

Watch Out! The Reformation May Not Be the Truth You Think

Reformation/All Saints Sun. – 11/03/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.
Text: John 8:31-38 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 31-32, [Literally from the Greek,] **“Therefore Jesus was saying to the Jews who were believing in Him, ‘If you all continue steadfastly living in My Word, you are truly My followers, and you will know the absolute truth, and that truth will set you free’.”**

Introduction

⌘ According to Pastor Wilhelm Torgerson, who used to serve as the rector for the *International Lutheran Society of Wittenberg* in Germany, it was only about half a mile that Martin Luther, the monk walked from his cell (i.e. his room) in the monastery, past the university where he was a teacher, to the church at the other end of town. It was there that he attached a poster on the doors of the *Church of All Saints*, which also served as the town’s bulletin board. If any of the “common” people passing by were interested enough to take a look, they would soon turn away in disappointment and say, “It’s just in Latin.”

➔ That’s the way we often surmise that it happened on October 31, 1517, in the town of Wittenberg, in the German Principality of Saxony; how Martin Luther first publicized his Ninety-five Theses for debate. Little did people realize that these hammer blows on the door of the Castle Church would change Western Christianity as well as the course of history.

⌘ But, how could just one man do that? Well...he couldn’t, and he didn’t. Just look at all the subsequent events that are part of what we have come to call the Reformation of the Church. It’s not about Martin Luther; it’s not about the Ninety-five Theses; it’s not about the right timing.

➔ In reality, the Reformation is all about the one truth in Christ Jesus over and against all of the many “truths” around us each day.

I. Luther - not “Reformation” truths but Bible truths

⌘ In fact, here on Reformation Sunday, I’m going to press the question, “Why do we even celebrate the Reformation at all?” Think about all of the other feast days of the Church. Christmas is about the birth of Christ. Easter is about Christ’s resurrection victory. Pentecost is the Holy Spirit gifting Christ’s people with true faith in Christ.

➔ And the Reformation? That’s all about Luther did this; his friends did that; Luther proclaimed or wrote something and his friends agreed. Slavery to all of the Pope’s rules was broken to the delight of every king, prince, duke, or earl because now he could make himself the ruler of the local Church. That sounds like we’re just celebrating the works and accomplishments of one man for the betterment of more men.

⌘ But you see, when Father Martin issued his ninety-five-fold challenge to the Church, it was a challenge to all Christians, not just the high and mighty like the pope and the bishops, the abbots and the prelates. He was challenging at least all Christians in the Western Church to come back to the source of faith and hope; to the Bible; to the Word of God, which is Christ Himself.

⌘ To many, this challenge made no sense, because on the outside, the Church at that time was “doing fine” – that is, if your standard is property and material possession, activity, people involvement, and influence.

➔ And if your standard was more academic, the Collegiate Church of All Saints in Wittenberg, better known as the Castle Church, was without question the admiration of all. This college of seven priests, subject to no local bishop but only to the pope in Rome, drew

thousands of visitors per year. They conducted no less than 9,000 masses each year – you heard me right. When you consider that no mass could be said without first receiving a payment (i.e. “offering”), that became a sizable income for the clergy. But it benefited the common man, because with each of those masses, the ones who paid received the guarantee of a quicker release from purgatory for themselves and their family members. Everyone was “happy” – it was great for a person’s conscience and an economic boost to the city. But now this monk comes and throws a wrench into it all.

✘ Here’s where we need to set things straight. First of all what did Martin the monk not say? He did not say to stop listening to the Church; that they had nothing of any value to teach or encourage. That’s where many in the so-called “Protestant Church” have tried to take Luther, as if he’s saying that “Anybody can believe anything he wants to as long as you don’t believe the Pope”. Dr. Luther would be horrified.

→ Instead Luther said, preached, wrote – and if he were he among us today he’d put it on the Internet, “*Retro ad fontes.*” And he would say it in much more than just Latin. Yes, he’d say it in good old Deutsch, but also in Chinese, then in English, and every language he could: “Let’s get back to the source.” And what is the source of faith; the foundation of the Church? It is the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. Verse 31, “If you continue steadfastly living in My Word, you are truly My followers”. But how did those who heard Jesus respond? “We are offspring of Abraham” (v. 33). In other words, “We don’t need your words; we’re blood-descendants of the great prophet. We don’t need to be set free!” At Luther’s time, the Church leaders responded similarly to his challenge: “You keep out of this, Martin; we know better than you.” Are you and I much different today? “I’ve been a member of the LCMS all my life, and I’m proud of it.” I’ve heard that countless times from people. In other words, “I don’t need to know Jesus and His Word of Truth. I’ve got my ‘faith-card’ already punched, so I can do and say whatever I please, and I’m still in heaven.”

✘ You see, to truly celebrate Reformation Day is not about making Luther into some kind of mythical German hero, but about getting back to God’s grace that helped us recover the hidden, the falsified, the changed, and glossed-over Word of God. This (*the Bible*) is the source! This is Jesus, right here! All of God’s mercy, packed in His Word; the whole Christ, crucified and risen for you; speaking to you His full message of repentance and salvation.

II. Living in the Truth is Hard!

✘ But look at our world here today. Whether it was last Sunday or today, there will be Reformation Day services across the country by many people who claim the name “Lutheran”; people who remember the same events in the 1500s, using the same translated Bible for personal use and for preaching in the Church, and yet their proclamation of what they claim to be “true” will differ greatly from ours to the point that we might begin to wonder what the name “Lutheran” even means these days. It’s a sad fact that even among those who claim to believe in Christ there are so many different views, opinions, philosophies, and convictions that our world has every right to ask, “What does the Christian Church even stand for?”

