The 509th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

Romans 1:16–17

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

Introduction –

This weekend, October 31st, as the world celebrates Halloween, the church celebrates the Protestant Reformation.

As I was visiting Wittenberg in 2024, I saw a book with the title Martin Luther, a Monk Changes the World. Even though that wasn't his goal, to begin with, he didn't want to separate from the Catholic Church; he just wanted to reform it.

He nailed the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg chapel. His ideas grew, spread, and ended up changing the whole world. In modern language: Luther posted a picture on the internet, people liked it, people shared it, and the movement went viral!

1. Does the Reformation really matter to our society nowadays?

I would say so. In Luther's world, Catholicism and the state were technically one entity. There was little freedom to choose, to innovate, or to see things from a different perspective. Democracy as we know it was a foreign concept.

With the Reformation came freedom: little by little, the state and the church began a long involuntary process of separation. "Religion shouldn't be forced onto you, just as a political party or ideology shouldn't be mandated onto the church."

Nowadays, there's a great sense of respect for human rights and the uniqueness of the individual. When we see freedom of speech, freedom of choice, democracy, universities, and developments in technology, we have much to thank the Reformation for.

However, when we see the government funding and controlling organizations and media outlets, "mandating" ideologies and political narratives, cancelling or prosecuting the opposition, and threatening to cut funds if there's no compliance, you start to see glimpses of the same issue Luther was dealing with in his day.

The underlying issue wasn't a religion, it was power — a timeless and universal struggle for mankind. Glimpses of the past are happening in our days.

For example: "No one has the right to tell others what to believe. But you must wear this T-shirt supporting Ice-Cream Day, and you must put this statement on your wall supporting Puppy Day—and just like that, you are being told what to do by the very state that 'limits' you to share your beliefs in the public square!"

2. Does the Reformation matter to our theology?

I would say so. As you know, the issue of purgatory and indulgences was the very thing that triggered Luther. He couldn't stand the idea that people could "buy God's favour with money." Moreover, upon visiting Rome, Luther was struck by the amount of luxury and indulgence in the Roman Catholic Church — it was pretty intense.

The world that we live in is secular, not in the sense that the state is separated from religion, but in the sense that people don't want to believe in or discuss religion. In Martin's days, however, God filled the world: arts, news, society, culture, education—every area of life was filled with the awe of God. You didn't need to go to church to hear about God; you could hear about Him everywhere.

For the sake of illustration, it was pretty much like the world I was born into (1994) and the world in which any adult or elder living in the West was raised.

In a world filled with the awe of God, the threat of hell was a good card to play for those in power. Purgatory was the doctrine of an intermediate state before a person could get into heaven. Their sins had to be "purged" in this dreadful place before Heaven could be achieved.

What was the solution to escape such an awful place? Indulgences. As the Roman Catholic Church was in need of money, why not use the threat of purgatory as a means of taking money out of people's pockets? Believers were now asked to "buy" their way out of purgatory with gold (and their loved ones' way out, too).

"The moment a coin hits the bottom of the offering plate, a soul is taken away from purgatory."

Application: Just a reminder! If you think that this kind of issue was left in the past, you are wrong; the gospel of prosperity is out and about to prove you wrong.

3. Does the Reformation matter to you?

I would say so. Luther believed everything he had been taught by the Catholic Church, as everybody else did. Nevertheless, he was a monk, a teacher of theology, and as he was studying the book of Romans in the original language, Romans 1:16–17

couldn’t get out of his sight: “The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel…” He didn’t see money, purgatory, indulgences, or good works; all he read was “gospel,” “faith,” and “righteousness.”

That was his aha moment, when he realized that God doesn’t save the believer because of his good works; rather, God saves believers because of the righteousness of Christ that is granted to everyone who believes—there are no costs or strings attached. This is what we like to call “salvation by grace alone,” “through faith alone,” “in Christ alone,” and “for the glory of God alone” (sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, soli Deo gloria).

Application: The church of his days taught that “righteousness” was received through money, penitence, good works, confessions, and whatever came in between. Luther realized that such righteousness is man-made—there’s no good news in that narrative. But the good news that the Bible teaches is the righteousness that comes from above: Christ’s righteousness is given to the believer from above, declaring him to be in good standing with God.

Last week, we talked about the miracle that Jesus performed in the synagogue, healing a lady who had been bent over for 18 long years. The religious leaders objected to the healing, saying, “There are six days on which healing can happen, but not on the Sabbath.” That echoes Moses and the Ten Commandments: “Obey the law, and God will bless you”—good works: salvation was completely attached to what I could do for God.

When salvation is attached to what we can give to God, we become anxious because, all of a sudden, the cross of Jesus is put to the side, and now what matters is me and what I can do for God.

It also makes you self-righteous or self-loathing. When you do good, you feel like God owes you a blessing and that you are better than the average. When you sin, you feel like God is coming after you, and woe to you!

That was the struggle that Luther himself had to go through. Before becoming a monk, he had set out to become a lawyer. He changed his career path only because he was afraid of dying during one of his travels, and he made a promise: “If I survive this trip, I will become a monk.”

As a monk, he would confess to the priest many times a day. Instead of loving God, he was scared of God. When he read the word “righteousness,” he read, “God will righteously punish me.” Thankfully, there was a shift in how he read this verse, a shift that was not intellectual but spiritual.

Many pastors argue that the average believer has the order of salvation wrong: I believe + I obey = I am saved. But what happened to Luther was a shift that must happen to every true believer: I believe = I am saved, and because I am saved, I obey. Not out of fear, need, or as a bargaining tool, but out of love and gratitude. Salvation doesn't depend on our obedience, but our obedience flows out of our salvation.

Conclusion — Romans 1:16–17, in Luther's own words:

"*You mean, here Paul is not talking about the righteousness by which God Himself is righteous, but about a righteousness that God gives freely by His grace to people who don't have righteousness of their own*."

"*Whoa, you mean the righteousness by which I will be saved is not mine?*" *It's a righteousness that properly belongs to somebody else. It's a righteousness that is outside of us. Namely, the righteousness of Christ*.

"*When I discovered that, I was born again of the Holy Ghost. And the doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through*." (Martin Luther)

My final and memorable words to all of you: Your prayer, your fasting, your church attendance, your good works (…) cannot make you better—no matter how hard you try. But if you understand what the Gospel is all about, your prayer, your fasting, your church attendance, your good works (…) will become much better.