



Volume 6 Issue 11

# West Suffolk Epistle

## West Suffolk Baptist Church

*“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”*



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*Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America*

## Luther and His Significance

On October 5, 1544, Martin Luther preached the dedication of the Castle Church at Torgau, Germany. This church lays claim to being the first Protestant church to be built, as all the other church buildings were converted Roman Catholic sanctuaries. Lucas Cranach, Luther's painter and engraver, designed the interior of this church, including the pulpit. It is a rectangular hall flanked by two galleries. The dedication also had a motet composed especially for the occasion by Johann Walter. Walter collaborated with Luther on hymns. They were the pioneers of Protestant hymnody.

At the dedication, Luther declared, “It is the intention of this building that nothing else shall happen inside it except that our dear Lord shall speak to us through His Holy Word, and we in turn talk to Him through prayer and praise.” He put an even finer point on this when he proclaimed, “We can spare everything except the Word.”

Many events in Luther’s life may be called representative. His posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on the church door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, and his stance at the Diet of Worms in April 1521 reveal his unparalleled courage and boldness. Luther’s presentation of his theses for the disputation at the Augustinian Chapter House at Heidelberg in 1518 or his debate against Roman Catholic scholar Johann Eck at Leipzig in 1519 reveal the sharpness of his intellect. His translation of the Greek text into German while holed up in Wartburg Castle shows the depth of his biblical scholarship. And the mountain of sermons preached at Wittenberg show his dexterity in the pulpit.

But probably few events in Luther’s life rival the representative status of the dedication service at Torgau. There we see a notable singularity of purpose. That singular purpose reveals Luther’s significance in both his day and, five hundred years later, in our day. That purpose may be expressed simply as the pure worship of the true God by the true people of God. This pure worship comes only when God’s Word is at the center of church life. Luther’s entire life was bent toward this one target. In fact, the entire Reformation could be summed up as aiming at this target.

Luther was born in a time of false worship dominated by what can only be described as a false church. If Luther said at Torgau that the true church could spare everything except the Word of God, the later medieval Roman Catholic Church was the opposite. It was about everything except the Word. Because the Word of God was pushed out of the center of church life, everything in the church went askew. Doctrine, practice, the church service—all that constituted the church was off-kilter. Luther sensed this imbalance right from the outset. His early years are marked by fear of a holy and just God. The German word *Anfechtungen* describes these years. The word means “struggles,” the deep struggles of man against all odds. In Luther’s case, the struggle was between a sinner and a holy God. There was no way the sinner could ever win.

Luther applied himself to academics, eventually earning his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Erfurt. As he was about to enter the profession of law, he was caught in a violent thunderstorm in June 1505. This brought his anxieties to a head. He thought God Himself was out to get him. In the downpour and the chaos, Luther made a vow that he would enter the monastery if God would spare his life.



# West Suffolk Epistle

## West Suffolk Baptist Church



### Luther and His Significance - Cont'd

But Luther dared not appeal to God directly. Instead, he went through a mediator, St. Anne, the patron saint of miners, his father's profession. Before the thunderstorm, Luther had been visiting his parents' home. In that home was a shrine to St. Anne. "Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk," Luther cried out.

Luther survived. In July, he entered the monastery. Yet, his struggles did not subside. They intensified. Looking for peace and rest, he found strife and turmoil. Luther tried white-knuckling his way to heaven. Later, he would say that if ever a monk could get to heaven by monkery, he would be that monk. In 1510, he was sent on a pilgrimage to Rome. He found the debauchery revolting. All of his attempts to get closer to God served only to drive him further away. At one point, Luther declared that he sometimes hated God.

The reason for Luther's downward spiral had everything to do with the obscuring of the Word of God and the consequent obscuring of the gospel. The whole Roman Catholic system depended on the quantification of sin and the quantification of grace. The problem is sins, or demerits. The solution is grace-enabled merits. The church consequently preached a false gospel of works to counter these demerits. The church also falsely taught that when this life is finished and demerits are still left over, the next stage is purgatory. In purgatory, the final demerits are purged and souls are readied for heaven.

Luther saw right through this by way of a (re)discovery of two all-important truths. The *first* concerns sin. The problem is not sins, as in the quantity. The true problem is that I am a sinner at the root (*radix* in Latin). I am a sinner and God is holy. This explains why Luther sometimes declared that he hated God. God, the righteous judge, demands righteousness. Yet, I can never achieve righteousness because I am a sinner at the root.

