

The Time of Reformation

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Psalter: 368:1, 2

Scripture: Hebrews 9

Psalter: 232

Sermon Text: Hebrews 9:10

Psalter: 126

Psalter: 128

The time of reformation.

—Hebrews 9:10

The text we will consider as a doorway for this message can be found in Hebrews 9:10, just the last phrase: “the time of reformation.”

The Time of Reformation

1. In Scripture
2. In history
3. Today

Each year, many in Reformed circles mark the last day in October as Reformation Day. Reformation Day is largely forgotten across this great land and sadly forgotten in too many churches as well. Generally, it is celebrated only as Halloween.

The practice of Halloween finds its roots around the eleventh or twelfth centuries with the ancient Druids from Western Europe. They dedicated October 31 for a festival called “Samhain” (pronounced, “saw-win”), which means “end of summer.” They believed that on the eve of Samhain, the dead rose up out of their graves to wander freely about the earth and make trouble by harming crops

and causing domestic disturbances. During the darkest hours of the night, a chief spirit referred to as the Lord of the Dead also was believed to call up all the lost souls for resentencing. Wayward souls were sentenced to spend twelve months in the afterlife in an animal form. The Druids were afraid of these so-called dead spirits and the animal bodies they had, so they sacrificed to their gods in hopes for some kind of protection. They believed they were surrounded by strange ghosts, witches, and spirits, and cats represented very wicked people who had been punished and reincarnated as cats. Thus the association of Halloween with ghosts, goblins, morbid afterlife events, and black cats.

The custom of jack-o'-lanterns comes from Ireland. In their tradition, a man named Jack was unable to enter heaven because he was too miserable, but he had played too many tricks on the devil to go to hell. As a result, he was said to be condemned to wander over the world with his lantern lit with an ember from the fires of hell. The Irish were afraid to receive the same sentence, so they began the practice of hollowing out turnips with a lighted candle in them to scare away his spirit from their homes. Today in America, the pumpkin has replaced the turnip.

In the 1400s during the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church was flourishing but felt challenged on how to address this Druid custom. They decided to compromise. They allowed people to join the church and still allowed them to continue these occult customs. But they said they would make a few small changes. Instead of praying to the heathen gods, they guided the people to pray to the dead saints. As a result, Rome called November 1 "All Saints Day." Mass on that day is called "All Hallowed Mass"; when it was celebrated on the eve of October 31 the name was referred to as "All Hallowed

Eve,” which was later shortened to “Halloween.” Thus, modern Halloween practices come as a result of Druid practices of the occult and witchcraft, and the Roman Catholic practice of praying to the dead.

Is it enough, however, just to teach our children that Halloween has unbiblical roots and leave it at that? Not at all. We should replace ungodly practices with good and godly ones, and the Lord has given wonderful opportunity to do that!

The Lord guided Dr. Martin Luther to nail his ninety-five theses protesting the Roman Catholic religion to church doors in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. In the years prior to that historic day, the Word of God had become increasingly muddled by the erroneous teachings of Rome. From the time of Luther and onward, the Protestant Reformation took shape and the Word of God was more and more uncovered through faithful preaching. Biblically Reformed churches multiplied and began to dot the landscape in Europe and beyond.

So what made these faithful churches distinctly Reformed? The answer is simple. They taught and preached that the Bible, the Word of God, was the only rule of faith and practice.

1. In Scripture

What does the phrase, “the time of reformation” mean in Hebrews 9:10? To answer that question, we must consider this phrase in the broader context of one of the main messages of the entire book.

The epistle to the Hebrews was written to show how the Lord Jesus Christ is superior in every way. He is a superior King; He is superior to the Old Testament priests; He has a superior covenant. Paul uses the word “better” twelve times in this book to highlight that point. Jesus Christ is “so much better than the angels” (Heb. 1:4). “He

is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (Heb. 8:6). Jesus Christ, the “greater” and “better,” fulfilled all that the “lesser” in the Old Testament simply pointed towards.

