

**500 Years of Grace: HBC Celebrates
the Reformation and the
Recovery of the Gospel
History and the Cross
Acts 4:23-31**

preached @ Hawkwood Baptist Church
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September 17, 2017

Intro.

If you've looked at a bulletin this morning you already know that the message today has something to do with history. But what you may not know is that this morning we are beginning a series of sermons on the most important period in Christian history since the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

I'm talking about the Reformation, that time 500 years ago when Martin Luther and a host of other godly men stood fast upon the word of God and shook the Roman Catholic church to its core. If you want to know how important the Reformation was, I'll just mention that if it hadn't been for Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and a host of others such as William Farel, Theodore Beza, Philip Melancthon, Martin Bucer, John Knox, Heinrich Bullinger, Thomas Cranmer, (all of these men known as Reformers) —had these men not been willing to suffer, or even die rather than place any authority above God's Word—well, there simply would be no Baptist church on this corner, no Alliance church up the hill behind the Superstore, no Anglican church in Ranchlands, and no Centre Street church either. Nor would the world be filled with missionaries, and mission movements sweeping across Asia, Africa, South America and elsewhere.

Actually, when I googled for images of the original Reformers, this is what I got (SH).

More importantly, without the Reformation there would be no one preaching the gospel of God's grace—anywhere. There would be no voice comforting those who shudder in justifiable fear for having broken God's law, no one telling them that the solution is not to try and earn their way to heaven, but rather to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, the God/man who died for our sins and rose again to set us right with God. There would be no gospel of grace, no message that eternal life is a matter of giving yourself up to Jesus, that is, to “[take yourself out of your own keeping and entrust yourself into His keeping]” (Acts 16:31, Amplified version) and be saved. That's the gospel, dear friends, and without the Reformation, or without a reformation at some point, we would not know it.

So I say again, in the realm of faith, the Reformation was the most important thing that ever happened between the first century and the present day. And as we move toward its 500th anniversary this coming October 31, it's my view that we should spend time exploring what God did in those days and why it makes a difference now.

But first, because this is a sermon and not a lecture, we need to let God's Word speak to us. We're going to read from Acts 4:23ff, but in order to read it with understanding, let me briefly set the scene.

What we're about to read is the last part of a story that began back in chapter 3. You probably know it well. Peter and John had been on their way into the Temple courts to pray when they heard a lame beggar asking for money. Remember Peter's response? “I don't have any silver or gold, but what I have, I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!”

And he did. He went walking, and leaping and praising God. A crowd gathered. Peter preached Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfilment of O.T. prophecies, and the Saviour of all who repent and turn to Him. But while he was preaching the Jewish priests came and arrested him and John, threw them in prison and brought them up for trial the next day. But the trial went nowhere so the priests let them go with warnings and threats to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus.

That had little to no effect on Peter and John. Here's what they said before they left, "Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

Today's Text

Acts 4:23 After they were released, they went to their own people and reported everything the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they all raised their voices to God and said, "Master, You are the One who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them. 25 You said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David Your servant:

**Why did the Gentiles rage
and the peoples plot futile things?**

**26 The kings of the earth
took their stand
and the rulers assembled together
against the Lord and
against His Messiah.**

27 "For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, assembled together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that Your slaves may speak Your message with complete boldness, 30 while You stretch out Your hand for healing, signs, and wonders to be performed through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." 31 When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God's message with boldness.

Acts 4 unpacked

1. Let's be sure we know who are the good guys and the bad guys. The bad guys were the priests and the Sanhedrin court who opposed Peter preaching the gospel. The good guys? Peter and John, along with all those to this day who love Jesus and live for Jesus, and those who unashamedly disturb entire communities by preaching Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

You would think that in a Christian church you would not need to point out the difference between the good guys and the bad guys. You would think this is the kind of truth that goes without saying, as obvious and as needless as declaring that water is wet. But sadly we live in a world where too many Christians are confused about the difference between good and bad.

Notice that to the priests Peter said, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, and we must be saved by it" (Acts 4:12). But were he to say such things today, a surprising number of evangelical leaders would denounce him for being judgmental, or for pastoral insensitivity, or something.

Things have gotten so bad in modern times that even Billy Graham in his last public years found it

impossible to declare firmly for Christ (check out his last interviews with Larry King and Robert Schuller). I hope you see now why I thought it important to point out that Peter and John, along with the church that supported them—these are the good guys in this story.

