

## UNIT EIGHTEEN: WHO WE ARE AS THE CHURCH

### SESSION ONE: WE ARE PROTESTANT – THE REFORMATION

#### Summary of the Eighteenth Session of the Course

We began by looking at who we are as the community of faith in Jesus, the Christ (Messiah). At the outset of the course, we had considered who we are as individuals and learned an individual cannot be a person without others, without relationships. Now, we are looking at the levels or layers of who we are as followers of Jesus.

I drew on the board a set of concentric circles starting with the largest and most inclusive, which I labeled **Christian**. As Christians we are all who identify themselves as the people of Jesus the Christ: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Anglican Catholic, Protestant, and sectarian. The next smaller circle I labeled **Protestant**. As Protestants, we are Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc. The next smaller circle I labeled **Reformed**. As Protestant churches within the Reformed Tradition, we are Reformed, Congregational, and Presbyterian of many different denominations in the United States and around the world. The smallest inner circle I labeled **Presbyterian**, of which there are also many denominations in the United States and throughout the world. Within Presbyterian, we are the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Then, I went outside the Christian circle to add two more designations of who we are, both larger and more inclusive than Christian: **Human** and **Creatures**. God's eye is on the whole world of people and the entire created order. As Christians, we are servants of God's love for the world and all creation. When the church forgets its call to serve for the sake of God's love for the world, it becomes isolated and parochial, which leads to the indifference and cruelty that come with pride.

#### Summary: As People of Faith in Jesus the Christ, We Are . . .

Creatures  
Human  
**Christian**  
**Protestant**  
**Reformed**  
**Presbyterian**  
**Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

## **Christian**

Our faith in is Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. In him and through him, we know God. In him, we find our true humanity – who we should be and, by God’s grace, can be. We are his disciples, learning life from him (and receiving it as we learn it). We are his ambassadors to the world he died to redeem for God.

## **Protestant**

Within the larger circle of Christians and Christian churches, we are Protestant, the name which refers to those churches developed out of the Protestant Reformation. The purpose of this session of the course was to learn how we became Protestant and what it means to be Protestant.

### **How We Became Protestant and What Makes Us Protestant**

The church in the West was Roman Catholic. By the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century, there were rumblings of protest in various lands of Europe because of the church’s centralized power and abuses of that power. From what was to develop as the Protestant point of view, the church had become less its people and more its clergy, especially its higher clergy, the bishops, the cardinals, and the pope. In the Dark Ages, Europe was mired in superstition and fear, and the church’s leaders played upon the people’s superstitions and fears to their own advantage. The Bible was available only in Latin, and attempts to translate it into the spoken languages of the people were met with repression and executions. Church traditions held authority at least equal to that of scripture, and the latter was open only to the educated who could read Latin. So, the church had sole authority to interpret a book the people could not even read (those who could read at all). The clergy were isolated from the people. The ordained could not marry or have sexual relations, although there were, of course, scandals and secrets. The lay people received Communion “in one kind” only, meaning they were given the host (bread) but not the cup; only the priests drank the wine of the sacrament. This distinction in Communion represented a division within the church that made the ordained (called “vocations,” meaning “the called”) a higher class of Christian.

There were various attempts at reform, all bringing suppression and retaliation. The situation came to a head in the church’s selling of indulgences to pay for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica. Indulgences were certificates of forgiveness for sale. The people were urged to buy them to shorten the time in Purgatory for themselves or their deceased loved ones.

The session focused on Martin Luther and some of his principal points of reform. Luther was a very troubled monk who struggled to feel justified before God (set right with God) but could find no way. He tried the usual methods of self-deprivation and mortification of the flesh, but could find no peace with God. Then, in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, he found his answer. A person was not justified with God by any works of the law, good deeds, or religious practices, but only by God’s

own grace, meaning God's unmerited love and undeserved forgiveness. Before God, there could be no human merit. Only God could set the person right. From this insight came Luther's principle of *sola gratia*, "**by grace alone**" can a person be justified.

But, surely, there must be some response to grace from the person's side; grace must be received and even accepted in some way. In Galatians, Luther found the answer he sought. Since a person can neither merit nor repay God's grace, all the person can do is trust God, but that trust (faith) can become the person's whole way of life. Faith for Luther was never a simple assent, never merely the verbal acceptance of doctrine. Faith was an all-consuming response to God's grace made available to us in and through Jesus Christ. For Martin Luther, justification was no easy deal, but it was a freely-given gift of God. No one could possibly earn or deserve it. No one could claim it, but could only trust God for it. From this insight Luther developed his principal of *sola fide*, "**by faith alone.**" Together, the two principles declared that justification comes "by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone."

