

# **Reformation 500**

## **The Present Need for Reformation**

*Revelation 3:1-6*

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# The Present Need for Reformation

## Scripture

On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther posted *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. That might seem strange to us, but it was the normal manner of conducting scholarly debate in Luther's day, as evidenced by his preface to *Ninety-Five Theses*:

Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore, he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.<sup>1</sup>

What followed was a list of ninety-five propositions that Luther wanted to debate. This list included propositions such as:

- When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
- It is vain to trust in salvation by indulgence letters, even though the indulgence commissary, or even the pope, were to offer his soul as security.
- The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.<sup>2</sup>

Luther's action is recognized by many as the start of the Reformation. Luther's goal was to reform the Roman Catholic Church. However, he was eventually excommunicated from the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>.

Roman Catholic Church, and he became the leader of the Protestant Reformation.

We are the spiritual descendants of Martin Luther. In 1507, ten years before Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Luther was ordained as a priest in Erfurt and started studying Theology at the University of Erfurt. During his studies, he came into contact with the ideas of the Humanists and embraced their slogan “*Ad Fontes!*” which means, “Back to the Source!” For Luther, this meant the study of the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek.<sup>3</sup> That commitment led Luther to study God’s Word, so that God eventually enlightened him as to the correct understanding of it.

While we are the spiritual descendants of Martin Luther, we have seen great spiritual declension in our day. There is an urgent present need for Reformation in our day too.

For the next few weeks, I plan to focus on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Today, I want to address the present need for Reformation. And in the coming weeks, I want to address the key truths of the Reformation that still need to be understood and implemented today.

As I thought about an appropriate text to discuss our present need for Reformation, I came across Jesus’ message to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6. I believe that a reflection on the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6 will help us consider our present need for Reformation.

Let’s read Jesus’ message to Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6:

**<sup>1</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.**

**“ ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.luther.de/en/leben/moench.html>.

complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. <sup>4</sup> Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ ” (Revelation 3:1-6)

## Introduction

The last book written by Dr. James Montgomery Boice before his untimely death in 2000 was titled, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?* The subtitle of his book tells readers what he was trying to accomplish: *Recovering the Doctrines that Shook the World*. Boice began his book by noting three books that appeared in the early 1990s. These books evaluated the evangelical church. The titles of the three books was revealing. They were *No Place for Truth* by David F. Wells, *Power Religion* by Michael Scott Horton, and *Ashamed of the Gospel* by John MacArthur. Yet, as Boice noted, the subtitles were even more revealing. The subtitle of Wells’ book is *Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* The subtitle of Horton’s book is *The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*. And the subtitle of MacArthur’s book is *When the Church Becomes Like the World*.<sup>4</sup>

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther initiated the Reformation. Luther wanted to reform the teaching and practices of the church in his day. He was able to recover the doctrines of grace that shook the world in his day. And while we are grateful for Luther and the other Reformers, we urgently need to understand and apply the teaching and practices of those same doctrines today.

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<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?: Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 19-20.

To help us examine our present need for Reformation, I would like to examine Jesus' message to the church in Sardis.

## Lesson

Jesus' message to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6 teaches us about our present need for reformation.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Rebuke Jesus Gives (3:1-2)
2. The Remedy Jesus Proposes (3:2-3)
3. The Reward Jesus Promises (3:4-6)

### I. The Rebuke Jesus Gives (3:1-2)

First, let's look at the rebuke Jesus gives.

Verse 1a says, **“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write....”** The city of Sardis had at one time been an extremely prosperous city. King Croesus reigned there with his fabulous wealth until the city fell to the Persian King Cyrus. In 17 AD Sardis was devastated by an earthquake. The Roman Emperor Tiberius remitted taxes for five years so that the city could be rebuilt. It did once again become a great city, but not like in its glory days. We know nothing about the start of **the church in Sardis**, nor of its progress, other than what is given to us here in Revelation 3:1-6.

The rebuke that Jesus gives to the church in Sardis is in verse 1b, **“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”** What a devastating critique. By all appearances, the church seemed to be progressive and dynamic and up-and-coming. This was a hip church connecting with the culture and community. There seemed to be life and vigor in the church.

But Jesus' eyes penetrate beneath the surface, as he said in verse 2b, **“...I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.”** The church was busy and active in all kinds of

ministry, but their actions did not meet with God's approval.

