an article in *The New Yorker*

<sup>ii</sup> Richard Cavendish, *History Today* Volume 64 Issue 5, May 2014, online at  
<http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/john-calvin-dies-geneva>.

<sup>iii</sup> This phrase is sometimes misattributed to Augustine, but it arose in Germany ca. 1627 in Lutheran and German Reformed churches, and was promoted in English by Richard Baxter, 1615-1691.