

Devotion – Twenty Second Week after Pentecost

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

This coming Sunday we will celebrate the Reformation. Since our heritage is the Scottish Presbyterian Church, we will celebrate some aspects of “Kirkin’ of the Tartans.” But why did the Reformation happen, and what does it mean to be Reformed? To many of us, that may just mean we’re not Roman Catholic or Orthodox. So let’s explore the causes of this major worldwide revolution in theology.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Protestant Reformation didn’t start with Martin Luther. It really began with the Renaissance, at the end of the Middle Ages, in the 14th and 15th centuries. The intellectual basis of the Renaissance was its version of humanism, derived from the concept of Roman *humanitas* and the rediscovery of classical Greek philosophy. This new thinking became manifest in art, architecture, politics, science and literature. Examples are the use of perspective in painting, so that characters didn’t appear two-dimensional. Literature written in native languages became popular. And the printing press, designed by Gutenberg in the 1430’s, resulted in the first printed Bible in 1456 that lay people could purchase. In this movement of new focus on learning, Catholic theologians and philosophers began to question the church, some of its questionable practices, and the authority of the Pope. Priests were known to be corrupt, to marry in secret, and to take bribes. The Pope also appeared to be corrupt when it came to raising funds for the church.

The first well-known “reformer” was John Wycliffe from England. He opposed private confession to a priest, he began an English translation of the Bible, he said there was no basis for purgatory, he opposed taxation by the Catholic Church, and he said there was no basis in the Bible for a Pope. After his death in 1384, he was declared a heretic, his remains were dug up and thrown into the river, and his writings were burned. However, the Wycliffe Bible survived in secret.

Jan Hus, from Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), preached sermons in Czech rather than Latin, opposed indulgences to redeem one’s life, and wrote treatises arguing that Christ alone was the head of the church. He was burned at the stake in 1415.

Erasmus, a Dutch monk, published the first printed text of a Greek New Testament in 1516. The church had been using the Latin Vulgate version of the New Testament for a thousand years. He attacked papal abuses in his writings.

Martin Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1517 from Germany, and was horrified at the extravagant living and immorality in the Papal Palace, as well as the open selling of indulgences to absolve one of sins, even future sins. The money was being raised by the Pope to build the Vatican. He submitted 95 theses about issues with the Catholic church on the Wittenberg University bulletin board in 1517 and asked for an open debate to discuss the matters. His students translated the theses from Latin to German and sent them to a printer. The document became a best seller and created a firestorm! Luther’s primary theology can be summarized by the five “solas”:

Sola Scriptura – scripture alone – the Bible is our highest authority

Sola Fide – faith alone – we are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ

Sola Gratia – grace alone – we are saved by the grace of God alone

Solus Christus – Christ alone – Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Savior, and King

Soli Deo Gloria – to the glory of God alone – we live for that glory alone

Luther believed that authority comes from the Scriptures, not decrees from the Pope or priests, and that common people can read and understand Scripture without need for interpretation by a priest, so each person should be able to study the Word in his/her native language. He translated the Bible into German.

Other reformers quickly followed: Huldrych Zwingli who worked to reform the Swiss Catholic church. He promoted austerity in worship – no images of any kind in the church, or organs. Only the Psalms should be sung, and a capella instead of with instruments. He stated that Communion was representative of Christ’s body and blood – that “this is my body” is metaphorical, because Christ’s body is seated at the right hand of the father.

John Calvin settled in Switzerland in 1535 and produced the *Institutes of Christian Religion* a year later. He believed in only four offices in the Church: pastor, doctor/teacher, elder, and deacon. He preached every day, often for several hours, and went through the Bible in order. His form of government has been adopted by the Presbyterian and several other Protestant churches.

John Knox studied with Calvin and returned to Scotland under the reign of Elizabeth I. He helped write the Scots Confession in four days in 1560, the foundation of the Scottish Presbyterian Church.

Other Reformed churches were founded throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries: the Huguenot Protestant church in France in the 1550s, the Baptist church founded by John Smyth in England in the early 1600s, the Quaker movement in England in the mid 1600s founded by George Fox, the Mennonite movement founded in the Netherlands by Menno Simons, and the Methodist movement founded by the Wesley brothers in the 1730s.

The Thirty Years War from 1617-1648 ended control by the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor of much of Europe and spread Protestantism across the area. Today, over 40% of the 2.5 billion Christians in the world are Protestant, with the fastest growing population in Africa. The United States has the largest Protestant population in the world.

So we will celebrate this heritage on Sunday, recognizing all of the countries from which our Protestant ancestors have come, and especially the contributions of John Calvin and John Knox to our Presbyterian heritage. So come, wear something to celebrate your ethnic Protestant heritage, and enjoy special music from the bagpipes and choir!

Jeanne