

# A Society Shaped by Reformation

Thomas Robinson, *Reformation Sunday 500*, October 29, 2017

## Ephesians 2:1-10

<sup>1</sup> And when you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, in step with the course (age) of this world, in step with the ruler of the authority of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once went about in the desires of our flesh, carrying out the wishes of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like all the rest, <sup>4</sup> but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with the Christ – by grace you have been saved – <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

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

## John 17:17-23

<sup>17</sup> “Sanctify them in the truth; your word (*logos*) is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

<sup>20</sup> I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (*logos*), <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may be perfected into one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

## Romans 1:16-17

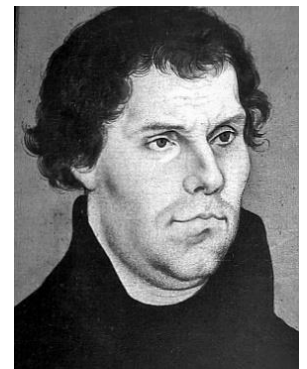
<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God’s power for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

<sup>17</sup> For in it God’s righteous faithfulness is revealed from God’s faithfulness into our faith, as it is written, “*The righteous from faith shall live.*” [Hab. 2:4]

## Acts 21:17-21

<sup>17</sup> When we (Paul and those with him) arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters welcomed us warmly. <sup>18</sup> The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup> After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup> When they heard it, they praised God.

Then they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. <sup>21</sup> They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs.”



Martin Luther,  
1483-1546, Germany  
Painting, Lucas Cranach the  
Elder, 1526

## A Story of Long Debate

500 years ago this week, a monk named Martin Luther, moved by his own theological struggle and 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: Historical marker for the “Reformation.” We are heirs of Luther and those events, theologically and in many other ways. One of the most important was the authority of scripture over against church tradition and the freedom and responsibility of believers to read and understand – to wrestle with – the scriptures for themselves.

Jesus came into a time of great debate about scripture. He brought an unexpected understanding of “Messiah” and Kingdom of God. Paul struggled to see a new way of reading scripture that led to a crucified Messiah. Paul talked about diverse points of view (Rm 14). Acts highlights diversity.

But the community also had a focus on unity (Jn 17). What united the communities? What was open to diverse points of view? In the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. churches under intense pressure began to focus on unity under a structure of authority – bishops. For 300 years the Good News spread in spite of strong opposition. In the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. emperor Constantine became a patron of the church, which took on the hierarchy and authority of the empire. It became Christendom, the religious governing culture of Europe. Important was limiting and controlling the interpretation of scripture – *magisterium*.

## Luther Wrestling with the Word

Luther was a trained and authorized interpreter of scripture, a monk who debated fine points within that *magisterium*. In 1517, Luther’s 95 Theses attacked the sale of indulgences authorized the Medici pope Leo X to raise funds for St. Peter’s Basilica. (“*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!*”). This was the spark that set off a revolution. But behind it was a deep theological struggle about the fundamentals of the Gospel. Luther was deeply serious in his commitment to his religious life, and struggled as an interpreter of scripture with Paul’s letters.

In 1519 in the midst of study of Rom 1:17 he came to a life-changing insight from scripture. The traditional interpretation turned the scripture into bad news. But he came to see that the tradition was distorted and false. It was for him like a new birth that illuminated all scripture. [“Tower Experience”]

The indulgence controversy led to Luther being excommunicated in 1520, 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 using the new printed edition of the Greek NT prepared by Erasmus of Rotterdam – “to the sources.”

## Freedom, Authority, and Unity

“*Sola Scriptura*” — “Scripture alone” as authority for Christian life was the revolutionary core of all that Luther did: the idea that anyone with tools of language could read the scriptures and understand it. William Tyndale, influenced by Luther, translated the Bible into English in the 1520s and was assassinated. Ironically, his translation became the basis of the “King James Version” in 1611.

The freedom implied set off changes in society that began transforming culture – undermining hierarchical authority. Diversity, division exploded. Zwingli, Calvin, Radical reformers, et al., struggled with unity and authority: Must the state have only one unifying faith, set by the rulers? Is such unity what Jesus prayed for? Radical reformers (Anabaptists) first refused this idea.

North America was the first extensive experiment in an entirely voluntary expression of faith. That pattern is now spreading through the world. Our own “restoration” movement struggled with the ideas of scripture authority and unity. Can we really go back to the scriptures and “restore” the diversity of the early communities, the debate, the centered unity focused on Jesus’ cross?