

Stand Firm

Scripture: II Thessalonians 2:15

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Evening Service

“I cannot... I will not... recant! Here I stand.” These words are part of the most famous words spoken by Martin Luther, when he was placed on trial, threatened with excommunication and death. It was a pivotal moment in the developing Reformational movement.

Three and a half years earlier, Luther had begun the debate about certain practices in the Catholic Church, especially on indulgences. On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. The debates soon intensified and broadened to encompass a wide range of issues. By 1521, the Pope had excommunicated Luther and at his trial, he was asked to recant—to take back his positions. Faced with the prospect of a death sentence if he refused, he gave a stirring defense of his teachings, based on the testimony of Scripture, concluding with those famous words: I cannot, I will not recant. God help me. Here I stand.”

Luther’s trial marked the break between the Catholic Church and the reformers. The rest they say is history. It is a history that has shaped the Western church, for good and for ill. Nearly 500 years later, we find the essential truths of the Reformation—Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone—we find these points to still resonate with us. We continue to stress these points, now not so much in opposition to the Catholic Church, but against the trends of our world that would undermine our commitment to these truths.

“Here I stand” was Luther’s rallying cry to safeguard the gospel. That’s what was at stake in the days of the Reformation: How are we saved? Was Jesus work on the cross enough for our salvation? On what basis do we answer these questions? These questions are critical to our understanding of the gospel. No wonder, Luther was convicted to say: Here I stand.

It’s a rally cry that echoes the text for this evening. I do not know whether Luther had this passage in mind, when he talked about taking his stand—there are numerous passages in the NT that call us “to stand firm.” This

is only one of them. But it is the one, we'll look at this evening: "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."

Let's unpack that verse, before applying it to what happened in the days of the Reformation and how it applies to us today.

"So then." A phrase like that indicates the Paul is making a conclusion on what he has just talked about. And what's that? Well, he was warning the church about the man of lawlessness: a person who will actively oppose God and his followers, someone who will seek to undermine the message of the gospel. And while Paul may have had in mind a specific person at a specific period in history, there are in every generation those who oppose God and who will seek to undermine the gospel.

In addition, Paul reminds them how God chose the people in Thessalonica to become followers of Jesus. Through the gospel, they were called so that they might share in the glorious victory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

"So then", because of this danger to the gospel, but also because of their status as believers in the gospel, they are called to stand firm and to hold on. Notice, how Paul addressed them: brothers. A term that includes both male and female. A term that identifies them as believers. Because through faith we belong to the family of God, we are now brothers and sisters in Christ.

So then, as believers, we are to stand firm and hold on. But to what? The NIV has "to the teachings we passed on to you." But if you notice, there is a footnote to the word teaching. The footnote says: Or tradition. In fact, "tradition" would be the more accurate word.

The NIV doesn't mind translating the Greek word as "tradition" when "tradition" is viewed in a negative light. For example, in Matthew 15, Jesus is asked: Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? Jesus' reply offers a negative view of that tradition, when he says: And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?

But here, when tradition is viewed as a positive thing, the NIV translates it as "teachings". Why? I think it's a reflection of the typical evangelical attitude towards "tradition". For many, "tradition" is viewed in a negative light. It's something bad.

Perhaps we need to recover the positive aspect of that word. Yes, tradition can be a negative thing. Jesus was critical of the traditions of the elders. But "tradition" can also be a positive thing. And that's how Paul uses it here. Tradition is the handing down of the teachings of the church. Yes, it includes the teachings of the church. And so the NIV's translation isn't far off base. But it also includes how those teachings are passed down.

In the days of Paul, the NT did not exist, as we now know it. Until the NT was written, the teachings of the church was passed on orally and then in written form. The “traditions” Paul talks about has become our NT, recognized now as the inspired Word of God.

Tradition, then, can be a positive force. Jaroslav Pelikan wrote a line about tradition that has become quite famous: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” I love that line. “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” It’s a reminder that tradition can be a positive force in the life of the church. And in our text, Paul urges the believers to stand firm and hold on to the traditions that were passed on to them and that they need to pass on to others.

