

Sunday 29th. October 2017
Reformation and Communion

On all Saints Day, 1st. October 1517, an obscure theology teacher named Martin Luther, nailed a list of 95 propositions, or thesis to the Wittenberg Church door, as topics worthy and necessary to debate. What gave rise to this was his recent conversion experience, and the realization that the religious status quo was keeping his beloved fellow countrymen in spiritual darkness, blindness and death.

The printing press had newly been invented, and unbeknown to him, many of his students had copied his '95 Thesis' and spread it far and wide, so the interest in what he was stating not only hit the nerve of many people, but reached far and wide.

Luther's main concern was regarding the sale of Indulgencies. An indulgence was a Papal paper that promised a reduction of time in Purgatory in exchange for a fee! The then Pope, Leo X had a grand building project, St. Peters Basilica in Rome, and wanted to raise some money, hence the wide scale promotion and sale of Indulgencies. To put it crudely, an indulgence was a get out of jail free card, a thing that does not exist!

The chief salesman of Indulgencies, a Dominican itinerate called John Tetzel was very good at his job and was a real salesman! His best known sales line was, 'As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs.'

Luther was an extremely zealous man and had an over sensitive conscience. It was said that before his conversion, he could spend three hours confessing his sin, and then try to return almost immediately to confess his pride at the depth of his confession! He was sent on a trip to Rome in 1510, where his confessor hoped he would find peace. However, Luther was shocked at what he found in Rome, abuses and hypocrisy seemed to predominate in the Church, and he came home disillusioned by what he had seen.

The Indulgence issue arose in 1517, and Luther's desire was for serious men to engage with the Theology of Salvation by faith alone. It was a reaction to the fleecing of the people and the giving of a groundless hope of salvation by a monetary payment.

There had been many previous Evangelical reforming streams in the Roman Church, the Waldensians, and the Hussite's, but all had failed to carry the Church and people in reform, root and branch. It must be remembered that the ignorance of the majority of the people concerning religion and Christianity was great. The Mass was said in Latin, a language generally not understood by the vast majority of Germans, so Church on Sunday for most was unintelligible. The Priesthood by this stage was more of a barrier between people and God. Many priests were not well educated, they read sermons given to them, and the understanding was that what you did was more important than what you believed.

In addition to this, the Church and State were either in cahoots with each other, or were competing with each other. With all these factors, and many more, the reformation of the Church was going to be as difficult and as messy as pulling a welly boot out of deep mud, it was always going to be a struggle, be resisted and a backbreaking task! Such a task called for strong men of faith and character, and of such was Martin Luther.

So then, what was the Reformation? Was it a sociological event? A political event? A change in Church polity? A Revival? The simple answer is that it was all of these and more. The events that unfolded over the course of Luther's life and beyond, cannot be explained by any one of these criteria alone, but it can be stated that God was in it and behind it, and the main mover of it.

I say this, because Luther was not a debater or a Politician, nor was he a career church man, he was capable in all of these areas. Luther was, firstly and lastly, a man of faith. He had an integrity that arose from his faith and a he was a man of prayer. He once commented that his day was going to be so busy that he would have to spend the first four hours of the day in prayer. He also held the view that he who has 'prayed well has studied well.' The collection of his written prayers, that still exist are earthy, brutally honest, and to the point, but always Christ centered and Christ exalting.

The Reformation called for stern and strong personalities to deal with the opposition and threatening's of the Church of Rome. At one point, the Pope put a price on Luther's head, but the popular response to Luther's standing up to the Roman Church authorities made him popular in Germany, so he had many who protected him. It was a bit like the times that Jesus bested the Pharisees, it brought joy to the people and a fresh air of grace and freedom from the heavy burden of the traditions of men.

The Reformation saw many courageous and strong minded men arise, and sometimes they came to strong disagreements over matters that we would find strange. None more than the dispute that arose between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli concerning the true meaning of the Lord's Supper.