2. Now I hope to challenge you to think a little more deeply about the text we've just read. If you're reading ahead you might be thinking, "Next he's going to talk to us about the importance of prayer when God's people are facing persecution." That's an excellent point, but I don't have to make it because you've already seen it for yourself. But what I hope I can show you is that in their prayer, God's people self-consciously linked themselves with God's plan for the world.
 - a. They declared that God had a plan when he created the earth.
 - b. They stated that God had foreseen all that would happen, including the world's rebellion against His Son.
 - c. They even believed and affirmed that Jesus' suffering and death on the cross was part of God's established plan (see Acts 4:27-28).
 - d. Then they begged God for the privilege of carrying on His plan of conquering the world for Christ and the gospel. Just as Jesus had undergone a death and resurrection, they, too expressed a desire to be bold like Christ, to risk everything as He had done, even at the point of risking their own lives, so long as they were privileged to boldly stand for the "truth as it is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21).
 - e. Now do you see why I'm calling today's message "History and the Cross?"
 - i. These early Christians knew that the cross was at the centre of history, arguably the only point to history. Why bother to build a universe and create humanity if it did not give the eternal Son of God a place to accept human flesh as the instrument by which He might suffer and die, the just for the unjust, the greatest sacrifice that could ever be made.
 - ii. In light of Jesus' sacrifice, these early Christians thought, what's the point of faith if we can't be like Him, loving God enough to boldly declare the truth and accept the consequences, even to the point of death.
3. One thing that stands out when you study the Reformation is that this same cross-bearing spirit was powerful in the lives of the early Reformers. They were bold to the point of death. Surprisingly, Martin Luther was not killed though several plots were hatched against him. He was doubtless preserved from death supernaturally, but many of the early Reformers did make the ultimate sacrifice.

The first Reformation Martyrs

Let me tell you about the first Reformation martyrs. This took place in 1522, just five years after Luther got it started in 1517. In the town of Antwerp in The Netherlands, three former monks, Esch, Voes, and Lambert, had become powerful preachers of the gospel, with literally thousands of converts to Christ. Because they were so successful they were arrested by the Catholic Church and interrogated by a priest named Egmondanus Hochstratten.

"Will you retract your assertion that the priest has not the power to pardon sins, and that such a

privilege belongs alone to God?" demanded Hochstratten. (Remember, the Catholic church at that time insisted that forgiveness could only be obtained from a priest, and then only after a payment.) Then Hochstratten listed all the other evangelical doctrines he wanted them to reject. "No, we will not retract anything," exclaimed Esch and Voes, "we will not deny the word of God, we would rather die for the truth of our faith."

Hochstratten - "Confess that you have been seduced by Luther."

Esch and Voes - "As the apostles were seduced by Jesus Christ."

Hochstratten - "We declare you to be heretics, deserving to be burned alive, and we hand you over into the hands of the secular power."

Esch and Voes were apparently ready to die, but Lambert was afraid and asked for four days to decide what to do. They were all sent back to prison to "think it over." At the end of that time Lambert was still struggling, but the RCC wanted to make an example out of somebody so they brought out Esch and Voes and tied them to the scaffold where they were to be burned.

These were strange times. The watching crowd knew something was wrong, and many were in tears. Even some of the official executioners were crying. They waited another half hour, just in case one of the men might change his mind. The inquisitor asked them one last time, "Are you willing to receive the Christian faith?" (meaning Catholicism) "We believe in the Christian church, but not your church," was the answer. "Become converted, become converted," exclaimed the inquisitors, "or you shall die in the name of the devil." "No," replied the martyrs, "we will die like Christians, and for the truth of the Gospel."

Finally the fire was put to the wood and the two men went to glory, praising God as they went. All this happened on July 1, 1523, and these young men are accounted the first martyrs of the Reformation. Nor were they nearly the last. However, none of these deaths were in vain. Wherever men and women were burned for their gospel stand, thousands of converts were made. Whole cities, such as Brussels, were turned overnight to the gospel. One Catholic observer actually said, "In every place where Aleander (chief religious judge in the Netherlands) raises a funeral pile, it seems as if he sowed a quantity of heretics (Protestant believers)." (Erasmus)

4. To me the main point of studying the Reformation is to remind ourselves that the Bible, along with the gospel found in it, are the most important things in the world. They are so important, so central to the well being of mankind, that they need to be proclaimed boldly. And when it becomes absolutely necessary, God's Word and God's gospel are worth dying for.
5. In times of spiritual decline Christians often look back to the First Century for inspiration. "Let's be more like the church in Acts," is the cry of many. But all too often, getting back to Acts means either a false interpretation of the sharing of possessions as described in Acts 2 and 5, where natural Christian charity is interpreted as government imposed socialism, or else an exaggerated emphasis on speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts.
6. It seems to me that more than any other movement in history, the Reformation truly awakened the spirit of the first-century church, with its emphasis on the Word of God, the gospel of Christ and the church's commission to disciple the nations. God help us to recapture a little of the spirit of Luther and not rest until we have risked all for the sake of the Name above all other names and until we see the crucified One take His rightful place as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.