The *second* all-important truth may be summed up in the expression alien righteousness. The righteousness God demands was earned apart from me and entirely apart from any works I might do even when enabled by grace. This righteousness was earned by Christ alone. It is outside of me, or alien to me.

Theologians use the word imputation. That means that my sin—not the part but the whole—is imputed to Christ. He takes my sin upon Him at the cross and, as my substitute, endures the cup of God's wrath. Then Christ's righteousness is imputed to me. His perfect obedience is counted as mine, and I am declared righteous. This is the gospel.

The question is, where did Luther learn this? He learned it from reading the Bible, from reading in Habakkuk that the righteous shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4). He learned it from reading Romans and Galatians. From 1515 through 1520, Luther was lecturing on these particular books. He was immersed in the text.

Luther's reading of the Bible is at the heart of his contest with the false church of his day. It led him to post the Ninety-Five Theses at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Desiderius Erasmus, the humanist scholar, published the Greek text of the New Testament in 1516. Luther was reading it when he was formulating his theses.

When Luther debated Eck at Leipzig, he clearly laid down the Reformation plank of *sola Scriptura*. At Worms in 1521, he stood upon Scripture. "*My conscience is captive to the Word of God*," he thundered. He was convinced that Scripture alone is the church's final authority.



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



## *Luther and His Significance - Cont'd*

From 1521 until his death in 1546, Luther labored to see the church firmly established upon the Word of God and boldly proclaiming salvation in the finished work of Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone. Luther's words at Torgau in 1544 marked his entire ministry: "We can spare everything except the Word."

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," the Reformation anthem, is nothing more than a reflection on a biblical text, Psalm 46. Even Luther's marriage and family were a result of his reading and obeying God's Word. There was no biblical basis for a celibate clergy. So, the former monk married a former nun, Katharina von Bora. Martin and Katie Luther built the first Protestant parsonage, modeling what a truly godly family could look like.

In any given week from the 1520s through the 1540s, Luther would preach five to seven times in either the Castle Church or the City Church in Wittenberg. On most mornings, he catechized his own children and invited the children of Wittenberg to join in. He lectured at the University of Wittenberg to students from across Germany and Europe, sending out pastors, missionaries, and, at times, martyrs.

In experiences of suffering and death, Luther showed his obedience to God's Word and demonstrated his utter reliance on the gospel. Such was the case with his own death on February 18, 1546. Luther was in Eisleben, the town of his birth. It had been a rough journey, and Luther fell seriously ill. Among his last words, Luther urges us to have humility as we approach the Word of God. He declares, "Let no one think he has sufficiently grasped the Holy Scriptures, unless he has governed the churches for 100 years." Then he adds, "We are beggars! That is true." This is gospel humility. Why does Luther matter so much so long after his death? Because he realized that we are all beggars.

This is Luther's significance both in his time and in ours. Apart from the Word of God, we are in utter darkness. But when the light of God's Word shines, all is brought to light. Our true need as sinners before a holy God becomes stunningly clear. The work of Christ on the cross for us also becomes beautifully lucid. We learn about Christ and the precious gospel only in the Word of God. Luther's statement at Torgau on October 5, 1544, must be our watchword: "We can spare everything except the Word." ~ **Dr. Stephen J. Nichols – President of Reformation Bible College, chief academic officer for Ligonier Ministries, and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow.**

## *The History of the Reformation*

"A cesspool of heresies." This was the judgment rendered by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V on May 26, 1521, shortly after Martin Luther took a stand at the Diet of Worms.

Earlier, in the bull Exsurge Domine, Pope Leo X described Luther as a wild boar loose in the vineyard of Christ and as a stiff-necked, notorious, damned heretic. On May 4, 1521, Luther was "kidnapped" by friends and whisked off to Wartburg castle, where he was kept secretly hidden, disguised as a knight. There Luther immediately undertook the task of translating the Bible into the vernacular.

Frequently the Reformation is described as a movement that revolved around two pivotal issues. The so-called "material" cause was the debate over sola fide ("justification by faith alone"). The "formal" cause was the issue of sola Scriptura, that the Bible and the Bible alone has the authority to bind the conscience of the believer.