Why was this so? We get a hint of the problem in verse 4a, where Jesus says, **“Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments....”** This figurative language refers to sin. The Greek historian, Herodotus, said that Sardis was a city that had a reputation for lax moral standards and sexual immorality. Apparently, those lax standards had impacted the church in Sardis, and the worldliness of Sardis became the worldliness of the church in Sardis too.

Martin Luther's criticism of the church in his day sounded a lot like Jesus' rebuke of Sardis. Luther saw a church that seemed to have an outward reputation of being alive, but it had lost the message of the gospel. There was lots of activity, but it did not have God's approval. And the worldliness of church was not being addressed. In fact, one of the concerns that prompted Luther to post his *Ninety-Five Theses* was the sale of indulgences. The Pope was trying to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and he was allowing indulgences to be sold so that people could escape purgatory completely. People bought the indulgences and then sinned because they believed that their souls were safe for eternity.

What about our day? Would Jesus rebuke churches today, 500 years after the Reformation? I think he would. James Montgomery Boice gives an example of an evangelical church in Philadelphia that distributed a brochure giving “ten reasons” to visit their Sunday evening service:

1. The air conditioning feels great.
2. Coffee and goodies for everyone after every service.
3. The music is upbeat and easy to sing.
4. You get to meet some really neat people.
5. The sermon is always relevant to everyday life.
6. You can sleep in on Sundays and still make it to church on time.
7. Child care and children's church are provided.

8. Free parking!
9. You can go to the shore for the weekend and still make it to church on Sunday night.
10. You will discover an awesome God who cares about you.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Boice went to say that this church brochure reminded him of an advertising brochure he had seen several years earlier. He asked his audience to guess what was being described. The brochure was printed in full color with pictures of attractive people, and the cover read, “This Is Where It’s At.” Inside the brochure were the following headings: “It’s about family. It’s about style. It’s about giving. It’s about fun. It’s about the best way to please everybody. It’s about caring.” Dr. Boice then went on to say, “Actually, the brochure was an advertisement for the Liberty Tree Mall in Danvers, Massachusetts. But its appeal is virtually undistinguishable from that of the churches I am describing.”<sup>6</sup>

What are the signs that a church may have a reputation of being alive, but is in fact dead? John MacArthur answers:

A church is in danger when it is content to rest on its past laurels, when it is more concerned with liturgical forms than spiritual reality, when it focuses on curing social ills rather than changing people’s hearts through preaching the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ, when it is more concerned with material than spiritual things, when it is more concerned with what men think than what God said, when it is more enamored with doctrinal creeds and systems of theology than with the Word of God, or when it loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the word of God Himself. No matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its buildings, no matter what its status in the community, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 111-112.

I pray that our Reformation 500 series will cause us to examine what we believe and do as a church—and what we believe and do as Christians—so that we do not receive a rebuke from Jesus.

## II. The Remedy Jesus Proposes (3:2-3)

Second, notice the remedy Jesus proposes.

There were a faithful few in the church at Sardis, as verse 4 indicates. Jesus gave the faithful few five commands that were needed by the church in Sardis, if they were to survive and thrive.

*First, the church in Sardis needed to **wake up** (2a).* The faithful few in the church in Sardis needed to pay attention to what was going on. Things in the church were in a dreadful condition, and, as John MacArthur said, they needed “to look at what was happening in their church, evaluate the situation, get involved in changing things, confront sin and error, and make a difference.”<sup>8</sup>

*Second, the church in Sardis needed to **strengthen what remained and was about to die** (2a).* The faithful few were to get active in the church and nurture and disciple those who were not doing well spiritually.

*Third, the church in Sardis needed to **remember, then, what** they had **received and heard** (3:3a).* The people of God in the church had **received and heard** the Word of God. In that word they had learned about Jesus and the gospel, which they had embraced. They had learned the elementary truths of discipleship. The faithful few needed to go back to the Word of God and its doctrine to serve as a foundation for recovery and renewal.

*Fourth, the church in Sardis needed to **keep it** (3:3a).* That is, they needed to obey the Word of God. Sound doctrine is necessary for sound practice. But if there is no sound practice, the sound doctrine is worthless. God’s people must obey his Word.

