

Remember the Reformation!

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One of the good gifts that God has given to human beings is that of memory and the facility to remember the past. Remembering our own personal past is absolutely vital to knowing who we are and having a sense of personal identity. We all know how diseases that ravage a person's memory destroy the ability of that person to function in any meaningful way in the present. The same holds true for communities and nations. When a community or nation forgets its past and where it has come from, it finds itself completely disoriented and ultimately unable to move head into the future. Not knowing where it has come from, it cannot chart a path to the future. Of course, like any good gift in our fallen world, this gift can be abused. It can bind a person, and even a community, to the past in hopeless regret or unforgiving bitterness or revengeful hatred.

But if it is true that knowledge of the past is vital to meaningful living in the present and the future, and I believe it is, then North American Evangelicalism faces a very uncertain future for we are living in a day when knowledge of our past as Evangelical Christians is abysmally low. Who were our forebears and what did they believe? What was their experience of God and how did that shape the churches they founded, churches which we have inherited? Far too many North American Evangelicals neither know nor do they care. In this regard, they are actually indistinguishable from North American culture, which is passionately in love with the present, eagerly anticipating the future, and totally disinterested in the past, or if nodding interest is shown in the past it is used as a vehicle for escapist entertainment. There is no serious grappling with the past to derive wisdom for the present or future. Evangelical forgetfulness of the past is thus actually a species of worldliness.

The Scriptures, on the other hand, make much of remembering:¹

- 1 Chronicles 16:12/Psalm 105:5: “Remember the wondrous works that he [that is, the Lord] has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered.”
- Hebrews 13:7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” [Note: this call to remembrance comes after the longest chapter in Hebrews, chapter 11, where God’s heroes of faith are remembered].
- Micah 6:5: “O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”
- Deuteronomy 24:9: “Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the way as you came out of Egypt.”²

In this year, we need to remember events and people from exactly five hundred years ago, from the end of the so-called Middle Ages, at the start of what has been called the modern world. We do so because the events of that time, the Reformation, have given rise to a host of Reformed and Evangelical churches that exist today. If the events of those revolutionary years had not happened things would be quite different today. We need to remember not only, though, to gain a better idea of where we have come from, but because people from that day can give us wisdom for the present day.

Speaking concisely, the Reformation was necessary because people during the Middle Ages forgot answers to three very important questions:

- What saves a person from judgment and hell?
- Who saves us from judgment and hell?
- How do we know the answers to these two questions?

Remembering what alone saves us

About twenty years ago an extremely learned theologian and scholar wrote this: “[Martin] Luther, in the conflict between his search for salvation and the tradition of the Church, ultimately came to experience the Church,

¹ All Scripture references are from the ESV.

² Cf. Luke 17:32: “Remember Lot’s wife.”

not as the guarantor, but as the adversary of salvation.”³ Those are the words of Joseph Ratzinger. At the time when he wrote these words, he was the Prefect of the Doctrine of the Faith for the Church of Rome, and later became Pope Benedict XVI. I do not for a moment think that the Pope has reversed the Roman Catholic Church’s stance on Luther – well summed up by the statement of the Council of Trent in 1563, when it was said, “If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone,” which Luther did, “let him be anathema.” But Ratzinger’s statement about the Church in the late Middle Ages is a totally accurate one. The late medieval Church had lost its way when it came to answering that vital question, which a Roman jailor in Philippi once asked, “what must I do to be saved?”⁴

On the basis of such passages as James 4:8 – “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you” – and Zechariah 1:3 – “Return to me...and I will return to you” – a number of mediæval theologians emphasized that a person who did his/her best on the basis of his/her natural ability would be rewarded with grace by God. If that person then co-operated with this grace – which was given regularly through the sacraments of the church – he or she would eventually win the reward of eternal life. In this understanding of salvation, one could initiate one’s own salvation and salvation was thus based on one’s faith and good works. But, at the time of the Reformation, the Reformers dared to question this perspective, and ask afresh: “What saves us – faith alone or faith and works? Grace alone, or grace and works?”

And when they came to realize that salvation is based on faith alone and they began to proclaim this great truth, the church in which they had been born and raised, the Roman Catholic Church, turned on them. Some it martyred, like William Tyndale; some it hounded out of their native land, like John Calvin; and some, whom it could not touch in either of these ways, it damned to hell, like Martin Luther.

Saving Martin Luther

Luther, for example, had spent ten years trying to find peace with God. He tried all of the recommended approaches of his day: he fasted and prayed; he stayed up all night and even whipped himself; he confessed his sins for hours on end to a confessor – but all to no avail. As he once said:

I was indeed a pious monk and kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say: If ever a monk gained heaven through monkery, it should have been I. All my monastic brethren who knew me will testify to this. I would have martyred myself to death with fasting,

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, trans. by Sister Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 196.

⁴ Acts 16:30.

praying, reading, and other good works had I remained a monk much longer.⁵

Luther sought to find peace with God through such works, but he was troubled by an overpowering fear of God's judgement. Again, listen to his words:

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule... Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession." Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it.⁶

In plainer language Luther later stated of himself, "If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy."⁷

When Luther and a host of others were saved – men like Guillaume Farel and John Calvin, William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer – they could but preach what they had found to be true: salvation is by faith alone and by grace alone. It is a salvation not based on our works, but based totally on Christ's works and Christ's merits. And the message that saved sinners then is the same one that saves sinners now. As Paul puts it in Titus 3:

[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy...so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5, 7).

