

SERMON 2 TIMOTHY 3 IT'S REFORMATION TIME

October 27, 2024

Today is Reformation Sunday. Now I usually don't preach on the Reformation, but I think we should occasionally discuss it, and its significance on the church today. Reformation, also referred to as the Protestant Reformation, was a separation from the Roman Catholic Church initiated by Martin Luther and continued by John Calvin and other Protestant Reformers in 16th century Europe.

The stormy conflict began on October 31, 1517, in Wittenberg, Germany, when Luther, a Catholic priest, made a list of ninety-five complaints against the Catholic Church and nailed that list to the door of the Cathedral in Wittenberg.

Now those of you who were raised in the Lutheran Church probably know more about this than I do. You also may have heard about the Lutheran pastor who was teaching a confirmation class on the sacraments of the church when he noticed that little Johnny at the back of the room was not paying attention. So to get his attention, he said loudly: "Johnny, pay attention; the sacraments are very important to the church."

"I know that," Johnny replied. "Then how many sacraments are there in the Lutheran Church?" the pastor asked. Johnny paused in serious thought and then guessed: "Two." The pastor was impressed; he could not believe that Johnny got it right. So he asked Johnny: "And what are the two sacraments?" With confidence, Johnny quickly replied: "Coffee and potlucks!"

Now Martin Luther's deep concern about the condition of the Catholic Church ignited the greatest upheaval in centuries within the church. This act resulted in a major division within the Church between those who wanted change and those who wanted the status quo. Fearing for Luther's safety, a sympathetic friend led him to the shelter of a castle. It was there that Luther experienced the renewed protection and comfort of a mighty God. Within his temporary hiding place, God's Word became more alive and vibrant for him.

During those days of solitude, prayer, and Bible study, Luther began a translation of the Bible from Latin into German. Up to this time, only the priests had access to the Bible. However, Luther believed that "All people must be able to read God's Word for themselves."

Luther also believed that congregational singing should be allowed. "The devil, who is the originator of sorrowful anxieties and restless thoughts, flees before the sound of God's music almost as much as before the Word of God," Luther observed. With that inspiration, he composed the hymn that we sang earlier "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which is a bold affirmation of a powerful and a loving God.

This nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses by Luther on the church doors had a significant impact on the church as we know it today, resulting in major changes. Unfortunately, throughout history, the church has forgotten its mission and drifted away from God, time and time again; thus, changes were periodically necessary.

By the time of Jesus, the Jewish religion had become obsessed with following a set of manmade rules and regulations, instead of God. People were trying to earn their salvation and favor with God. They were trying to put God in their debt by following a checklist. In other words, if I follow this rule and that rule, then God owes me; He has to do something good for me. It's like trying to get your children or grandchildren to behave by promising them some treat or gift.

Jesus came to free us from this bondage of rules and regulations, and to re-establish the personal relationship between God and His children. When asked by a lawyer what was the greatest commandment, Jesus reduced the Ten Commandments and all the Jewish manmade rules and regulations into two simple commands: love God and love neighbor.

It's that simple; put God first and seek the best for others, and everything else will fall into place. Jesus came to show us that it's a relationship, not a religion. We can't earn our salvation; it is a gift, freely given by a loving God to all who believe and accept His Son Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The Early Church understood this and because of their devotion to the Lord, Christianity quickly spread throughout the known world at that time. But as the Church grew, it started to revert back to its old ways and became more of a business with more and more rules and regulations. In addition, the Church became more political, wealthier and corrupt.

By the time of Luther, the Church was selling indulgences for sins; in other words, your sin could be wiped out by paying a certain amount to the church. Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses centered around two beliefs: the Bible is the central religious authority and salvation comes by faith and not works; salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned. Jesus Christ paid the price once and for all for our sins on the cross at Calvary; our sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, not the Church.

The Protestant Reformation brought about necessary changes in the church and tried to re-direct it back to the way God intended. But unfortunately, as time has gone by, we are again reverting back to some of the old ways. In many cases, the church has become more of a business and focused more on money, membership, buildings, and minor theological issues that are pulling it apart instead of the two commandments of Jesus: love God, love neighbor.

The Apostle Paul, who established many of the early churches, understood this problem. Most of his letters in the New Testament were written to provide guidance to struggling churches who were going through growing pains. In Second Timothy, Chapters 3 and 4, Paul warns his young protégé Timothy about this problem. Listen to Paul's prediction for the church in the first five verses of Chapter 3, and verses three and four in Chapter 4 of 2 Timothy.

Read 2 Timothy 3:1-5 and 4:3-4

Doesn't this describe our world today? Do Paul's words reflect the world we are living in today? Are we self-centered, trying to accumulate the most toys, proud, arrogant, unloving, ungrateful, and wanting teachers and preachers to justify our lifestyle? Is the Church fulfilling its spiritual role, remaining faithful to its calling or is it conforming more and more with the values of the world?

Now the one warning that caught my attention was the reference to itching ears. People wanting to hear biblical interpretation that matches their personal opinions and biases, not spiritually true or as the *Message* put it: "people with no stomach for solid teaching, but filling up with spiritual junk food – catchy opinions that tickle their fancy." Do you think that it's time for another reformation? Now I'm definitely not Martin Luther and could never come up with Ninety-Five Theses, but I do have four thoughts for your consideration.