Sometimes, we view the Reformation as a complete rejection of the traditions of the church. After all, it stressed that Scripture alone is the basis of our faith. Yes, Luther, Calvin and other rejected church tradition as on equal par with Scripture. When Luther spoke his rallying cry: Here I stand, he appealed to Scripture as the foundation to our faith.

But in defending his teachings about faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and even Scripture alone, he also appealed to the traditions of the church. He turned to the creeds of the church as well as to the writings of the early church fathers for support.

If you read the introduction Calvin wrote to the Institutes of the Christian Religion, the key theological textbook of the Reformation, you will discover, not only a desire to root everything in the Bible, but also to show how the creeds and church fathers would agree with the Reformers. Far from being the innovators and instigators of change, the Reformers claimed they were the ones who were standing firm and holding to the traditions and teachings of the church.

In that sense, they were the traditionalists. They saw a threat to the gospel. And they held stood firm and held to the traditions of the church. But they were not traditionalists, in Pelikan’s sense of that word. The Reformers wanted a living faith, a vibrant church, a dynamic sense of discipleship. It led to all kinds of changes in the church, yet all the while, seeking to be true to the traditions of the church. But those changes were a recovery of past teachings and given new shape to meet the challenges of the time.

And so, the challenges remains to us today: Stand firm and hold on to the traditions passed on to you so that the next generation will also be able to hear, believe and enjoy the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But the threats to the gospel have changed since the days of the Reformation. We live in a very different context than in the days of Luther and

Calvin. The danger of Reformation Day services is that we think our battles and struggles are still with the Catholic Church. They're not. While significant differences remain, the Catholic Church is now, often our ally to stand firm and holding to the traditions of the church.

And so, we do need to remember the lessons of the reformation, we need to reassert the basic truths, of faith alone etc, but we need to reapply them depending on the threat to the gospel.

Let me illustrate this by focusing on the controversial book of Robert Bell, entitled: *Love Wins: A book about heaven, hell, and the Fate of Every Person who ever lived*. I don't expect that many of heard of this book, but Rob Bell is an evangelical pastor in a non-denominational mega church in Grand Rapids. This book was so controversial that Salem Bookstore won't sell it. I can't do justice to the controversy tonight. But Bell raises important and vital questions about heaven, hell; questions we tend to ignore or downplay.

Unfortunately, the book is seen as a threat to the gospel because of his answers to these questions. He is open to universalism—suggesting that in the end, everyone or nearly everyone will be saved. He's definitely open to second chances after death so that hell becomes another opportunity to accept the gospel. He's weak on the doctrine of sin, doesn't do justice to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and has a naïve view of human will. Taken altogether, the teachings of the book go against the teachings/traditions we have been called to stand firm upon and cling to.

And so, as I look at this case, I see how Bell in his book fails to stand and cling to the traditions of the church:

- First and foremost, he doesn't deal fully with Scripture. I'm preaching through Romans, while I read this book, and Romans offers a very different perspective than *Love Wins*.

- Second, Bell completely ignores the creeds of the church. Sure, he mentions some people in history who seem to agree with him, but he makes no appeal to the agreed upon creeds of the church. The creeds mention God as the judge of humanity, as a key image for God. Bell re-writes that.

- Third, it's clear that Bell does not work out of any confessional tradition. Some of these hard questions are dealt with in the Canons of Dort, but because Bell doesn't belong to a confessional tradition, he doesn't wrestle with the answers of the past on these issues.

But this case also reveals how the Reformation makes it difficult to hold to account a person like Rob Bell. One of the tragic and unfortunate consequences of the Reformation is the breakup of the unity of the church. As a result, Bell is only accountable to his local church—which, from what I can figure out, isn't part of any denomination. That makes it difficult to hold him

accountable to the broader church community. That's a negative result of the Reformation: the breakup of the church, which weakens the church's ability to stand firm and cling to the traditions of the church in a healthy and sustaining way.

But the charge remains: To stand firm! Luther was forced to make his declaration: "I cannot... I will not... recant! Here I stand." We too, need to take our stand, holding to the teachings, the traditions, of what has been passed on to us. Amen.