

REFORMATION RESOLUTIONS: NEW YEAR'S DAY 2009

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Texts: Romans 5:8-10

INTRODUCTION:

Do you know what January 1st is? Well, yes, it is New Year's Day. But today also is a day in which we celebrate the idea that "Today, a child was born." No, not that child, whose birth we celebrated last week. Another child was born on New Year's Day in 1484!!!

How many of you have heard of Huldreich Zwingli? Not many; I thought that would be the case. Zwingli (1484-1531) was one of the first generation figures in the Protestant Reformation. He was born less than two months after Martin Luther, who is credited with beginning the Reformation by posting what is known as his "95 Theses" on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Saxony on October 31, 1517 (Halloween).

Let me tell you a little bit about Zwingli because we who are Baptists have a few connections with him. He became well-educated and was a Swiss humanist. The humanists at this time were primarily Christians who elevated the role of humanity, stressed the importance of faith and reason, and were well known for their study of the ancient writings. Zwingli came under the influence of Erasmus, a Dutch humanist who prepared the first published Greek New Testament. This Greek version became the foundation for translating the New Testament into other languages, including Martin Luther's German New Testament, and William Tyndale's English New Testament, which was very influential on the King James Version of the Bible. Zwingli placed great emphasis on the teaching of the Bible and was a dedicated Biblical student. This dedication to the Scriptures in the original languages became a major influence in his reforming views.

Zwingli was also a priest. He served ten years at Glarus. He then served at Einsiedeln during 1516-1517 (when Luther's reform began). He later confessed that during this time he had an affair, which he called a "celibacy slip." This illustrated one of the problems of the Catholic Church during these days, which was a requirement that priests remain celibate and were not allowed to marry. Later in 1524, Zwingli married Anna Reinhard, the widow with whom he had lived for a few years, as a rejection of the Church's policy and also an expression of Protestantism. Most of the reformers took wives to demonstrate their reforming views.

In 1518 he became pastor and preacher at Zurich. He preached against indulgences as a means for forgiveness of sins. He began to preach in the language of the people. By 1520 he was emphasizing the authority of the Scriptures in matters of faith and practice. In 1523 he influenced the Zurich city council of his reforming views by presenting 67 articles that contained three important views: the authority of the Scriptures, justification by faith alone, and approval of clerical marriage. His views were adopted.

However, conflict resulted in the ranks. Zwingli continued to support infant baptism, while some of his followers asserted that the Scriptures taught adult baptism of believers. A split took place, indicating a Baptist tendency. Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and others started a movement called the Anabaptists, or ReBaptizers because they had been baptized as infants and were now being baptized as adults. Later, when many were drowned as martyrs because of their convictions, they experienced what was called the third (and final) baptism. We who are Baptists have a lot in common with the Anabaptists, and they are certainly first cousins spiritually.

Zwingli also adopted what is called the Symbolic Memorial view of the Lord's Supper. This position holds that the elements of the bread and wine are only a symbol and have no sacramental grace for those who participate in the Supper. Baptists, who arose later, have practiced Zwingli's position from their very beginnings.

Zwingli and Luther failed in an attempt to unite their movements in 1529. Two years later in 1531 Zwingli tried to impose his reforming views on five Catholic Swiss cantons, like counties, and was killed in battle. His body was quartered and burned, his ashes were mixed with those of swine and were then cast into the wind. It was not totally popular to be a reformer during such days. Not too many years later, his movement was absorbed into that of John Calvin of Geneva. This became known as the Reformed tradition, which also included Presbyterianism in Scotland, English Independency and Congregationalism and the New England Puritans, and the English Particular Baptists and the Regular Baptists of the American colonies.

REFORMATION RESOLUTIONS

So how do we make sense of this in the 21st century? On a day when we like to make resolutions I propose that we adopt what I call Reformation Resolutions. There are three important principles that characterized most of those identified with the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. They are the authority of the Scriptures, justification by faith, and the priesthood of the believer.

I. The Authority of the Scriptures

How do you justify a Reformation, or more realistically a revolt? You start with an appeal to a higher authority. The Roman Catholic Church appealed to both the Scriptures and to church tradition, and if there seemed to be a conflict, tradition won out. Services were in Latin and only priests could interpret the Bible.

