

The Church Of The Reformation — The Restored Original Christian Church.

Text: Eph 2:20
Apostles

Suggested Hymns:

195, 392, 179, 249, 331

- 1) It Is Built On No Other Foundation Than The
And Prophets
- 2) It Has No Other Corner-Stone Than The Lord Jesus
Christ

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Ephesians 2:20, ²⁰ *having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

On the 31st of October in the year 1517, at about noontime, a monk with a haggard face and care-worn features was seen emerging from the door of the Augustinian Convent in Wittenberg, Saxony.

In the one hand he held a scroll and in the other a hammer. With a brisk gait he walked through the streets to the Castle Church, which was not far away. There he stopped, unfolded the scroll, and tacked it to the church-door.

Upon the long sheet of paper which he posted in this conspicuous place he had written ninety-five theses directed against the abuse of selling indulgences, the forgiving the sins for money, and he challenged anyone to meet him in public debate on these sentences which he would defend.

There were no newspapers in those days, and the common way to make things known to the public was either to cry them out in the streets, or to put them down in writing and to post them in some conspicuous place for passers-by to read.

The monk chose the latter way to give notice to the public, and no sooner had the sounds of the hammer died away than people stopped and read. So interesting were the theses to the readers that crowds gathered at the church-door. The theses were copied and recopied. They became the talk of the town.

Inside of two weeks they were known in all parts of Germany, and in four weeks throughout Europe, as if angels had borne the good news to the most distant parts. With a few strokes of the pen the unpretending monk had created a sensation which affected the whole world.

He had kindled a fire which spread with irresistible force, a fire which no power on earth could check and which burns to this day.

That monk was Dr. Martin Luther, and the 31st of October, the day on which he nailed those ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church, is the birthday of the Church of the Reformation.

Was Luther, then, the founder of a new church and religion? Is the Church of the Reformation, the church which separated from the papacy, a departure from the original Christian Church, from the Church of the apostles?

This is what Roman Catholics claim. They say, What are you Protestants? A body of rebels who have left the mother church, the one, holy, Catholic, or universal church, and who are divided into numerous sects. Is there a single doctrine in which you agree?

And what are you Lutherans in particular? The followers of a discontented monk who led you away from the old established Christian Church. Does not history show that the Church of Rome is the very church which Christ Himself has founded and which from its foundation has been continued without interruption to the present day?

Does not the Church of Rome trace back the succession of popes to the Apostle Peter, whom Christ Himself had made the first pope when He said to him, *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven”*?¹

Is not the Church of Rome in possession of the oldest Christian documents and of the relics of antiquity with which she can prove her identity and show before the world that her origin dates back to the days of the apostles?

What, then, is the Lutheran Church or the Church of the Reformation? It is a new departure, a departure from the old established Church of Christ, a departure which neither Christ nor any apostle would sanction. It is an opposition to the Christian Church, a new church and religion.

Now we shall see that these accusations of the Roman Church are utterly false, and that the Church of the Reformation, far from being a new departure, is nothing but the restored original Christian Church.

Let us consider, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, *The Church Of The Reformation — The Restored Original Christian Church*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

**1. The Evangelical Lutheran Church,
Like The Original Christian Church,
It Is Built On No Other Foundation Than The Apostles And Prophets**

Our text begins, you are *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*. This is what Paul says of the Christians of his day. In the days of the holy apostles the Christians were not built upon any other foundation than that of the apostles and prophets, that is, upon the Holy Scriptures, the Bible, the prophets representing the Old Testament, and the apostles the New Testament.

Those early Christians rested their faith on the Word of God alone, and would acknowledge no other authority in matters of faith. All their doctrines they derived from the Bible alone, and if a man wanted to set forth a doctrine without scriptural foundation and call it Christian doctrine, he would be termed a heretic, and no Christian would hold fellowship with him.

But how did the Christian Church develop in the course of time? Did those who represented the Christian Church before the world always remain upon the basis of the Word of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets?

In the first centuries of the Christian era they did. Especially during the time of bitter persecutions, in the first and the second century, when the Christians were hunted down like wild beasts, and slaughtered by the thousands, and put to death in the most cruel manner, the Word of God was their buckler and shield, their power and strength, and their only comfort in life and in death.

But when, in the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great professed the Christian faith and made Christianity the religion of the great Roman empire; when the Church which had been so bitterly persecuted attained honour and glory in the world; when the bishop of Rome claimed for himself a higher rank than that held by the other bishops in the Church, because he dwelt in the capital and because he was the emperor's spiritual adviser; when those great

church fathers who saw the danger coming and successfully stemmed the tide of corruption in their days, Athanasius, Augustine, and others, had fallen asleep, — then the corruption and disintegration of the Church set in.

It was not in a year or two that the papacy developed in the Christian Church, but it took a long time. Its incipient stages can be traced back to the days of Constantine the Great and before. It took centuries until the Antichrist, who “*sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God,*”² had built up and finished his own temple within the temple of the Christian Church.

Under his tyrannical rule those who called themselves Christians gradually drifted away from the foundation of the apostles and prophets. They deviated from the Word and made up doctrines and practices of their own.

Thus the doctrine of purgatory was introduced, the practice of calling upon the saints and especially the Virgin Mary, the mass, in which the priest claims to sacrifice Christ for the sins of the living and the dead, the celibacy of the clergy, the religious orders with their peculiar garbs and their supposed superior holiness, the dogma of the Roman pontiff’s infallibility, and, above all, the doctrine which does away with Christianity altogether and is equivalent to rank heathenism, the doctrine that man can get to heaven by his own deeds, by his prayers and good works.

