

“CRACKED CISTERNS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

September 17, 2017, 10:30AM

Scripture Texts: Jeremiah 2:12-13; Colossians 2:6-8

October 31, 1517.

In the Protestant world, this year is a Jubilee year, the 500th anniversary of when a young monk, Martin Luther, did the modern equivalent of making an online blog post inviting public discussion. He nailed 95 theses or points for discussion to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It was the nail that turned the world upside down.

Completely unknown to him or even intended by him, he lit a fire that still burns 500 years later. This event is being commemorated all over Europe and North America this Fall. Lord willing, we will spend the next seven Lord's Days leading up to Reformation Sunday, October 29, considering five pillars of the Protestant Reformation and how they relate to us today.

But before we do that it is reasonable to ask the question why, is it really necessary or important?

Why history?

First, God is the God of history. He writes history, He is Lord of history, He works in history. God's redemptive purposes are continuing to be worked out in history. History is His story, so it is an important way of seeing the hand of God at work.

Second, we need to remember history for the same reason we talk to our parents and grandparents about our family history and genealogy. It is important to remember where we have come from and how we got here. Our history stretches back far beyond the year 1900.

None of us likes the prospect of losing our memory, and we shouldn't lose our church memory or our spiritual memory. When we talk about the Reformation we are talking about our spiritual grandparents, our roots. They are our brothers and sisters, our bond with our family of faith is closer than our family of flesh.

Scripture is filled with history and historical and genealogical references and repeated calls to remember and retell the story of faith.

Psalm 78:1-4, 7-8 Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!

2 I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,

3 things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.

4 We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.
7 so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;
8 and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Third, the church of Jesus Christ is made up of people from every tribe and nation in every generation. It is a powerful thing to see God's grace poured out and working all over the world over all time. God's grace in 1517 still very much affects us in 2017.

Do you appreciate congregational singing? Before the Reformation parishioners were spectators. There were no hymnals, no way to be on the same page. Luther and Calvin strongly believed in the priesthood of all believers and that singing should be done by all and not just the pastor or choir. They started a worship explosion. By the year 1600 nearly 25,000 hymns had been written.

Do you appreciate having a Bible and having it in your own language? That really started with the Reformation, before that only priests had Bibles and they were only in Latin. Men and women of Reformation gave their lives so we could have our own Bibles in our own tongue.

Do you appreciate preaching that is from the Word, preaching on texts of Scripture and in your language? For all this we are indebted to the Reformation.

Do you appreciate being able to receive both the bread and the cup during communion? Luther restored the cup to the laity. Catholics would not be able to receive it until Vatican II in 1963, and still today most do not.

Do you appreciate that the table is a simple spiritual meal and not a re-sacrificing of Christ on the altar? This was one of the great debates of the Reformation.

Do you appreciate that lay people can be elders and deacons and officers and teachers in the church? The Reformation reintroduced the idea of the priesthood of all believers and closed the gap between clergy and laity.

Do you appreciate that there is a separation of church and state? Prior to the Reformation the Church governed politics; she controlled emperors and kings and governed the law of lands. The church was more than just the church, it was the Holy Roman Empire.

Do you appreciate not having to buy indulgences to get souls out of thousands of years of purgatory? If you know the joy of all your sins forgiven and new life in Christ, if you are walking by faith and enjoying peace with God, never forget that you owe this priceless privilege to the Reformation.

The Reformation touched every aspect of life, business, capitalism, economic, home and family life. The way we live, think, and worship today has many roots in the Reformation.

The church owes an incalculable debt to Luther and the Reformers.

Fourth, as the saying goes those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. The Reformation is not just some ancient historical relic that is no longer relevant. Let me show from Scripture why we needed the Reformation and still do.

Cracked Cisterns and the traditions of man, Jeremiah 2:12-13; Colossians 2:6-8.

It's easy to start well, it's hard to finish well. It's easy to start an exercise plan or a diet, it's hard to keep it. It's easy to start a project, it's hard to see it all the way through to completion. It's easy to start a marriage or a family, it's hard work to finish well.

Beginnings are filled with so much promise, it's the endings that are a challenge, whether for a person, a family, a nation or a denomination.

To maintain faith takes a fight, to finish well takes an immense amount of effort. Sin causes chaos and disorder and an eroding of faith.

Judas, a disciple of Jesus, started well and then something happened. Demas, a disciple of Paul, started well and then II Timothy 4:9-10 says he fell in love with the present world. The church in Ephesus started well, but then something happened. This was a church known for their love (Ephesians 1:15), but Revelation 2:4 says they lost or left their first love (Jesus).

Israel started well and then something happened. Israel, the chosen people, the holy nation, the children of God had forsaken the Lord. The God who delivered them from bondage, who had safely led them through a dangerous wilderness, who had provided for them everything they needed for 40 years, who gave them a Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the God who had done all this, Israel had forsaken to go whoring after other gods.

Mind you, God was no dead and useless deity, look at what He had done for His people. Look at His love, look at His promises and His power to keep them. Look at the kind of water He provides. No wonder God asks:

Jeremiah 2:5 “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness [worthless substitutes], and became worthless?”

Israel had become faithless, Israel had broken covenant and committed adultery by pursuing pagan gods. The utter insanity of it is summed up in Jeremiah 2:13 where Jeremiah paints the picture with a little parable, a parable of people turning away from flowing streams and fountains of living water to drink out of stagnant cisterns they have made for themselves.

Cisterns are holes in the ground hewn out to hold water. The best of them crack and leak and become unreliable, the best of them are filled with water collected from roofs or from the ground and are mixed with dirt and clay and whatever a nearby stable might offer.