The Reformers appealed to the sole or the supreme authority of the Scriptures. The Bible was the foundation for both faith and practice. The Reformers would not agree on the proper interpretation of issues, like church polity, or the ordinances or sacraments, or the forms of worship, or theological positions. But they did agree that the starting point was the Scriptures.

The Reformers also agreed with individuals like John Wycliffe from an earlier century that every person had a right and responsibility to read and study the Scriptures. To do this they needed to be able to read the Bible in their own language. One of the major results of the Reformation was the translation of the Bible into so many native tongues. The invention of the printing press in the 1400s was a significant contribution to the task of Biblical translation.

If we are to make a difference in the 21st century, we need to understand and apply Biblical teachings. From my own journey I would suggest to you that the Bible is not simply a book of rules and regulations, nor are we confined to a flat Bible when it comes to interpretation. The dangers of such an approach are Bibliolatry and selective literalism, and selective ethics.

After years of both study and teaching I came to the conclusion that the Bible is the result of faith, written by religious pilgrims on a faith journey. They responded to their convictions that God had revealed himself to each one of them. They then applied their understanding of that revelation to their culture and their world.

What does "Whosoever believes in Him (Jesus) should not perish but have everlasting life" mean to us today? The early Christians had to figure out what it meant to Samaritans, God-fearers, Gentiles, Romans, pagans, etc. What does "whosoever will" mean today? Paul spent three chapters on the issue of whether eating meat sacrificed to idols was OK. In the end he said "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." What does that mean to us today in a world of diverse ideas and practices? When there was conflict within the church, Paul would write "Whatever you do, do it peaceably and in order." How do we apply these teachings to our generation?

The answer lies in the belief that God has given us the freedom and responsibility to make decisions on issues, including those that are peculiar to the 21st century. We cannot shirk this responsibility. We can look to the principles of the Bible and observe how those who came before us responded to their time with the good news.

I suggest that we seek to understand the Biblical principles found in the Bible and apply them to the 21st century. It may be that the Bible points us to the questions and not always the answers. What does faith mean in the 21st century and how do we express it and share it? I believe that we should begin by looking for the workings of God in our society and then seek to find ways to apply Biblical principles and participate in those workings.

II. Justification by Faith Alone

Justification by faith is one of the great teachings of both the Bible and the Reformation. The phrase "justification by faith" is found four times in the Scriptures - Habakkuk, Galatians, Romans, and Hebrews. Maybe it's important?

Jesus taught that we are not made right with God through keeping the law or through practice of particular religious rituals, although he did not demean such. He called upon us to have faith, like that of little children. We are to have trust and confidence in the love and goodness of God. Paul, a legalist of all legalists initially, after his conversion called upon a faith that was freeing for believers. He wrote to the Galatians that "For freedom Christ has set you free."

So many Christians today start out with a freeing faith. Yet, too often they transition to a legalistic approach. Faith becomes rules, regulations, adherence to orthodox doctrines or ethical principles. Before long faith has been replaced with a narrow, binding legalism.

Let me give you an example. Have you noticed how for many years there has been such a battle in the public sector over the Ten Commandments? Many Christians are outraged that we can't place the Decalogue in courtrooms or on the walls of official state and federal buildings, or in classrooms. Now, I like the Ten Commandments. They are a nice set of rules that if we all followed them we would have a better society.

But Jesus didn't call for us to be legalists. Read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 ff. He called upon us to examine our attitudes and our motives as the sources for our ethical decisions. If we can change them we will go far beyond the law. He called upon us not to follow laws written in stone but to love that flows from the heart. He called upon us to have the faith of little children, to trust God, to love one another. He summarized the greatest commandment in terms of loving God and loving our neighbor.

Why would Christians do battle over the Ten Commandments when Jesus called upon us to be people of faith? Why would Paul suffer rejection, beatings, and imprisonment to insist upon faith over law? Because faith is the better way.

And one other thing, faith is not a set of beliefs, it is not a set of ethical principles, it is a way of life. The just shall live by faith. Martin Luther after a journey through a sacramental church and life of denial in a monastery, discovered as a university professor in the teachings of the Bible that wonderful principle that "the just shall live by faith," and from there launched the Protestant Reformation, the most important Christian movement following the rise of the New Testament Christianity.