And we preach that same message today, confident of this: it saved sinners then and can do so now.

Remembering Who alone saves us

It is important to note that when Martin Luther and the other Reformers protested against the church of their day, the main thrust of their attack was directed against the piety of the mediæval Roman Church. From the vantage-

⁵ Cited Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation. A narrative history related by contemporary observers and participants* (Repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 24.

⁶ Cited Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1988), 7.

⁷ Cited Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 315.

point of the Reformers, it was a piety that was shaped by superstition and man-made religion.

Late mediaeval men and women had a deep concern with death and judgement, a concern that was an outgrowth in part of what is known as the Black Death. A particularly powerful outbreak of the bubonic plague in the 1340s, the Black Death slew around 40% of the population of Western Europe. On the eve of the Black Death, for instance, the population of England and Wales stood between 4 to 5 million. By 1377 successive waves of the Black Death had reduced it to 1.5 million. The plague found ready soil in the unsanitary conditions of mediaeval society, for as one historian has put it, the Middle Ages was “a thousand years without a bath”! In the face of such massive death, where can security be found? One answer, and one that dominated the medieval church, was that safety and indeed salvation was to be found in the saints.

Look again at the experience of Martin Luther. He decided to become a monk after being caught in a thunderstorm on July 2, 1505, not far from the walls of the town of Erfurt in Saxony. He was returning to Erfurt after summer vacation. The previous spring he had gotten his B.A. at the university in Erfurt and he was now on his way back there to study for a law degree, which his father had encouraged him to get. But it was not to be.

Thunder clouds had built up, and suddenly the lightning flashed, a bolt striking right beside Martin, who was knocked to the ground, though unhurt, in terror he shouted out: ‘Beloved St Anne! I will become a monk.’ St. Anne was the patron saint of miners; Martin had heard prayers to her throughout his childhood perhaps more than to any other saint. ...In later years he described himself at the moment when the lightning struck as ‘walled around with the terror and horror of sudden death.’⁸

Twelve days later, on July 17, 1505, Luther knocked at the gate of the Augustinian order in Erfurt and asked to be accepted into their monastic ranks. When he later told his father of his decision, his father was quite angry that his son was not continuing with his studies. He asked Martin, “Do you not know that it is commanded to honour father and mother?” Luther’s response was that his terror in the thunderstorm had led him to become a monk. “I hope it was not the devil,” his father replied.⁹

Praying to the saints, though, robs Christ of his glory, for it makes the saints in part our saviours. The Reformers were thus led to ask: “Who saves us – Christ and the saints, or Christ alone?” And alongside this emphasis on the saints there was also a growing reverence for Mary. Especially from the twelfth century onwards, there was a rapid expansion of the cult of Mary. A

⁸ John M. Todd, *Luther. A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), 25-26.

⁹ Cited Hillerbrand, *Reformation*, 24.

synod in Paris in 1210, for example, required all professing believers to know the prayer Hail Mary along with the Creed and Lord's Prayer. And in 1349 – the year of the Black Death – it was claimed that God the Father had scheduled the world to end on September 10, but Mary had successfully asked him to postpone it.¹⁰ Thus, there arose in the late Middle Ages a contrast between Christ the judge and Mary the merciful intercessor. Again, the Reformers would pose this question to their contemporaries: “Who saves us – Christ or Christ and Mary?”

This question is still vital. In our pluralistic world, which is an integral part of the Canadian mosaic, few want to ask this question: “Who saves us? Christ alone – or Buddha or Allah or Mary?” The standard party line of multicultural Canada is that whatever answer you give you will get to the same place in the end. Honestly, such an answer is at best utterly wimpish – dare to take a stand! – and at worst, a denial of everything any follower of any of these figures holds dear. They cannot all be saviours. As the Reformers answered this question, so do we, for their answer was itself an answer based on words that were ancient – but ever new – in their day:

- 1 Corinthians 8:5-6: “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”
- Acts 4:12: “There is salvation in no one else [apart from Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

In other words, the Reformers remembered what many of their Roman Catholic contemporaries had forgotten: Jesus Christ alone – his sinless person and glorious work on the cross is enough, more than enough, to save sinners.

Remembering how we know truth

You will have noticed that again and again the Reformers went back to the Bible for their answers. They did not disparage all of the books that had been written about the Bible between their day and the first century when the Bible was finally finished. They treasured the books of early Christian authors like Irenaeus and Augustine and medieval figures like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus. But they did not take the writings of these men to be their final authority for what they believed and taught, for the simple reason that these

¹⁰ Adrian H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 339.

men's writings were not infallible and these men themselves looked to the Bible as their unerring guide and compendium of truth.

The Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages had come to believe that the Bible and certain teachings of the Church were the authority for what one believed and taught and practised. Not so the Reformers, who asked, "Where is authority to be found? In the Bible alone – or in the Bible and tradition?"

Nearly thirty years after the appearance of the first edition of Tyndale's New Testament in 1526, an English Protestant named John Rogers was on trial for his Christian faith in 1555. Rogers, who had been converted through Tyndale's witness, was told by Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester and the Lord Chancellor of Mary I and the man who was judging his case, that "thou canst prove nothing by the Scripture, the Scripture is dead: it must have a lively [i.e. living] expositor." "No," Rogers replied, "the Scriptures are alive." Scripture alone is sufficient to teach us how to know God and live lives that glorify him: 2 Timothy 3:15: "The sacred writings...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" for "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

