

500 years—wow, what a long time! 500 years of Grace alone. Faith alone. Scripture alone. 500 years of salvation by grace through faith. 500 years of preaching Christ and Him crucified. In other words, 500 years of the Gospel—now that's worth celebrating!

But what else has happened in the last 500 years? 500 years of fighting and division. 500 years of denominations multiplying—today more than 30,000, with an average of 200 new ones added each year. 500 years of drawing lines, choosing sides, marking distinctions. Does that sound like 500 years to get excited about?

Stanley Hauerwas, a professor at Duke Divinity School, once started his Reformation sermon this way: "I must begin," he says, "by telling you that I do not like to preach on Reformation Sunday. Actually I have to put it more strongly than that. I do not like Reformation Sunday, period. I do not understand why it is part of the church year. Reformation Sunday does not name a happy event for the Church Catholic; on the contrary, it names failure. Of course, the church rightly names failure, or at least horror, as part of our church year. We do, after all, go through crucifixion as part of Holy Week. Certainly if the Reformation is to be narrated rightly, it is to be narrated as part of those dark days."

Together, as we look at Church history, we find that for the first 1,000 years it was unified. It was only then that it was split into two—East and West. But then thanks to the Reformation in the 1500s it has since splintered into the 30,000 plus denominations we know today. And we must ask ourselves, is this something to celebrate or to mourn? Should we be dressing up our church in the exciting color of red, or the penitential color of violet?

I mean, just imagine what the last 500 years could've been! 500 years of unity in the Church! 500 years of peace and harmony! 500 years where families and friends and neighbors could all get up on Sunday morning and drive not to separate houses of worship but sit together in the very same pew! Now that sounds like 500 years worth celebrating!

But, just imagine what the last 500 years could've also been. 500 more years of dreading purgatory. 500 more years of going without a Bible in our hands. 500 more years of listening to a Pope's opinion instead of God's promises. 500 more years of buying indulgences, doing penance, visiting relics, entering monasteries, going on pilgrimages. 500 more years of intercessory prayers to saints, heretics burned at the stake, celibate priests, worship in another language, and superstitious rituals. 500 more years of Communion under one kind, receiving the body of our Lord in the bread only, without also receiving His blood in the wine. Worst of all, 500 more years of searching for a loving God—a God who accepts us, forgives us, saves us not because we deserve it but because we don't.

Luther looked into that future, and he didn't like what he saw. But Luther also didn't want to divide the church either. Luther wasn't a revolutionary, a rebel, a radical like he's so often made out to be. When he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the castle church door it was anything but an act of defiance. It was nothing more than an academic exercise, a debate between theologians—himself and a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel, who was peddling plenary indulgences, little get-out-of-purgatory free cards. If it wasn't for a few of Luther's students who translated these theses from Latin into German, and mass-produced them, and widely distributed them, who knows if we'd even be here today. See, all the while, Luther wondered if he was doing the best thing. After all, how could he be right, he asked himself, if everyone else was wrong? How did he know *he* wasn't the crazy person in the room?

Well, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so," Luther had learned. And it was because of this great Gospel discovery—that Christ Jesus has squared everything up between us and God, no strings attached—that Luther just couldn't back down. When he found himself cornered, pressured to take everything back, here's what he said: "Unless I am convinced of error by the testimony of Scripture or...by manifest reasoning, I stand convinced by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

What else could Luther do, after all—he didn't want to build a new church, but he also knew the current one was standing on the wrong foundation? And with that, we come to find out that Luther's Reformation was only *that*—reformation. Not revolution, not rebellion, not radicalism—it was just taking a church that had been hijacked from the Gospel of Jesus Christ and returning it to its rightful owner. It was actually the church of Luther's day, which had revolted, rebelled, radicalized against God's timeless truth, and was dividing the Christian people. So, what else could Luther do?

Well, for that matter, what else could St. Paul do? Paul was faced with a reformation in his own day. In Galatians, he tells about a certain group called the Judaizers, A.K.A. the Circumcision Party. They were Christians, sure, but they insisted that everyone keep the Jewish Law. While Paul would be the first to say that the Law is all fine and good, he'd also be the first to say that circumcision or dietary restrictions or any such thing can't bring us any closer to God than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ already has. Even Peter the Apostle was demanding at the time that the Gentiles be circumcised according to God's old covenant. So, what was Paul to do—keep the peace for the sake of unity, or take a stand at the risk of disunity? "We preach Christ crucified," Paul had said, "a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles." Because of Christ's Gospel, what else could Paul do but to say, "Here I stand. I can do no other"?

Even Jesus—what else could He do? He had a reformation of His own. See, it had been just over five hundred years since the Jews had been exiled for their unfaithfulness to God, and so they all together said, Whoops, we don't want to do that again! And so Rabbinic Judaism came in taught that as long as they remained good little Hebrew boys and girls that God would bring about a new golden age for the Palestinian people. So, what was Jesus to do—go along to get along and let everyone think they can merit anything before God, or stand up for God's grace even if it meant rattling a few cages? Well, He tells us, "I came not to bring peace but a sword." Jesus says, "For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."

Now, why would Jesus ever do a thing like that—because the Gospel was at stake! Jesus couldn't hold back the truth—no matter how controversial—if it meant living a lie. He refused to act like an angel if it meant that the whole world would go to hell in a handbasket. No, He would die before letting that happen. And so He said, "Here I stand. I can do no other"—or rather, "Here I hang. I can do no other." After all, what else *could* Jesus do?

And today, what else can *we* do? When you and I find divisions, it's only because new teachers have come along with new teachings and say, "Here I stand . . . and *here*, and *here*, and *here*." It's unfortunate that the last 500 years have brought that kind of division. But also just think of the unity—the true, authentic, genuine unity—we've enjoyed because of the Gospel—the full and free forgiveness all of us have through our Savior Jesus Christ! The truth is, the Reformation isn't just 500 years old—it didn't begin with a German monk. And it didn't stop with him 500 years ago either. No, it's been going on ever since a serpent first hissed into Adam's ear and God stood up and set the record straight by promising a Messiah. And it will continue to go on anytime God's love for us in Jesus is called on the carpet and you or I actually dares to speak up.

If we don't have the Gospel, then you or I don't have a leg to stand on. But thank God that we do—we can stand tall with both legs firmly planted. So, join me in saying, "Here I stand. I can do no other." Reformation 2017—it's still about Jesus. And that, my fellow reformers, is worth celebrating!