

"Reformation Sunday: 500 Years of Biblical Faith"  
Romans 1:16-17  
October 31, 2021

There's an old song that was popular in my parents' day that had a line in it that goes: "Don't know much about history..." I think that pretty much describes our generation. We are close to being historically illiterate in our day. We know a little about the founding of our nation, we know something of our own family heritage, but when it comes to our collective religious roots, well that's another story. For example, many know dates like October 12, 1492, and July 4, 1776, and certainly September 11, 2001. But how many of us know the significance of May 4, 1415 or October 31, 1517? We may know trivia tidbits like the names of the 3 ships that Columbus sailed to the new world: the Nina, Pinta, and the Santa Maria. But many, if not most, have never even heard of John Wycliffe, John Hus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, or John Knox. And yet, these names are far more important to our Protestant faith.

This is Reformation Sunday, commemorating the day 500 years ago when a monk named Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the wooden doors of the Wittenberg Chapel, protesting the excesses of the church. It was a world-changing moment in history that ultimately impacted the way we view and practice the Christian faith. So, I think we need to do more than just sing the obligatory verse or two out of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Let's spend some time considering our Reformation heritage starting with the Scripture that changed Luther's life, Romans 1:16-17:

Stand please for the reading of God's word: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:16-17 ESV). Prayer.

A Bohemian Psalm Book dating from 1572 and preserved in the Prague Library contains a hymn to a martyr's memory and three medallions depicting three key figures of the Reformation. In the first, a man is striking sparks from a stone. Below it in the second medallion is a man kindling a fire from the sparks. In the third medallion, a man is holding high a flaming torch. This old Psalter gives a visual survey of the Reformation. The one who struck the spark was John Wycliffe in England. The one who kindled the coals was Jan Hus in Bohemia in what is now the Czech Republic. And the one who picked up the blazing torch and lit up the world was Martin Luther in what is now Germany.<sup>1</sup>

The historians refer to the time before the Reformation as the "Dark Ages." And surely that was so because of the shroud of spiritual darkness and ignorance that hung over the world. The church was in need of a correction, a change, a reformation, a revival! The Christian religion of the church was a polluted mixture of legalistic piety, gross hypocrisy, material greed, sexual immorality, and biblical illiteracy. In the cathedrals and churches across the land, the Scriptures were read in a dead language, known only by the clergy and the elite, so precious few who heard the Scriptures could understand them. Scandals among the priesthood, and even the papacy abounded. Historian Stuart Garver describes the situation:

“Sunday and Holy Day Masses drew large crowds while priests and friars hawked their relics and indulgences as they mingled with the multitudes in the streets - having no higher motive than to increase the wealth of their already rich monasteries.”<sup>2</sup>

A Spaniard of that time wrote: “I see that we can scarcely get anything from Christ's ministers but for money; at baptism money, at bishoping money, at marriage money, for confession money—no, not extreme unction without money! They will ring no bells without money, no burial in the church without money; so that it seemeth that Paradise is shut up from them that have no money.”<sup>3</sup> It was a dark time. And it was in this time that God raised up a man called John from England to strike the spark.

## I. JOHN WYCLIFFE: STRIKING THE SPARK

Today, you open your Bible or pull out your smart phone and open your Bible App and read a passage of Scripture in your language (or any language) John Wycliffe was the one God used to provide you with a Bible that is in your own language. Because if you had lived 600-700 years ago, you would have needed a university-level education or be in ministry to understand the language of the official version of the Bible: The Latin Vulgate. John Wycliffe was one of the first to *protest* this situation. He was the first of a long line of *protest-ants*, Protestants, of which we are a part.

The future reformer was born about 1324 near the village of Wycliffe, Yorkshire, in the diocese of Durham. He was educated at Oxford, earning a doctor of divinity. He became a towering intellectual force at Oxford, writing some 200 works during the course of his career. For most of his life he was a staunch and orthodox Catholic, but the more he studied Scripture, the more he was grieved at the corruption of the Catholic Church.

