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Reformation: A Call for Renewal

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READINGS
OT 2 Kings 23:1-8; Psalm 119:25-32; Epistle Titus 3:3-8; Gospel Luke 5:36-39

Reformation Sunday

Key Verse –

“No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old.” - Luke 5:36

Reformation Sunday is not simply a day to remember Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, or the historical events that changed the course of Christianity. It is a day to ask a much more searching question: Does the Church of Jesus Christ continually allow itself to be renewed by the Word and Spirit of God? Every institution, including the Church, can gradually become comfortable with traditions, structures and practices that once served a good purpose but may later lose their spiritual vitality. What began as a living movement can become a routine. What began as faith can become formalism. What began as a passion for Christ can become an attachment to religious institutions. Therefore, reformation is not merely something that happened in the sixteenth century. Reformation is an ongoing call to renewal.

The Protestant Reformation is generally associated with Martin Luther, the German Augustinian monk and theologian who, in 1517, challenged practices and theological positions within the Western Church, particularly the abuse surrounding the sale of indulgences. Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, traditionally associated with 31 October 1517, became a catalyst for a much larger movement of theological and ecclesiastical reform. His insistence on the authority of Scripture and his emphasis on salvation by grace through faith became central themes of the Reformation. The Reformation was not simply a rebellion against an institution. At its deepest level, it was a call to return to the Gospel. Luther and other Reformers believed that the Church needed to be brought back to the centrality of God’s Word and the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Reformation eventually produced profound changes in theology, worship, church structures, education and society. But there is a danger in celebrating the Reformation merely as history. We can honour Luther and forget the challenge that Luther represents. We can celebrate the recovery of the Bible while failing to allow the Bible to reform our own lives. We can speak about justification by faith while continuing to live by self-righteousness. We can remember the Reformation while resisting every reform that God may be demanding from us today. Therefore, the message of Reformation Sunday is not simply “Remember the Reformation.” It is “Allow God to reform and renew us.” The four passages before us give us four dimensions of this renewal.

1. Renewal Begins When We Return to the Word of God (2 Kings 23:1-8)

The first great lesson comes from the reforms of King Josiah. When Josiah became king of Judah,

the nation had experienced years of spiritual decline. Idolatry had entered deeply into the life of the nation. Religious practices had become mixed with pagan worship. The people had drifted away from the covenant of God. Then something remarkable happened. The Book of the Law was discovered in the temple. When the Word of God was read before the king, Josiah was deeply moved. He realized how far the nation had departed from God's commandments. Josiah did not simply say, "This is interesting information about our ancestors." He responded with action. He gathered the people, read the covenant publicly, renewed the covenant before the Lord and began removing the objects and practices associated with idolatry. The Word of God became the instrument of reform.

This is one of the most important principles of genuine reformation: renewal begins when God's Word is allowed to speak again. The Church does not reform itself merely by changing buildings, programmes, committees, titles or administrative structures. Those things may sometimes need to change, but genuine spiritual renewal begins when the Church once again hears the living Word of God. The sixteenth-century Reformation recovered the importance of Scripture because the Reformers believed that the Church must continually be examined in the light of God's Word. Josiah gives us an important model. He did not use the Word merely to criticize other people. He first allowed the Word to expose the condition of his own nation. That is a challenge for us today. We may easily use the Bible as a weapon against somebody else. We can find verses to criticize another denomination, another congregation, another leader or another generation. But Reformation Sunday asks: What does God's Word need to reform in me? Perhaps our worship needs renewal. Perhaps our prayer life needs renewal. Perhaps our preaching needs renewal. Perhaps our churches need to recover compassion for the poor, justice for the oppressed and concern for those who are spiritually lost. Perhaps we need to examine whether our traditions are helping people encounter Christ or merely preserving our institutional habits. Josiah teaches us that when God's Word is rediscovered, renewal must follow.

2. Renewal Happens When God Revives the Soul (Psalm 119:25-32)

Psalm 119 gives us a deeply personal picture of renewal. The psalmist cries: "My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to your word." This is not merely a prayer for information. It is a prayer for life. The psalmist knows God's Word, but he also knows his own weakness. His soul is close to the dust. Therefore, he asks God to revive him. This is the heart of reformation. Reformation is not simply changing external structures; it is the renewal of the inner life. A church can have a beautiful building and a spiritually tired congregation. It can have sophisticated programmes and weak prayer. It can have many meetings and little mission. It can have excellent organization but little spiritual power. The psalmist says, "Revive me." That prayer should become the prayer of the Church.

The Reformation recovered the authority of Scripture, but Scripture is not given merely to increase our knowledge. It is given to transform our lives. The psalmist continues by speaking about God's ways, statutes and commandments. He asks God to teach him, strengthen him and enlarge his heart. There is a beautiful expression in verse 32: "I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding." When God renews the heart, obedience is no longer experienced merely as a burden. The renewed person begins to "run" in God's way. That is true Christian renewal. God does not merely make us more religious. He makes us more alive. A renewed Christian becomes more loving, more forgiving, more generous, more truthful, more prayerful and more committed to God's mission. Therefore, Reformation Sunday should not only lead us to ask whether our Church structures are correct. We must ask whether our hearts are alive in Christ. The

Church needs not only reformers of institutions; it needs men and women whose hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit.

3. Renewal Is the Work of God's Grace (Titus 3:3-8)

Paul's letter to Titus takes us even deeper. Paul reminds Christians of what they once were. They were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by various passions and pleasures. But then something changed. Paul writes: "But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us." This is the theological foundation of Christian renewal. We are not renewed because we are good enough to reform ourselves. We are renewed because God's grace reaches us. The Reformation strongly emphasized the gracious character of salvation. Human beings cannot earn their salvation through religious achievements. Salvation is God's gift. Paul tells Titus that God saved us, "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." This is the Gospel. Reformation is therefore not simply about correcting other people's mistakes. It begins with humility. We ourselves stand in need of grace.