These two giants came to a debate to try and settle the matter of what was the core of the Lord's Supper. From Luther's point of view it was the phrase, 'This is my Body.' Zwingli however, who seemed to have moved further in his thinking from the idea of Transubstantiation than Luther, held that the meaning of the Supper was a remembrance, 'Do this in remembrance of me.'

Transubstantiation, was he doctrine that when the bread and wine was elevated by the priest that it became the actual flesh and blood of Christ, even though it looked the same as before. This came to be viewed as a re-sacrifice of Christ every time Mass was said!

The debate between Luther and Zwingli did not go well. Neither would budge and inch on their position, even though they were in essence agreed, the focus of each kept them apart! It was only when John Calvin appeared on the scene that the circle was squared as he spoke of a spiritual flesh and blood, and that the supper was a means of grace by faith.

The astonishing thing for us is that the two phrases in dispute appear together in Luke's account of the Lord's Supper. Luke 22.19 says,

'This is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me.'

So then, how is Communion understood in the light of all this?

There are four elements that we must consider from Luke 22. V 19.

1. Firstly the giving of thanks.

People only give thanks for things they are grateful for. We all know how we hated to write thankyou letters to aunts and uncles for Christmas presents that did not excite us. In our family a bright orange and green kipper tie did the rounds for about three years. Not only was it a hand-me-down, unwanted present passed on from others, but it was hideous. This made it very difficult to have any sense of gratitude for the gift, not even the thought counted!

Thanks is due to God because He is the source of every good and perfect gift, but where God is not taken into account, there is ingratitude, and muted formal thanks. Now the fact that our hearts are not always overflowing with gratitude to God is our lot in life. Setbacks, illnesses, anxieties, sins and temptations will all subdue our spirits, and this is something every Christian experiences and needs to take into account. However, when there is never a full flowing expression of thanks and a full flowing desire to thank God still more and better, if that is never our experience, then it does not indicate a healthy heart!

Saying grace before a meal has gone out of fashion. I am as guilty of this as another, but still, if we are not thankful in little, we will soon forget that God is the source of all, because most daily providences are little in our eyes because they are regular. For example, it is very legitimate to give thanks for a night's sleep, for a roof over our head, for the breath of fresh air we get as we step outside, for our food and clothes and jobs and so on!

Jesus gave thanks for the simple bread and wine of the meal. We are to give thanks for these elements too, as well as for what they represent.

2. 'This is my body, given for you.'

Jesus broke the bread, and offered it to the disciples. He offered, they had to take it. Christ crucified saves no-one unless He is taken. The blood of the Passover saved

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no-one until it was applied to the door posts. John 3.16 explains the receiving of Christ as believing, not feeling, or earning or deserving, but empty hands open to be filled. In Revelation, Jesus is depicted as knocking on the door waiting to be let in, and the Apostle talks of all who receive Him becoming children of God.

Christ must be received initially by faith, and the Christian life is one of continual receiving of Christ by the Holy Spirit. In the Communion service, this fact is visible demonstrated by the offer of the bread. Each one of us must receive Christ crucified for us. There is no other bread, there is no other way, and there is no other Lamb of sacrifice, but Christ alone.

If our hands are filled with other things, we cannot take the bread. If we come thinking that we have, 'done our best,' have 'not done anyone harm,' or that 'we have tried to be good,' then this fills our hands with self-righteousness, and we will fail to take Christ alone as Lord and Saviour. Paul in Romans tells us that there are none good, none who by nature are righteous, but we are all like sheep that have gone astray to our own way. All our iniquities have been laid on Christ, we must let Him die for us, or else we will die for ourselves and be eternally lost.

We come to Communion with empty hands, to receive the salvation of God, and to acknowledge that God's Christ is the only way to life now and for eternity. This is an immediate experience, a taking of Christ now.

3. 'Do this in remembrance of me.'