There was a papal schism, with rivals claiming to be the legitimate Pope, that happened during Wycliffe’s career and had an important bearing on his views of papal authority. Wycliffe discovered that Peter in the New Testament was nothing like the medieval popes with their pomp and worldly power, but a man of humility and true spiritual power. Peter wore no tall hat, no expensive robes, carried no golden staff, and exercised no political power. Wycliffe argued in his pamphlet *De Potestate Papae*, “that no man should be pope unless he is the son of Christ and of Peter, imitating them in deeds.”<sup>i</sup>

The Bible was a far more trustworthy authority than papal pronouncements or church tradition. Wycliffe held that the Bible is “one perfect word, proceeding from the mouth of God,” and is “the basis for every Catholic opinion.” Wycliffe also claimed that “All law, all philosophy, all logic and all ethics are in Holy Scripture.” Further, to “ignore Scripture is to ignore Christ.”<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, Christ as the foundation of all salvation and sole redeemer of man is the subject of the Bible in all of its parts.<sup>iii</sup> So Wycliffe's approach ran counter to medieval scholasticism, which considered Church tradition as co-equal in authority with Scripture. In fact, many saw the Church as the primary and ultimate authority. As 14<sup>th</sup> century theologian Guido Terreni put it, “the whole authority of Scripture depends upon the Church.” However, Wycliffe argued the opposite: “In Holy Scripture is all truth.”<sup>iv</sup>

He was grieved that the Bible and the true Christian faith were so far removed from common people. What was worse is that instead of instructing the people, the priests kept the people in spiritual ignorance. Wycliffe seethed: “They run fast, over land and sea, in great peril of body and soul, to secure rich benefices, but they will not go a mile to preach the Gospel, though men are running to hell for lack of the knowledge of God” (cf. Hos. 4:6; Matt. 23:15).<sup>v</sup>

As he saw it, the priest's job was to communicate God's Word in a way the people could understand. But, to make matters worse, the Bible was written in the dead language of Latin and often chained to the pulpit. Wycliffe saw the situation as unacceptable: "Would to God that every parish church... had a good Bible and good expositions on the Gospel, and that priests studied them well, and truly taught the Gospel and His commandments to the people! God bring this end to his people."<sup>vi</sup>

The longer Wycliffe served the Lord, the more it dawned on him that nothing would change until the people had God's word in their own language. So Wycliffe decided to do something about it, and he struck the spark of reformation by taking on the enormous task of translating the Latin Vulgate into the English language during the late 1370's and early 80's.

He not only worked alone; he was abused, slandered, hated, and viewed as a heretic. He was stripped of his Professor of Divinity he earned at Oxford University. He was branded: "An instrument of the Devil, enemy of the Church...an Author of Schism."<sup>vii</sup> But he persevered in this task, fighting against time and death.

This man who had a heart for God and a mind that was exceedingly brilliant, was the first to translate the New Testament into English in 1382. On the flyleaf, are written these immortal words: "The Bible is translated, and shall make possible a government of the people, by the people, and for the people."<sup>viii</sup> He didn't have the privilege of knowing that some 500 years later on a blood drenched battlefield in a land yet to be discovered, that an American president would use those very words in his Gettysburg Address. These were first the words, not of Abraham Lincoln, but of John Wycliffe, the man who struck the spark.

Although he was discredited, he died a peaceful death, but he was not allowed to rest in peace. Some 30 years after Wycliffe's death, a decision was made at the Council of Constance on May 4, 1415 to officially condemn him as a heretic. Wycliffe's remains were exhumed by Papal command, and the bones of his skeleton were burned to ashes as a public act of condemnation. This from a chronicler of that day:

"They burned his bones to ashes, and cast them into the Swift, a neighboring brook, running hard by. Thus, this brook hath conveyed his ashes into the river Avon. And on into the Severn, and the Severn into the narrow Seas, and they into the mighty ocean. And so the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrines which now are dispersed the world over."<sup>ix</sup>

Yet the burning of his bones, nor the scattering of his ashes in no way silenced his message. By that time the protest-ants were growing in number. And the persecution they faced, instead of discouraging their growth, it only purified and accelerated it. There were a growing number of men and women who were determined to stand alone even if it meant death, and indeed it did. Now the Bible was in the language of the people. Now there was a cause to fight for that was readily understood. And there was a need for someone to kindle the coals of Reformation. And God raised up John Hus as his instrument.

## II. JOHN HUS: KINDLING THE COALS

John Hus was born of Czech parents in 1369 at Husinec in Southern Bohemia (now the Czech Republic). The word "Hus" means goose, and its distinguished bearer often applied the literal meaning to himself. For example, he wrote from the same Council of Constance that condemned

Wycliffe, expressing the hope that the Goose might be delivered from prison, and he exhorted the Bohemians, "if they loved the Goose," to secure the king's aid in having him released. His parents were poor and, during his studies in the University of Prague, he supported himself by singing and working manual labor jobs. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1393, of Divinity a year later, a Masters in 1396, and in 1398 began delivering lectures in the university.

