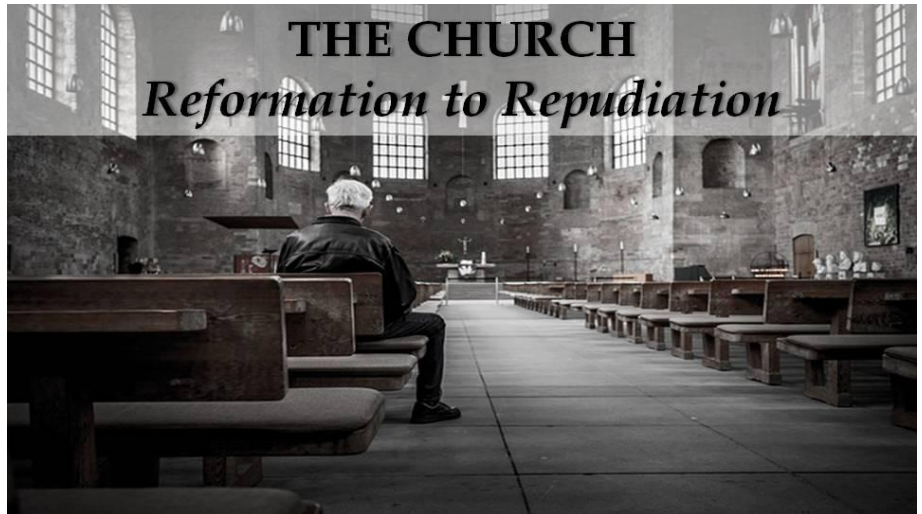


THE CHURCH *Reformation to Repudiation*

Message by Jason Gilbert
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JF Believers in Menomonie, WI



You may be asking, “*What is this about?*”? I’m usually a guy who settles for one or two syllable words, not four or five syllable words... So what do I mean by the reformation of the church? The *reformation* of the church is the action or process of reforming a church *institution* or church *practice*. More on that shortly... What do I mean by the repudiation of the church? The *repudiation* of the church is the rejection of the proposal or idea of the church; refusal to fulfill an agreement, obligation, or debt to the church; and the denial of the truth or validity of the church... more on that later.

Now as to the reformation of the church, the “Great Reformation” was a 16th century movement to reform the abuses of the Catholic Church (the only established church at the time). The abuses of the church included:

- Selling indulgences (i.e. certificates) to absolve sin
- Enforcing the doctrine of transubstantiation (*just Google it*)
- Claiming salvation was not by faith alone
- Claiming the highest authority was the Pope, not scripture
- Forbidding translations of the Bible into the common language
- Executing those who taught or practiced contrary to the church’s doctrine

Many who practiced contrary to the church’s doctrine were pronounced a heretic, damned to hell, and then burned publically at the stake. In fact, Queen Mary the 1st of England (*i.e. Bloody Mary*) had 288 dissenters burned at the stake in a span of only 4 years (including women and children). Some women with their children by their side would watch their husband burn at the stake before they were bagged and drown in the sea. Even children were executed for reciting “The Lord’s Prayer” in English. This was truly a dark time for the church.

So what launched “The Great Reformation”? We’ll start with a 14th century priest by the name of John Wycliffe, also known as “*The Morning Star of the Reformation*”. John Wycliffe was known as one of the greatest philosophers of the 14th century, teaching theology at Oxford University. Using the Latin translation of the Bible, he began teaching salvation by grace alone through faith alone. He also began to question the doctrine of transubstantiation (which was at the center of the church mass and worship). Though loved by his chancellor and students, John Wycliffe was banished from Oxford by the church. He moved a few miles into the country and began pastoring a church. Some of his students took his writings and went to Prague in

Bohemia. Others followed him to his church and began helping him translate the Bible from Latin into the common language, English. For that, John Wycliffe was charged with heresy. He escaped his first trial with a letter from the Queen, protecting him. Another trial was delayed by a massive earthquake. Finally, John Wycliffe died of a stroke... But not before translating multiple copies of the Bible into English and sending out young pastors to preach in English. Two decades later, the church would pronounce him a heretic, exhume his bones, burn his bones, and dump his ashes into the nearby Swift River. The Swift River fed other rivers, which fed the Narrow Sea, which fed the Ocean. It is said that *"Wherever his ashes travelled, so did his influence."*

