

More Belief; Fewer Beliefs (Part One)

“It will be done just as you believed it would”

Reflection 16 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

O.K., we start with history. So take a deep breath and then exhale all the bad thoughts you still carry around with you about high school history. Feeling better?

There was probably never a more dynamic time in the history of the church than 500 years ago in the early sixteenth century. It was the time of the Protestant Reformation. The state of the church was not good in AD 1500. The papacy in Rome was decadent. It was the time of the Borgia popes, hedonistic and politicized, filled with the egoistic spirit of the Renaissance. Meanwhile on the popular level, the vast majority of the people in Western Europe were semi-pagan rustics, their religion largely superstition and emotional excess. Everywhere there was a recognized need for a new spirituality. And now when the next big idea or set of ideas came there were printing presses to get the word out before it could be silenced by church authorities.

It was then on October 31, 1517 that a previously obscure monk and scholar named Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Luther struggled with bouts of deep depression. He had barely survived a lightning strike in 1505. He had been appalled by a trip to Rome in 1512. And he was a tortured soul desperately seeking assurance that he was saved. Then when lecturing from Romans at the University of Wittenberg he found his answer in Romans 1:17 – that “the just shall live by faith,” not by church ritual but by faith.

His breaking point with Rome came over the sale of indulgences. For several centuries priests had been offering to people remissions of punishment for sin on earth and especially in Purgatory. That is, your years in Purgatory would be, the system claimed, shortened. These indulgences were usually granted for some penance the person had done. But now in Luther’s time they were just being sold. It was a good deal. Buying an indulgence was a bit like buying a lottery ticket today. It was a small, repeatable purchase that gave you momentary hope that day that your future could be great. “Give me Play 3 Quick Pick; no, give me a Mega Millions ticket.”

All this was too much for Luther which led him to that fateful day in 1517 when he posted his Ninety-Five Theses (or debating points) on the door in Wittenberg. At first he had no thought of breaking with Rome but when the Pope condemned him with a papal bull (a papal letter) in 1520, Luther burned the bull, and was then excommunicated in 1521. Summoned in April 1521 by the Emperor Charles V to appear before the Diet (or parliament) of Worms and asked to repudiate his beliefs, Luther’s answer became a classic, “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”

And so the Protestant Reformation caught fire, and over the next generation or so huge systems of Protestant doctrine developed to rival those of Rome. And there came to be Lutherans and Calvinists and Anabaptists, and then many kinds of each. The world has never been the same.

It did not have to be that way.

There was another man, a contemporary of Luther, Erasmus, a Catholic priest and a great scholar, well-known in educated circles across Europe. And he saw all the things wrong with the Renaissance church that Luther did. And he wrote about them critically as Luther did, though with a touch more humor. But he also saw what was about to happen and pleaded for reform from within the church. Above all, he called for unity of all people of good will around a very few articles of faith.

He rigorously opposed complicated theology. So he wrote on various occasions: “One should not turn everything into a matter of faith.” “We know that the human mind is such that it clings with tooth and nail to anything that is defined.” “Peace and unity can only come about when we define as little as possible, and leave the judgment free on many matters; besides, there is the immense obscurity of very many questions.”

Erasmus then distinguished between fundamentals, essential doctrine, and non-essentials, including – surprisingly – even the Trinity among the non-essentials. He understood that truth is complex when it’s applied to real life, and he was convinced that usually neither of two conflicting positions entirely captures the truth. And so Erasmus pleaded for more belief but fewer beliefs.

Erasmus did not carry the day back in the sixteenth century. He probably should have. If you wonder where I line up between Luther and Erasmus, for years my favorite online password for pretty much anything was “Erasmus.” But it’s a new day now, and Erasmus now 500 years later is carrying the day. More and more people understand what Erasmus was saying, and why he was saying it.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week