If Wycliffe was the mind of the reformation, Hus was the heart. Hus was sharp but not the scholar Wycliffe was, yet God blessed him with an unmatched authority and eloquence in the pulpit. Hus preached with fiery passion. Hus kindled the coals.

Now Hus was not only a professor at the university, he was also a Roman Catholic priest, ordained in 1402 as Rector at the Chapel of Bethlehem, which was Prague's national church sanctuary. That ancient cathedral seated 3,000 people, and they packed it out every Sunday to hear Hus preach. And he spoke in Czech, in their language, not in Latin, which was the official language of the Church. And there are still those in our day who insist that the "official" Bible is the King James Version, which most Americans cannot read and understand. Strikingly similar situation. That's why we need to know history, so we don't make the same mistakes that the Catholic church made. But Hus got into trouble for preaching in the language of the people.

However, John Hus not only took the heat, he turned up the heat. He spoke of the church being poisoned by greed and materialism. He exposed the scandals and the arrogance of the papacy and the priesthood. And when he was confronted, instead of retreating and recanting, he simply became more determined and more dogmatic. Here's a sample: When Pope John XXIII urged the sale of indulgences (paying to reduce punishment for sin in purgatory and for better "standing" with God), the papal legate went so far as to auction off diocese, deaconships, and parishes. "They were sold," Hus thundered from his Bethlehem pulpit, "to incompetent priests, debauchers and gamblers guilty of scandal, but marvelously skilled in taxing penitents from whom they extorted to enrich themselves quickly."

When he was confronted by representatives from the Pope sent to silence him, Hus said in their presence: "So far as the commands of the Pope agree with the commands and doctrines of the apostles, and are after the rule of the law of Christ, so far I am heartily prepared to render them obedience. But if I see anything in them at variance with this, I will not obey, even if you kindle the fire for the burning of my body before my eyes."<sup>x</sup>

Well Hus got what he asked for. God used John Hus' message to cause a serious business slump for the Church in Bohemia. The sale of indulgences fell off sharply. Ecclesiastical privileges were openly mocked. And students began to riot on the university campus in protest against the excesses of the Church. The coals were getting hot and were about to burst into flame.

Finally, John Hus was excommunicated, he was "churched," as some might put it. He was ordered to report to the Council of Constance, but was jailed for months and his health was broken. Starved and sick, Hus stood trial and he was given ample opportunity to recant. His crime? Church inquisitors called it Wycliffism. He was guilty of preaching the Bible as the ultimate authority. His defense. Simply this: "If you can show me from the Scriptures my error, I will immediately recant. If you cannot, I will not." They could not. And he did not.

He was publicly declared a heretic, stripped of his pulpit and priesthood, and condemned to die by being burned at the stake. You've heard the saying: "His goose was cooked." Well this is where it came from. Given one last chance to repent, he declared: "God is my witness that the things charged against me I never preached. In the same truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught,

and preached, drawing upon the sayings and positions of the holy doctors, I am ready to die today.”<sup>xi</sup>

On July 6, 1415, at 5:00 in the afternoon, John Huss was led to the stake to be burned alive. Led by three trumpeters riding on black horses, the procession wound its way through the narrow streets of Constance. Some cried, some mocked, others prayed for Hus, who bravely sang the words of Psalm 31: “In Thee O God I put my trust, bow down Thine ear to me.” The executioner tore his clothes from him and placed a shirt soaked with pitch upon his back. Then with his hands tied firmly to the stake, the executioner squeezed oil drenched wool between his legs and dumped so much oil on his head that it dripped from his beard. As the fire was lit and the smoke began to choke the dying martyr, the hushed mob heard him pray: “O Lord, Sabbaoth, take this sin from them, Lord Jesus Christ, thou Son of the living God, have mercy on me.”

John Hus, the Goose, was burned alive at the stake for preaching the word of God. Two hours later, his body was fully cremated and his ashes dumped into the river Rhine. But John Hus kindled the coals.

