

October 27, 2019

Reformation Sunday

Text: Romans 3:19-24

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (ESV).

Truth Decay

Some of you may remember that, in 2004, our congregation went to see Mel Gibson's riveting movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Afterwards we gathered in the Parish Hall for pizza and discussion. When the evening concluded, I returned home in a somber mood, deeply reflecting upon the sacrifice of Christ and the part I had played in it.

When I got home, I checked my email. Emails don't normally make an impact on me. But this one was different, so different in fact that I have saved it all these years. It was a message from a Unitarian congregation, inviting me to visit their community of faith. They listed four ways in which they were unique:

- We espouse no religious doctrine. We encourage the freedom of individual thought and belief.
- We offer warm, user-friendly services. Our services normally include some readings, inspiring music, an uplifting sermon focusing upon our inherent goodness, and time for meditation.
- Children are precious to us. We teach our children to be accepting of differing beliefs and the importance of each person seeking his or her own truth. We study the world's major religions and draw on the core values of each faith tradition.
- So if you're looking for a congregation that celebrates the freedom of individual beliefs, you will find a warm sense of community here. So please visit us and be a part of our faith community.¹

When I finished reading this, I was stunned. I had just seen Christ's holy, bloodstained body slump in death. Just before he died, I heard him say, "**It is finished!**"² And I remember him saying to his disciples just the night before, "**I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**"³ And now I was reading about a group for which none of this mattered. The contrast was staggering!

What we have here is not a failure to communicate.⁴ I knew exactly what this group was saying. No, what we have here is truth decay.

How did it get this way? Answer: Little by little. Slowly, very slowly (over decades and centuries) false teachings wormed their way into the church such that, too often, truth could not

be distinguished from error. And this had happened throughout Church history. Concerning the Church, the old axiom is true: If it stands for nothing, it will fall for anything!

Even in the days of the apostle Paul, truth and error were mingled together. And Paul had to set them straight. So, to the Galatians, he said, “As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”⁵

...Accursed! Accursed is the translation of the Greek word *anathema*. There is no stronger word for condemnation in the New Testament.

Now, let’s fast-forward the clock to the time of the Reformation. Sixteen centuries after the New Testament began, the church had become horribly corrupt. Over the centuries, it had slowly lost sight of its greatest treasure: The Gospel. The message that sinners are saved by faith alone in the merits of Christ alone was no longer heard.

Instead, the heresy of works-righteousness prevailed. Rome imposed so many rules and penitential exercises on the people that they were terrorized and obsessed with the fear of going to hell. Indeed, the common people lived out their lives in constant terror of the fiery abyss. Was there no hope for them? Yes, there was.

And it was God’s doing. He would not allow the Gospel to be buried under the rubble of human reason and churchly tradition any longer. It was time for him to act. He did so through a man named Martin Luther, a man who was also terrorized and obsessed with the fear of going to hell.

What Luther rediscovered was the pure Gospel. He rediscovered that salvation was not something for mankind to earn, but something that Jesus had already earned for mankind. He earned it by his sinless life and by his sin-atonement death. When he discovered this, when he placed his trust in Christ alone, he said, “I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”⁶

The Reformation was the most significant and far-reaching theological reawakening since the time of Jesus and the apostles. Its import can be felt even today.

Let me explain by pointing out a few of the errors of Roman Catholic theology. In doing so, I need to make one thing clear: I am speaking about Roman Catholic theology, not about Roman Catholic people. We can disagree without being disagreeable.

Consider the word *alone*. It was this little word “alone” that became the battlefield upon which the entire Reformation was fought.

- The Church of Rome held that Scripture was authoritative. But it did not hold that Scripture alone was the final authority for all matters of faith and life.
- Rome taught salvation by grace. But it did not teach salvation by grace alone.
- It taught salvation by faith, but it did not teach salvation by faith alone.