What did the early Christians know of these doctrines and practices? Search the New Testament, search the books of early Christian writers, and you will not find the slightest trace of them, or you will find that the original Christian Church has rejected these very doctrines and practices in the strongest terms.

Matters grew worse all along, and those who raised their voice against the existing evils were promptly put to death. Immediately before Luther the Church was in such a deplorable state and condition that, as even Cardinal Roberto Bellarmin, the most able defender of the papacy, admits that scarcely anything was left of the Christian religion.

Now what was Luther’s work which he inaugurated with the nailing of those ninety-five theses? It was not a departure, not a separation from the Christian Church, but a reformation of the Church. Luther merely cleansed the Church from the errors and abominations that had crept into it.

Luther extracted from under the rubbish which for centuries the papacy had been accumulating upon it, the pure Word of God. Luther recovered the lost and forgotten Bible which the pope had hid under a bushel, and showed the Christians how they must base their faith and doctrine on the Word of God alone and on nothing else.

See how manfully he stood up for the Word of God when at the diet in the city of Worms he was asked to renounce his doctrine. He said, *“If I am not convinced by proof from the Holy Scriptures or by cogent reasons; if I am not satisfied by the very texts that I have cited, and if my judgement is not in this way brought into subjection to God’s Word, I neither can nor will retract anything ; for it cannot be right for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”*

What, then, is the Church of the Reformation, the Church which bears Luther’s name? It is the Church which is based on the Word of God alone, the restored original Christian Church, the Church which is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

2. For, Like The Original Christian Church, It Has No Other Corner-Stone Than The Lord Jesus Christ.

And, like the original Christian Church, the Church of the Reformation has no other corner-stone than the Lord Jesus Christ.

As our text says, not only does Paul say to the Christians of his day, *“**You are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,**”* but he adds, *“**Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.**”* Not only did the early Christians base their faith on the Word of God alone and, consequently, keep themselves free from false doctrine, but they also recognised Him who is the heart and soul, beginning and end, Alpha and Omega of the Holy Scriptures.

Jesus was everything and all to them. They would rather suffer the most cruel and ignominious death than deny Jesus. In Jesus they saw their only Saviour who had died for them on the cross and merited for them eternal life by His great work of redemption. What did Paul and Silas say to the keeper of the prison when asked, *“**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**”* They simply answered, *“**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.**”*³

And the early Christians considered Jesus Christ their only Master, while they among themselves were brethren. Was there any pope in the original Christian Church who could dictate to the Christians what they must believe and do? No; all were alike, and Peter's authority did not exceed that of any other apostle.

If Peter had been the vicar of Christ, or the first pope, would Paul have dared to withstand him to the face at Antioch and to censure him openly for not walking uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel? You can read about it in Galatians 2:11-14

But what was done in the course of time? After Constantine the Great's conversion, the bishop of Rome who had no more power and authority than the bishop of Alexandria, or the bishop of Jerusalem, gradually came to be looked upon as holding a superior rank in the Church.

At first the other bishops honoured him voluntarily as the most distinguished man in their midst, because he had his seat, or see, in the great city of Rome. By and by the bishop of Rome rose more and more in influence and authority. He then demanded as a divine right the distinction which had been voluntarily given to him.

He used bribes and cunning, craft and threats that he might increase his authority. Finally, he issued the declaration that he considered himself the visible vicar and vicegerent of Christ on earth, whom all people, even the princes and kings, must obey.

The Greek churches of the Orient would not obey, and to this day the Greek Catholic Church, the Church of Russia, does not bow to the authority of the Roman pontiff. But with the greater part of Christendom the bishop of Rome succeeded. And now, the pope having taken the place of Jesus Christ in the Church, Christ Himself was dethroned. He is no longer pictured as the merciful Saviour, but as a severe Judge whom you cannot approach in any other way than by the intercession of His mother Mary.

The voice of the Gospel was hushed. The corner-stone and rock of salvation was cast aside and the Church turned into an abode which was little better than a heathen temple.

Now what was Luther's work when he undertook the Reformation? His great work consisted in exposing, dethroning, and putting out the pope who had made such havoc in the Church of God.

On the other hand, he restored the old corner-stone, the precious and tried stone, in its proper place in the foundation. His great work finally consisted in proclaiming the everlasting Gospel, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, and without whom there is no salvation, who is the only Mediator and Redeemer, and to whom all people must hearken if they want to be saved.

Read Luther's books, and what will you find? In every treatise, in every sermon you will find him singing the praise of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour of fallen mankind. He Himself says, *"In my heart reigns supreme and shall forever reign this article of faith, namely, the faith in my dear Lord Jesus Christ, who is the beginning, middle, and end of all my spiritual and holy meditations."*⁴

What, then, is the Church of the Reformation, the Church which adheres to Luther's doctrine? It is the Church in which the corner-stone, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom the pope had cast aside, putting himself in His place, has been restored.

It is the Church which has no other corner-stone than the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Church whose standard is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and which stands and falls with that great truth, as written in Acts 4:12, ***¹² Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.***

It is the Church which has gone back to the doctrines, usages, and practices of the original Christian Church which was ***"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone."***

Let us never swerve from this foundation and cornerstone, from the Word of God and the Gospel of Christ. Let us be Lutherans to the core, true Lutherans, clinging to the Word of God and to Christ and leading a godly life upon this earth, and thereby show that we are faithful members of our Church. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 16:19

² 2 Thessalonians 2:4

³ Acts 16:31–32

⁴ Preface to the Epistle of the Galatians (St. L. ED. IX, 9) Quoted in Walther's "The proper distinction between Law and Gospel" p408