### III. MARTIN LUTHER: BRANDISHING THE FLAME

One hundred years later, we come to a cell in a monastery, where a monk wallows in misery. He prayed, he fasted, he piled penance on penance. He worked, studied, pleaded, wept, agonized, driving himself to somehow save his own soul, which he could not do. And he did this for 10 long excruciating years before God revealed the truth that changed his life and indeed changed the world. The monk's name was, of course, Martin Luther.

Born at the eleventh hour on November 10, 1483, Martin was the eldest son in the eventual family of nine and named for the Saint on whose day he was baptized. His father, who was a successful miner, had great expectations for the brilliant young Martin. Indeed, he father paid dearly for Martin to go to school to become a lawyer, and he was doing well in his studies. However, two near death experiences, the latter of which was a violent thunderstorm with lightning strikes all around, prompted him to plead with St. Anne, which Catholic tradition names the mother of Mary and the patron saint of miners, and promise the saint that he would become a monk instead of a lawyer in 1507.<sup>xii</sup> Because of that, he and his father had a falling out.

But even worse, Luther had a falling out with Father God. In the monastery at Erfurt and then at Wittenberg, in what is now Germany, he slavishly worked to achieve eternal life and got nowhere. Luther was utterly frustrated by the impossibility of pleasing a Holy God. Luther scholar Roland Bainton describes his miserable existence: “He fasted, sometimes for days on end without a crumb...He laid upon himself vigils and prayers in excess of those stipulated by the rule. He cast off blankets permitted him and well-nigh froze himself to death. At times he was proud of his sanctity and would say: “I have done nothing wrong today.” Then misgivings would arise. “Have you fasted enough? Are you poor enough?”<sup>xiii</sup>

Luther was a living example of monastic piety, much as Saul of Tarsus was an example of Pharisaic piety, yet it got him no closer to God. If anything, Luther felt he was even more distant and it led to severe depression.

Martin's superior and weary confessor, Fr. Johannes von Staupitz heard him one night rolling in his cell, crying out: "Oh my sin, my sin, my sin, my sin!" Staupitz tried to comfort him, urging him to seek truth from the Scriptures, to find hope from the writings of Paul. So Luther poured over his Latin Vulgate hoping for light, hoping for truth, hoping for hope. Ultimately, Luther's dark cell

was flooded with divine light. For when Luther read and pondered Romans 1:16-17, the Spirit of God gave him a *durchbruch* or “breakthrough,” as he called it. For God revealed the truth of His word to that miserable monk, and it set him free.

Hear again the word of God: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:16-17 ESV).

It is not a righteousness that is by works or by penance or by indulgences or by absolutions or by prayers to the saints, but a righteous that comes only by faith. By faith! That was the truth that set him free. And that is the truth that sets us free. You've heard that your whole Christian life, but Luther had never heard it before in this way. And in his cell, God revealed it to him: “The righteous shall live by faith.”<sup>xiv</sup>

It is by grace alone through faith alone in the person of Christ alone - in His sacrificial death on the cross - that God honors when he declares sinners “righteous.” Not by our sacrifices or offerings, our works or our goodness. But by our faith in Christ. So Luther, haunted by his sin and hounded by his guilt, stopped trying and started trusting. He raised the white flag of surrender and basically said: “Lord, I come as a repentant sinner, and by faith I throw myself on your mercy and receive your grace and trust in Jesus Christ alone.”

Luther was gloriously saved, set free, and transformed. No more wallowing in guilt. No more rote rituals. No more white-knuckled anxiety about death or purgatory. No more unhealthy fear of a distant, vengeful God. Now he experienced forgiveness. Freedom. Yes, even joy! And once he had a taste of this Good News, it was too good to keep to himself. He had to share it!

If Wycliffe was the brilliant mind of the Reformation and Hus was its passionate heart, then surely Luther was its iron will. And this intense, fearless, man of God took up the torch and brandished the flame. For this monk, no longer miserable, now became determined to be used of God to set others free. Through a biblical lens, Luther increasingly saw the Church in need of correction, and he began to protest.

First in Luther’s sights for reform was this extra-biblical Church practice of indulgences. The whole idea behind indulgences, selling and buying the remission of punishment and release from purgatory for one’s self or loved ones was, in reality, a bait and switch to raise money for the Church. This was revolting to Luther. Add to that, the Archbishop appointed a Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel to sell indulgences to help build St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Tetzel traveled with great pomp and circumstance throughout Germany. He was quite the orator, painting people as hopelessly sinful, God as fearfully wrathful, and purgatory as absolutely unbearable, so you had better buy an indulgence from the Church or else! He played upon the common people’s fears of death and sympathies for departed relatives and friends whom they might release from their sufferings in purgatory. Slick salesman that he was, he promised: “As soon as the coin in the chest clings, the soul from purgatory springs.”<sup>xv</sup> Hearing about this latest con, Luther reached the boiling point.

