

The Feast of the Reformation
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

491 years ago, many brave men stood in front of the Emperor Charles V willing to lose their careers, their kingdoms, and even their heads for the sake of their confession of the Gospel. Thank God for these brave men that would not put up with any kind of deviation from the truth of God's Word. They were brave, resolute, and unflinching in the face of real danger.

What has happened to us?

Generally, we are weak-kneed, faint-hearted, beta males begging people to like us. We are too busy erring on the side of the Gospel to warn people they are driving themselves deep into the pit of hell. Instead of being a church where "the Mass is held among us and celebrated with the highest reverence," we generally have tried to be all kinds of churches for all kinds of people. And then we wonder why people aren't in church!

So, what can we learn from the Reformation about what has happened?

First, the writers and signers of our Confessions talked differently than we do about those confessions. They all spoke with a gravitas about their confession because they knew and believed they would stand before the judgment seat of God with that confession. Do you believe this? We don't seem to speak that way anymore. Do we take seriously Jesus' words to the church in Laodicea?

¹⁵ "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. (Revelation 3:15-16)

If that doesn't sound like the church in America, then I don't know what does!

Second, they had to wrestle with the Word of God and make the confession their own! The Augsburg Confession and the rest of the Book of Concord quote Scriptures heavily. That's because the writers and signers believed that the source and norm of all their beliefs was the Holy Scriptures. They took to heart Jesus' words, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." (John 8:31) The Augsburg Confession is nothing other than explaining what Jesus' Word says. We far too easily rest on our theological laurels and fail to make the Confessions our own. The Augsburg Confession was written by a layman, read to a layman, Charles V, and presented and confessed by layman and pastors alike. Our 1887 German hymnal has a copy of the Augsburg Confession in it. Pastors and laymen alike were expected to read it regularly! Our forefathers understood that if we lose the Augsburg Confession, we lose the beautiful, true, and good Lutheran confession of the Scriptures. It is my opinion that if anyone would study the Augsburg Confession and Holy Scriptures seriously, they would most likely become Lutheran.

Can you imagine if most Lutherans regularly read the Bible and the Augsburg Confession? Sadly, not even most Lutheran pastors read both regularly.

So, what's the answer? It's certainly not the revivalistic Church Growth movement that permeates American Christianity and that so many LCMS Lutherans are attracted to. There's a better way. I say we double down on being authentically Lutheran. That means you actually need to know what it means to be Lutheran. And that doesn't necessarily mean, "the way we've always done it." That means we take the Bible and the Augsburg Confession seriously. But I must warn you. If you confess boldly authentic Lutheranism, also known as the truth, you will get some harsh reactions that Jesus warned you about.

"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." (Jn 15:20a)

We expect this kind of reaction from heathens but, sadly, many Christians will also have this reaction. Double-down!

Now I would love to go through the Augsburg Confession article by article, but let's start with two things to orient ourselves to authentic, Bible-believing Lutheranism.

The first thing can be explained in two ways, either full-force law or original sin. So much Scripture talks about the Law of God, but hear this description from Psalm 19:

⁷ The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul;

The testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple;

⁸ The statutes of the LORD *are* right, rejoicing the heart;

The commandment of the LORD *is* pure, enlightening the eyes;

⁹ The fear of the LORD *is* clean, enduring forever;

The judgments of the LORD *are* true *and* righteous altogether. (Psalm 19:7–9)

God's Law is perfect. It's incredible. It's the way in which God put together the universe. It's how you ought to live. But if you look into the mirror of God's perfect Law, you realize you don't keep it. And you cannot keep it. Way too many Christians water down the Law and act as if they keep it. The Sermon on the Mount becomes merely a blueprint for living instead of Jesus hammering home the points that you cannot keep the Law and that you must have a perfect righteousness. You need faith in Jesus. You need baptism. There you are washed clean of your evil deeds and made perfect in the eyes of your Father in heaven through faith. Lest you think Lutherans don't talk about works, Articles VI and XX in the Augsburg Confession talk about the necessity of good works. God actually expects you to live as a Christian. But both articles confess that only works done in faith are pleasing to your Father in heaven. As Hebrews says, "without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6a)

