

The Reformation: The Power of the Truth

John 8:31-36

The Holy Scriptures instruct us: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). We do that on Reformation Sunday as we recall the life and legacy of Martin Luther who 494 years ago tomorrow, October 31st, nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Of course Luther was not alone in his confession of the truth. Others such as C.F.W. Walther, a German immigrant pastor and one of the founders of the Missouri Synod, whose 200th birthday was observed this past Tuesday. Closer to our own time was a learned and courageous pastor and professor, Hermann Sasse who was deeply committed to authentic, confessional Lutheranism in the face of challenges raised by Hitler and Nazism in Germany in the middle of the last century.

In an essay written just prior to WWII in 1938, Sasse penned these words: “Where man can no longer bear the truth, he cannot live without the lie” (*Union and Confession*, 1). In this wonderfully lucid little booklet, Sasse goes on to contrast the truth with the lie. He notes that from the beginning the lie and the truth have done battle within the church. So it was in the days of the apostles as Paul said to the congregation at Corinth: “For there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (I Cor. 11:17). The lie, Sasse said, takes on various forms. There is the **pious lie**, that hypocrisy with which man lies to himself, to others, and even to God. The pious lie easily becomes the **edifying lie**. This is the lie that takes comfort in untruth. Sasse sees an example of the edifying lie embraced by medieval Christians when they trusted in the power of the saints, relying on the excess of their merit to further them in the struggle toward righteousness. The edifying lie was the lie unmasked and expelled by the Reformation. Then there is the **dogmatic lie**, the assertion that we have come to greater doctrinal maturity and old teachings are to be changed for a more contemporary, relevant theology. Finally there is, Sasse warned, the **institutional lie** when the churches embody the lie in their own life, instituting false teaching as normative. Here we need only think of the churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America just two years ago instituting the blessing of same sex unions and the ordination of homosexuals into the ministry.

The contest between the truth and lie has a long history; it goes back to our first parents when the serpent uttered those beguiling words to Eve: “Did God really say?” Of course, the serpent did not stop with questioning the words of the Lord; he cunningly contradicted God, called Him a liar, saying “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). Eve believed the lie; she was deceived and misled into false belief.

The battle between God’s truth and Satan’s lie rages on down through the corridors of Israel’s history as unholy priests, false shepherds, lying prophets distort and pervert the

word of the Lord. The lie seduces not only the children of Abraham but the whole of humanity so Paul describes our common plight: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped the Creator, who is blessed forever” (Rom. 1:24-25).

Those who do not know the truth cannot recognize falsehood. So the Jews in our text from John’s Gospel boast: “We are the offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.” The Lord who is Truth Incarnate stands there in their midst and yet they cannot recognize Him. Proud of their lineage of liberty, these Jews apparently do not remember their own history which included decades of bondage in old Pharaoh’s land where they were subjected to back-breaking labor. The memory of seventy years of captivity in Babylon must have been erased. And even as they stand there on the streets of Jerusalem, can’t they see the Roman soldier’s patrolling the streets and Caesar’s imperial banner waving above the holy city?

The lie enslaves; it holds hearts and minds captive. The lie promises pleasure but it delivers pain. The lie promises heaven but serves up hell.

The lie would emerge in the life of the church as human merit and worthiness aided of course by God’s grace was thought to be sufficient to lead to salvation. Indulgences were sold as though grace was a commodity that could be purchased for a price enabling the client to progress toward eternity with the confidence that sins had been paid for, at least in part. “It was a false, misleading dream that God His Law had given; that sinners could themselves redeem and by their works gain heaven” (LSB 555:3). Luther unmasked that lie and before world confessed that sinners are justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. That is the truth which saves.

But we must not think that the struggle between the lie and the truth ended with the Reformation. It is a contest which continues on –even today- and it will until the Day of the Lord’s coming in glory. For the temptation to believe the lie remains: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (I John 1:8). Pilate’s ancient and skeptical question emerges ever anew: “What is truth?” This question is not heard only in the world where we might expect it, but also even in the church.

As long as the lie asserts itself saying there is no sin or my sin is something I can reasonably handle by my own efforts or manage by own devices, the Reformation is not obsolete. Remember the words of Sasse: “Where man can no longer bear the truth, he cannot live without the lie.” Unable to bear the truth about ourselves and our sin, we embrace the lie. It may be a pious lie or an edifying lie; it may be a dogmatic lie or an institutional lie, but it is a lie. It is the lie of one who proudly proclaims himself to be free and yet is enslaved: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). And Jesus goes on to say that the slave does not remain in the house forever, but the son does remain. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

This is the Gospel that Luther heard and believed – the glad news that on account of Christ Jesus crucified for our sins and raised again for our justification- sinners are set free. This is the freedom that comes only through the blood-bought forgiveness of sins won by Jesus. On account of Him, the Apostle John says “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9). That is the truth which is Luther’s legacy to us and it dispels the lie. To celebrate Reformation Day is put our “Amen” to this Gospel confessed with such clarity and boldness by Martin Luther and to pray that by God’s grace we might be firm and steadfast in confessing that truth in our generation, a truth that will endure for God is Faithful and His Word will not return to Him empty. Amen.

Prof. John T. Pless