# West Suffolk Epistle

## West Suffolk Baptist Church



## The History of the Reformation - Cont'd

Church tradition was regarded with respect by the Reformers but not as a normative source of revelation. The “protest” of Protestantism went far beyond the issue of justification by faith alone, challenging many dogmas that emerged in Rome, especially during the Middle Ages.

In a short time, the Reformation swept through Germany but did not stop there. Aided by the translation of the Bible in other nations, the reform spread to the Huguenots in France, to Scotland, England, Switzerland, Hungary, and Holland. Ulrich Zwingli led the Reformation movement in Switzerland, John Knox in Scotland, and John Calvin among the French Protestants.

In 1534 Calvin delivered a speech calling the church to return to the pure Gospel of the New Testament. His speech was burned, and Calvin fled Paris to Geneva. Disguised as a vinedresser, he escaped the city in a basket. During the next year, some two dozen Protestants were burned alive in France. This provoked Calvin to write his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was addressed to the King of France. His thought contained in the *Institutes* developed into the dominant theology for the international expansion of the Reformation.

The first edition of the *Institutes* was completed in 1536, the same year Calvin was persuaded by Farel to come to Switzerland to build Geneva into a model city of Reformation. In 1538 Farel and Calvin were forced to leave Geneva. He lived and ministered in Strasbourg for three years until he was recalled to Geneva in 1541.

Calvin's theology stressed the sovereignty of God in all of life. His chief passion was the reform of worship to a level of purity that would give no hint to or support of the human penchant for idolatry. Geneva attracted leaders from all over Europe who came there to observe the model and be instructed by Calvin himself.

During this period turbulence spread to England when King Henry VIII resisted the authority of Rome. In 1534 Henry became the Supreme Head of the Anglican Church. He undertook the persecution of evangelicals, which escalated under “Bloody Mary,” causing many to flee to Geneva for refuge.

The persecutions were suspended under “Good Queen Bess,” Elizabeth I, whose stance provoked a papal bull against her in 1570. The Reformation spread rapidly to Scotland, largely under the leadership of John Knox, who served 19 months as a galley slave before he went to England and then to Geneva. In 1560 the Scottish Parliament rejected papal authority. In 1561 the Scottish Reformed “Kirk” was reorganized.

One interesting footnote to this is that the first man John Knox ordained into the ministry of the church was an obscure clergyman by the name of Robert Charles Sproul, of whom I am a direct descendant.

In the early 17th century, the Reformation spread to the new world with the arrival of the Pilgrims and colonies of Puritans who brought Reformed theology and the Geneva Bible with them.

Reformation theology dominated Protestant evangelicalism for decades but became diluted later under influences of Pietism and Finneyism.



# West Suffolk Epistle

## West Suffolk Baptist Church



## The History of the Reformation - Cont'd

By the end of the 20th century, Reformation theology declined dramatically in the Western world, being assaulted by 19th-century liberal theology on the one hand, and the influence of Arminian theology on the other. This was especially true in America.

In the present scene of American evangelicalism, Reformation theology is a minority report. The dominant strands of theology that reign in current evangelical circles are dispensationalism and neo-Pentecostal charismatic thought. The phenomenal spread and growth of dispensational theology in America is a fascinating chapter in church history. Having its roots in British Plymouth Brethren suppositions, dispensationalism spread rapidly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fueled by the Bible School movement, prophecy conferences, and the preaching of men like D. L. Moody, dispensationalism gathered enormous popular support.

The American version of dispensationalism got a great boost by the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. The Scofield Bible, with its study notes, served as a popular tool for the spread of dispensational theology. This theology was forged by men who had their roots predominately in Reformation thought. The themes of classical Reformed theology were modified significantly by this movement.

The Reformation Study Bible (originally published as the New Geneva Study Bible) is the first distinctively Reformed study Bible in English to appear since the Geneva Bible in the 16th century. It seeks to recover the theology of the Reformation and provide a guide for the laity to understand its historically, doctrinally, and biblically rich system. Its importance to American Christianity is enormous. It is my hope that it will help guide English-speaking evangelicals back to their Reformation roots. More importantly, it is designed to call evangelicals back to the Bible itself and to their historic confessions of biblical theology.

Beyond the borders of America, the *Reformation Study Bible* may be used to expand the light of the Reformation to lands where the original Reformation never reached, especially to Russia and Eastern Europe.

