Conscience REFORMED –

It’s kind of fun being the first guy out the shoot on our Re-Formed Small Groups series. I get to set the tone, I get to show the trail head and study, and lead the way. With that in mind, I want to lead out with a bias that I have regarding our series. My bias is that this isn’t merely academic, facts and information. No, don’t get me wrong. A bit of that is going to be necessary. We need the facts of Martin Luther’s Life, Ministry and his legacy. This is not only ours, but is largely the steps that the Western Church has walked as they were following the steps of Martin Luther.

This is the 500th year of his posting of the 95 Thesis on the chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany. So many ideas don’t last 500 years. So many ideas become fads and maybe last for a generation or two. Other movements fizzle after the foundations are found to be wanting or the leaders can’t sustain their philosophy. An example of how this has taken shape is the philosophy of Marxism and the movement of communism, which came to dismal failures in the close of the 20th Century.

But, not Luther and his ideas! Perhaps, his ideas were so big and changed culture from top to bottom. He considered government and the doctrine of the two kingdoms. He spoke of vocation and the idea that all our work in life is of the Lord Jesus. And, he spoke, of course, of theology and was a hardcore writer and teacher. But, maybe, it was more. And, perhaps, it was more because Luther had a conscience that was ill at ease.

In our culture, we don’t seem to struggle with sin as a problem before God. We have come from a time in Western Culture where we do what feels good and our sense of right and wrong has been dismissed as archaic and old school. We have little shame and little guilt when it comes to sin, until the sin hits home. We typically don’t think about such things, and, when we do, so often it’s a wink and nod at the cross as if the sacrifice of Jesus was no big deal, or some sort of ending to a sad Disney story.

For Luther, the issue was conscience. His conscience. He was acutely aware of his sin and his sin as an affront to God. He struggled with how God could love him. He struggled with how God could forgive him. So often, the pulpits of the day preached a sort of cooperation with God. That is, man does his part of salvation and God does His. Man lives a life of good works, pleasing God, and those good works then kind of add up like points. Every good work is a point. Every sin takes a point away and, at the end, maybe together, between me and God, there will be enough points to be saved. This drove Luther crazy. He lost sleep, he beat himself up, both mentally and physically, there was no rest for him. It was his desire to go back to Scriptures and see a loving God and a Savior in Jesus that would assuage his conscience and bring him peace.

That leads us to this series of studies. It’s not merely an academic exercise that, at some point you have to take a test or write a paper to show the understanding of specific facts and themes. But, even more, we will explore our own consciences and our place before God in Christ. Perhaps, in walking in Luther’s steps and being led by key Scriptures, we will discover in our small groups a deeper connection to God and to one another.

I had hoped that we wouldn’t simply give you another study on Luther, of which there are many. I had hoped that these studies wouldn’t be reduced to facts and information, but that your conscience would be comforted and that your faith in Jesus Christ would grow through His Word. The Word…one of the best pieces of the Reformation for me is the translation of the Scriptures, with the emphasis on every Christian reading the Scriptures, and the Gospel being that which brings forgiveness, life and salvation. One of the key Scriptures that engage our mind and conscience is from Roman’s 3:23-26. Let’s turn to that together:

+Romans 3:21-26 leads us two places that bring Reformation for us. First, the Law and the Prophets, or simply said, the Scripture. In a postmodern time, when there is a premium put on relative truth, or truth to me, Paul leads us to the Scriptures as the source of the truth. The Scriptures reveal to us not primarily an angry God, but a God who is righteous and just. The righteousness of God is outside of the law. The law kills and provides guidance in life, but, make no mistake, the law doesn’t save. And, the reason why, that is the demand of the law to be perfectly followed. We simply can’t do everything right and also do nothing wrong. We have all sinned, as Romans 3:23 makes clear.

So, that answer isn’t an answer of work harder, try more, be a better person. The answer is to turn to Jesus. Sin is a god-sized problem. It doesn’t find its reckoning in a man-sized solution. So, God went to work. He sent Jesus to be the answer for sin. Jesus kept the law perfectly, where humanity can’t. Jesus did everything He was supposed to do and then He died. In His death, we are justified. I love the little definition; justification is “just as if I never sinned.” God’s righteousness has been delivered to us in Jesus, His son. Paul writes, “…and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.” That’s what Luther was looking for…a gracious God with love in His heart, rather than fire in His eyes.

For you and me, the gospel sets free. How is your conscience? Are you losing sleep? Feeling guilty? Struggle with issues of shame? Are you lost and listless in your life? Are you spiritually feeling far away from God? Are you angry? Are you chronically angry? The answer for Luther that he received from the church is -- work harder and get yourself right with God. What he discovered in this passage was that Jesus is God’s gift that makes us right with God. Our consciences are calmed through faith in Christ.

Phyllis Tickle, in her book, “The Great Emergence,” starts with a premise that God works in 500-year epochs. She highlights the first 500 years of the church and the spread of Christianity over the Roman Empire. She then leads to 1000 AD when the Church split into east and west at the Great Schism and monasteries were built across the west. In 1500, Martin Luther’s Reformation took place, and 500 years from 1517 is…well, 2017. I wonder, sometimes, at the decline of our culture, at the struggles in our society, and the catalytic nature of worldwide communication if there is another big shift coming.

To be sure, it’s a great time to be alive…to think big thoughts, to live peaceful and joy-filled lives, to raise children in a time of relative peace. And, as much as things change, God doesn’t. If, indeed, He is doing something that will reform the whole church, there is no doubt that it will lead us all back to Christ, back to Scripture, back to grace, back to faith, and back to living each day to the Glory of God. As the world continues to change, so, too, the love of God becomes relevant and real to each one of us, and the church continues reforming and renewing itself in Christ.

I pray more than anything else, that you will be re-newed and re-formed through these studies. I hope that you find peace for your conscience and that the soothing salve of the gospel is yours. I hope that you grow in your relationships in your life group and share the love of the Jesus. But, even more, that you take that love into your relationships and that you “infect” others with the gospel. From the time of Luther, the movement of Christianity hasn’t stopped. Be the catalyst that brings that Love. God bless your discussion now and have fun. ☺