III. The Priesthood of the Believer

The third great teaching of the Reformation flowed out of the doctrine of justification by faith. Luther and those who followed him believed in the priesthood of all believers. They taught that we need no human mediator to approach God. Rather we approach Him directly through our faith in Christ. No human stands between the believer and God, neither can anyone else answer for us. Through faith alone we experience the grace of God and the love of God. We do not need sacraments through which God's grace is mediated, nor do we need priests to administer the sacraments properly. We approach God through faith alone.

Luther also emphasized the fact that all believers were in a sense spiritual priests who could interpret the Scriptures themselves. Congregations could choose their own ministers. Believers answered to God on matters of faith, theology, and exercise of one's faith.

And, they served in a priestly manner to those who were separated from God or who needed the ministry of the church. Christian rights were also Christian responsibilities. We were to share with others that which we had received through faith in Christ. So, being a priest is both a blessing and a burden, which has been given to all believers.

CONCLUSIONS: Today in modern Zurich there is a statue of Zwingli not far from the Grossmunster Church where he pastured. His eyes have a cold, steely look to them. In his arms there rests a Bible, and his two hands are clasped upon the handle of a huge sword upon which he seems to be leaning. The statue symbolizes a man committed to both the Scriptures and to the power of civil authority. The first was the basis of his reforms, the second the basis for his untimely death (He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword).

In 1983 I traveled to Europe for the first time on a tour that celebrated the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. When I returned I told Janis of the beautiful stained glass windows in the cathedrals and churches. That Christmas Janis gave me a small stained glass window comprised of seven symbols of my vocation as a professor of the history of Christianity that she had made for my office. The churches in Europe have different weather vanes symbolizing their respective faiths. The cross symbolized the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the voluntary sacrifice of Christ. The swan symbolized Luther's Reformation - Jon Hus had been burned at the stake in the fifteenth century and supposedly stated that "You have burned the goose but a swan shall arise from my ashes." Luther was that swan. The rooster symbolized the Reformed tradition. Some say it was a symbol of religious freedom. I hold to the view that it was a satirical symbol against the Roman church who claims Peter as its first Pope. The rooster symbolizes the idea that Peter denied Christ three times. Anyway, all three symbols are in the window. An open Bible is also there, which symbolizes the freedom that all believers have in studying, interpreting, and applying the Scriptures. There is also a shelf of books, symbolizing the professor and scholar, as well as the invention of the printing press, which was so important in the spread of ideas. In the background of these symbols there is a division from one corner to another. In the lower section there is a wavy, blue glass, which symbolizes the international missions for which the people called Baptists led the way. In the upper section is the color red, symbolizing the martyrs, who gave their lives for their faith. Janis thinks that I secretly desire to be a martyr. And my goal is to die for my faith - at age 108. The bottom line is that the window symbolizes who I am and I treasure it.

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In the 21st century we can learn from the good that came from Zwingli, Luther and other reformers. Today we can make New Year's Resolutions to commit to the teaching of the Scriptures, the foundation of our Christian commitment upon the principle of justification by faith, and the practice of the priesthood of the believer.

Should someone choose to create a statue of a stained glass window of us who are here this morning, I would hope that it would reflect the positive contributions based upon our Reformation Resolutions. I would hope that they would see in our eyes the love for God and for our neighbors.

Maybe we should have statues or scenes of others of all races and creeds surrounding us. I would hope that they would see our love for the Scriptures with the presence of a Bible in one hand, with possibly a globe of the earth resting on it symbolizing not only our love for the Scriptures but our commitment to practicing its teaching throughout the world. Our freedom through faith might be expressed by broken shackles at our feet with a gaze toward the heavens symbolizing our dependence upon God, and our commitment to serve in a priestly or ministering manner to others who need God's grace and love with an outstretched hand to those around us.

Maybe you have some better ideas. But I encourage you to resolve to love the Bible by serving the One to Whom it points, to practice Christian freedom through your faith, and to seek to minister to those whom you encounter in your daily lives.