

HERE WE STAND, I: FIRST PRESBYTERIAN TODAY

by Tom Cox

October 30 will be Reformation Sunday, a day set aside in the church calendar to celebrate the actions of Martin Luther 488 years ago and the events that he set in motion thereby. Yet somehow Reformation Sunday has been afforded little special attention in Kendall Presbytery, the day being devoted instead to an exchange of ministers among the presbytery's various churches. When the Rev. Kristine Blaess, ordained as a Lutheran minister but currently serving the Presbyterian church in Rigby, preached at Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church on Reformation Sunday two years ago, her sermon contained no mention of Luther. Afterward I chided her gently about the omission. Her reply was something like this: "I didn't think Luther held a special place in the Reformed churches." She may be right; the presbytery's action in making October 30 exchange Sunday would seem to suggest as much. Yet we owe a huge debt to Luther, one we clearly ought to acknowledge.

On October 31, 1517, Luther, an Augustinian monk serving as a professor at the local university, nailed a challenge to debate on the door of the church in Wittenberg, in what would become Germany but was then a part of the Holy Roman Empire. With the ninety-five points (or theses) he made in the document that he posted, Luther was not seeking to start a religious revolution, but simply following the common academic practice one used when wanting an issue debated by scholars. His action set in motion forces that were to change Christianity forever. John Calvin, John Knox, and others followed, but the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello and the larger Reformed faith of which it is a part exist today because of what Martin Luther started that day.

The bulk of Luther's theses focused on the legitimacy of the church selling indulgences — dispensations granted, for a price, that freed one from certain temporal punishments for sins. The practice had no Biblical justification, Luther argued, and it worked in ways contrary to the cultivation of true faith. The church rolled out its heavy guns to silence this impertinent monk who dared to challenge a lucrative practice which Rome welcomed and popes had endorsed, but Luther remained unconvinced.

As tempers heated and events unrolled, it became clear Luther would soon be dragged before ecclesiastical authorities and charged with heresy. Friends spirited him away to Erfurt castle, where, protected by a friendly prince, he continued his studies, working out the implications of his ideas, central to which was thesis sixty-two of the original document: "*The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God*" — the church's foundation rested not on popes, nor on councils, nor on holy traditions, but on the Bible! This was the central bombshell in Luther's ideas, and a flood of works poured from his pen as he developed his ideas in the safety of Erfurt castle.

So central was the Bible to Luther's thinking that he once wrote that he would gladly give up on all his other differences with Rome if the Pope would only acknowledge the Bible as the sole foundation of the church. Diligently Luther translated it into German, so that common people could tap this great source of strength. Meanwhile, church authorities attacked his ideas mercilessly, for they knew that they threatened the primacy of the Pope and much that was non-

Biblical in Catholic tradition. German princes divided into hostile camps, threatening to bring civil war to the disjointed Holy Roman Empire of which their lands were key parts. At length Luther was summoned before its parliament, or Diet, to defend his views. He went to the meeting in the city of Worms in fear and trepidation, strongly suspecting that he would be arrested, jailed, and, perhaps, burned at the stake as a heretic. But he went, making the long journey across Germany in a horse-drawn wagon guarded by troops of a supportive prince. As a biblical scholar, Luther must surely have pondered the words from Isaiah 7: 9 as he made his way to Worms, for he knew them well: “. . . if you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.”

In 1521 when Luther arrived at last in Worms to appear before the Diet, papal authorities denounced him unsparingly to the assembled princes, demanding that he recant his views. An archbishop, given the task of examining Luther, asked: “Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of scripture? . . . You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith. . . . I ask you, Martin — answer candidly and without horns — do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?”

Who knows all that went through Luther’s mind at that moment. Perhaps it was the words from Psalm 34: 4 — “I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.” Whatever it was, Luther stood erect before Rome’s emissaries and the authorities of the realm and gave his answer: “Since, then, Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth.” He did not, he said, accept the authority of popes and councils, “for they have often contradicted one another.” His authority was the Bible alone. “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant. . . . Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God. Amen” What a brave reply! Faced with such power and uncertainties, would Christians today do as well? One can only hope so.

Confronted by authority, could members of the First Presbyterian Church proclaim: “Here we stand”? Indeed, do members of the congregation know what they and their church stand for, can they articulate what one hundred years of faith and service have made their church? One thing is clear: the First Presbyterian Church is not the same today as it was in 1904, when it was founded — or even 1944, during the very successful ministry of E. T. Ferry. Time and events have changed the church in many ways. To proclaim “Here we stand,” members must understand not just theology, but what their church has become in non-theological ways as well. To reach such understanding is no easy task, and the centennial history of the church, portions of which have been published in *News & Views*, has been written in an effort to help members to do so. May the full published version, when it appears, do just that — and, in the meantime, may we never forget that we owe a debt not just to John Calvin, John Knox, and their successors, but to Luther as well.

Luther and Calvin frequently disagreed. As the Rev. Jim Cramer once commented to this author, “if Luther and Calvin were preparing to get in a boat to go on a picnic, they would argue about what kind of sausages to take.” Yet while they might quibble about secondary issues, even minutia, they agreed on the basic point that was and is the bedrock of Protestant Christianity: the Bible is the Church’s foundation, the source of authority on which all else depends. For making

that point so bravely, we should acknowledge Luther on October 30, and thank God for his perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds.