

The Wesleyan Way V The Reformation Legacy

Today is Reformation Sunday ... a day commemorated by Protestant Christians, recalling the great breakthrough in our understanding of the faith that occurred in Europe some 500 years ago. German theologian and monk **Martin Luther, lit the fuse that ignited the 16th-century Protestant Reformation.** His words and actions fostered a movement that recovered basic tenets of Christian belief that had been lost or neglected by the church. Unfortunately, it resulted in a great division of Western Christendom between Roman Catholicism and the new Protestant traditions (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglican, Anabaptist)

Revealed in Scripture

For many centuries before Luther, the church had strayed from the faith of the apostles. **The church began emphasizing obedience to acts of piety and penance in order to receive forgiveness of sin** and salvation. Since so many people were illiterate, the priests controlled what they heard from the Bible. This became a corrupted system in which church officials allowed people to believe they could "buy" their salvation, either by gifts or service to the church. The priest became the mediator between God and His people, the church became a large land holder and political power, and its hierarchical organization was ruled by the bishop of Rome, the Pope.

Into this mix came a man by the name of Martin Luther. As a young man he entered an Augustinian monastery where he followed the strict regimen of a monk, an existence of daily worship and work. He was a monk's monk, strictly following all calls to prayer and worship, earnestly seeking to please God and find peace in his soul. Despite his efforts, and the encouragement he received from his superior, he found no peace. He was ordained as a priest, got his doctorate in theology and taught at university. Yet he continued to be troubled, unsure of his place before God. He found no solace in the rituals and practices of the church.

It his study of Scripture his eyes and heart were opened to the truth that the Lord had delivered to the apostles. Paul's letter to the Romans, especially, confronted him with the truth that we cannot be saved from sin by our own efforts. As it says: **...all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus, Romans 3:24. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law, Romans 3:28.**

This profound truth, and his realization of it, changed Luther's life and from then on, he taught that salvation and life eternal are not earned by obedience to priests, popes, rituals, and good deeds. Rather, **salvation can only be received as the free gift of God, through faith in Jesus Christ** as Redeemer from sin. This was the firm rock of faith on which all other Christian beliefs must be built. Luther's teaching challenged the authority of church leaders and the office of the Pope, as he taught the Bible is the only authority for divinely revealed truth. He also taught that priests were not necessary to mediate one's relationship with God as all baptized Christians are a holy priesthood.

The doctrine of justification by faith which Luther rediscovered and proclaimed, revolutionized and revitalized Western Christianity and Western Civilization. Then, some two hundred years after Luther came John Wesley who discovered for himself the truth of justification by faith as taught by Luther.

Grace Proclaimed

John Wesley, like Luther, was very educated. He was brought up in a Christian home, entered ministry and was ordained in the Anglican church, as was his father. Like Luther, he too **sought to please God and find rest for his soul.** He believed that Christ died for his sins and that he should do his

best to emulate the Savior, the great example. At Oxford Univ. Wesley belonged to the “Holy Club” that focused on doing good deeds and attending to worship and sacrament. But the Holy Club was not a happy club. He did not find peace with God.

Then on May 24, 1738 at a prayer meeting at Aldersgate Street, in London, upon hearing read Luther’s preface to Paul’s Epistle to the Romans Wesley’s “heart was strangely warmed.” He later wrote that, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” This grace he proclaimed near and far for the rest of his life.

For the past four Sundays I’ve tried to share and make clear our Wesleyan way of understanding and living our Christian faith. There is a connection with Reformation Sunday and John Wesley. Our **Wesleyan Christianity is rooted solidly in the truths of Christianity rediscovered in the Protestant Reformation.** It is no coincidence that John Wesley’s “born again” experience was prompted by a reading of Martin Luther’s preface to his commentary on the book of Romans. When he realized the power of God’s pardon of his sin, not a generalized pardon of humanity’s sin, but his own, personal sin, then he began to experience the joy of salvation, experiencing each new day as a gift from God. And all England heard about it!

