

Saved by Grace through Faith

[Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

Reformation Sunday

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, October 29, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray for God's enlightening word to speak to us: Oh, Lord, our Heavenly Father in whom is fullness of light and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no one can understand your truth. For Christ's sake. Amen.

While this time of year is normally represented by the green stole to emphasize the growth of the church, today we recognize a historic intervention, and it is with the color orange. I wish I had an orange stole today to wear; and that is that the fire of the Reformation burns because people have engaged Scripture personally, and believe that Scripture can change the church back to God's original intent, at different points. Today we recognize that Protestants protest the lack of continuity with Scripture in the church. And, if you are a good Protestant, you will continue to protest discontinuity with Scripture in the church.

In Ephesians, Chapter 2, we see the heart of the words of the Reformation: we are saved by grace, through faith. We need to be saved by God's grace through the exercise of our human faith. But even that human faith is a gift of God, so we can't even take credit for the fact that we are exercising faith. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot save the world through some great human ingenuity. Only God can save us; and only God, in Jesus Christ, can save the world.

The great themes of the Reformation are: Scripture alone, *Sola Scriptura*; grace alone, *Sola Gratia*; Christ alone, *Solus Christus*; faith alone, *Sola Fide*. Only when we exercise those biblical cries do we come back to grips with the core of what faith should be in this world.

T. S. Eliot, in his poem, *The Wasteland*, came to grips with one great person in history who was struggling with the core issues of reformation of his soul. Eliot says this: "To Carthage then I came burning, burning, burning, and burning" with reference to a young man who came out of North Africa to be in a university in Carthage, thrust into a hissing cauldron of his own lust—longing for love, but unable to separate from that lust. He talked about his own life as so "polluted in the stream of friendship with its foulness of lust, and clouded its purity with the dark hell of illicit desire," that he jumped into a frying pan of wicked loves. Even in the midst of that, he was searching for something more profound. He read Plato and Cicero. He followed some of the great Greek philosophers. He had a passionate zeal to know something of deeper substance and love, but he still sunk down to the depths of the lower beauties of this world, of sexual promiscuity. Desiring to draw to a higher beauty of virtue and justice, he kept his search going. Driven to read the Bible to see what answers he could find, he was disappointed because the particular translation of the biblical text he read was translated by some inept people who didn't understand the text. So, he went on to examine some other patterns of philosophy—fortune-telling, astrology—and he found everything wanting. The high-mindedness of his search was constantly being contradicted by the low-mindedness of his moral confusion. He speaks of himself as a moral prisoner: "The enemy held my will and made a chain out of it to bind me to myself; a perverted will to lust; a slave; a habit; a necessity; and an addiction to sex." Even in his professional life, he was twisted. An ardent search for a blessed life, he turned to a burning zeal for truth and wisdom; instead, he would teach people how to use the truth for their own vindication: words became propaganda to be manipulated. He taught the art of deception; and he desperately wanted something more in his own life.

I'm speaking of Aurelius Augustine. He met Saint Ambrose in Milan one day, who, in his great rhetoric, declared that Jesus Christ had the power to break the bonds of moral failure. "Only Christ," Ambrose said, "Christ alone can give you the ability to live a virtuous life; and you are longing for it." He invited Augustine again to read Scripture, this time in a translation that had artistic quality to it. And Augustine, even at that point, prayed with a double mind: "Lord, give me chastity and self-control—but not yet."

Understanding that grace was expensive—that he couldn't commit his life to Jesus without pain at the price of change—he resisted. And, yet, in a Milan garden, in the storm of his own struggle, he heard a voice of a child singing: “Take it and read it. Take it and read it.” As if chanting to a soul, he snatched up the Bible, opened it, and read these words in Romans: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh and sexual promiscuity.” He found Jesus, and we have a reformation—a reformation not only of this man's soul, but a Reformation of the church. And it was the great Reformers who read Aurelius Augustine, who also was a support and a rootage for their own commitment to reformation. Augustine understood that it is Scripture alone that gives us the clear message of who God is, as a gracious God, in Jesus Christ.

Scripture alone tells us all we need to know about God and how God saves us; that we are, in fact, in trouble. You recognize a place in your life when you have been in trouble, and there has been no way out. And what are your instincts at that point? You've tried everything, and you cannot get out of this deep hole that you have sunken into. There's only one option, and that is to pray for a God of grace to intervene and get you out of trouble. Only God can save human beings. God gives us the gift of Jesus to show us the full extent of love and grace. And God gives us the gift personally, of faith, that we might exercise trust in God when we even have our own doubts. This Scripture, as well as many others, affirms the beginning place of grace: and that is, that God takes action in the midst of our trespasses and sins. God is good and gracious; and we are in trouble. We are too deep in debt to God, and to one another, to pay it back. Sins—things that miss God's good way of living, and trespasses—things that do hurt to one another, things that cross over into another person's life that do damage to the other person. I trespass on their soul and their existence; and I trespass on our relationship. We are dead in our trespasses and sins.

Richard Hooker made a comment about Martin Luther as a sinner: “Luther was not a person you would want to have dinner with. He was temperamental, peevish, egomaniacal, and argumentative. But, this single-mindedness, this enormous self-confidence, and strident belief in the rightness of his arguments, allowed him to stand against opposition; indeed, to harden his position in the face of death by fire, and the usual punishment which is for heretics.” God used Martin Luther to reform his own soul, in spite of his obnoxiousness.