In our day we have seen a revival of interest in the Bible and a renewed commitment to the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture. But the Reformation was more than a doctrine about the Bible. It was sparked by a deep and serious study of the Bible. It is not enough to extol the virtue of Scripture—we must hear the teaching of Scripture afresh. It is only by a serious and earnest recovery of biblical truth that we will be able to avoid falling into a new cesspool of heresy. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**

## What is Reformation Day?

A single event on a single day changed the world. It was October 31, 1517. Brother Martin, a monk and a scholar, had struggled for years with his church, the church in Rome. He had been greatly disturbed by an unprecedented indulgence sale. The story has all the makings of a Hollywood blockbuster. Let's meet the cast.

**First**, there is the young bishop—too young by church laws—Albert of Mainz. Not only was he bishop over two bishoprics, he desired an additional archbishopric over Mainz. This too was against church laws. So Albert appealed to the Pope in Rome, Leo X. From the De Medici family, Leo X greedily allowed his tastes to exceed his financial resources. Enter the artists and sculptors, Raphael and Michelangelo.



# West Suffolk Epistle

## West Suffolk Baptist Church



### What is Reformation Day? - Cont'd

When Albert of Mainz appealed for a papal dispensation, Leo X was ready to deal. Albert, with the papal blessing, would sell indulgences for past, present, and future sins. All of this sickened the monk, Martin Luther. Can we buy our way into heaven? Luther had to speak out.

But why October 31? November 1 held a special place in the church calendar as All Saints' Day. On November 1, 1517, a massive exhibit of newly acquired relics would be on display at Wittenberg, Luther's home city. Pilgrims would come from all over, genuflect (to bend the right knee to the floor) before the relics, and take hundreds, if not thousands, of years off time in purgatory. Luther's soul grew even more vexed. None of this seemed right.

Martin Luther, a scholar, took quill in hand, dipped it in his inkwell and penned his 95 Theses on October 31, 1517. These were intended to spark a debate, to stir some soul-searching among his fellow brothers in the church. The 95 Theses sparked far more than a debate. The 95 Theses also revealed the church was far beyond rehabilitation. It needed a reformation. The church, and the world, would never be the same.

One of Luther's 95 Theses simply declares, "The Church's true treasure is the gospel of Jesus Christ." That alone is the meaning of Reformation Day. The church had lost sight of the gospel because it had long ago papered over the pages of God's Word with layer upon layer of tradition. Tradition always brings about systems of works, of earning your way back to God. It was true of the Pharisees, and it was true of medieval Roman Catholicism. Didn't Christ Himself say, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light?" Reformation Day celebrates the joyful beauty of the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is Reformation Day? It is the day the light of the gospel broke forth out of darkness. It was the day that began the Protestant Reformation. It was a day that led to Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and many other Reformers helping the church find its way back to God's Word as the only authority for faith and life and leading the church back to the glorious doctrines of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It kindled the fires of missionary endeavors, it led to hymn writing and congregational singing, and it led to the centrality of the sermon and preaching for the people of God. It is the celebration of a theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural transformation.

So we celebrate Reformation Day. This day reminds us to be thankful for our past and to the Monk turned Reformer. What's more, this day reminds us of our duty, our obligation, to keep the light of the gospel at the center of all we do. ~ **Dr. Stephen J. Nichols – President of Reformation Bible College, chief academic officer for Ligonier Ministries, and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow.**



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*Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America*

*Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner - November 2019*

### Birthdays

Brenda A. (1)  
Abigail W. (7)  
LeAnn M. (10)  
Audrey D. (11)  
Luke P. (15)  
Malcolm H. (19)  
Walt L. (20)  
Jesse W. (29)

### Anniversary

Gene and Brenda A. (22)  
Marlin and Sadie H. (22)

I have always found it depressing to listen to the kind of people who, whenever you meet them, will always for sure tell you the story of their conversion many years ago. They tell you that story every time. I have known people do exactly the same thing with revival. There is always something about an initial experience that is remarkable and outstanding. And a time of revival is so amazing and wonderful that it is not surprising that people go on talking about it. But, if they give the impression that they have had nothing since that wonderful experience, that ever after they have been walking through a wilderness, and travelling through a desert, then it is absolutely wrong. Their idea of the Christian life is of a dramatic experience, perhaps at the outset, after which they just trudge along, living on the strength of that and partly keeping their eye turned backwards as they go forward. ~ *Martyn Lloyd Jones*



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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or its leadership.

## West Suffolk Baptist Church Leadership