A Bulwark Never Failing

Our assurance of Christ’s power to save us is our strong defense against the slings and arrows of temptation that Satan throws at us. As I simply realize that I am saved by trusting in Him a calming peace enters my soul. **I am justified, not because I am sorry for my sin, or have even repented of sin, but because of what Jesus has done for me.** When I turn to God and accept what He reveals, at that instant the supernatural miracle of God’s grace rushes into me, bringing me into a right relationship with my heavenly Father. The impregnable safety of justification and the resulting sanctification is God Himself.ⁱ

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death, Romans 8:1-2.

What Difference Does It Make?

In previous sermons I’ve emphasized the Reformation’s foundational truth of the Christian faith: our salvation is in the Christ alone. In fact, without God’s pardon of our sin through Christ, we could not echo St. Paul’s conviction that he **...consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ, Phil. 3:8.**

Sitting in church for any number of years does not make you a Christian. Only that personal surrender, that repentance that recognizes the depth of your own sin and your need for a Savior, then taking the hand of Christ offered by our heavenly Father ... only this will make you a Christian. In a way it is a great humiliation – and that is, I suppose, why so many hold back or scorn the offer of Christ – to come to the low point and admit that you are not all-sufficient in yourself to overcome the pervasive darkness that lurks in your heart. As Oswald Chambers puts it: “The Gospel of the grace of God awakens ... intense resentment, because the revelation which it brings is not palatable. There is a certain pride in man that will give and give, but to come and accept is another thing.... I will do anything, but do not humiliate me to the level of the most hell-deserving sinner and tell me that all I have to do is accept the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱ

But until you reach that moment you are still living in sin and walking in the shadows of this world’s bent to sinning. **As long as we possess anything in the way of pride or independence, God cannot do anything for us.** Yet, once you cross the threshold of grace, receiving God’s pardon for sin, you become a new person, you experience a new birth, and are now headed to the righteous living that God has intended for you all along. Once you have made this profound step into His marvelous light many things become clearer to you. *Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,”* John 8:12. Scripture comes alive, pregnant with meaning and eternal promise. Hope becomes an ever-faithful companion and peace of heart and mind gives assurance that you are God’s child here and now.

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies, Rom. 8:33. Because we are made right by God's boundless grace in Jesus, **we can let go of our anxious need to make things come out right.** This doesn't mean having no care in the world. Rather it means trust that through Jesus Christ your sinful nature is fully pardoned and you can begin a new life in Him.

Because we are made right by God's boundless grace in Jesus, **we can let go of our anxious need to insist on the "purity" of everyone** and everything, while still seeking holiness ourselves. The great American Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards played a critical role in shaping the First Great Awakening in America and oversaw some of the first revivals in 1733–35 at his church in Massachusetts. (A second revival sprang up in 1741 with the preaching of George Whitfield – a student of John Wesley – when he visited the colonies.) I read somewhere that Edwards was later asked the difference between those who, during the revivals, were touched by the Holy Spirit and those who were not. He replied that generally speaking those caught up in revival were concerned about their own sins. Those who did not respond to the Spirit were concerned about other peoples' sins.

If you have not yet plumbed the depths of your soul and found that you need the Savior Jesus Christ, do it now. Do not hesitate for **today is the day of your salvation.** If you believe you have already given your life to Christ, go to Him again and ask that He fill you to overflowing, so much so that you can say, ***I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,*** Galatians 2:20.

Lastly, because we are made right by God's boundless grace in Jesus, and because the Reformation has resurrected this truth, we can know that **when the church is primarily focused on the development of its own organization it is no longer a spiritual gathering.** The rehabilitation of the human race must be realized through Jesus Christ – He is the hope of the world – and He must be realized in our organizational life as well as our individual life. Apostles and teachers have been sent by Jesus Christ to lead and teach us into life filled with Him.ⁱⁱⁱ

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Romans 5:10.

ⁱ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, Oct. 28.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, Nov. 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, July 12.