

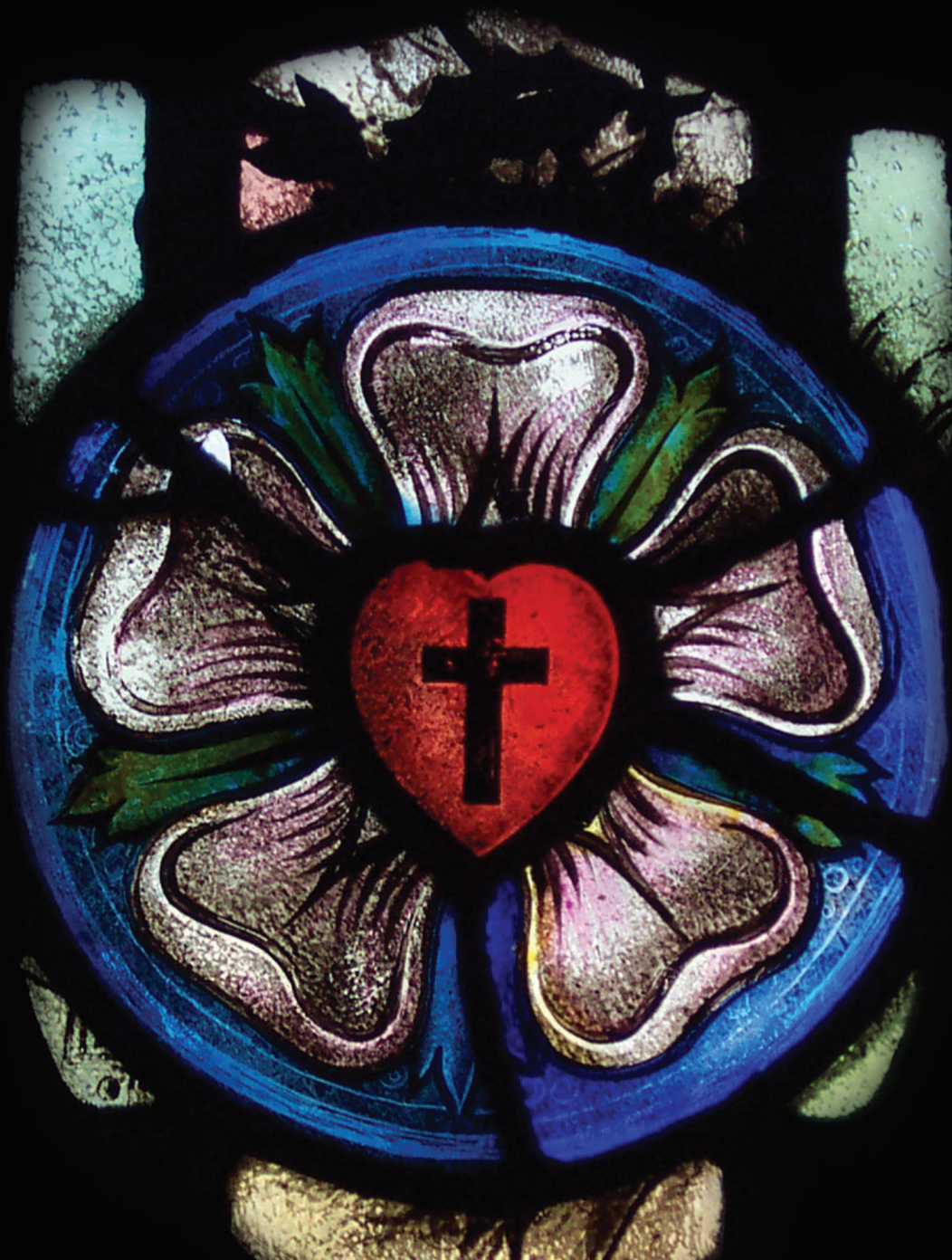


REFORMATION

500

500: THE IMPACT OF THE REFORMATION TODAY— BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

A Bible Study by Dr. Timothy P. Dost



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OBVIOUSLY, if a group watches each segment of *500: The Impact of the Reformation Today* during a one-hour session, there is too much material here to use all of it following the video. To lead this study in five sessions, the leader should select one of the main points or be selective in some other way. However, the benefit of having too much material is that the study could be taught with extra sessions beyond the five video segments. Feel free to edit as you need to. Furthermore, the sessions, as well as their component parts, mostly stand alone for one-time use as needed.

The concentration here is not on what passages the reformers took to heart as they did their work, but rather on the ways in which the early church and the people of the Old Testament reflected the same sorts of values, providing a solid foundation for the Reformation that was later to arise.

Timothy P. Dost

PART 1

This episode deals with changes to the perception of the individual as a Christian in contrast to the authority of the priesthood. A major element of the Reformation was the teaching that lay Christians also had an important vocational standing before God, one no less important than that of called clergy.