Then we have a 15th century priest named John Hus, less than a century later. John Hus was influenced by the writings that came to Prague from John Wycliffe's students. He began teaching many of the same beliefs, such as salvation by grace alone through faith alone. John Hus became very popular with the church in Bohemia and with the King of Bohemia. He began publishing hymns in English, establishing congregational worship. Eventually, he was tricked into a trial. He was initially promised protection from the king as he went before the Catholic Church Counsel to explain and defend his views. However, John Hus was never given an opportunity to defend himself. The Catholic Church threatened to excommunicate the King of Bohemia in order to remove the king's protection over John Hus. They then tried John Hus and convicted him of heresy. In 1415, John Hus was sentenced to be burned at the stake. It was recorded that just before he was burned, he said before all, *"Now we will cook the goose [note: hus means "goose" in Bohemian]. Yea, but there will come an eagle in a hundred years that you will not reach."* Then, as onlookers watched and the flames rose, he sang in English, *"Jesus Son of David... have mercy on me..."*

And that brings us to Martin Luther, a 16th century German monk. 102 years after John Hus died, in 1517 Martin Luther posted his *"95 Theses"* on the church doors in Wittenberg. In his *"95 Theses"*, Luther called for the church to repent, attacking their false doctrine of selling indulgences to absolve sin, and attacking the authority of the Pope over that of scripture. This call for reform is considered by most to be the *spark* of "The Great Reformation". Martin Luther was soon tried and convicted as a heretic in 1521, but due to loyal German followers, the Catholic Church could *"not reach"* him. He was hidden in seclusion by his loyal followers. While hidden in seclusion, Martin Luther translated the New Testament into the local language, German.

Another well known reformer of the 16th century was William Tyndale. William Tyndale was an Oxford scholar and priest. He left Oxford to go to Cambridge to study the Greek and Hebrew languages under Erasmus. He eventually mastered 7 languages (including Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and English). He was known as one of the greatest linguists of the time. After being denied the opportunity to translate the Bible into English on behalf of the Catholic Church, he fled and continued his work in seclusion. William Tyndale was chased by spies from town to town... from Worms to Wittenberg. Eventually, he translated the Bible into English. He would then smuggle English Bibles from Germany to England in sacks of feed. With the help of the modern printing press, he was able to produce Bibles 200 times quicker than John Wycliffe, staying ahead of the Catholic Church's efforts to burn English Bibles. Eventually a spy, hired by the Catholic Church but posing as a follower, tricked William Tyndale. Tyndale was led to the authorities, arrested, and convicted. William Tyndale was eventually strangled and burned at the stake. But before being strangled, he prayed in the hearing of the people, *"Lord, open the King of England's eyes"*. Ironically, two years later, King Henry VIII ordered the Coverdale Bible (Tyndale's Bible) to be chained to every pulpit in every parish across England.

Other reformers of the time included Erasmus, John Calvin, John Knox, and John Rogers. Many of these men and many others sacrificed their comfort, their position, and their very lives to *reform* the church from its *abuses*... and to provide us with a *Bible* we can read today.

But what did the reformers believe that so inspired them? They all held to three principle doctrines that were at the heart of “The Great Reformation”:

- Sola Scriptura: By Scripture Alone (arguing scripture over tradition)
- Sola Gratia: By Grace Alone (arguing grace over merit)
- Sola Fide: By Faith Alone (arguing faith over works).

For these they left prosperous careers and families, were chased and were condemned...

But what does the Bible say? After all, it really doesn't matter if someone sacrifices themselves for a belief, unless their belief is based on the truth of scripture. In regards to Sola Scriptura, the Gospel of John opens with “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the **Word was God.***” Other scriptures arguing for the authority of scripture include Mark 7:9, Ps 119:105, Ps 119:160, 2 Tim 3:16-17, and Heb 4:12. What is the highest spiritual authority in our life? Where do we look for authoritative answers? We would do well to look at the scriptures. In regards to Sola Fide and Sola Gratia, Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, “*For **by grace** you have been saved **through faith**, and this is not of your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” Other scriptures arguing for grace and faith over works and merit include Rom 1:16, Rom 3:23-24, 28, Gal 2:16, and Heb 4:16. The problem is sin. Where do we go with it? How are we cleaned of it? We must remember the words to the song, “*What will wash away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus...*” Clearly, the church was in need of reform in the 16th century. They needed Sola Scriptura, the *scripture alone* as the highest spiritual authority. They needed Sola Gratia and Sola Fide, salvation by *grace alone* through *faith alone*.

