

## **Your Life Can Have Its Own Reformation**

Acts 3:38; Matthew 4:12

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In 285 B.C., Alexandria was the largest and most prosperous city in the world. It was a port city in northern Egypt founded by Alexander the Great. On the shore was a lighthouse considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. (<http://www.ancient.eu/alexandria/>)

It was the seat of learning and attracted the world's leading scholars in every field. Among the things that attracted them to Alexandria was the world's largest library, which had an estimated 500,000 papyrus scrolls. (Ibid)

The founder of this great library was King Ptolemy I. To add to his collection, he was advised to procure a translation of the sacred books of the Jews. Their sacred books were written in Hebrew and Aramaic. To make them available to the masses, they would need to be translated into Greek. (<http://www.bible-reasearcher.com/brenton1.html>)

The King sent a request to Eleazar, the high priest, asking for seventy-two interpreters, six from each tribe of Israel. (Ibid)

It is reported that they completed their work in 72 days. What we know for sure is that their completed translation is called the Septuagint, (Latin for Seventy). (Ibid)

For the first time in history, the Hebrew Bible moved through a translation process. When that's done, it's never easy to get the meaning of every word completely correct.

These translators had the added difficulty of introducing theological ideas from one culture and language into another. However, first century Jews embraced the translation believing it was as inspired of God as the Hebrew version.

Most people never how ancient Jews were able to obtain a scroll of any of the Hebrew scriptures. Any portion of the scriptures had to be hand copied from a scroll that had been hand copied.

Each time this was done, there was the potential for errors to creep in, and some minor ones did, mostly in spelling. These are called textual variants and they are noted in some versions of the Bible, like the New International Version.

From Alexandria, new copies of the Septuagint had to be hand copied. New scrolls had to be painstakingly copied word for word on scrolls, which were then distributed to synagogues throughout Israel.

One of these scrolls would have ended up in Nazareth and Jesus would have read from it the day he preached his first sermon in the synagogue.

The Septuagint was the primary Bible of Jesus and Paul. (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/tips/what-bible-did-jesus-use-11638841.html>)

However, Greek did not stay the dominant language in the Western Empire. Three centuries after Jesus, as the world expanded and languages grew, Latin began to gain a foothold. (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-28/405-jerome-completes-vulgate.html>)

So the Septuagint was translated into Latin. Now the Latin translation of the Bible was two translations removed from the original Hebrew Bible, thus running the risk for even more of the original meaning to be lost. (Ibid)

Some of these Latin copies were not translated with the care that the Septuagint had been. Several were circulating and none of them seemed to match the other. (Ibid)

This was noticed by an accomplished 29-year-old scholar named Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius, who became known simply as Jerome. Aren't we glad? (Ibid)

Jerome was living in Rome in 345 when one night he had a dream of being preoccupied with secular learning. In his dream, he was accused of being a follower of Cicero, Rome's greatest politician, and not a follower of Christ. (Ibid) This dream changed his life.

For the next several years Jerome lived an ascetic life in the Syrian Desert, studying and transcribing the Scriptures and mastering Hebrew. (Ibid)

That's when Jerome realized there was a problem with the unreliability of the scriptures because they had been translated poorly. (Ibid)

So he wrote a letter to Pope Damasus. He explained the problem and proposed a solution.

This is what he wrote: "If we are to pin our faith to the Latin texts, it is for our opponents to tell us which; for there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies. If, on the other hand, we are to glean the truth from a comparison of many, why not go back to the original Greek and correct the mistakes introduced by inaccurate translators, and the blundering alterations of confident but ignorant critics, and, further, all that has been inserted or changed by copyists more asleep than awake?" (Ibid)

The Pope agreed and he commissioned Jerome to make a translation from the original languages. So Jerome found copies of the Bible in their original language and translated them into Latin. This became his life's work. It took him 23 years to translate everything. (Ibid)

Jerome's completed work was called the Latin Vulgate and it became the official Bible of the Catholic Church. (Ibid)

If you have ever wondered why the Catholic Bible contains other books our Bible does not, books called the Apocrypha, it is because those books are in the Septuagint. (Ibid)

So Jerome was compelled by the church to include these books in his translation, although he was opposed to them as being fully inspired doctrine. (Ibid)

Unfortunately, as the Vulgate began to be copied by hand, generation-by-generation, some errors began to creep into its text, some of which did affect the doctrine of the church, and that brings us to Martin Luther and the Reformation. (Ibid)

When Martin Luther went to the University as a teenager at Erfurt, he found a copy of the Latin Vulgate in the library. This was a big deal to Luther because it was the first time in his life he had access to the Holy Bible.

Bibles were rare, if for no other reason than they had to be hand copied. The Catholic Church controlled them. Only certain people had access to them: priests, theological professors, and some universities. Because people were not able to read the Bible, all their understanding of it came from the priests.

All their understanding about God came from the priests. They were not allowed to question or have any opinion that differed from the teaching of the Church.

Even if a man had been able read a Bible in a library, he was still taught that he needed a priest to tell him what the Bible meant and how its words were to be applied to lives of others.

Some time after Luther became a monk, he was given permission to leave the monastery to return to the university to study theology. He dedicated his life to the study and the teaching of the Bible. While there, he read the Latin Vulgate. However, Luther did more. He studied the Bible in its original languages. (<http://ronaldivhuggins.blogspot.com/2016/01/acts-238-matthew-417-from-do-penance-to.html>)

What he discovered, changed the course of history.