Martin Luther says in the first of his 95 Theses, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Discuss why this is as true for believers today as it was in Luther’s own time.

Read Romans 6:1–14:

How is the believer to regard his or her relationship with sin? How is the individual to live anew in Christ?

How does our baptism both influence and affect this relationship with Christ? How does being buried with Christ in his death and rising again with him empower us to live our new lives as his followers?

Read 1 Peter 2:9–10:

What does it mean to you that you are part of God’s royal priesthood and holy nation? How does continual repenting, that we do as Christians, allow God to work through us and in our lives? What does it mean to you that you have received mercy from God?

Read Ephesians 6:1-9:

Considering the text in terms of work relationships today (bosses and employees, rather than masters and slaves), what does the text tell us about the importance of working well at whatever vocation we find ourselves called to? Who do we really work for in life? How is the family considered as important as the workplace?

PART 2

This episode treats the Reformation goal of spreading the truth of God's word, by various means and in the most effective manner possible, to the people. The result was a laity that better understood the word of God and was resistant to being swayed by simple superstitions. Although education was carried out in different ways in biblical times (for example through the priesthood, from parent to child, from apostles to people, and person to person) the principles of disseminating and learning the word and avoiding superstition were the same as today.

Read Deuteronomy 11:18-20:

Under what circumstances should we learn God's word and meditate upon it? How should we pass it on to the next generation? How did this work during the Reformation with the new advances in printing? What advances of today could be used to present the word of God in an engaging manner?

Read Proverbs 22:6:

What is the likely result of raising children according to God's word?

Read Luke 12:16-21:

How does Jesus's parable generate images in the mind? Jesus told many parables; why was this a useful way to teach lessons? How can church images (stained glass, statues) act as useful reminders of the stories of the Bible? How can music function in a similar way? How can these forms be abused in the lives of believers? What other recent "images" can accomplish the work of the kingdom?

PART 3

Here we see how the Reformation has influenced our current situation in three ways: first, participation in worship; second, reactions to violence and injustice; third, both the freedom and obligation found in our justification by Christ's work and our new lives as believers.

Read Psalm 47:1:

Who is to participate in this worship of the true God?

Read 1 Kings 8:54-60:

What happens when Solomon prays? How do the people respond?

Read Isaiah 25:6–9:

What is the response of all the people to the feast that God has prepared? What people is God's good news for?

Read Ephesians 5:19:

How would God have us speak to one another in worship? Does this allow for a variety of forms?

As an aside: consider the fact that prior to literacy and printing, major participation in worship by the laity could only occur if worship was highly repetitive, so that major sections of the worship could be memorized. With high literacy today, we might assume things are different. But how does this affect ministry today among those who have trouble reading? (This is more prevalent than you would think, due to eyesight problems, poor education in some areas, and other factors.)

Review the story of Joshua and the siege of Jericho, or read Joshua 2–6:

How is the long-term evil of the people of Jericho addressed in this text? Would this be a popular view of God's work today? Given that the Reformers were unaware of the more recent position on intrinsic human rights, how might their views on how to handle the elimination of evil differ from our own?

Summarize the captivity and exile of the people of Israel and Judah. How did God treat the peoples of Israel and Judah because of their long-term unfaithfulness to him? What was the result of this captivity upon their return?

Read Luke 3:14:

What were the instructions of John the Baptist to soldiers who came to him? Did he condemn their profession, or simply tell them to practice it righteously?

Read 1 Peter 2:13–17:

Who were these civil authorities in the text? Were they supportive of or antagonistic toward Christians? What does this say about an appropriate Christian response to the authorities? What happens in a culture when the people themselves hold the authority and the officials are simply stewards of the people's power, such as in the United States of America?

Read Matthew 5:38–42; 1 Peter 3:8–11:

What does this say about another way for individuals to deal with the evil in the world? Might there be a distinction between the way individuals and authorities deal with evil? How did Jesus deal with the evil around him?

Read Philippians 2:5–11:

How does the line about letting the mind of Christ be in us affect how we read about Christ's humiliation and exaltation? As believers in him, how does his humiliation and exaltation become ours?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-10:

What does this tell us about our current status before God and humankind? And what can we long for in terms of our status as lords in Christ's kingdom?

— PART 4 —

Part four of this series treats several issues that the Reformation addressed including individual reading and interpretation of the Bible, the seeds that led eventually to religious pluralism, and the idea that we have rights from God, eventually leading to the principle of intrinsic and universal human rights.

Read Psalm 1; Matthew 7:24-27:

What are the blessings to those who meditate on God's word, day and night? Does this meditation provide a more substantial base than for those who ignore the word? How does the foundation of our lives, whether firm or shifting, make a difference in how we can love and serve both ourselves and those around us?

Read Isaiah 49:6-8:

While Old Testament Israel and Judah esteemed themselves as having special status, what does this say about God's view on who he wants to save?

