



“Re-Formation”

Reformation Sunday

5:30 p.m.

Saturday, October 24, 2015

The Reverend John H. Brock

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Romans 3:19-28](#); [John 8:31-36](#)

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We're not one Church, are we, the way the Church was in the first century after Jesus' resurrection? The church was one, but due to a lot of different things, some of which are

historical. Because, over a 1,000 years ago, we did have just the one Church.

The Roman Empire had arisen, flourished, split and fallen, only to pick itself up out of the ashes and attempt to move forward. The emperor Constantine, in the fourth century after Jesus' ascension, had built let's call it a "backup" capital in modern day Turkey, the land of his birth, and named the place after himself: Constantinople (or as we know it today, Istanbul). This became the capital for the eastern portion of the empire.

About 150 years later, when Rome fell to those Germanic tribes known as the Visigoths, and with the empire no longer united, the eastern portion had to fend for itself. Meanwhile, the

Church continued to build and grow and continue. But by the middle of the eleventh century, the Church itself split. The Western church continued to be headquartered in Rome; the Eastern Church based their central office out of Constantinople. Today, we know the Western church as the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Church we lump together and call the Orthodox Church. They're basically the same church. There were a few theological nuances, and some differences in the way worship happened, but for the most part, the split was due mainly to geography and ethnicity.

A drawback to the Western church, however, was that they, more or less, got stuck back in the fourth century. Worship was done, not in the

local language of wherever that congregation happened to be, but in *Latin*, which WAS the local language in the *fourth* century, when Christianity became legal. But Latin became the official language of the church, and it stayed that way, for over 1,000 years. Scripture was not allowed to be translated from Latin into local languages. “If it was good enough for Jesus to speak, then it’s good enough for us.” The Eastern Church didn’t keep quite as strong of a hold on worship and scripture, being far more likely to allow local languages to prevail, so as to better spread the message of God’s love to get out.

One of the strong emphasis of the Western Church was *Works Righteousness*: trying to earn God’s love. Doing enough good stuff, making

ourselves good enough, to get God to realize that I have earned my reward of going to heaven because of all the good things I have done in my life.

The Western church, also, started doing some other things that we might look at today as being questionable. Did you know that for a long time it was illegal for an individual to own a Bible? Bibles were so valuable, in fact, that they were often chained to the lectern from where they were read. Worship centered, not around the reading of scripture, but around Communion; Eucharist; the Bread & Wine, the Body & Blood. Scripture became at best a distant second.

And unfortunately, monetary gains and land acquisition had become more important to some of the church leaders than the actual spread of the gospel. Those goals of the church officials lead to some weird practices, like paying for the privilege of praying to relics.

What's a relic, you ask? Okay, so, say a person lives a really good life. They did their best to live out the message of the salvation. They fed the hungry, they clothed the naked, and they gave money to the poor. That person dies. But because that person is so well loved and respected, other people begin to attribute special powers to that persons' clothing, to the objects they owned, or even to their bodies. And so the belief grows that if you pray in the presence of these article, of these things (or

relics as they came to be called), then because of the faithfulness of the individual, the Lord God would give your prayers some extra special attention, and therefore, if you were praying in the presence of a relic, your prayers were far more likely to be answered in the way in which you want them to be answered (that thinking, by the way, is not scriptural in any way). There were even folks who purportedly had pieces of the “true cross of Christ,” and that, of course was supposed to be even *more* special than any other relic. There was one church leader who did not go along with relics who once said something like ‘If we ever gather together all of the pieces of wood that are supposed to be relics of the true cross of Christ, they would build not a cross, but a majestic tree, towering in the sky.’ But, if you WANT to

pray in the presence of a relic, then you have to pay for the privilege to do so. You have to pay to pray.

Another thing that happens during this time period: the Crusades. Now up until 1099 when Pope Pius sent out the first Crusade, to wrest the blessed holy land away from the infidel Muslims. They went to Jerusalem, where, a couple hundred years prior, the Muslims had taken control of the city. One of the interesting things, though, was that since the Muslims had begun ruling Jerusalem, the Jews, Christians, and Muslims had lived together in peace, and for the most part some pretty good prosperity. It wasn't until the Crusades came along that there began to be all that tension.

So all of this . . . stuff going on, all of this human-ness, all of this . . . sin, was going on in the church, in the western world, since the split of the Eastern & Western churches. And there began to spring up those who felt that these practices were just not quite right. That praying to relics; that purchasing pieces of paper saying you would be forgiven for committing a crime if you paid enough (those were called indulgences); that invading a perfectly peaceful country simply because the religious leader said the folks living there were not **worthy** of living there, were not what the Christian Church was supposed to be about.

There arose those within the church that began to call for the church to Re-form. So it's out of this background that people like John Wycliffe,

born in England (1330 - 1384) came about. He was an important theologian in Oxford. He taught that we must rely altogether on the sufferings of Christ. "Beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness" Wycliffe wrote.

Another such person was Jan Huss, born in the Czech Republic in 1371. He was greatly influenced by Wycliffe. He rejected indulgences and said *Christ* is the head of the Church, not the pope. And while Wycliffe died a natural death, Huss was burned at the stake as a heretic, for claiming that the pope was not the head of the church.

Over in Germany, in the late 1400's, a boy named Martin Luther was born. A few years

after him, in England, another fellow, William Tyndale is born. All of these folks, before Luther, and Luther himself, and his contemporaries, like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, & John Knox, all of these people were working, not to shut down the Church, but to change the Church. To try to bring it back to the way they understood the Church to be in scripture, to bring the Church to the way that they understood it to be as they lived out their faith.

Martin Luther, in writing his 95 Theses, was not looking to break the Church apart. He wanted to fix what he saw as a broken Church. And the primary reason he wanted to fix the brokenness is because of what he came across as he studied the Letter to the Romans:

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.

Or, as it is even clearer in the Letter to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2:8,9)

It is by grace we have been saved. Not by works righteousness. Not through good deeds. Not through praying to bones or cloaks or

pieces of wood. By grace we have been saved through faith. Faith which is given to us as a gift. We cannot **earn** that grace. We cannot **buy** that grace. We can never be *good enough* to be given that grace as a reward. Because God gives grace to all of us. God gives us that grace because we are loved. God gives us that grace, because we are saved. God gives us that grace, because we **are** sinful and unworthy. And because we are not worthy, that makes that gift of grace all the more precious.

Now that gift of grace calls us to live to live in a Christ-like manner. Doing good works will not buy us God's love, but we are called to do good works because that is how Christ calls us to live. Doing good works does not earn us God's love, or get us God points. God loves us

BECAUSE we are sinful, *because* we are lousy, *because* we are hurtful, human beings. God loves us also because God is always **re-forming** us. Taking us imperfect human beings, and making us new. Making us new by the gift of God's love, making us new by the grace of Christ, making us new by the blood that Jesus spilt on the cross.

So as we heard in John's gospel,

³⁶ if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Let us go forth, holding onto that freedom, indeed.

Amen.

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