As Philip Melanchthon relates the story, it was on October 31, 1517 that Luther took a mallet and nailed his list of 95 Theses or truth propositions to the wooden doors of the Schlosskirche or Castle Church at Wittenberg, a day before the crowds would fill the church in observance of All Saints Day. He titled of the Latin document: “Disputation to explain the Virtue of Indulgences.” He had invited debate, but no one accepted the challenge. No worries though because his Theses were

copied, translated, printed, and “spread as on angels' wings throughout Germany and Europe in a few weeks.”<sup>xvi</sup> Talk about the shot heard round the world, this was the hammer blow heard round the world. For in a matter of days, word of Luther’s protest against the Church spread, and the battle was engaged for the true essence of the Gospel and the Christian faith.

At first, the Pope ignored the battle, he called it a contemptible monkish squabble. When the battle began to spread across Germany, he said: "It is a drunken German who wrote the theses, when sober he will change his mind."<sup>xvii</sup> But Luther was neither drunk nor ready to change his mind. In fact, Luther offered to defend his beliefs in public debate with anyone. And debate he did.

Luther debated at Heidelberg on April 26, 1518 with members of his own Augustinian order. The Heidelberg 28 Theses were at the heart of the disputation, representing Luther’s expanded thought from the 95 Theses regarding indulgences to a more complete theology. He contrasted divine love and human love, and defended the doctrine of human depravity and the bondage of the will. This disputation also led to Johannes Eck's challenging Martin Luther to the Leipzig Disputation in 1519.

Eck had been a friend of Luther’s but now felt he must defend the Church against Luther. He had invited Luther’s colleagues to participate in a debate in Leipzig in June 1519. Ultimately, Luther showed up in July. To accommodate, Eck expanded the terms of the debate to include doctrines such as the existence of purgatory, the sale of indulgences, the need for and methods of penance, and the legitimacy of papal authority. A skilled debater, Eck pressed Luther until he declared that Scripture alone was basis of doctrine. Therefore, the Pope had no power since the office is not mentioned in the Bible. Luther also condemned the sale of indulgences to the laity to reduce time in purgatory, since there is no mention of purgatory in the Bible. Charges of heresy flew.

The results of this debate reached Pope Leo X, who issued a Papal Bull on June 15, 1520 titled: “*Exsurge Domine*” (Latin for "Arise O Lord"). In it, Pope Leo censured 41 propositions extracted from Luther's 95 Theses and subsequent writings, and threatened him with excommunication unless he recanted within a 60 day period commencing upon the publication of this Bull in Saxony and the neighboring regions. Luther refused to recant and responded instead by printing polemical tracts that took aim at the papacy. Further, on December 10, 1520, he publicly burned the Papal Bull in defiance. Luther’s humble and earnest efforts to reform the Church had now become something else entirely. Reformation became revolution.

Philip Schaff, a careful historian and source for much of my information about Luther, described Luther's combative personality like this: "Luther is a man of war...[his] writings smell of powder; his words are battles; he overwhelms his opponents with a roaring cannonade of argument, eloquence, passion, and abuse."<sup>xviii</sup> Schaff said he heaped such vulgarity on one man that he couldn't translate its meaning into descent and presentable English.

Luther thrived on anger. He said: "I never work better than when I am inspired of anger, when I am angry, I can write well, pray well, and preach well. For then my whole temperament is quickened, my understanding is sharpened, and my mundane vexations and temptations depart from me."<sup>xix</sup> His colleague Philip Melancton said of him: "One is an interpreter; one, a logician; another, an orator, affluent and beautiful in speech; but Luther is all in all — whatever he writes, whatever he utters, pierces to the soul, fixes itself like arrows in the heart —he is a miracle among men."<sup>xx</sup> He was a man of passion and he caused quite a scandal when he, as a monk, took a wife in 1525 and began to start a family.

