

Sermon Series – Reformation 500 Themes

The Reformation Comes to Denmark

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Theme: The Rock on which the Church Stands

Since Reformation Sunday last year, we have looked at how the Reformation affected various people groups and things, such as Hmong, African, African-American, Latin American ministries or education. One group, however, that was dear to my heart is one of the smallest minorities in our country, the Danes.

I grew up thinking that this country was at least half Danish. Growing up in Racine, I thought that every bakery had Kringle and every butcher shop had medester poles (a Danish sausage) Last names that ended in “gaard” or “sen” were common. In the few blocks around my dad’s gas station in West Racine we had Bendsten’s, Larsens, and Ostergaard’s bakeries, Rasmussen’s jewelry store, Jorgensen’s Hardware and clothing stores, Erickson’s paint, Jensen’s gifts, and Nelson’s Dime Store. Almost every church in town was either Lutheran or Catholic. I didn’t know of any other denominations.

Little did I know that I lived in the most Danish city in the country, and that we were but a small minority. But the Danes played an important part in the early Reformation. Several Danes went to study in Wittenberg during the early years of the Reformation. Denmark was the first country in which the entire country became Lutheran. The University at Copenhagen was modelled after the University in Wittenberg. Theologians such as Bugenhagen helped to write the order of service and prepared the agenda which included the Baptism, confirmation, ordination, marriage, and burial services. Early on the Danes embraced the Reformation and the teaching that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ.

Later things did not go so well with regard to the faith in Denmark. When the Swedish King Gustav Adolphus came to the aid of the Lutherans in Germany during the 30 Years' War in the 1600's, the Danish King looked at it as an opportunity to attack Sweden. He lost, and it was the end of the Danish Empire. In the 1700's Rationalism, the belief that everything had to be reasonable, began to prevail in Denmark. The Scriptures, and all biblical teachings were assailed. Many of the people continued to secretly sing the hymns of their great Reformer Thomas Kingo, the author of 5 hymns in our hymnal. Men like Grundvig, the author of our sermon hymn, brought a new period of Spiritual renewal in the 1800's. About 1/3 of the hymns in the Danish hymnal are written by him. But there was a lot of opposition. He was once convicted of libel for opposing the Rationalists, and he was even deposed from his pulpit for several years.

It is sad today in Denmark, that while 75% of the country is Lutheran, it is in name only. Only 2% of Danes attend church on any given Sunday, 25% believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and 18% believe that he is the Savior of the world. (Wikipedia – Church of Denmark) On a visit to Denmark several years ago, relatives of mine said were surprised that the people of our church still believe in basic Christian doctrines.

It is sad that many of the Danes and people throughout the world are rejecting Christ and our salvation in Him today, but He does remain the Rock on which the church stands.

I. Who do people say that Jesus is today?

The disciples had heard what people were saying about the Christ. Some people said that he was John the Baptist, others said Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. While they were not correct, they were still flattering.

What do people say about Jesus today? My fear is that it is not so flattering. As I said earlier, even most people who call themselves Christians in Denmark today do not consider Jesus to be the Son of God or the Savior of the world. In our country most people still claim to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but it is declining rapidly, down about 10% in the last 10 years. I think that today if you ask most people who Jesus is, they just don't care. I recently heard someone speak about how busy their grandkids are with sports and other activities. They are always on the go. Then I asked whether they have ever been in a church. The answer was never. The truth is that today we are building our lives on so many other things, especially sports and leisure, that we have no time for Jesus. We see how so many lives are crashing because they are built on sand. Suicide, drug abuse, other addictions, and crime are up, because people are building their lives on the wrong things.

II. But Christ alone is the Rock on which we can build our lives.

When Simon confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus changed his name to Peter, which means "a stone." Then He said, "On this rock I will build my church." The church is built on the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world. By making that confession that Jesus is my Savior, we become stones that are built into that Rock. There is nothing that can move us when our lives are built on that confession of Christ.

Have you sinned? You confess that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Are you afraid? You confess, “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.*” Are you mourning? You confess that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. There is no storm of life that can harm us when we cling to Christ, the solid Rock. His word gives us hope and comfort. His people give us help and support. Think of those beautiful words that Kingo wrote in our Hymn of Praise

Hold me ever in your keeping; Comfort me in pain and strife.

In my laughter and my weeping Be with me throughout my life.

That is what it means to cling to Christ, the Rock of our salvation.

III. The gates of hell cannot prevail again this confession.

Jesus made this promise to Peter and all of the disciples that the gates of hell could not prevail against His Church. The apostles must have sometimes wondered whether this could be true when they were being persecuted and martyred by the Romans. The faithful Christians in Denmark must be wondering the same thing today. Many of the Scandinavian countries began missions to African in the 1800's. Today those African countries are sending missionaries to Scandinavia. In our country, almost every congregation bemoans how difficult it has become to find new members and encourage people to worship.

Yet, Jesus' promise is that the gates of hell shall not prevail. We often feel as though we are playing defense, just trying to hold on, like an NFL team when it goes into prevent defense. But Jesus says that the gates of hell will not prevail. We are on offense against all of the powers of hell. When we share the Gospel, there will be times when it seems there is no one who listens. But just as with farming, there are seasons of planting and reaping. When we sow the word, there will eventually be a harvest. Since the first century or since St. Ansgar first brought the Gospel to Denmark, the church has grown far beyond what any of those people could imagine. Today our confession of Christ will continue to bear fruit. There is nothing that the devil can do to stop the spread of the Gospel no matter how hard he tries. The victory is ours in Jesus Christ.

Sadly there are many people today, who are building their lives on other things that the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It hurts when we see those lives come crashing down. But the message is still there for them and for all of us, that Jesus Christ is our Savior. He is the sure Rock on which we can build our lives.

Amen.

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