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<sup>8</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 114.



*And fifth, the church in Sardis needed to **repent** (3:3a).* The church in Sardis needed to ask God's forgiveness, and turn from its dead orthodoxy.

These five steps were necessary for the church in Sardis to come back to life again. And these five steps are necessary for any church that has a reputation for being alive but is in fact dead to experience renewal and revival.

### III. The Reward Jesus Promises (3:4-6)

And third, observe the reward Jesus promises.

Actually, Jesus promised three things to those who remained faithful, to **the one who conquers** (3:5).

*First, Jesus promised that **the one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments** (3:5a).* **White garments** are promised to those who remain faithful to Jesus. The **white garments** symbolize purity. And they are also the garments that will be worn by all believers at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Revelation 19:7-8 says, "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints."

*Second, Jesus promised that he **will never blot his name out of the book of life** (3:5b).* There is a **book of life** in heaven, and all true believers have their name written in that book. Jesus promised that it will never be erased, and that is the hope and security of every true Christian that enables him or her to preserve in the Lord.

*And third, Jesus promised that he **will confess his name before his Father and before his angels** (3:5c).* Jesus had made this promise during his earthly ministry. He said in Matthew 10:32, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will

acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.” Jesus affirmed in the strongest way that he will present all believers to his Father.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Jesus’ message to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6, we should be a church that is Reformed and always in need of being reformed according to the Word of God.

James Montgomery Boice suggests that we must recover the historic Christian faith as follows:

This will require serious study of the Bible, and for some it will involve a radical reordering of their entire perspectives, not to mention the way they have been going about their Christian work. For all, it will mean a new reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through the teaching and preaching of God’s Word, rather than a frantic search for some tantalizing new methodology to persuade unbelievers to attend and join our churches.

In 1524, seven years after Martin Luther had nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, the farmers of Germany rebelled against their feudal lords in what became known as The Peasants’ War (1524–1526). It began near Schaffhausen, where Hans Mueller, acting on a suggestion from Thomas Muenzer, formed the peasants into an “Evangelical Brotherhood” pledged to emancipate the farmers. By the end of that year there were 30,000 farmers in arms in southern Germany refusing to pay state taxes, church tithes, or feudal dues. In March 1525, they drafted and circulated widely a document called the “Twelve Articles,” in which they claimed the right to choose their own pastors, pay only just tithes, be considered as free men rather than serfs, enjoy fair rents, and make other reasonable demands. They were also favorable to the Reformation and opposed to the Roman Catholic Church.

The peasants sent a copy of the articles to Luther, fully ex-

pecting his support. And, indeed, Luther's first response was sympathetic. He acknowledged the injustices about which the farmers were in arms and blamed the rulers of both state and church for their plight. But Luther did not endorse the rebellion, even though the majority of its goals coincided with those of the Reformation. And later, when hundreds of monasteries were sacked and many cities overrun, Luther denounced the violence in characteristically fierce terms. Why did Luther react this way, when nearly everyone, the peasants above all, expected him to side with them? Luther's justified fear of anarchy was one strong reason. Another was his belief that God had established the authority of princes. To rebel against the powers that exist is to rebel against God, he said.

Luther also knew that the power of the sword has not been given either to the church or to the individual Christian, and he was aware that our weapons are not the weapons of this world. It is the power of God operating through the teaching of his Word that alone has power "to demolish the strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4). According to Luther, the Reformation would proceed *non vi, sed verbo*—not by force, but by the power of God's Word. And it did! The Peasants' War was a tragic episode in the Reformation period. As far as Germany was concerned, more lives were lost in that war than in any tumult prior to the Thirty Years' War, which came about a century later (1618-1648). Some 130,000 farmers died in battle or afterward as a result of harsh retaliation. The Reformation itself almost perished. But it did not, because it was moving forward by the power of the Word of God, as God blessed the teaching and influence of the Reformers.

Can we have that power again in our day? We can. But only if we hold to the full-orbed Reformation gospel and do not compromise with the culture around us, as we have been doing. If we hold to these doctrines, our churches and those we influence will grow stronger, while other churches go the way of the liberals before us, not vanishing entirely but becoming increasingly insignificant as an effective religious force.<sup>9</sup>

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, 37-39.

## **Mission Statement**

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## **Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz**

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
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