Martin Luther started a revolution he never planned or expected. On April 18, 1521, Charles V, the

Holy Roman Emperor, and the Catholic Church demanded that he recant his heresies or face a fiery death. Luther famously replied: ““Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience...” In the growing clamor, with his critics hurling accusations of heresy, Luther declared in German: “Here I stand, I can not do otherwise. So help me God. Amen!”<sup>xxi</sup>

For this stand, Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church, condemned as a heretic, and lived out much of his life in hiding. Yet his accomplishments are numerous. Foremost among them was his translation of the Greek New Testament into the German language for his people in 1522. Amazingly, it only took the brilliant Luther a few months to complete while in Wartburg Castle.<sup>xxii</sup> With the help of others, the Old Testament translation from Hebrew was finished in 1534 and a complete Bible was printed.<sup>xxiii</sup> Finally, they would be able to read the Bible for themselves and not be completely dependent on or slavishly deceived by the Church. The German Bible was a game changer.

Some people after reading it fomented revolt and revolution, which was not Luther’s intention, but it inspired the quest for freedom from tyranny in both Church and State that had a far-reaching impact. Regarding government, Luther taught that the civil magistrate’s job is to protect life and property and keep the civil peace. As to our responsibility as citizens, Luther stated:

“We are to be subject to the governmental power to do what it bids, as long as it does not bind our conscience but legislates only concerning outward matters...But if it invades the spiritual domain and constrains the conscience, over which God only must preside and rule, we should not obey it at all...”<sup>xxiv</sup>

His teaching opened the door to rebelling against civil or church authorities who are acting outside of God’s proscribed role as set forth in Romans 13. The Bible suddenly had renewed application to all of life, even to our role as citizens.

Luther didn’t stop with the Bible. He knew the power of music to teach truths. Now singing was limited to the chanting of priests and choirs, but Luther wrote hymns for the people. It became his passion to have songs written in the language of his people so they could sing their faith. So Luther introduced congregational singing and contemporary Christian music to the church, himself writing some 37 hymns, including the most famous of all: “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” based on Psalm 46. It is the victory anthem of the Reformation, declaring God as an unassailable refuge. The fiery darts and arrows of demons and of men may fly without, doubts and discouragements may rage within, but God’s strength is sure, and Christ is our champion:

A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He amid the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing.  
For still our ancient foe  
Doth seek to work us woe-  
His craft and power are great,  
And, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not His equal.  
Did we in our own strength confide,



Our striving would be losing,  
Were not the right man on our side,  
The man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is He-  
Lord Sabaoth His name,  
From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.<sup>xxv</sup>

Eventually, the hymn, next to the Bible and the sermon became the most powerful missionary of the Reformation doctrines. These hymns were scattered far and wide, sung in the house and in the church and on the street. A contemporary said: "One cannot go into the fields without finding the plow at his hallelujahs and the mower at his hymns." So to Luther belongs the merit of giving his people a Bible and a hymnbook in their language. He was indeed a revolutionary.

Luther's torch touched young Philip Melancthon, the scholar who helped articulate and spread Luther's message more effectively. There was also Ulrich Zwingli, who lit his torch off of Luther and carried the message over into Zurich, Switzerland. He, Balthazar Hubmaier, and others took things a step further and said that only believers ought to be baptized. The most influential of the Reformers was arguably John Calvin of France, who became the chief theologian of the Reformation took the message to Geneva, Switzerland and like-minded reformers gathered there and produced the Geneva Bible and then scattered all over Europe and Great Britain. Then came John Knox of Scotland, who was as passionate and powerful a preacher as any of these men. Queen Mary reportedly said: "I fear John Knox's prayers more than all the assembled armies of Europe."<sup>xxvi</sup>

And I could go on but this torch was passed from person to person, village to village, nation to nation in the Old World, and ultimately across the Atlantic to the New World, carried in the hearts of our Pilgrim and Puritan forefathers who brought the Geneva Bible with them, and ultimately by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield in the Great Awakening, which was formative for our Founding Fathers in America. But it was Martin Luther who was used of God to brandish the flame of the Reformation and that flame touches our lives even to this day.

A story has been passed down through the ages about Luther's conversion experience, whether fanciful or true, I don't know. But we're told that when God revealed this great truth to Luther that we're saved by grace through faith in Christ apart from works, he was literally staggered under the blow of it. He stepped out of his cell in the middle of the night, and made his way through the cloistered halls of the monastery, his eyes blinded by darkness and by tears of joy. And all of the sudden, he nearly fell. Instinctively, he reached out and tried grab hold of something to support himself, and when he did, he grabbed a rope, and that rope led to the belfry, and he rang the bells in the middle of the night, as if to say to the world: "The righteous shall live by faith! The righteous shall live by faith!" And this Bible truth revealed in a dark monastery became a shining light to all the world.

