

The Feast of the Reformation  
Romans 3:19-28; Matthew 11:12-19

Today we celebrate the Reformation. We celebrate how God used Dr. Martin Luther to restore the Gospel to His church. If there's anyone who shows the old adage that "you can't please everyone," it's Luther. He changed too much for the Roman Catholic Church and changed not enough for the other reforming churches. Whenever you speak the truth, you'll have this problem.

John the Baptist spoke the truth and is accused of having a demon. Jesus spoke the truth and is accused of being a wine bibber. Luther spoke the truth and the Roman Catholic Church calls him a heretic and the other Reformers, while giving him lip service, don't honor any of the truth that he teaches. That is, in fact, why we have a Lutheran church today which is something Luther never wanted but conceded to when it was obvious there was no other choice.

Even though we are called Lutherans, we don't follow Luther. He is not our "Jesus" as some outsiders derisively say. However, you may get uncomfortable with how much I quote Luther and I understand that feeling. I had it myself when I first became Lutheran and kept hearing quotes from this Luther guy. And to be fair, I may quote him too much. The reason we care about what Luther said is that God used him to recover the Gospel for the whole church. Imagine you're in a room with a bunch of people and you have a question about the Bible. The Bible can be a confusing book. In one part of the Bible it says, do the 10 commandments and you will live (Leviticus 18:5; Luke 10:28). In another part of the Bible it says that no one is justified by the law (Romans 3:20). How are we to understand this apparent contradiction? If there's a pastor in the room full of people, wouldn't you go to him for an answer since he's trained? Going to Luther is like having a room full of pastors and he's by far the smartest guy in the room that you can go to. Our confessions say it this way: "By the Almighty's special grace and mercy, the teaching about the chief articles of our Christian religion

(which under the papacy had been horribly clouded by human teachings and ordinances) had been explained and purified again from God's Word by Dr. Luther, of blessed and holy memory"<sup>1</sup> (FC Introduction) We think highly of Luther but we don't take what he says blindly. Neither should you take what any pastor says blindly. Paul commends the Bereans for comparing what he preached against the Scriptures. (Acts 17:11) You should be the same way.

But whenever the truth is spoken, it will cause division. Whether it's Jesus or John the Baptist or the Apostle Paul or Saint Augustine or Luther; when the truth is spoken it causes division. In John 6, when Jesus tells the crowds that they must eat his Flesh and drink His blood, many fell away. (John 6:66) In Matthew, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." (Matthew 10:34-35) Furthermore, the Word of God is described as a two edged sword! (Hebrews 4:12)

The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence but it in itself is not a kingdom of violence. It's a kingdom ruled by the Word and by grace. As John 3 depicts so beautifully, whenever the Word of God is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit works a living and active faith whenever He wills. Children of God "are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:13) When you're born into the kingdom of God by water and the Word, you immediately get Satan's attention. He becomes an enemy. As Peter says that Satans "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

The main way he does this is through false doctrine. Paul warns Timothy and us about this: "The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but have itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." (2 Timothy 4:3-4) That

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Timothy McCain, ed., Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 506.

time is here and has been here since the beginning of the early church. We have the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed because error crept into the church and had to be fought against. If you can't confess the Nicene Creed or Athanasian Creed, you aren't Christian. We have the Book of Concord as our confessions because of error in the church. If you can't confess the Book of Concord, you may be Christian, but you certainly aren't Lutheran. But if you can't confess the Book of Concord, then you have heterodoxy in your confession of faith. Heterodoxy is a mix of good teaching and bad teaching. Heterodoxy is dangerous to your faith and can lead you to chase after myths.

So, why am I telling you this? You're all Lutheran, after all. Heterodoxy in other churches is dangerous to other Christians, but you're not other Christians. But the problem comes in when heterodox theology makes its way into good Lutheran doctrine. We must always be on guard for it. How do we keep our guard up? We can take a lesson from counterfeit training. People who spot counterfeit bills are trained in what the real currency looks like. When they are sufficiently trained, they compare the bills they come across to the standard they learned. They know when something is genuine and when something is false. We do the same thing. We are trained in the Scriptures and our confessions to know what the True faith is. And then we come across other denominations or faiths, we compare and contrast their ideas to the true Faith. Some of their ideas will be genuine and some will be marred and some will be outright false. Then we proclaim what we find so that others may be warned against any ideas that might be harmful to faith.

But speaking the truth does not just mean speaking what is true. It also means speaking against what is negative. Consider the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus didn't just proclaim the beatitudes, but spoke against the hypocritical behavior of the Pharisees. Jesus didn't do that to shame the Pharisees but to warn others and drive the Pharisees to repentance. We speak the truth in love to warn some and drive others to repentance. If you've ever had to confront someone with what they don't want to hear, you know it's not always easy or pleasant.

When we talk this way we can be perceived as being elitists. Sometimes it does sound that way, especially in times like ours where absolute truth is disbelieved and frowned upon. This attitude pervades our culture so much, you might even feel like you can't express the truth or shouldn't insist on one way being superior to others. Society considers you elitist if you insist there's a right or wrong. The problem with that is that there actually is a right and a wrong. Jesus says that He is the way and the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him. (John 14:6) Even the Roman church says there are many paths to salvation and sadly many Lutherans believe this also.

If the reformation showed us nothing else, it has shown us that the church is in constant need of reformation. Not renewal or innovation, but reform. We must keep coming back to the timeless truths of Jesus who says that He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. (Hebrews 13:8)

Jesus teaches us many things. Some things are more important than others. There is a chief thing that He teaches. If you don't understand the chief thing, then the other teachings make little or no sense. You know what the chief thing is: we are saved by grace alone through faith alone for the sake of Christ alone. The Epistle reading today reflects this beautifully:

*v. 21: The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...*

No one is made righteous in God's sight by adherence to the Law. It doesn't matter if you're a goody two shoes all your life or cross all your t's and dot all your i's. You have no righteous standing before almighty God!

*v. 21: Although the Law and Prophets bear witness to it,*

All Scripture is about the righteousness of God who is Jesus. Just as Jesus told the disciples on the road to Emaus, the whole Bible points to Jesus and what He has done for us. Consider Psalm 22 where we have the very words of Jesus from the cross!

*v. 22: The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*

We must have an alien righteousness. We receive this through faith. We call this the blessed exchange: Jesus gets our filth to take to the cross and we get His robe of righteousness!

*v. 22-23 For there is no distinction” for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*

All men and women and children and infants fall short of the glory of God. We all need grace.

*v. 24 and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*

Salvation is a gift. We can't earn it. We can't buy it. It must be given to us by Jesus Himself.

*v. 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by faith.*

The attempted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham points to Jesus' atoning sacrifice. The blood on the doorways in Egypt points to Jesus' atoning sacrifice. The sacrifices of countless animals in the Old Testament points to Jesus' atoning sacrifice. Jesus' atoning sacrifice paid for all sin of all people for all time and is received as a gift by faith alone!

*v. 26 So that He might be the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is the God who is just and who justifies His people with the blood of God the Son. He does all the work in salvation. We are the ones acted upon.

This is the chief article of the Christian Faith. We are Lutherans not because we like Luther so much. We are Lutherans because Luther recovered the chief article of the Christian faith.

May we continue to hold fast to the chief article and not accept any additions or alternatives. And may we continue to proclaim it boldly to a world that so desperately needs Jesus!