If given the choice, why would anyone choose that when something much better is offered? They who had been delivered from bondage had now returned to bondage.

It happened to Israel, it happened to the church in the Middle Ages and it continues to happen to the church today. This happens again and again at every level of life, from personal to cooperate.

There are cracked cisterns being dug in universities and seminaries and denominations and churches all over America. Some of them have a prominent place on TV. Some of their books are in our Christian book stores. Some of their ideas get published in Christian magazines.

It is a constant danger that we could be carried away by some new idea or erroneous philosophy. We are in constant danger of believing a lie, some distortion of the truth. We must discern what is from God and what is from man, what is of divine origin and what is of human origin.

Look at the church in America, weak, anemic, caving in on issue after issue, increasingly materialistic, consumeristic, politically correct, watered down and marginalized.

We are forgetting our spiritual history and heritage, we are drinking from cisterns rather than streams of living water. What is wrong with God, what has He done to fail us or forsake us?

Today both Catholics and Protestants are being covered up by modernism and post-modernism, by political correctness and compromise. We must be reformed and always being reformed.

The fruit of false teaching is it enslaves, it does not set free. The truth sets us free, the lies of Satan take us captive.

Remember the teaching of the Pharisees that laid heavy burdens on the people. So, the church in the Middle Ages laid heavy burdens on the people and led people into spiritual bondage.

The Reformers did not introduce a new teaching but rather rediscovered and re-emphasized the truths of the Gospel as taught by Christ, the Apostles, and the early Church. Their mission was the joyful recovery of the Gospel and apostolic purity in the 16th century

The Reformation was a return to and recovery of the living water as the source of life and truth.

The church then had turned to the cisterns of the traditions of man needed to be turned back to streams of living water. But that need never stops. Every new beginning finds itself at some point wandering and drifting. It's true today.

What cisterns are we trusting in for living water, when there is only one true fountain of living water? Where do we need renewal and revival and reformation?

Two caveats.

Sinners used by God.

Earlier I said the church owes an incalculable debt to Luther. But I want to be clear about something. Though he was a great man in many ways, he was also a sinner and a seriously flawed man, and it would be folly to deny it.

Luther and Calvin and Knox were like Abraham, Moses, David, and Esther. Men and women with serious sins who were mightily used by a gracious God. There are no other kind.

The Reformation was not led by sinless saints, but by flawed men, sinners every one. Luther was an outspoken anti-Semitist, he wrote some terrible things against Jews. Calvin was complicit in the execution of a heretic, Michael Servetus. Others had serious sins.

It's true the times were different, the cultures they lived in varied greatly from ours. Every generation has its blind spots, and we have ours. That's why I think the adult SS class we are offering right now is so important, to help us see our own culture blind spots and where we have accommodated ourselves to sin without being aware of it.

No Reformer, no spiritual leader, no pastor, no Christian writer is without sin, much sin and serious sin. God used seriously flawed sinners to write holy Scripture. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible and yet his sin was so great that God would not let him set one foot in the Promised Land.

I say this so we can speak honestly about those God has used in the past to reform His church. The Reformation was not all good guys against all bad guys. There was plenty of sin on both sides. But the church of the day had fallen into serious error and the truth of God's Word was being covered up by layers and layers of false teaching and human tradition and in God's sovereign purposes He brought countless influences together at just the right moment to bring about a necessary reformation of His church.

After much darkness, God brought light again. And it isn't like we don't still need that or need it again. We are reformed and always in need of reforming.

The Catholic Church today.

Finally, a word about the Catholic Church then and now.

The Catholic Church in America today is not Luther's Catholic Church and in fact it is not even our grandfather's Catholic Church. Though change was very slow in coming and in fact some of the changes didn't come until 1963 at Vatican II, there have been changes.

Most significant from Luther's day, the Roman Catholic Church is no longer the political power it once was. In Luther's day, the RCC in Europe was the Holy Roman Empire, the Pope had a huge standing army, emperors were appointed or approved by the Pope.

Today Catholics sing hymns, have Bibles and hear sermons in their own language. And there are many Catholics who hold evangelical beliefs. We agree on more things, and yet some of the most fundamental theological differences remain and those differences still matter, so we are still in need of more Reformation. Not just them, but all of us.

Implications and application.

Our goal will not be to understand the truths of the Reformation better so we will be smarter or more knowledgeable, but that we will love the truth and love God and worship God more joyfully and thankfully and purely.

The Reformation was about the relationship between God and man. How can sinful humans have a relationship with a holy and righteous God? About what must I do to be saved? The central message of the Bible was being brought back into the light.

The five solas or onlys are core commitments of what it means to be a Christian and a Christian church. We will consider each of them not as some historical or academic exercise but as a reaffirmation of our faith, of what we believe. They are the heart and soul of the gospel and of our assurance of salvation.

Each week I will seek to link what we learn from history with our lives here in the present.

My prayer is we cultivate a taste and thirst for streams of living water, and stop drinking out of cisterns and increase in a passion for truth and care about our faith and our church enough to defend that faith from error, from cultural accommodation, from peer pressure, from going along the get along,

Most of all may God continue to be glorified in His Church and in our lives in all we say and do.

Prayer: Forgive us, Father, when we imitate the sin of Israel, abandoning you and making our own cisterns. Help us to rely on you each day, whether at work or home, whether alone or with others. Be the fountain of life and truth for us. By your Spirit be ever reforming us according to your Word for your glory. Amen.