

The Basis of the Reformation

Romans 3:19—28

Introduction

It never fails. If I go to the store wearing my clericals, someone will say, “Good day, Father.” I sometimes just let it go. But there are times, I just have to say something. “I’m not your father.” “Just call me ‘Papa.’” That’s what my grandchildren call me.” At least, those are things that I’d like to say. Usually, it’s just, “I’m not a Roman Catholic priest. I’m a Lutheran pastor.” Of course, then I can give them my business card and put in a plug for Grace Lutheran Church. But when I tell people I am a Lutheran pastor and not a Roman Catholic priest, the reply I usually get, especially from Roman Catholics, is, “That’s Okay. There’s not much difference is there? We’re all Christians, right?” Well, yes and no. We *are* all Christians. But other than looking alike and sounding a little similar, we are different.

Why the Reformation?

My question is, “If there’s no real difference, why did the Roman church excommunicate Martin Luther, essentially banishing him to hell?” When most people think of the Reformation, they think of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenburg chapel. Some have said the real cause of the Reformation was the printing press. Luther’s 95 Theses were in Latin. He wasn’t trying to start trouble. That was how one scholar let other scholars know he wanted a debate. He would nail talking points to a church door. They were written in Latin so only other scholars could read them. Luther wanted to get a debate going concerning indulgences. Each thesis was a talking point for a debate. It’s believed that some unknown person translated them into German, ran them off on the printing press, and distributed them to the people. That was what upset Rome so much. He was getting the people stirred up.

What Was the Reformation About?

Some think that the Reformation was about money, that Luther objected to the sale of indulgences because the people couldn’t afford them. While it may be true that the Romans were using them as a fund raiser to get the capital needed to repair St. Peter’s, that wasn’t Luther’s main objection. First, indulgences were sold to get people released from Purgatory. There is no mention of such a place anywhere in Scripture. **2 Maccabees 12:46** mentions making atonement for the dead. But that’s not part of the canon of Scripture.

What Is Purgatory?

Purgatory is a place where Roman Catholics believe all Christians go to work off unconfessed sins. According to them, only sins that are explicitly confessed are forgiven. Since no one can name all their sins, everyone dies with unconfessed sin. Since no sin can enter heaven, something must be done with the sins of Christians so they can get in. Enter purgatory, where Christians go when they die, where they won’t be sinning, and over time, their sins will all be paid off. Indulgences buy time off from purgatory for yourself or a loved one.

What's the Bible Say?

Not only does the Bible not mention a purgatory, but it also shows no need for one. As **Romans 3:24** says, *everyone is justified by [Christ's] grace as a gift*. In **Hebrews 10** we read (read **Hebrews 10:11—14, 18**). Christ cleanses everyone from all sins, confessed or unconfessed. Purgatory and Indulgences obscure the cross of Christ. That was Luther's issue.

What's the Difference?

So, what's the difference? The doctrine of Justification. The Roman church says that Christ's death pays for original sin, and we must pay for the sins we commit. The Bible, and thus the Lutheran church says that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Let's look at our text again (read **Romans 3:21—25a**). Notice, the righteousness of God, which is the only righteousness that counts, doesn't come through the Law. If it did, we could earn it with good works. This righteousness is available to all who believe because it's received by faith. It's a gift of grace, so all we can do is humbly receive it. Christ is the propitiation. That means He, and He alone, satisfies the demand of God's righteousness. He satisfied that demand on the cross. He paid for our sins with His life, with His body and blood.

What Did Luther Do?

This teaching of Martin Luther was nothing new. The main reason I am a Lutheran was a class I took at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Webber taught us how to revitalize and restore worship to what it is supposed to be using what he called Ancient-Future Worship. This is re-connecting with the ancient church and bringing back elements of worship that have been lost and translating them into our context today. You don't hear about this in the Lutheran church because that's what Luther did. He bypassed the medieval church and re-connected with the ancient church. Every historical, confessional Lutheran church is still doing that today.

Does It Matter Today?

So, is it still a big deal today? Yes. In the words of Martin Luther: *The doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone is the pillar of the church. If we lose sight of that, we lose the church*. That's what we celebrate when we celebrate the Reformation, justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. That grace is communicated to us through Word and Sacrament. Faith comes by hearing the Word and, when we receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion in faith, we receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of our faith. Let us rejoice that, thanks to the Reformation, God's grace is still available for us today.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
