

The Ever-Reforming People of God

Thomas Robinson, *Reformation Sunday 499*, October 30, 2016

Romans 10:14-17

¹⁴ How then will they **call on him** in whom they have not **believed**? And how are they to **believe** in him of whom they have never **heard**? And how are they to **hear** without a preacher?
⁵ And how are they to **preacher** unless they are **sent**? As it is written, "*How beautiful are the feet of those **announcing good news of good things!***" [Isa 52:7]

¹⁶ But they have **not all obeyed** the **good news**. For Isaiah says, "*Lord, who has **believed what they have heard from us?***" [Isa 53:1] ¹⁷ So **believing** is from **what is heard**, and **what is heard** is through the **message of the Messiah**.

Ephesians 2:8-10

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Messiah Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

John 17:20-21

²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

A Journey through Centuries

499 years ago tomorrow, a monk named Martin Luther, moved by what he saw as the corruption in the church, walked to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed up a series of 95 "theses" for debate. This event and what followed set off the "Protestant Reformation." We are heirs of those events in many ways.

Paul traced God's amazing paths leading to his own time. The story went on. For 300 years the Good News spread in the Roman Empire and beyond, in spite of strong opposition. In the 4th cent. emperor Constantine became a patron of the church. The church gradually took on the hierarchy and government pattern of the empire. At the top it used tools of empire to enforce conformity. Many wonderful things, but also deep transformations as it became Christendom, the religious governing culture of Europe. With the political and violent power of the state often came corruption and conflict.

As Christendom came to its zenith in the "Middle Ages," the church, crossing all political boundaries of Europe, had vast power, but often poor leadership at the top.

Early Signs of Reform

One of the key elements of dispute was access to the Bible. Jerome's 1000-year-old Latin translation, the Vulgate, was the only authoritative Bible used in all churches.

John Wycliffe, a philosopher at Oxford, criticized the privileges of the clergy and began translating the Bible into English (Middle English, Chaucer). Many people had never heard scripture read in their own language. Eagerly copied. Manuscripts banned.

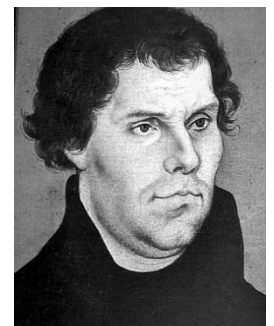
Jan Hus in Prague was influenced by Wycliffe. He challenged indulgences, and called for lay people to be able to take the wine of the eucharist. He was burned at the stake.



John Wycliffe, 1320-1384, England



Jan Hus, 1372-1415, Czech



Martin Luther, 1483-1546, Germany

Erasmus of Rotterdam, was one of many Christian Humanists in the early 16th cent. to go “back to the sources” (*ad fontes*), learning Greek and classical Latin, seeking out forgotten manuscripts. Erasmus called for reform in the church, used the new technology of printing to print the first Greek New Testament in 1516. He also printed his own Latin translation, challenging much of the language of the Vulgate.



Desiderius Erasmus
1469-1536

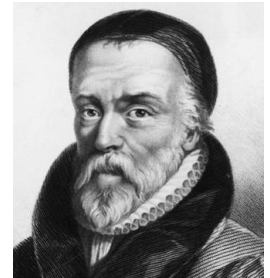
Rediscovering the Authority of Scripture and Its Message

Martin Luther attacked the sale of indulgences to raise funds for St. Peter’s Basilica. (“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!”). In 1520, Luther was excommunicated, but supported by his local German prince.

In 1521 at the Diet of Worms he stood firm: “*Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since ... they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.*” Hidden in Wartburg Castle, he translated the NT into German.

“*Sola Scriptura*” — “Scripture alone” as authority for Christian life was the revolutionary core of all that Luther did. Looking at scripture anew one discovered new light on repentance, faith, grace, priesthood of all believers and so much else.

William Tyndale, influenced by Luther, translated the Bible into English in Germany in the 1520s, though under threat of death by Henry VIII. Betrayed, he was imprisoned, strangled, and his body burned. Ironically, his translation became the basis of the “King James Version” in 1611.



William Tyndale,
1494-1536, England

Searching for the Form of the Church

Ulrich Zwingli began preaching reform in Zurich in 1519. He wanted to restore the primitive simplicity of congregational worship: “*Everything that is added to the true institutions of Christ is an abuse.*” He developed the idea of the silence of scripture as exclusive.

Discovering the Community of Believers

The Radical Reformation was called “Anabaptist” (rebaptizers) because they practiced believers baptism rather than infant baptism. (First, Jan. 1525) They also broke with the authority of the state and sought to create voluntary communities based not on nationality but on faith and personal commitment. They began the free church tradition.

Balthasar Hubmaier (a theologian and preacher). Conrad Grebel (1498-1526), others. Persecuted by both Catholics and “Magisterial” reformers (state based). Often drowned.

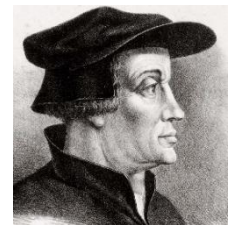
Envisioning the Sovereignty of God

John Calvin, theologian, lawyer, city governor of Geneva. Systematizing a vision of absolute divine initiative and action: the Sovereignty of God. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He developed the doctrine of predestination, and set the course of the “Reformed” tradition that is seen through Huguenots, Puritans, Presbyterians, and many others.

Our Heritage from Their Work

Most important is the fundamental idea of going back to the origins of Christianity, back to the scriptures, to Jesus, Paul, Peter, in order to understand what this faith is about. If later tradition (*magisterium*) overrides scripture, the faith loses its basic identity in Jesus. By going back, they rediscovered faith and grace and freedom from works-based life.

Their era played out the struggles of authority and unity. Most still thought a nation could have only one expression of faith, enforced by the state. The Radical Reformation challenged that through baptism. North America was the first extensive experiment in an entirely voluntary expression of faith. That pattern is now spreading through the world.



Ulrich Zwingli 1484-
1531, Switzerland



Balthasar Hubmaier
1485-1528, Germany



John Calvin
1509-1564,
France/Switzerland