

## VOC Reformation Day 2015

## Back to the Word

*Isaiah 8:20*

On this last Sunday of the month of October I ask you to go back with me almost 500 years. To a city in what is present-day Germany called Wittenberg. In those days that city was located in the province of Saxony in what was known as The Holy Roman Empire. Its main church was known as the Castle Church.

There a monk of the Augustinian Order, and one at that time already well-versed in the Scriptures posted no less than ninety-five statements or theses on the door of that church. Evidently that door served as a kind of bulletin board. It was used to announce important events especially to church leaders as well as to one-and-all .

It was on October 31, of the year 1517. The next day would be All Saints Day or All Hallows, when many people would come to church to celebrate the life and death of saints, both those known and unknown. Today's Halloween has become a commercialized and secularized substitute for what was originally a religiously motivated occasion.

Those who took the time to read Luther's statements soon realized that he had a lot to say. Especially about the matter of *indulgences* which were like certificates, authorized by the pope. In those days these indulgences could be obtained by payment into a money box of travelling priests . These payment supposedly guaranteed *relief from the guilt of sins, release from purgatory and assurance of a place in heaven.*

It was a simple scheme by which the pope hoped to receive enormous amounts of money from the completion of St. Peter's cathedral in Rome. At the same time it was convenient for a certain Albert of Hohenzollern, or Albert of Mainz who, though actually too young to become an archbishop bought that position after borrowing a very large sum of money. To help pay back his debt to these bankers the pope allowed him to pocket half of the proceeds of the sale of indulgences in his ecclesiastical territory.

Martin Luther came to see this sale of indulgences as an evil which threatened to do away with true repentance and the need to live according to the precepts of God's Word.

The sale of indulgences was but one of numerous abuses which had crept into the church and into daily life. Another was the reliance on relics which were kept in many churches and which were adored by the masses. No wonder, for viewing these relics like a supposed tooth of St. Peter or a piece of straw from Jesus' crib in Bethlehem were said to lead to a vast reduction in the time one would have to spend in *purgatory*. The more relics a church possessed and the more money and time spent at viewing them the better. For it would mean less time spent in what was thought of as an unpleasant place where should of sinners go after death in order to undergo further purification.

Luther had no intention of being a revolutionary. He desired to work for much needed change from within the church. Yet he was used by his Lord and Savior to be an effective instrument in what came to be known as the *Protestant Reformation*. A Reformation which came to involve other spiritual leaders such as John Calvin, in France and

Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingly in the Swiss city-state of Zurich and John Knox in Scotland.

There were important hallmarks of that reformation including the calls: Sola Fide, ( Only by Faith), Sola Gratia, ( Only by Grace) Sola Scriptura, ( Only by The Scriptures) . We may also include, Sola Deo Gloria or To God alone, the Glory.

Now we are living many, many years from the days Luther took his stand. What days they were when the Word of God was practically unknown among the people. For all the Sunday services were at that time conducted in Latin which few people understood. So the people were ignorant of what the bible says until Luther translated it into German in .

There were also political conflicts galore and there was a great amount of *loose, ungodly living, even amongst the clergy*. But the Lord caused the 'reformation trumpet' to be blown as it were. He led a blessed return to the Word of God. Although Luther's views were condemned and he was pronounced to be a heretic who had no right to live, in time many people throughout Europe became Protestant.

Was it the only time in history when there was a wholesale return to God's Word? O No!. I had to think of a passage in the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 8. It was at the time when Israel had already for years been divided between ten of the tribes, ( the Northern kingdom), with its capital of Samaria, and the Southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin. There came a time when the Lord threatened to sweep Judah away by the armies of the king of Assyria, the up and coming powerhouse at the time.

Yet the Lord God called believers not to fear what many feared but to fear the Lord with a holy, and contrite fear. Though many would stumble and fall and would consult the witchdoctors of their days, as Isaiah said, God gave them the solution to the terrible problems, divisions, and abuses which had become so common in their midst.

In chapter 8: 16 he had these words broadcast among the people, “ *Bind up the testimony seal the teaching among my disciples.*” Again in v. 20 we read similar words, “ *To the teaching and to the testimony. If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.*”

Throughout history, including the history of God’s own people you hear this urgent, call. A call to wake up to the demands as well as the grace of God, in obedience to His Word. Right at the beginning of Isaiah’s prophecy he had cried out to the people, “ Hear the word of the Lord you rulers of Sodom, listen to the law of our God you people of Gomorrah” ( ch. 1:10). God himself likened his people, once the “apple of his eye” to the inhabitants of those two most wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“ *To the teaching ( or the law) and to the testimony.*” That teaching which is as wide as God’s Word. That “testimony” which is that same word, the revelation given to the prophets that the people might know God’s will for their lives. That word, as a psalmist says, “ *Is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*” ( Ps. 119:105).

That teaching is no something to be dismissed either. In th days of Jeremiah the prophet there were flee prophets who prophecies lies

even in the name of God although they grossly misused that holy name. But the Lord declared, “Is not my word like fire,.... and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” ( Jeremiah 23:29).

Now fire can warm you and me up on a cold day at then campground, let us say. It also purifies, as it was, and still is, used to separate gold and silver from impurities. But it can also swallow up and destroy forests and property and people, as we’ve seen recently in the terrible fires that have ravaged large areas in both the States as well as in Canada. God’s word is like that. His testimonies can break the most hardened opposition into pieces. In the process it can demolish pride and unbelief. So that hearts are turned upwards to the “Son above” . That hearing the voice of the Master, the amazing God and Saviour people’s lives are truly changed and new life and new perspectives take over.

That’s what happened at the time of the Protestant Reformation. When God Almighty caused people like Luther to take a stand. Take a firm stand on God’s Word, his precious teaching.

Is that necessary today or can human beings carry on and be happy outside of God and his word? O how necessary it is that there is a universal return to the Law and to the testimony. We live in such turbulent times when all God’s laws seem to be up for grabs. When the most precious relationships must bow before ‘his majesty’ human rights’. Meanwhile, families go to pieces, confusion as to what is right and wrong abounds. Children grow up not knowing what constitutes a blessed marriage between one man and one woman. A marriage in which a family seeks to honor the Lord.

Therefore dear listeners, Take hold of God's Word, yes, take hold of God, sincerely, gladly and humble yourselves in his sight. That is no trick, yet it is a wonderful and lasting treat to do so. For God is living and he is gracious still. Jesus Christ his precious Son rules on high and he opens his arms to receive all those who bow before him and seek *his face*. *For his is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever.*

*Amen, and may you have a blessed Reformation Day!*