Paul speaks of the "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Notice that word: renewal. The Christian life is not merely about becoming a better version of ourselves through human effort. It is about the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. This has enormous significance for the Church today. Sometimes we think that if we change our constitution, our leadership structure, our programmes or our methods, the Church will automatically become renewed. But institutional change without spiritual renewal can simply produce a new structure with the same old heart. We need the Holy Spirit. We need people who have experienced the grace of God. We need pastors who preach grace. We need congregations that practise grace. We need churches where sinners can come, repent, experience forgiveness and begin again. We need Christians who understand that they themselves are recipients of mercy. The Church cannot be an instrument of renewal in the world unless it continually experiences renewal within itself. Therefore, the question of Reformation Sunday is not only, "What should we reform?" It is also, "Where do we need God's grace to renew us?"

4. Renewal Requires New Wine and New Wineskins (Luke 5:36-39)

The Gospel reading gives us perhaps the most challenging image for Reformation Sunday. Jesus says: "No one pours new wine into old wineskins." Jesus was speaking about the difference between His new work and the religious forms that people had become accustomed to. The problem was not necessarily that the old wineskins had once been useless. A wineskin could have served its purpose well. But when new wine was poured into it, the old wineskin could not accommodate the new wine because it had lost its flexibility. Jesus was making a profound spiritual point. God is always at work, and sometimes our old forms are not capable of carrying the new work God wants to do.

This does not mean that everything old is wrong and everything new is right. Christianity must never confuse novelty with renewal. Some old things are precious because they faithfully preserve the Gospel. Scripture, prayer, worship, the sacraments, Christian community and the apostolic faith are not obsolete. But Jesus challenges our tendency to make our forms more important than our faith. A church can become so attached to "the way we have always done it" that it cannot respond to the needs of a changing world. The question is not whether we should preserve everything old or accept everything new. The question is: Are our traditions serving the Gospel, or has the Gospel become imprisoned by our traditions? That is a crucial Reformation question. The Reformers did not invent

Christianity. They sought to recover the Gospel at the heart of Christianity.

Today, the Church faces new circumstances: young people who think differently, technological changes, secularization, migration, economic pressures, social divisions and new forms of communication. The Gospel remains the same, but the ways in which we communicate and embody that Gospel may need renewal. We must be willing to ask difficult questions.

How can the Church reach the younger generation?

How can we make worship meaningful without compromising biblical truth?

How can we use technology for mission?

How can the Church become more welcoming without losing its theological identity?

How can we move from being consumers of church programmes to disciples of Jesus?

How can our institutions become instruments of mission rather than ends in themselves?

New wine requires appropriate wineskins. But there is another warning in this passage. Jesus says that people often prefer the old wine because they say, “The old is better.” This is the danger of spiritual complacency. Sometimes we prefer what is familiar simply because it is familiar. Reformation requires courage to say: God may be calling us beyond our comfort zone.

Conclusion

Reformation Sunday finally brings us to a personal question. We can remember Martin Luther. We can remember 31 October 1517. We can remember the Ninety-Five Theses. We can remember the great themes of the Reformation - Scripture, grace and faith. We can celebrate the history of Protestant Christianity. But the most important question is: What is God asking us to reform today? Josiah teaches us: Return to the Word. Psalm 119 teaches us: Ask God to revive the soul. Titus teaches us: Receive the renewal of the Holy Spirit through God’s grace. Jesus teaches us: Be willing to become new wineskins for the new work of God. The Church must never become a museum of past revivals. It must remain a living community through which Christ continues His mission in the world.

Perhaps some of us need a personal reformation today. Perhaps our prayer life needs reformation. Perhaps our relationship with another person needs reformation. Perhaps our priorities need reformation. Perhaps our church needs reformation. Perhaps our understanding of ministry needs reformation. Perhaps we have preserved the leaves of religion but lost the fruit of the Spirit. Perhaps we have maintained the structure but lost the passion. Perhaps we have protected our traditions but forgotten our mission. Perhaps we have spoken much about Christ but followed Him too little. The good news is that God is still a God of renewal. The God who renewed Judah under Josiah can renew His people today. The God whom the psalmist prayed to for revival still revives souls. The God whose grace appeared in Jesus Christ still saves and renews through the Holy Spirit. And the Christ who spoke about new wine is still calling His Church to be flexible, faithful and ready for His continuing work.

Therefore, let our prayer on this Reformation Sunday be: “Lord, reform us again.” Reform our hearts. Reform our churches. Reform our priorities. Reform our witness. Reform our mission. Reform our relationships. Reform our understanding of discipleship. And above all, renew us by Your Word and Your Holy Spirit. The Reformation of the sixteenth century changed history because

people were willing to listen again to the Word of God. Our generation also needs people who will listen, repent, believe, obey and act. May we not merely celebrate the Reformation. May we become people of renewal. May the Church continually return to Scripture, continually receive God’s grace, continually be renewed by the Holy Spirit, and continually find new ways to proclaim the unchanging Gospel of Jesus Christ to a changing world. And may our lives become a living testimony that the God who reformed the Church in the past is still renewing His people today. “Revive me according to your word.” (Psalm 119:25). “He saved us... through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5). “No one pours new wine into old wineskins.” (Luke 5:37) May God give us the humility to return to His Word, the faith to receive His grace, the courage to change what must be changed, and the wisdom to preserve what must be preserved. Reformation is not only a memory of yesterday. It is God’s call to renewal today.

Amen.