

Here We Stand, We Can Do No Other

This October marks the 500th anniversary of what is commonly called the Protestant Reformation – and while we are not Lutheran, the acts of Martin Luther had an impact throughout the world including our denomination.

On October 31, 1517, a German Catholic monk and scholar by the name of Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses (questions or debate points) on the door of the Wittenberg Castle. Luther, first as a student and later as a professor, was greatly influenced by the early church philosopher Augustine who had emphasized the primacy of the Bible rather than Church officials as the ultimate religious authority. Augustine believed that humans could not reach salvation by their own acts, but that only God could bestow salvation by his divine grace. The Catholic Church taught that salvation was possible through “good works” or works of righteousness that were pleasing to God. Meanwhile, the Church began the practice of granting “Indulgences” to provide absolution to sinners. By the time of Martin Luther, the practice of indulgence-selling was so corrupt that the Church hierarchy funded an extravagant lifestyle by this practice – these indulgences, the Church said, could be bought for oneself, for past or future sins, or for loved ones to buy their way out of purgatory into heaven. Then in 1517, a push to sell even more indulgences began in Germany in order to fund the renovation of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

Martin Luther, through study of the Bible, came to believe that salvation could be reached through faith by divine grace only. Much like John Wesley a couple of hundred years later, Luther did not intend on forming a new denomination or causing a revolution. Just as Wesley wanted the Anglican Church to internally reform itself, Luther wanted the Catholic Church to recognize the authority of Scripture and end its corrupt practices. It just didn’t turn out that way.

The 95 Theses started with 2 central ideas: (1) that God intended believers to seek repentance and (2) that faith alone, and not deeds, would lead to salvation as an outcome of God’s grace. The other 93 theses dealt with specific Church practices – a number of them dealt with indulgences and many of the others dealt with the wealth of the pope and other bishops. The 95 Theses were quickly distributed throughout Germany, thanks to a new German invention – the

printing press. From there they went to Rome. Later, Luther was summoned to defend his opinions before an imperial assembly called, of all things, the Diet of Worms. Luther was commanded to recant his writings. He refused to recant saying “Here I stand, I can do no other.” Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church and his writings were ordered burned. By this time, though, it was too late. A reform movement initiated by his writings had grown to the point where there was no containing them, and the movement quickly outgrew Martin Luther. Protestantism was born. Luther also, after his excommunication, wrote his most famous hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God. Based on Psalm 46, the hymn is a celebration of the sovereign power of God over all earthly and spiritual forces, and of the sure hope we have in God because of Christ. After its publication, it gained immense popularity throughout Reformed Europe and became the anthem of the Reformation.

It is interesting historically to note that thus far in the history of the Church, every 500 years or so, Christianity has undergone a reforming. The first 500 years saw an amazing explosion of Gospel belief. The Church, during that time, was struggling to invent itself as an institution – to move beyond the early house churches to accommodate the growing numbers of believers and come up with some uniformity of belief and practice. By the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, the early church was resolving issues of the canonical books of the Bible and a creed which would summarize essential Christian beliefs. Around 500 AD, Pope Gregory the Great solidified key principles of the universal church, at that time centered in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome. Around 1000 AD, there was what is called the Great Schism, the division between east and west, the division of the Church into the western Catholic Church in Rome and the eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople. 500 years after that we come to the Reformation, and the birth of Protestantism. Protestantism has led, in the past 500 years, to an explosion of denominations from Lutherans, to Baptists, to Pentecostals, and yes, to us Methodists. And we all know the facts – the numbers of people attending church are dwindling, younger people are leaving the church, fewer people profess a faith in God. Is all lost? I don’t think so – I think, if we focus on the essentials of our faith, we can find a unity and a purpose that has been lost.

Following these 500-year time periods, at least 3 things seem to happen. First, a more vital form of Christianity emerges. Second, the organized expression of Christianity, the legalism, is reconstituted in to more pure form of its former self, ending up with better churches. And finally, the faith spreads dramatically. We may not be seeing that spread of faith in our country right now, but in other parts of the world Christianity is exploding. What can we do here?

It is interesting that many churches in America, spurred on by the mega-church concept, believe that to expand, to grow, we need coffee bars in our church, hip youth programs, smoke and lights, musical performances, drama, you name it. I am not saying that some of these things are bad – one of the worst thing about church is the “It’s Always Been Done This Way” syndrome. However, in recent polls, I find it interesting that the thing purportedly most desired at church today is preaching – and not only is it the preaching, but a very specific form of preaching – Bible-based preaching. The church, God’s church, is, in the end, not a social club or a business – it is to be about the making of disciples for the transformation of the world.

Listen to words spoken by some of our great preachers of the faith and think about what they are saying:

Leonard Ravenhill was an English Christian evangelist who died in 1994. He challenged the church today to compare itself to the church in Acts. Ravenhill said, “Isn’t it staggering when you think that one sermon on the day of Pentecost produced 3000 believers? And we had some cities yesterday where 3000 sermons were preached, and nobody was saved. And it doesn’t even faze us.”

Or from AW Tozer, an American Christian pastor and author, “It is either all of Christ or none of Christ! I believe we need to preach again a whole Christ to the world – a Christ who does not need our apologies, a Christ who will not be divided, a Christ who will either be Lord of all or will not be Lord at all!”

John Wesley: “You have one business on earth – to save souls.”

Or another one from Ravenhill, that since I have heard I have not been able to forget: “If Jesus had preached the same message that ministers preach today, He would never have been crucified.”

So, if on this 500th year since the Reformation we are in the process of reforming church, what might it look like? I think maybe we need to consider a return to what we once were and invite you to consider the early church in Acts. This was a time when the church was on fire and faith was alive. In our Scripture reading from Acts 10, Peter is preaching. What is his message? Let's turn to our Scripture reading for today.

First, reading from v. 34-36, Peter reminds them, and us, that Christianity is a faith for all. "I truly understand," he says, "that God shows no partiality, but in every nature anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.... He is Lord of all."

In verses 37-41, Peter reminds them and us that Jesus Christ is to be the focus of the church and the focus of their faith. Jesus, anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, lived, died, and was raised on the 3rd day and appeared to various witnesses. Jesus, Peter says, "Is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead."

Third, in v. 43, Peter reminds them and us of the message. "Everyone who believes in him (Jesus) receives forgiveness of sins through his name." It's such a simple message. A message that in one sentence conveys love and grace and forgiveness and life. And yet we, collectively, have muddled it, made it confusing, and attached to it such legalism as would do lawyers proud. We have attached rules, conditions, traditions, politics, dress codes, moral expectations, you name it – and in the process have all but obscured it from view.

Finally, in v. 42, Peter reminds them of their obligation, of what Jesus commanded believers to do. "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify." Our church states we are to make disciples of all nations for the transformation of the world. It starts with us and it starts here. Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:1-2, "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

John Wesley put it this way: "Give me 100 preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not whether they be clergy or laity, they alone will shake the gates of Hell and set up the kingdom of Heaven upon

Earth.” This obligation is not limited to clergy, but to both those who preach and those who testify.

Acts 10:44 tells us what happened next: “While Peter was still preaching (in other words, before he even concluded his sermon), the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.”

So maybe, just maybe for our church and for the universal church, the way forward is a return to what was. A return to a church that was on fire and filled with the Holy Spirit. A church that did not celebrate tradition because it did not have a tradition; a church that had a simple message and an overwhelming passion for delivering that message to a broken world. I ask you to join with me in saying, “Here we stand. We can do no other. God help us.”