

The Festival of the Reformation, A ✕ D 2009

John 8:31-36 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Your hand will serve you better with less back-patting and more breast-beating.

Your mouth will serve you better with less "God I thank you that I am not a papist, a Baptist, or a non-denominational" and more "God be merciful to me, a sinner." The Reformation is not a self-congratulatory memento of what you're not, but a clarion reminder of what you need. The first of the Ninety-Five Theses, nailed to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg four hundred ninety-two years ago, is the most important and also the most difficult to believe: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' He willed that the whole life of a believer should be constant repentance."

2 Forgiveness is not free. Indulgences are too cheap. Want to buy off an eternity of torture in hell, the agony of being eternally separated from God? Don't dig into your wallet, but plumb your arteries. Blood, not gold, is the price. And no small portion will do. Every drop is required. There is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood. No indulgence, no mass said on your behalf, no intercession of the saints can remit sins. Blood, the kind you smear on doorposts and lintels, the kind the high priest would splash onto the altar and scatter over the people, points to the penalty for sin, sin inherited and sins committed.

3 But indulgences don't threaten you anymore. They sold well because people in the sixteenth century were afraid of the wrath of God. But the wrath of God is no longer a concern. The God who called sin adultery and sinners whores has been replaced by a more politically correct god who is concerned more with your customer satisfaction than the salvation of sinners. The Jesus who warned about being a slave to the sin you commit is replaced with a Jesus who still wants to set you free—not from sin, but from social ills like poverty and corporate greed and from spiritual malaise. The God who demanded sacrifice, who seemed to have a distasteful obsession with blood and who found the smell of the burnt sacrifice a pleasing aroma, has been replaced by a bloodless god, a god not of sacrifice and sacrament but of emotion and enthusiasm. Those are false depictions of God. Repent.

4 Don't go nailing theses to any doors until you're first willing to let the Word of God pierce your own heart. The Reformation was not a license to protest, not a triumph over papalism, not the formation of anything new. It was and is a call to repentance, a call to admit your slavery to sin, a call to acknowledge your damnable desire to placate God with your own works, a call to return to the pure Word of God.

5 Forgiveness is not free. There is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood. But you needn't pay with your own blood. Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is your Lord, who has redeemed you, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that you might be His own. Real blood to pay for real sins. Real blood, the kind that first flowed at the slice of

flint when God in the flesh was eight days old, the kind that last flowed at the stab of a soldier's spear into the side of the Crucified God, the kind that still flows into the chalice Jesus offers.

6 Your freedom comes at the price of the life of God, the death of Jesus. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free in deed. Free, not from Rome, but from sin. Free, not from the Pope, but from the devil. Free, not from righteousness but from sin. That's true Christian freedom. You are free from the demands of God's law, free from the burden of having to be righteous enough to earn His favor, free from too cheap indulgences. Your salvation was bought with the incomparable riches of the drops of blood of your Lord, each more valuable than a treasure chest of gold coins. He has thus set you free. Free not to leave, but free to stay. Free to stay in daily repentance that the Lord graciously gives. Free to stay here hearing His word, receiving His Absolution, remaining in His Baptismal grace, receiving His Body and Blood. You are free to stay in the tradition of the Reformation, receiving God's gifts and delighting to be where God delivers His forgiveness.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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