→ What did Jesus say in verse 31? The Greek Word He uses is “meno” (μένω) which means “to live in or stay; to continue steadfastly”. In today’s lingo it means “not to budge one bit” from Jesus’ Word every day and you will be His disciples. This is the point of the graphic that you see printed inside the front cover of today’s bulletin. VDMA – in Latin, *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum* means, *The Word of the Lord Endures Forever*. In Luther’s day this became the motto of those who remained a faithful part of the Reformation.

→ Luther’s German prince, Frederick the Wise had it sewn onto the right sleeve of his court’s official clothing which continued for generations afterward as a sign of their commitment to the unchanging truth of Jesus and His Word against any and all challenges, be it the Pope, the

Roman Emperor or those early “Protestants” that wanted to misuse the Reformation for their own agenda instead of Christ’s.

✘ This is still our challenge today folks. How many Baptisms have taken place in this church during your lifetime! And yet, do you see all of those so blessed “by water and the Word” sitting here in the pews with you? How many confirmands have vowed their fidelity to Christ and their loyalty to the Church at this altar! Where are they now, and do you care? Sure some have moved to another town; no problem. But far more have left the faith – that’s the tragedy every pastor and every congregation needs to face.

→ So, how do you stick with it; how do you “live steadfastly”? I can’t possibly overestimate the importance of Christian education, catechism instruction, and weekly worship attendance for the survival of each Lutheran in his/her Christian faith. Why else would Jesus Himself say in the Great Commission that His disciples are “made” by “baptizing” and “teaching” them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20)?

→ Additionally though, every Christian and every Church must take seriously the responsibility Jesus gives us for the care of those souls among us and around us. Never can we stray in the slightest from the pure Word of God nor can we allow ourselves to take it lightly, because doing so, puts the eternal outcome of both ourselves and our listeners in jeopardy. We have no right – either as a preacher or a lay member – to “reinterpret” what the Bible “really means” in light of our world’s modern views. Rather, as Jude verse three says, we are to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

→ But let’s be honest, doing so, will not win us any popularity contests within the general population of our culture and sadly, even among many who claim to be “Lutheran” or “Christian.” Even when Jesus, the Son of God proclaimed it, there was debate, disagreement, and contention. Why should we expect anything else?

✘ Immediately after Jesus tries to comfort His listeners by saying in verse 36, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” Jesus is compelled to say, “I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill Me because My Word finds no place in you” (v.37). And then He shows them that their true connection is not with Abraham, but in fact, because of their rejection of Him and His Word, He says, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning...” (v. 44).

→ What’s Jesus saying there? “If you will not live steadfastly in My Word, than you are sinners who are following Satan!” Those are strong words; an unmistakable message to those who rely on themselves and take pride in their own condition that rejects Him and His unchanging Words. But those are the Words of the One who, according to Hebrews 13:8 is “the same yesterday and today and forever”; and therefore, though they are strong words, they are words that we all need to take very seriously and “live in” as His followers.

III. Christ’s Truth Alone Sets Us Free!

✘ Now, perhaps what I’ve said so far is a bit too much for you; not exactly setting the “feel good” mood that you were hoping for in a Reformation celebration. Well, this is not intended to be a course in history. But as a part of a faithful worship service, it must always be a message for the here and now; a message to strengthen us all to be and remain steadfast upon the road to our final goal.

→ Which is why Jesus said in verse 32 that as His followers “you all will know the absolute truth, and that truth will set you free.” The Greek word for “truth” is *alāthea* (ἀλήθεια) which speaks specifically of God’s absolute truth in contrast to manmade “false truth”. This is the only truth we should ever hear proclaimed within the Church of Christ, whether it was from Luther or any pastor or teacher up to and including this moment today.

- This is therefore the only truth that can set you, me and any other sinner free from ourselves and our inborn sinful ways, because the fact is every sinner is a slave; bound; tied up; loaded down from conception.
- ✘ Yet Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). And so, since He is also the Word of God in human flesh (Jn. 1:14), then when we live steadfastly in His Word we are living steadfastly in Him; which also means that knowing the absolute truth from God is knowing Jesus as He intends us to know Him from His Word!
- He is the one and only truth that sets sinners free from the bondage of sin today ... and forever! That can never change, nor will it ever change.
- ✘ So, what do you have to do to be set free? It’s not about knowing the man Martin Luther or what he did. It’s not about identifying under the name of “Lutheran” or paying to have mass said for your release, or any other work that you might come up with to try and earn your way into heaven.
- It is only and always this from verse 36, Jesus says, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” And Jesus has done that in His death on the cross for all of your sins! In Him, dear sinner, you are free! Indeed!
- ✘ This is the truth that the Reformation is all about; the truth directly from the source; the truth that is Himself the source of freedom and life.
- His Word is the only word of absolution spoken here; His Words are what make ordinary bread and wine to be His true body and blood given and shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins; His alone is the life-giving, soul-cleansing Word that He joined with water in our baptism, to burst through the gates of hell and bring us in His arms into the everlasting gates of heaven!
- ✘ That’s Reformation Day and All Saints’ Day together. That’s the truth of Jesus! Amen.