In the Old Testament, it was good and well to have all those sacrifices, but they were only symbolic. They pointed to a higher reality. They had to make way for the fulfillment who was Jesus Christ Himself. When He arrived on the scene in history, the entire external Old Testament sacrificial system became obsolete. We find Paul teaching that in Hebrews 9:9–10.

In verse 9, Paul writes that the Old Testament sacrifices were a “figure [that is, symbolic] for the time then present [the Old Testament time], in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect [or complete].” In other words, the Old Testament sacrifices could not do the job of completing salvation; they could only point to how. Verse 10 continues, “Which stood only in meats and drinks [these things were only external meat and liquids], and divers [various ceremonial] washings, and carnal [physical, external, fleshly] ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.”

In other words, all those Old Testament practices accomplished their purposes in their time. The word *time* is noted twice in these verses to emphasize that now was a different time. What was that time? A time of reformation! Literally, making straight, reshaping, or re-forming. Who and what makes matters straight and who reforms? The answer is found by asking: what is the whole book of Hebrews about? And what does the next verse say? “But Christ being come an High Priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building [creation]” (v. 11).

So Paul is writing that the time of reformation is the

time of Jesus Christ. He is the One who was not created by human hands. Christ is the original, divine Reformer! He is the one who makes all things right and reshapes the crooked to make it straight. Paul writes that the Old Testament was good at its time, but now the time of reformation was upon them—and that reformation is to be found in the person and work of Jesus Christ Himself, who is perfect and complete. As perfect and divine, He has both authority and ability to make the crooked straight (Isa. 40:4). Indeed, He makes all things new (2 Cor. 5:15, Rev. 21:5). The Jews in Paul's time wanted to cling to old, external ways, so he labors to show them they were now living in the New Testament reformation time of which Jesus Christ Himself was the initial and sole Reformer.

So what is to be reformed by Scripture's definition? It is to be Christ-centered. It is to see Christ as the purpose and goal for all things. It is to follow the One who initiated the original Reformation and is the original and ultimate Reformer in the fullest sense of the word. To be Reformed is to understand every portion of Scripture in light of Jesus Christ Himself. It is to believe that all truth flows ultimately from Him (John 14:6). But if Jesus Christ was the original two thousand years ago, how has that unfolded throughout history?

2. In History

Solomon writes that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9). By the 1500s, the church had fallen into many errors: not only the error of sinful living, but, worse, the error of wrong theology and doctrine. They were doing what mankind does naturally, what Jews were struggling with in Paul's day. They were caught up in the externals at the cost of sound doctrine.

Rome was teaching that beside the Word of God, you had to add some good works to your faith and make it

meritorious. It was principally the same problem Paul faced among the Hebrews. They desperately needed reformation, so God convicted men in their hearts by the Holy Spirit to get back to the clear message of salvation in Christ alone as found in the Bible. In light of that truth of God's Word, they were convicted of the error of Roman Catholic theology. Thus the Protestant Reformation began to take shape in the late Middle Ages.

It began with a few forerunners to reformation: John Wycliffe ("The Morning Star of the Reformation") and John Hus. Then came Luther with the bold move to nail his theses to the castle doors in Wittenberg. Luther was the central figure of the Protestant Reformation because he so loudly and clearly championed the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He was followed by men like Calvin and Zwingli in Switzerland, who further ironed out details of the doctrine. Soon the Protestant Reformation spread across Europe, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

What emerged from all of this is what is affectionately called by the Reformed community *The Watchwords of the Reformation*. Those five Watchwords of the Reformation are: 1) *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone; 2) *Sola Gratia*—grace alone; 3) *Sola Fide*—faith alone; 4) *Solus Christus*—Christ alone; 5) *Soli Deo Gloria*—glory to God alone. Let us consider each one briefly.