At the time, the church's whole system of salvation was based upon merit and authority: the merit of the saints and the authority of the church (meaning the church's hierarchy). Luther intended his biblical principals to reform the church, but the adoption of those principals would have destroyed the church as it actually existed (and intended to continue existing). The sale of indulgences depended upon the church's teaching that the saints had accumulated excess merit (more than they needed for their own salvation); some of their excess merit could be sold off as indulgences. At much deeper levels than the blatant abuse of the church's beliefs and authority in the sale of indulgences, the authority and power of the church would be challenged by Luther's principals. But there was more, besides.

Martin Luther insisted that Jesus Christ was the only mediator needed between the people and God. So, he put forward his principle of the "**priesthood of all believers.**" At the most obvious level, this principle eliminated the need for the sacrament of confession. The people could confess their sins directly to God and be assured, by faith, of God's forgiveness. This idea amounted to taking away the church's power to forgive (sometimes for a price) or to withhold forgiveness. But did not the Pope, as the holder of the office of St. Peter, hold for Christ the keys to the kingdom of heaven? Had Jesus not told the church, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"? For Luther, all believers were called by God (were "vocations"), and all could serve as priests to each other. The danger in the phrase "priesthood of all believers" is that Protestants will miss the word "all" and think of it as the priesthood of *no* believers. Especially in America, where rugged individualism is almost a doctrine of society, Protestant Christians can find themselves alone in a God-and-me or Jesus-and-me faith. We do need each other. All of Martin Luther's principles of reform serve to give the people of the church, not just more individual freedom, but also the greater personal responsibility that comes with that freedom. We are to minister to each other.

Luther insisted further that the **Bible** should be translated into and made available in the **languages of the people**, that priests and nuns should be **permitted to marry**, and that the people

should be given **Communion** in both kinds (bread and wine). By all these principles, Luther was reconstructing the church as the community of faith – the people, not just the clergy. And he was making God accessible to the people through Christ and not through the hierarchy of the church.

One more principle is of key importance. The church maintained that, because the Spirit of God continued to be at work in the church (meaning its leaders), the canonized tenets and traditions of the church were just as much inspired as scripture and bore just as much authority. Luther denied this idea and sought to establish the contrary principle of *sola scriptura* “**scripture alone**,” meaning that only the scriptures could have such enduring authority, standing above all church councils, papal pronouncements, and canons of the church. Today, we may think of the principal of “scripture alone” as restrictive, but it was actually liberating. It gave the church the power to admit it had been wrong. It freed the church to rethink its formulations which may have been good and helpful in their own time but which became outdated and incomprehensible to the people as times changed. The church could change its language for expressing the truth of God revealed in scripture and could even retract pronouncements. The Bible became the standard for all the church’s truth. (The Catholic Church accused the Protestants of replacing the Pope with a “paper pope.” Protestant Fundamentalism remains subject to some truth in that charge.)

Luther’s principal of *sola scriptura* denies absolute authority to any creed, confession, doctrine, or tradition. Even as Protestants, we tend to forget or ignore this principal when we want to establish some standard in addition to the Bible. Prior to 1967, the Presbyterian Church came dangerously close to establishing just such an authoritative interpretation of the truth of God proclaimed in scripture by its over-attachment to the “Westminster Standards,” meaning the Westminster Confession of Faith with its Larger Catechism and Shorter Catechism. Those confessional statements now stand with eight other historic statements of faith in our Book of Confession, and so the power of the Westminster standards has been diluted back to human, fallible, and correctable levels, under scripture. No confession would be elevated to authority above the Bible as its official interpretation. Any official interpretation effectively exceeds the authority of the Bible itself. If I have the official interpretation, why read the Bible?

### **Summary: Luther’s “Alone” Principals**

Grace alone (*sola gratia*)

Faith alone (*sola fide*)

Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*)

### **The Church is the People of Faith in Jesus Christ**

Priesthood of all believers

Communion in both kinds

Bible in the language of the people

Clergy permitted to marry

Worship in the language of the people

Luther and the other reformers denied the infallibility of the Pope. They renounced the infallibility of church canons. God's word stands forever, but our human interpretations and applications of it do not; they belong to their time and place, and are never infallible.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses for church reform on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany (the university's customary bulletin board). In time, the church responded by excommunicating Luther and thereby, it was believed, putting him outside salvation and damning him. He would have been arrested and probably put to death, but Luther was protected by a German prince who served as his benefactor.

Instead of reform, Luther's principles produced schism, the splitting of the church and the establishment of new churches calling themselves Evangelical or Protestant. Over time, the split became a fragmentation of the church into countless churches, as we know the situation today. Martin Luther married a nun, established the churches that would bear his name, and wrote voluminously, mostly on the Bible and always on faith.

Luther was a human being, as fallible as he insisted all human beings to be. Sadly, he wrote some anti-Semitic notions that were later put to horrible use by Adolph Hitler and his Nazis. He also denied his support to the peasant uprisings that were, no doubt, inspired at least in part by his principles. He remains, however, for all his humanness and even his sins, the towering figure of the Protestant Reformation, the champion for his time of the grace of God.