Read Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:11:

At the end, all will know the Lord. In this time before the resurrection and judgment, how can we bring about a knowledge of the Lord in our neighbors, family, and friends through his word?

Read Numbers 11:24-30:

What should the attitude of church authorities be to lay people learning the word of God? Do you think people really appreciate the privilege they have been given to handle God's word?

Read 2 Timothy 2:14-16:

Is there still a useful and valid place for biblical expertise, and how should we honor those who rightly handle the word of truth?

An historical comment on religious pluralism in the early church is in order. Rome was actually amazingly tolerant regarding religion, provided the group sacrificed to the emperor as well. Jews were granted an exception because of their strict, ethical monotheism. Their dietary restrictions as well as their Sabbath regulations caused the Romans to exempt them from military service as well. In very early Christianity, the Romans regarded believers in Jesus as a sect of Judaism. Early on, distinctions were discovered and cause for persecution arose due in part to misunderstanding the teachings of the Christians, as well as the tremendous ego of some of the emperors who declared and esteemed themselves gods.

It is essential to bear in mind that the absolute nature of the Christian faith — with regard to divinizing men, as well as their desire to avoid all forms of syncretism (essentially religious mixing of faiths) — resulted in much of the persecution. This was partly due to absolute intolerance or compromise on the part of the believers. Furthermore, Christians were misunderstood as intolerant atheists (because they believed in only one God and denied all others), practitioners of infanticide (they were thought to drown their infants in the ritual of baptism), arsonists (due to the preaching of some that the Roman world would be purged by fire, a theme found in some interpretations of Revelation), immoral people (due to their agape love feasts), and cannibals (because they proclaimed that they ate and drank the body and blood of Jesus Christ).

In light of these factors, how can Christians remain true to their beliefs and still make their way in this pluralistic world of ours? In what ways is our world like (and unlike) that of the Roman Empire, and how are our problems of outreach similar (or different)?

There was one thing that the polytheistic Romans could not deny, despite their accusations listed above. Christians deeply loved one another in a way that the Romans with their stoicism could not match.

Read Isaiah 45:1-7; 2 Kings 5:1-19 (especially 17-19):

How did God use these people who were not part of the people of Israel or Judah as his instruments?

What did Elijah forgive Naaman when he worried about becoming a leper again and bowed down with his master at the temple of Rimmon?

Read John 13:34-35:

What is the way that Christians are actually known by all? How does our love look to others? Are there times for tough love? Is our forgiveness of those who have confessed their sins deeper than the judgment that brings them to repentance?

Read James 5:15-18:

What is the role of prayer in bringing people to confession? Can sin affect the lives of the whole community as well as the lives of individuals? How does the current emphasis on individualism affect our attitude toward this possibility?

Read Matthew 17:24-27:

The sons of the kingdom are privileged and exempt, according to this passage. Why does Jesus nevertheless pay the tax? What does the way Jesus gets the tax money say about his complete sovereignty over the creation? How is Jesus modeling being Lord of all and still servant of all?

Consider for discussion: what is the difference between having intrinsic rights and having privileges? How do the two positions affect whether we are likely to be grateful to God or not? Can we nevertheless have rights if God establishes an authority that guarantees those rights (as in many democratic systems)? Are these intrinsic rights, or are they nonetheless derived from God's authority?

PART 5

Part five continues the study of changes wrought by the Reformation with three areas: (1) the Bible for the laity and its effect on pastoral ministry; (2) the practice of usury and the rise of capitalism; and (3) arguments over the Lord's Supper and their influence on the politics of the day.

We have already discussed the effect of the Bible on the laity, so the focus here will be on how this educated laity and a better-educated clergy resulted in a more supportive, lifelong role in the lives of people.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:57–58:

What is the response of people who are steeped in the word of Christ? What does steadfastness and immovability look like in the life of the Christian? In what areas should the Christian be immovable and in what areas should the Christian be flexible?

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2–6:

What does the life of the believer look like in response to the gospel preached by Paul?

Read Deuteronomy 24:10–15:

What compassionate responses were to be taken by lenders and employers in their treatment of borrowers and workers in response to God's law?

Read Leviticus 25:35–43:

Given that people in the past often had to enslave themselves for at least a time to settle their debts, what kinds of compassionate protections were built into God's law and how were they to be implemented? Read the rest of this chapter to see some of the surprising things God required, some of which were implemented rarely or never.

Read Matthew 5:42; Luke 16:9:

What is the Christian's attitude toward the wealth of this world? What is its real value for the kingdom of God?

Regarding the Lord's Supper, there were several distinct positions concerning the role of the priesthood, who should receive communion, and how Christ was present in the sacrament.

Read Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26:

Discuss why the word "is" — not "represents" or "symbolizes" — is the only word used in all four passages. In what sense is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper also a remembrance or a memorial meal?



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