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, something Christ explicitly commanded we do. We are to continue to do this. Calvin wanted to celebrate Communion every week, but financial matters restrained this as it did in former days in the Reformed Church. One of the founding fathers of the Pentecostal Movement, Smith Wigglesworth celebrated communion every day, and many Pentecostal denominations break bread every week as do some Brethren congregations and others.

These celebrations are not the formal events as in the high Church, or the event as in most congregations like ourselves where many people think a communion service twice a year is a sufficient response to Christ. Even if we do not celebrate Communion every week, we are to continually remember what Christ has done for us in dying and rising, and this daily!

Our tendency is to forget and downplay what God has done for us. The Communion Service is to remind us, to refocus us on the joyful indebtedness we owe Christ, and the joyful reality of the salvation and grace in which we stand.

This reminding should grow in us the sort of longings and resolutions that Paul speaks of as his in Philipians. Chapter 3 v 10-11 says,

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'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.'

The 'somehow' of this verse is not one of doubt or uncertainty, but is the 'somehow' of inheritance as in how can flesh and blood, such as I am, be endowed with such riches! Astonishment, not unbelief or a vain hope!

It is by living more and more with the reality of the presence of God with us and in us that we will grow in grace. This is why a constant reminder and remembering of Christ's death and resurrection so needed and so valuable.

Here is an exercise that all those who believe should be familiar with. Can we answer these question? Why did Christ die? What is important about the shedding of His blood? Why did Christ have to rise from the dead, and what does this signify that He is seated at God's right hand? These and similar questions are good ways of remembering and moving us to gratitude. Even more than this, if we know the answers to these questions, be it ever so little, and our hearts rise to these answers, it is a sure evidence of us being in a state of grace, and this is a comfort and assurance of having an inheritance in heaven!

4. The spiritual eating and drinking of John Calvin.

Communion is a celebration that is of faith. The Catholic Church teaches faith and works, with an emphasis on works. Taking the bread and grape juice will do nothing in itself. It is not the bit of Mothers Pride and the sip of purple grape juice that will impart grace, but the taking of these in faith that they represent to us the historical facts and event of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man in the place that should have been ours. He substituted Himself for us. He took the bullet due to us. He stood between us and eternal death, He died in our place. It is faith that sees this, and when we take the bread and wine in faith, this is what we are confessing is true of us by the grace of God.

To take Communion in such faith is a means of grace, because the Holy Spirit can witness to us that Christ has indeed died and been raised for us. Even if this does not happen, we come in faith as unprofitable servants, and trust in the promise of this grace. Again, even if we have a desire that this would be true of our state, then even this is a sign of grace. We come in different states and under different pressures.

Application.

So then how are we to respond to this?

1. It is always profitable to grow in understanding of this celebration. Ephesians 3v8 speaks of the unsearchable riches of Christ. Communion is one of these unsearchable riches. Unsearchable riches does not mean that we cannot know them, but rather that

we will never be able to fully comprehend the magnitude of them, nor come to an end of them in time nor eternity. So, meditate, think about what riches Christ has parceled up for us in His death and resurrection.

2. For examination.

Thankfulness, receiving Christ, thinking on Him, receiving grace, is any of this happening in us? Where do our desires lie? What do we desire and long for in our hearts? The world will tell us of wealth, fame, and power. Our flesh will call out for satisfaction, ease and fulfillment, the devil will offer us a false heaven which is hell, but is there behind this a stronger, even if a small voice calling out for more of God? If not, do not stop praying and calling out to God for mercy until there is a desire for God born in our hearts,

3. Christianity is not just for Christmas, nor is it only for Communion Sundays, but it is for life. Every day and all day Christians are to be Christians. Where do we stand in regard to this? There is more to faith than attending a Church service, but we will never grow in our callings in the Body of Christ without Church involvement. Membership is not really an option, neither is real membership a signing of a bit of paper. Live the Christian life by living it with Living Christians!

There are many more applications that could be made, but a Biblical one is good to finish with. Since Christ died for us, what sorts of people should we be? Apply ourselves to answering this question, and we will be making progress