God used Wycliffe to strike the spark, Hus to kindle the coals, and Luther to brandish the flame! And it is within our hearts that the flame of the Reformation burns on. The righteous shall live by faith. That is the Gospel. Now it is our turn in our generation to nurture and guard this flame, to feed and brandish it, to lift it high and pass it on to the generations to come, for Jesus' sake.

Are you struggling with a burden of guilt like Luther did? Why not leave it at the cross of Christ because He has already paid the debt for your sin, and you can experience the freedom Luther did

by putting your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

Many others have already experienced that freedom, and you need to be a torch bearer like Luther. Could it be that God has chosen you to be a part of continuation of this great story? To stand alone for Jesus Christ against the conventional wisdom or even the abuses of the modern church. Could it be that the torch is being passed to you? Will you take hold of it? Will you lift it high? With God as my helper, I am ready. Are you?

In an old Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal, there is a Reformation Day Prayer that I have updated...will you pray it with me?

Prayer: "Almighty God, who through the preaching of your servants, the courageous Reformers, has caused the light of the Gospel to shine forth: Grant us Father, that knowing its saving power, we may faithfully guard and defend it against all enemies, and joyfully proclaim it, to the salvation of souls and the glory of your Holy Name; through thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen."<sup>xxvii</sup>

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Dr. Kenyn Cureton, a former pastor and Vice President for Convention Relations for the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, currently serves as Vice President for Christian Resources with Family Research Council.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 6:315.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart P. Garver, *Our Christian Heritage* (Hackensack, NJ: Christ's Mission, 1973), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation: The Reformation in Germany from its Beginning to the Religious Peace of Augsburg* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 97.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Wyclif, *Tractatus de Potestate Papae: Now First Edited from the Manuscripts with Critical and Historical Notes by Johann Loserth* (London: Trübner & Co., 1907), 215.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Wyclif, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, R. Buddensieg, ed., 3 vols., (London: Trübner & Co., 1905-07), 1:249.

<sup>6</sup> John Stacey, *John Wycliff and Reform*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 80.

<sup>7</sup> Stacey, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Garver, 62.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Vaughn, *The Tracts and Treatises of John De Wycliffe*, (London: Blackburn and Haddon, 1845), 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> Schaff, *History*, 6:266.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Barker, *English Bible Versions: With Special Reference to the Vulgate, the Douay Bible, and the Authorized and Revised Versions* (New York: Edwin S. Gorham, 1907), 79.

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<sup>12</sup> Schaff, *History*, 6:325, citing Fuller.

<sup>13</sup> R. Martin Pope and Herbert B. Workman, ed., *Letters of John Hus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904) and see [http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1994#Huss\\_1328\\_321](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1994#Huss_1328_321) for the specific paragraph.

<sup>14</sup> David S. Schaff, *John Huss: His Life, Teachings and Death, after Five Hundred Years*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 257.

<sup>15</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:112.

<sup>16</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Bainton, 65, records Luther's words: "I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness.

<sup>18</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:128. In German: "Sobald der Pfennig im Kasten klinget, Die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt."

<sup>19</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:130.

<sup>20</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:143.

<sup>21</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:159.

<sup>22</sup> William Hazlitt, ed. and trans., *Table Talks of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 2004), 206.

<sup>23</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:245.

<sup>18</sup> Luther in his *Epistel A. Petri Gepredigt und Ausgelegt*, as cited in Ewald M. Plass, ed. *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 601.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick H. Hedge, trans. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," in *Hymns for the Family of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Paragon Associates, 1976), no. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 8. Here is the prayer as originally printed: "Almighty God, who through the preaching of thy servants, the blessed reformers, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine forth: Grant, we beseech thee, that knowing its saving power, we may faithfully guard and defend it against all enemies, and joyfully proclaim it, to the salvation of souls and the glory of thy Holy Name; through thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen." The phrase "world without end" is a rendering of "saecula saeculorum," usually rendered "ages of ages," but is the calque of what was probably a Semitic idiom, via Koine Greek, meaning "forever." We got "world without end" in English from King James I's Authorized Version of the Bible in Ephesians 3:21 and Isaiah 45:17. So the original prayer's ending of "world without end" is simply an unfortunate rendering by the KJV of the Latin, thus the change in wording from the original.