First, the Church needs to remember who the real Boss is. In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul describes the church as a body with Jesus Christ as the head. Many of the problems of the church today are the result of forgetting who is really in charge. Instead, we try to operate the church as a business, seeking our own agenda and not God's.

We blindly follow the lead of human CEO's such as bishops, the Pope and even pastors without consulting the real CEO Jesus Christ. More than thirty years ago, two professors from Duke University wrote a strong indictment against mainline Protestant churches. They accused the mainline churches of conducting their business as if God didn't really matter, as if God was not here.

I remember attending a meeting of the pastors and laity of the Albuquerque District a few years ago. In his report on the good news in the Conference, the Provost highlighted the giving to UMCOR, the giving to the Conference through our tithes, and worship attendance. Now doesn't that sound like a business report to the stockholders of a company?

However, that's not what Jesus Christ is interested in; there was no mention on the numbers of souls saved, the number of professions of faith, the number of people fed, or the number of mission trips. The report focused entirely on internal statistics and not outreach or missions. It's no wonder that we close one or two churches each year here in New Mexico.

Second, the Church needs to remember the mission that Jesus gave it in Matthew 28:19-20 – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Jesus knew that sometimes we humans tend to forget things, so He repeated it again right before He ascended back into heaven in Acts 1:8 – “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Do you think that Jesus needs to repeat this a third time to the Church?

At the meeting I just mentioned, we had round table discussions on three questions. The first question was: “What's our mission?” I don't know why they asked that; I think, or at least, I hope that most of the people in the room knew what our Boss Jesus Christ has already told us; make disciples.

A better question would have been: “How are we fulfilling our mission from Jesus Christ?” And to the credit of those in attendance, most of the answers were directed at the ways to fulfill the mission. As we have discussed previously in the Parable of the Sower from the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we are to sow the seeds of the Good News at every opportunity and everywhere we can; not worrying about where the seeds fall. We are to make people thirsty for Jesus Christ. We are also called to make God visible through acts of love and kindness such as demonstrated by our many mission and outreach programs.

Third, the Church needs to remember the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and the Church was born. It was a powerful moment; however, over the years we have neglected the power that God offers us through the Holy Spirit and tried to rely more and more on our own power and strength. Unfortunately, as we have discussed before, we don’t take advantage of even a small percentage of this power that is at our finger tips.

There’s a story about a preacher, who went to England and visited the chapel on Aldersgate Street where John Wesley had his heart warming experience. Now the original chapel is no longer there, but it was there when this minister visited. As he walked inside, he started looking for the pew where Wesley had his unique experience, but it took a while because the chapel was dimly lit. Finally, he found it up near the front. Evidently, Wesley was not a true Methodist because he liked to sit up front and not on the back row.

There was a small plaque on the side of the pew with a small light above it. The minister knelt down and read the plaque: "On May 24, 1738, here John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed." The preacher then got up and decided to go sit at the back of the chapel under the balcony to meditate on the moment, to pray, and to gather his thoughts.

As he sat there, suddenly the doors of the chapel flung open and a grungy old man in an overcoat came in and walked down the aisle. He came to the Wesley pew and read the plaque where Wesley had felt his heart strangely warmed. Then the man fell to his knees, looked towards heaven, threw his arms up, and cried out loud: "Do it again, Lord, do it again!"

Someone has said that the difference between physical and spiritual power is that you use physical power, but spiritual power uses you. Ever since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been trying to use Christians to spread the gospel and build God's kingdom here on earth.

We have seen the power in Peter and the other disciples, Paul, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Dwight L. Moody, Peter Marshall, Billy Graham, and others. However, we need the Lord to do it again! Are we, as individuals and a church, willing to be used by the Spirit? Are we willing to tap into the power that is available to us?

Finally, the Church needs to remember its roots, the foundation of the Early Church. We as a church collectively have not lived up to what God wants us to be. We have gotten complacent, lazy and lost our focus on serving God and following Jesus Christ.

In many cases we have turned inward and become a social club and not fulfilled the Great Commission. Vance Havner said that “today much of the professing church has gone in for theatrics, running a showboat instead of a lifeboat, staging a performance instead of living an experience.”

We need to return to the roots of the Early Church as described in the second chapter of Acts. We have discussed this passage before; do you remember the characteristics of the Early Church, why it was growing? It was a learning church; its members were always studying God’s Word.

It was a worshipping church; the members gathered together as often as possible. It has been said that worship is a stairway on which there is movement in both directions; God comes to us, and we go to God. It was a church of fellowship; they shared their joys and concerns, carried each other’s burdens; there was a sense of community. It was a praying church; when we fail to be a praying church, we cease to exist; prayer is our lifeline. Finally, it was a sharing church; it was a church that cared and loved their neighbors.

Now I’m not going to nail my four complaints to the church doors because they are glass and that would upset Bruce and the Trustees. While these are basically my thoughts about the overall church, they also apply to us right here in Rio Rancho. In addition, while we cannot control what happens in other churches, the Conference, or the denomination, we can strive to be the church God wants and needs here in Rio Rancho.

Let us continue to focus on the two commandments: love God and love neighbor. Let us continue to seek God's guidance through daily prayer. Let us continue to sow the seeds of the Good News all over this community. And let us continue to reach out in love to our neighbors through our mission projects. Who knows, we might just make a difference not only here, but throughout the church universal. Amen