- *Scripture alone* teaches that the Bible alone has authority for both faith and practice—not the Bible plus tradition, as Rome taught. Rome taught that tried and old practices are equal in authority to Scripture. The Reformers responded that tradition has its place, but not in the realm of authority. The Bible alone holds exclusive authority within itself and needs no augmentation. Jesus taught the same in Matthew 15:1–11.

- *Grace alone* teaches that God’s salvation in Jesus Christ is not based upon any human merit or choice. This focus is on the will of mankind. The Reformers and the Bible teach that our will is corrupt, but Rome (and many churches today) teach that we can still spiritually choose good prior to the presence of grace. The Reformers responded that only the grace of God can give the grace to respond to God’s call. By nature, we have no natural spiritual ability or desire for the things of God in Christ. “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7).
- God’s grace is received by *faith alone*, not a combination of faith and works. It is not what we practice plus what we receive that gives us grace. Ephesians 2:8 states clearly, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”
- *Christ alone is Mediator*. He is the only one, Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:5. Dead saints are not even partial mediators. Jesus Christ accomplished salvation alone, and He alone saves us and mediates for His church. He doesn’t need the help of any dead priests.
- *Glory to God alone*. The formula is not God, plus dead saints, plus church hierarchy which share in glory. Rather, God alone receives all the praise and glory in a sinner’s salvation. “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another” (Isa. 42:8).

Many Reformed leaders taught these five watchwords tirelessly—and in some cases, even died defending these

truths. As history marches onward, where does this leave us today?

3. Today

The Protestant Reformation transpired in the 1500s, but this did not go unaddressed by Rome. Rome experienced what is often referred to in Roman Catholic circles as “the counter reformation.” It was a movement that lasted approximately a hundred years in the same time frame. During the counter reformation, Rome established major reforms such as:

- Organization of seminaries for priests so they would be better versed in their beliefs with the intent that all their study would keep the priests busy and distracted from immoral shenanigans.
- They cracked down on wild lifestyles of priests and others who were living in the irreligious mode of eat, drink, and be merry.
- They established religious orders of nuns and priests who would carefully practice a regime of external religious rites like special diets, self-inflicted pain, sleep deprivation, etc.
- Rome made decrees regarding things like art. No more nude or vulgar art could be painted and displayed.
- They made decrees regarding music. Only the most solemn music could be played. All the rest was not tolerated.

So they cleaned up their act—externally. Interestingly (from a historical point of view), this counter reformation won many people back to the Roman Catholic Church who had joined the Reformed movement. But there was

a huge difference between Rome's counter reformation and the Protestant Reformation. That is, the Roman Catholic counter reformation only involved externals. They did not change their doctrine and it has not changed to this very day.

What about us? Are we truly Reformed in doctrine? Do these five watchwords of the Reformation ring in your soul and conscience? Or are we more concerned about the externals in life like Rome? Sadly, too many are, even in Reformed churches, at the cost of failing to adhere to and emphasize the grand doctrines of grace!

Remember Paul's day. Who was worried about losing all external practices at the cost of doctrine? It was the church! At the time of the Protestant Reformation, who wanted to hold to old traditions and external practices and therefore a time of reformation had to take place? Was it world or church? It was people in the church! So we ask: is it possible these same errors might be repeated? Sadly, yes. That is why the church needs to be "Reformed and ever reforming." The original Latin for that seventeenth-century slogan reads, "*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est.*" The translation is, "A Reformed church must always be reforming itself." We always need to be going back to the basics of the core doctrines of grace; that is where errors begin and that is where we desperately need to be kept straight and Reformed. The grand old doctrines of grace are the good old paths. The Lord spoke many years ago in Jeremiah 6:16, "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." Walking in the good old Reformed paths gives rest to the soul.

So, the question comes to us: are you truly Reformed? Much that is called Reformed today sadly can't pass this biblical test. Paul says being Reformed is being of Jesus

Christ. The Protestant Reformation was all about the exclusive Christ and His exclusive Word. Are we following Christ alone? Are we true sons and daughters of the Reformation?