And today, just like in Luther’s day, false teachers and heretics preach their poison to the

people. And the people accept it as the truth. They accept it as the truth because they are biblically ignorant.

And because they are biblically ignorant, they will fall for anything. Consider, for example, the rise of the Joel Osteen phenomenon. Over 52,000 people a week flock to Houston's Lakewood Church to learn how to live their best life now.⁷ The goal is to make your lives more healthy, happy, hopeful, and prosperous!⁸

There is very little mention of eternity or how to get to heaven. A this-world-only Gospel forms the basis of its preaching and teaching. I am not far off the mark when I say that the "Osteen Gospel" teaches that God is more concerned about your present happiness than about your eternal salvation.

But perhaps the most widespread heresy today is what we might call "salvation by experience." What many people want today is not biblical truth about sin and salvation. No, they reject historical facts about Jesus in favor of experiencing God in their "gut."

So when they go to church, they want to feel the presence of God inside them. Congregations that want to be successful (usually measured by numbers) will accommodate themselves, sometimes unknowingly, to this desire. Traditional hymns are often replaced with contemporary music. While there is nothing wrong about contemporary music per se, it is often used to appeal to human emotions. For seekers, God is to be found in the emotions of the worship experience.

But the God that such people seek is not necessarily the Triune God. Many want to be spiritual but not religious. As such, biblical truth is rejected for lack of being experiential. Truth, for them, is not located in the Bible but somewhere inside them. Many will sacrifice anything (sometimes even themselves) to avoid the objective fact that God is to be found outside them, in his Son.

- A Muslim may pray to his god for forgiveness, but the true God will not forgive him.
- A Hindu may pray to all of his gods for forgiveness, but the true God will not forgive him either.
- A person may pray to some "Supreme Being" for forgiveness, but, once again, the true God will not forgive him.

Why? Because the one, true God grants his forgiveness only to those who trust in Christ.

This comes as a great shock to many because they believe that if they are good, or if they are sincere, or if they are spiritual, God will forgive them. Not so, for God demands absolute moral perfection in thought, word, and deed. But what if somebody were really good and sinned only a few times in his life. Wouldn't that be good enough? Most people think so. But no!

Consider this: an antidote succeeds in killing 99% of the Ebola virus in a man. Almost! A hotel is on fire and a desperate woman jumps 400 feet only to miss the safety net by a foot. Almost! An airplane climbs to clear a 15,000 foot peak only to come a hair short. Almost!

Coming close just doesn't cut it! Almost is still a death sentence. So it is in spiritual matters

too. Perfection is the only passing score. And the truth is that we can't even come close.

Thank God that Jesus lived a sinless life for us. Thank God that he died to pay for all of your sins and mine. Faith in Christ alone delivers forgiveness and eternal life to our souls.

We, at Redeemer Lutheran Church are, by God's grace, a church of the Reformation, a church that confesses the faith of Luther and the reformers. We believe, teach, and confess the faith which the Bible teaches and reaffirm that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. With the reformers we confess that Christ is the Life that sets us free from the wages of sin.

May this remain our confession now and always.

In the name of Jesus: Ἰησοῦς.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

¹This email came from a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Unitarian Universalists deny that religious truth exists. Instead, they hold to no faith traditions and espouse that there are many ways to heaven and to God. Check out the following: <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/principles/index.shtml>.

²See John 19:30.

³See John 14:6.

⁴Some may remember the famous line in the 1967 film "Cool Hand Luke" in which the work boss said to Paul Newman, "What we have here is failure to communicate." This line has become iconic in American culture.

⁵See Galatians 1:9, ESV.

⁶See Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950) p, p. 65. See a fuller quotation of Luther's words in the third paragraph of the article posted at <https://www.ivpress.com/bible/romans/>.

⁷See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakewood_Church.

⁸See, for example, a review of Joel Osteen's theology at <https://wolfmueeller.co/joel-osteen-versus-martin-luther/>.