Which brings us to the problem of original sin. You still have the problem of the old Adam hanging around our neck that produces all manner of sin. No other confession of faith is as strong as the Lutheran Confessions on original sin. They take seriously King David's confession that you are conceived and born in sin. (Psalm 51:5) This means you're born a bad tree who only bears bad fruit from moment of your conception when left to your own devices. This means no one is good as Paul says in Romans. (Romans 3:10-18) Your problem with the Law is not the Law because it is perfect. Your problem with the Law is you! You cannot save yourself. You cannot redeem yourself. You don't even know how bad you are! You are spiritually dead and dead people do not raise themselves. Except for Jesus who is fully God and fully Man. He did what we could not do and kept God's perfect law perfectly. That is the righteousness you need, and He gives it to you as a gift through faith. Jesus must come to *you* and give *you* what *you* so desperately need. God's answer to sin is Jesus who is just and the justifier. Your only answer to sin; your only hope is Jesus. The clearest understanding of this is by the Lutherans who confess full-force Law and the total depravity of original sin whose only answer is Jesus.

Satan would love you to be ensnared by your sin and be enslaved to your sin. Anyone who makes a practice of sinning becomes enslaved to that sin. Jesus wants you free from your sin. Free in Him.

Which brings us to the Second thing from the Augsburg Confession today. It is article four of the Augsburg Confession which states that you are justified by faith alone through grace alone for the sake of Christ alone. Listen to this perfect confession:

¹ Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. ² People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. ³ God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5]. (AC IV)

There's no other confession that so plainly and perfectly confesses how you are saved. It is through faith alone based on the work of Christ alone and it is forensic. Forensic means that it is declared over you by God just like you would be declared innocent in a court of law.

Scripture backs it up again and again. And these are great passages to have in your arsenal when you talk to other people about Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8–9:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Galatians 3:1–6:

3 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? ²This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?—³Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ⁴Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed *it was* in vain? ⁵Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, *does He do it* by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? ⁶just as Abraham “*believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*”

Romans 3:21–25a:

²¹But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²²even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness.

You need to hear this over and over again because your old man hates that salvation comes by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone. This keeps Christ at the center and not yourselves. The medieval monks, mystics from all times, and pietists demand that works must be done to reach up to God. It is so enticing to your old man. It is easy to fall prey to this kind of thinking. After all, it's all around you. There are over twenty so-called Christian churches that are in Rialto. And they all teach some form of works-righteousness. Why am I so confident in saying this?

Because they don't have our confessions. Our confession is the only one that is so clear on justification. There are, indeed, I'm sure, Christians in Rialto who cling to Christ alone. But that's in spite of the bad teaching they receive and not because of it. Let us double down and insist on the pure teaching that's found in the Lutheran confessions.

One thing that constantly comes up when the Augsburg Confession talks about justification by faith alone for the sake of Christ alone is the glory of Christ. I'm amazed at how many times our confessions talk about the glory of Christ. Anything that you contribute to your salvation takes away from the glory of Christ. What would you do if you had two sons and one was always claiming credit for his works and the work of his brother? How much more offensive would it be if you claim any credit for the work of your big Brother, Jesus? Or picture Isaiah in the throne room. What does he say when confronted by the glory of God:

“Woe is me, for I am undone!
Because I *am* a man of unclean lips,
And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King,
The LORD of hosts.” (Isaiah 6:5)

This is what happens when you encounter the holiness of God. Can you imagine taking any credit for your salvation by claiming you made a decision for Christ? Or offering up paltry works as worthy of righteousness?

When you focus on your salvation, you focus only on Jesus! When you focus on your works, you focus on what the neighbor in front of you needs from you. But that is a topic for another sermon.

Let us double-down on being Lutheran.

Let us read the Bible devotionally. And keep our eyes on Jesus.

Let us read the Bible theologically, struggling with all that it says, keeping our eyes on Jesus.

Let us read our confessions devotionally, especially the Augsburg Confession. And yes, keep our eyes on Jesus.

Let us struggle with our confessions, and yes, they will be a struggle. But that's really the only way we make them truly our own! And again, keeping our eyes on Jesus!

Let us drown our Old Adam in the waters of Baptism with the full-force of God's perfect Law.

Let us put our trust in the promises of God which are Yes! and Amen! only in Jesus!

And finally, let us remember that we will stand before the judgment seat of God. But we will not stand alone. Jesus, our big brother, will be with us! And in Him true freedom is found! What a glorious day that will be.

In Jesus' name. Amen.