

Our Christian Heritage
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(Romans 3:22b–25a NRSV) For there is no distinction, {23} since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; {24} they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, {25} whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

This morning we are continuing our look at our Christian Heritage by looking at the most important event in shaping modern Christianity.

The history of the church during the period known as the middle ages is fascinating, if not disheartening. The church suffered through one conflict after another. And by the time of a Priest by the name of Martin Luther (1483 – 1546), the church seemed to have lost it's way.

Let me try to illustrate. Imagine if you had to walk from Ridge Church to Purdue University in West Lafayette → and you had to do it without the benefit of a compass or map. Purdue is virtually due South of Munster, so all you have to do is walk straight and you will get there. But what if you start to wander a few degrees off course? Instead of ending up in West Lafayette you might end up in Indianapolis or Springfield.

That was the situation at the time of Luther.

And this is not just a protestant understanding of the situation.

If you go to the Catholic Encyclopedia on line you will find this entry concerning this time period.

Gradually a regrettable worldliness manifested itself in many high ecclesiastics. Their chief object – to guide man to his eternal goal – claimed too seldom their attention. . . . Many bishops and abbots (especially in countries where they were also territorial princes) bore themselves as secular rulers rather than as servants of the Church. Many members of cathedral chapters and other . . . ecclesiastics were chiefly concerned with their income and how to increase it. . . . Luxury prevailed widely among the higher clergy. . . . The scientific and ascetic training of the clergy left much to be desired, the moral standard of many being low, and the practice of celibacy not everywhere observed. . . . As to the Christian people itself, in numerous districts ignorance, superstition, religious indifference, and

immorality were rife. . . . From the fourteenth century the demand for “reform of head and members” . . . had been voiced with ever-increasing energy by serious and discerning men.

This was the church of Luther, who was ordained a priest in 1507.

The story of Luther is a fascinating one. He was rather uncertain what he wanted to do with his life → studying the law for a time, and also philosophy. But his life changed on July 2nd 1505, while riding on horseback, returning to the university, a lightning bolt struck near him. He was terrified and made a vow to become a monk. Some suggest that it really wasn't a decision he was happy about, but he did not feel that he could break the vow with God.

Luther struggled with the notion of worthiness throughout his early life. He never felt like he was worthy of God's love – that he had not done enough to earn God's grace. After many years, Luther came to realize and articulated the idea that became the central doctrine of the Protestant reformation.

He realized that we are justified by faith, and not by our works.
We can never earn God's grace → it is always a free gift.

He found this in our passage from Romans today:

(Romans 3:21–24 NRSV)

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, {22} the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, {23} since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; {24} they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

This was a radical idea.

The church had been built on the notion of reward and punishment

- If you do the right things → you will be rewarded
- If you don't do the right things → you will be punished.

In addition to this theology of reward and punishment, the Roman Catholic Church of this period was engaged in another practice that aggravated Luther.

The pope was raising funds to rebuild St Peter's Cathedral in Rome.

The strategy was to enlist a number of priests to run a rather unique capitol funds drive.

The priests promised the people that if they contributed to this effort, that the church would petition God to ensure that their dead loved ones spent less time in Purgatory.

One fund raiser named Father Tetzal came to Luther's town in Germany and preached:

Don't you hear the voices of your wailing dead parents and others who say, 'Have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me, because we are in severe punishment and pain. From this you could redeem us with a small alms and yet you do not want to do so.'

He was also believed to say: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Luther was livid → and in response he composed a list of ninety-five statements questioning the practice of selling indulgences. He posted these 95 theses on the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg Germany on October 31, 1517.

And with the help of a fairly new invention, the printing press → Luther's challenge to the church soon spread across Germany.

The church → instead of dealing with the problem and its abuses instead sought to silence Luther and the others who were following him. And in January 1521 Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church.

Within a short period of time → Lutheranism (much to Luther's chagrin) become the church of large portions of Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

The Reformation brought about many changes to the way church was done and understood. I want to lift up three key beliefs, that we all take for granted today, that came about because of Luther and his willingness to stand up to the church.

1. The Priesthood of all believers

Luther argued that all who are Christians are called to use the gifts that God has given them in ministry to the world.

Ministry is not just for the clergy.

Ways that we serve in ministry

Katrina relief

Flood relief

Haiti

Feeding hungry in Hammond
(Thursdays mission meeting)

Teaching Sunday School

Helping with VBS

Singing in the choir

2. Sola Scriptura

SCRIPTURE ALONE → the Bible should be the primary authority in defining faith and practice of Christians

The Bible should be accessible to everybody → not just clergy
Translation of the bible into common languages

3. Justification by faith alone

Luther described this kind of faith in his preface to the Book of Romans: Faith is God's work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God (John 1:13). It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. . . . Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures, The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith.

That document was what transformed John Wesley and ultimately leads to the Methodist movement.

Not long after Luther, other reformers began to initiate revolt against Rome and the abuses of the church. The result, which has continued to today --- was the endless fracturing of the church into a multitude of denominations. According to World Christian Encyclopedia there are 38,000 Christian denominations throughout the world.

Most of the early reformers agreed with Luther's essential claims, but did not believe that he went far enough.

John Calvin and his protégé John Knox were among the second wave of Reformers, and their efforts resulted in the formation of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

Swiss, Dutch and many German groups used the name "Reformed"
Scotch and English groups us the name Presbyterian

John Calvin is seen as the theological father of both the Presbyterian and Reformed traditions.

Calvin's key contributions are five theological points that have become known by an acronym TULIP

T - Total Depravity

Which means that we human beings are utterly sinful and we cannot save ourselves. We are so lost and broken by original sin that we cannot even turn toward God.

U - Unconditional Election

The belief that God has chosen, from the beginning of the world, that some are saved and others are damned. Those who are selected for salvation (or damnation) are not picked on the basis of anything that they have done, but solely of the basis of God's choice.

L - Limited Atonement

Jesus dies only for the elect!

Salvation is not for everyone, only those whom God has preordained

I - Irresistible Grace

If God has chosen you, you cannot resist God's salvation

Your will has nothing to do with your salvation

P - Perseverance

Once you have been chosen, you cannot lose your salvation. You will persevere until the Day of Judgment. If you do slip away from God, then it is likely that you were not really one of the elect.

Obviously, this is at odds with Wesley's beliefs and we will talk about this next week and at WWE on February 10th

The hallmark of Reformed and Presbyterian theology is the notion of the sovereignty of God.

The word sovereignty, with regard to God, is a way of saying that God is the absolute ruler, reigning over every aspect of creation.

We see this idea play out in TULIP in the idea of predestination.

Calvin in his *Institutes of Christian Religion* notes that nothing happens apart from God. Even the evil that we do is a part of God's plan.

Obviously for many of us in the Wesley tradition see some problems with this theology → especially in light of things like the earthquake in Haiti.

Last week when I taught at Westminster, somebody asked me what the difference is between Methodism and Presbyterianism → historically, the differences are many. But practically, today, the only real difference has to do with how we do church, not what we believe.

Luther and Calvin (and the other leaders of the reformation) changed the world. The impact that they had might be equal to that of the early church fathers who gathered at Nicaea and created our creeds.

We are all indebted to their contributions to Christianity.