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<sup>i</sup> Johannis Wyclif, *Tractatus de Potestate Papae: Now First Edited from the Manuscripts with Critical and Historical Notes by Johann Loserth* (London: Trübner & Co., 1907), 215.

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<sup>iii</sup> John Stacey, *John Wycliff and Reform*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 80.

<sup>iv</sup> Stacey, 81.

<sup>v</sup> Garver, 62.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Vaughn, *The Tracts and Treatises of John De Wycliffe*, (London: Blackburn and Haddon, 1845), 27-28.

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<sup>viii</sup> Henry Barker, *English Bible Versions: With Special Reference to the Vulgate, the Douay Bible, and*

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*the Authorized and Revised Versions* (New York: Edwin S. Gorham, 1907), 79.

<sup>ix</sup> Scaff, *History*, 6:325, citing Fuller.

<sup>x</sup> R. Martin Pope and Herbert B. Workman, ed., *Letters of John Hus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904) and see [http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1994#Huss\\_1328\\_321](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1994#Huss_1328_321) for the specific paragraph.

<sup>xi</sup> David S. Schaff, *John Huss: His Life, Teachings and Death, after Five Hundred Years*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 257.

<sup>xii</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:112.

<sup>xiii</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 45.

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<sup>xv</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:128. In German: "Sobald der Pfennig im Kasten klinget, Die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt."

<sup>xvi</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:130.

<sup>xvii</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:143.

<sup>xviii</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:159.

<sup>xix</sup> William Hazlitt, ed. and trans., *Table Talks of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 2004), 206.

<sup>xx</sup> Charles P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1899) 86.

<sup>xxi</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:245.

<sup>xxii</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:276. Philip Melanchthon, who was Luther's superior with Greek, helped edit.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Schaff, *History*, 7:277: He at once proceeded to the more difficult task of translating the Old Testament, and published it in parts as they were ready. The Pentateuch appeared in 1523; the Psalter, 1524. In the progress of the work he founded a Collegium Biblicum, or Bible club, consisting of his colleagues Melanchthon, Bugenhagen (Pommer), Cruciger, Justus Jonas, and Aurogallus. They met once a week in his house, several hours before supper. Deacon Georg Rörer (Rorarius), the first clergyman ordained by Luther, and his proof-reader, was also present; occasionally foreign scholars were admitted; and Jewish rabbis were freely consulted. Each member of the company contributed to the work from his special knowledge and preparation. Melanchthon brought with him the Greek Bible, Cruciger the Hebrew and Chaldee, Bugenhagen the Vulgate, others the old commentators; Luther had always with him the Latin and the German versions besides the Hebrew. Sometimes they scarcely mastered three lines of the Book of Job in four days, and hunted two, three, and four weeks for a single word. No record exists of the discussions of this remarkable company, but Mathesius says that "wonderfully beautiful and instructive speeches were made." At last the whole Bible, including the Apocrypha as "books not equal to the Holy Scriptures, yet useful and good to read," was completed in 1534, and printed with numerous woodcuts.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Luther in his Epistel A. Petri Gepredigt und Ausgelegt, as cited in Ewald M. Plass, ed. *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 601.

<sup>xxv</sup> Frederick H. Hedge, trans. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," in *Hymns for the Family of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Paragon Associates, 1976), no. 118.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Brian G. Najapfour, ed., *The Collected Prayers of John Knox* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), preface.

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 8. Here is the prayer as originally printed: "Almighty God, who through the preaching of thy servants, the blessed reformers, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine forth: Grant, we beseech thee, that knowing its saving power, we may faithfully guard and defend it against all enemies, and joyfully proclaim it, to the salvation of souls and the glory of thy Holy Name; through thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen." The phrase "world without end" is a rendering of "saecula saeculorum," usually rendered "ages of ages," but is the calque of what was probably a Semitic idiom, via Koine Greek, meaning "forever." We got "world without end" in English from King James I's Authorized Version of the Bible in Ephesians 3:21 and Isaiah 45:17. So the original prayer's ending of "world without end" is simply an unfortunate rendering by the KJV of the Latin, thus the change in wording from the original.