But what is the biggest threat to Christianity today? We must never forget what the reformers taught us, but I would argue that the greatest threat to Christianity today is the repudiation of the church. That is the rejection of the proposal or idea of church, the refusal to fulfill an agreement, obligation, or debt to the church, and the denial of the truth or validity of the church. These afore mentioned men died to *reform* the church, not *annihilate* it! Have we thrown out the Baby with the Bathwater? Have we thrown out the church with all its corruptions?

Google tells me that 83% of Americans identify themselves as Christians, while only 20% actually go to church. A recent survey conducted by Mars Hill church in 2013 on behalf of Pastor Mark Driscoll gives insight as to why this might be. Consider the most common answers given in response to five questions asked to more than 70,000 Americans:

- Q: What is the Highest Good? A: Human Autonomy (*i.e. personal freedom*)
- Q: What is the Highest Authority? A: The Individual (*i.e. follow your heart*)
- Q: Who is God? A: A Subjective Experience
- Q: What is Sin? A: A Violation of Autonomy
- Q: What is the View of Salvation? A: Universal (*i.e. everyone goes to a better place*)

If this is what 21st Century Americans (who mostly identify as Christians) think, there is no wonder why we reject the idea of church, why we feel no obligation to the church, and why we question the truth and validity of the church. Why would we need church? We have made *ourselves* God!

Ironically, when the scriptures are opened and the gospel is preached, 1 Timothy 3:15 tells us, “*the church is the **pillar and foundation of the truth.***” A church teaching the scriptures will tell us that the greatest good is *God*, the greatest authority is *scripture*, that God is manifested in the *person of Jesus Christ*, that sin is a *violation of God’s law*, and that salvation is *by grace alone, though faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone*. Furthermore, we see that it is *the church* that “***displays the fullness of Christ***” (Eph 1:22-23) and the “***manifold wisdom of God***” (Eph 2:10), not an individual’s subjective experience. Jeff Read of BILD international says, “*Too often today we embrace the gospel and yet fail to pay attention to His instructions concerning how we are to live as a community of believers. It is almost as if we think we are free to make up our own plan. Yet Christ’s design for His churches is set forth for a purpose. It directly relates to His overall mission.*”

Additionally, “*the church is the **dwelling place of God by the Spirit***” (Ephesians 2:19-22). As missionary Michael Griffiths puts it, “*The churches are not merely incidental means of grace to help individuals to be saved. They are not merely temporary providers of care and protection while on earth. God’s long term purpose is to produce a new, beautiful, redeemed human society in which he himself will dwell.*” It might be good to ask, is our relationship with God one of *independence* or *codependence*?

We also need to consider how God *sees* the church. According to God’s word, the church is ***the body of Christ*** (Eph 5:22,29-30, 1 Cor 6:15, 12, Eph 4:11-16). God’s word also tells us that *the church is **the bride of Christ*** (Eph 5:25-27, John 3:29, 2 Cor. 11:2). Imagine someone dissing *Christ’s body* before God. Then imagine someone dissing *Christ’s bride* before God! Do we see the church as *God sees* the church?

But perhaps most telling is how God *values* the church. According to God’s word, the “*church was **purchased by Christ’s blood***” (Acts 20:28). Think of it... God gave his only, perfect, beloved son over to a cruel and brutal death in order to purchase... the church. Do we *value* the church as *God values* the church? I think not.

Perhaps it is time to reconsider what the greatest challenge is to Christianity today. I propose we consider the repudiation of the church. Imagine “The Great Reformation” of the 21st century... churches open the scriptures, pastors preach the Gospel... and people *love* the church. As author David J. Hasselgrave puts it, “*If Christians are to love what their Lord loves, they must love the church... When we inquire into a person’s faith, we do well to ask what that individual thinks of Christ... and his Church.*” Do we love *Christ* today? Do we love *His Church*? Perhaps it is time for professing believers to once again be *reformed* to what the scriptures say... concerning the church...

“*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*”

-Hebrews 10:24-25