Luther found places in the Latin Vulgate that differed from the Bible as it was written in its original language.

For example, while Luther was studying the Book of Acts he compared Acts 3:38 in the Latin Vulgate with the original Greek translation and he made a discovery that rocked his world. (Ibid)

In the Latin Vulgate, the text mistranslates *metanoëó* as “do penance.” But the Greek translation for *metanoëó* actually means, “repent.” (Ibid)

In the famous sermon where Peter preached at Pentecost and thousands made a decision to follow Christ, “Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

What Peter said to them was, “Have a change of heart.” He did not say, “Before your sins can be forgiven you must go to the priest and then do what the priest tells you to do before your sins can be forgiven.” That’s doing penance.

He also found the same thing true of the words of Jesus in Matthew 4:17: “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (NRSV)

Instead of “repent,” the Latin Vulgate says, “do penance.”

Because the Latin Vulgate translated these as the words of Jesus, the Church wanted to make penance one of seven sacraments of the church instituted by Jesus. (Ibid)

All his life Luther had been taught that the way to have sins forgiven by God was to do penance. To do penance, you had to confess to a priest.

The priest would tell you to do so many “Hail Marys,” or how much money you had to give the poor, or what kind of indulgence you should purchase.

The practice of purchasing indulgences became a way the Church made its money to fund its building projects. The priest would agree to absolve your sins and shorten your time in purgatory for a sum of money.

Now Luther understood that the absolver of sin was Christ and Christ alone. More than that, he discovered no biblical basis for purgatory at all.

Luther had been taught that if you died and you left any sin unconfessed, you could spend thousands of years working off your sins in purgatory, a place of suffering, before God granted you grace and heaven.

Now Luther understood that repentance focused on the future more than it did on the past.

Repentance is not so much about looking back as it is about looking forward to a new life and a freedom from the past.

Repentance acknowledges that we need forgiveness. We want to turn away from those things that are not perfect in us and head toward life with Christ. The focus is on a new life with Christ.

Penance focused on the outward acts of trying to atone for a sin-sick soul. No amount of good works can ever atone for the sin we have in our lives.

Repentance focuses on who we are as a sinner but it also focuses on who we are in relation to God: forgiven, loved, and accepted, which provides us with a new heart and perspective for living.

This Sunday marks the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his grievances or his 95 disagreements to the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, where he preached in the university town.

This was not only a defiant way of protesting but also a public invitation to enter conversation and debate about the fundamental things that had held their faith together for over 1000 years.

Martin Luther literally put his life on the line when he nailed his grievances to the door of that church. While his grievances contained much more than this, here are three things that reverberate with us 500 years later.

1. No one person or group has the right or authority to dictate how we must read or interpret the Bible. As we understand how our Bible has come to us, it is important to rely on the wisdom of scholars who read and study the original languages, yet remember that it is our privilege and responsibility to read the Bible for ourselves. While reliable translations are available to all us, they are little good if they are not read, studied, and applied to our lives.

2. From the earliest of times, individuals and the Church have used the Bible and bent the truth to fit personal agendas. We must always be careful that we do not do the same thing, like people did when they used the Bible to defend slavery. Instead, we must allow the Bible to bend us around its moral ethic, which should end up looking like Jesus.

3. We must be careful that we never come close to teaching a “works equals righteousness” theology. Luther’s discovery that *metanoéo* did not mean “do penance,” freed him.

All those years that he tried to find peace in his heart by doing everything that was required of him by the Church to free himself from guilt never freed him from guilt.

Everything he did that was required of him by the priest to be freed from his sin was never enough to give his soul peace.

We can never do enough to earn God’s favor. No life can be lived that’s good enough to balance out our sin debt with God.

Luther suffered from the same weight on his soul that Saul did before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul, who became Paul, wrote to the church at Philippi that no one had more reason to place confidence in the flesh than he did. He boasted, “As for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” (Philippians 3:6)

He did everything his religion taught him to do, but he was not sinless, and he was still troubled in his soul until he met the living Lord. Then he understood “the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (Philippians 3:9). It is a gift which we accept by faith. It is not a matter of doing anything.

This discovery by Luther fueled the reformation and helped unlock a gospel that had been held captive for over 1000 years.

For some, this message still hasn't been heard and received.

Some still think that to believe in God is about being good enough or about doing enough good things that outweigh the bad.

We must understand that we fall short of God's standards and nothing we do will ever cause us to measure up in God's eyes. You can't do enough good things for God to say, “Wow, you've just tipped the scales. Because of your goodness, you're in.”

Coming to God is about acknowledging our depravity. We have to come to God in all humility and say, “I want to know Christ. I want to know the power of his resurrection in my life. I want to feel the grace of his love to have my sins forgiven.”

As a response to his love and grace, we then live as changed people. Our lives show evidence of the change we have within us and the gratitude we feel for the peace we have in our souls.

This is the gospel. It has always been the gospel. For a long time, this message was locked away. At other times, it wasn't preached, as the text was not accurately translated. Other times, the Church was slow to acknowledge its true meaning.

However, the Reformation helped correct these things and today you have been presented with the truth. How will you respond?

If you need to change your mind and your heart this morning, Jesus is listening through his Holy Spirit. Make a decision and come to God through faith in Jesus. Make the next step and share that decision with the church. Watch your life have its own reformation.

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