Do you know any obnoxious people that you pray for their reformation? I'm sure there are people praying for you. I know there are people praying for me. Luther understood that it wasn't just about himself—that it wasn't just grace alone that would save him; it was also grace that would save the church. And so he stood against indulgences. The core of an indulgence is that I can somehow pay enough money for God to absolve my sins so I don't have to go to Hell. And, of course, in his thesis No. 28 out of 95, he said, “‘As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs’ is one of the problems of the church.” This was an absolution of people who can buy themselves out of sin and Hell. And what Luther says is: “No, you don't have enough money to do it. You don't have enough status to do it. You don't have enough prowess to do it. You don't have enough talent, and excellence, and position to do it. You cannot buy yourself out of Hell; only Jesus can go down there and get you out. Sola Gratia affirmed in the Reformation that only the grace of God can do away with our sin. God loves us so much that he sends Jesus into the world as a gracious action to show us clearly that God would not condemn us, nor hurt us, but God would lay down his life for us. Even when we are dead in our own mistakes, God makes us alive in Christ. God's grace saves us. God resurrects us. God lifts us up into higher places. God shows us immeasurable wealth of the grace and kindness of Jesus Christ. God even gives us the gift of trust— that we might even turn to God and say, “I trust you even a little bit.” Grace means that God is acting for the good of us, whether or not we deserve it.

We also see that grace was manifested in Jesus, the Christ; only Jesus, only the Christ, Solus Christus. Only through Jesus is humanity saved; only through Jesus do we have life now, and forever. Jesus is the only way to salvation. I know that people today struggle with that statement. It is good to struggle with that statement, but let me attach something else to it that may help you: Jesus is the only way, but guess what? God is the only judge of who gets there. The Reformation affirmed: God is judge; we are not judge. God is the only one who knows who is going to be in Heaven; who has eternal life. We dare not take ‘Jesus is the only way,’ to our setting ourselves up as judge and jury for others—to decide whether or not they are going to make it. So Solus Christus—Jesus is the only way—is a core value of the Reformation.

We also see that another core value of the Reformation is Sola Fide. Grace leads to faith alone. “By grace you have been saved,” Paul says, “through faith.” But that faith is not because you have initiated it; not because I am such a wonderful person with abilities to be able to trust God in some special ways. It is because God has given us the gift. You can't manufacture it; you can't manipulate it. Faith becomes a gift of God for you to exercise; and every one of us has a little bit of faith. Faith is the exercising of the gift of God to trust one another. It is the exercising of the gift of God to trust God... even when we have doubts... even when we have questions... even when we are deeply hurt, faith reaches out to trust because we are hungry to trust someone. If you do not trust God today, I guarantee, you are looking for someone to trust. Try Jesus.

“We believe,” according to the confession we read today, means, “We trust.” We trust in God who is three persons. We trust in Jesus Christ. We trust in God, the Holy Spirit. “Confession” means that we declare that we trust God.

Some of us have had to drive around the Marine Corps. Marathon today; and that's going on right now—thousands of people running to honor the Marines, to remember Semper Fidelis —Semper Fi. I once did a wedding of two Marines, and I started that wedding out by saying, “Semper Fi.” Are there any good Marines here? What do you say? [Audience response.] “Hoo-ah.” All right! [Audience laughter.] Amen. You never thought you'd do that in a Presbyterian church, did you? [Audience laughter.] I got a “Hoo-ah” all the way through the church. It was a Pentecostal moment; I felt orange all over me. [Audience laughter.]

One of the reasons we see the Marines as such a strong part of our military is because they are focused and committed. They are trustworthy to the depth of their commitment; and they stand for someone who will not give up, who will not leave anyone behind. There's a recent statement in Two Hundred Nineteen Reasons to Love the Marine Corps: one of them was the best status— “Sailors are the staff on the ship, but the Marines go for the cruise — and then hit the shore.” It is important to realize that that faithful statement, “Always faithful,” is about always being one of trust; always being trustworthy; and that's only found as a gift of God. Even faith is a gift. We don't manufacture trust; we don't do anything but exercise the little bit of faith that God gives to us. And sometimes that is so small we can hardly see it or feel it. “If you have just a little bit of trust,” Jesus said, “you can move mountains.” We understand that that little bit of trust comes from God; and, as you exercise it, it gets stronger, and stronger, and stronger.

Today, we recognize that, when we exercise trust... when we accept the grace of God... when we acknowledge that only God can save us because we are so deeply buried in our own troubles and mistakes... we have the freedom and the power to recognize that only Jesus, who has laid down his life for us, can save us. This is what God has done for us. Have you discovered that you are dead someplace in your life? That you are stuck in your sense of life's meaning in your awareness of destructive behavior that you participate in? In your relationships which are dead and dying, or divorced, and gone? In your ability to make things happen the way you want to make them happen? In your abuse of your personal gifts? In your hurting of other people? Are you dead in your trespasses and sins? There is only one way out: it's Jesus. Like Augustine, if you are burning up with a sense of ‘What now?’ you have no purpose. It's the person of Jesus. Like Martin Luther, are you tired of playing religion, and just going to church, and just going through the motions? Are you hungry to know God? Then, come to follow Jesus. Ask God to meet you. Exercise the little bit of faith you have, and lean into the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and read Scripture and let the Spirit teach you what God says.

God is a mighty fortress, according to Martin Luther. “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that might be? Christ Jesus, it is He, Lord Sabaoth (Lord of Rest) His name, from age to age, the same. And it is He who must win the battle,” because you have lost it.

And so, today, on Reformation Sunday, remember: God is not willing to leave anyone behind. God is not willing that any should perish. And God gives us a little bit of faith to embrace his grace in Jesus Christ, to bring you out of the mess and put you in a light and bright place.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, may you move in our hearts today on this Reformation Sunday. And may you give us passion, and leadership, and guts to lay down our lives, because we know your saving grace. We pray this in the wonderful name of Jesus—who has prepared for us a new life, and a lot of good work to do. Amen.