

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Reformation Day – October 29, 2023
Romans 3:19-28 – Justification by Faith
Rev Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In 2017, during our honeymoon in Europe, Rebecca and I spent a day in Wittenberg, Germany. It was a neat time to visit, because 2017 was the year of the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church on the Eve of All Saints, 1517.

So we toured Wittenberg, the town, churches, and museums. At the Castle Church we saw Luther's pulpit and lots of beautiful Renaissance art. And there were the famous doors, not the original wooden ones but newer bronze doors engraved with the Ninety-Five Theses.

But we were disappointed by how the German Lutheran church was celebrating the 500th anniversary. All over town, posters, sculptures, and abstract art installations communicated the message that in the spirit of reformation, society and the church must always be reforming. And these displays emphasized two things needing reform. First, the church must reform itself to become more inclusive. It must repent of ever speaking against various beliefs and sexual orientations. And second, the divisions between Christian denominations need to be healed. The religious factions created by the Reformation should engage in ecumenical dialogue to agree over what's really important. They should find ways to compromise and affirm God's love for all people, regardless of faith, nationality, or sexual orientation. This was the message of the German Lutherans of Wittenberg to the world on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Such a message is really a call for the church to submit to the doctrines of men. Because the world seeks peace at all costs. The world wants all religions to just get along. So it hates the idea of absolute truth. Truth is divisive, truth cannot coexist with falsehood. The world wants to allow one person's truth to stand alongside other so-called truths. And the world hates those who claim to possess the truth. It hates those who say that any sin, sexual or otherwise, is subject to God's law and condemnation. It hates those who confesses the truth of Scripture, without compromise.

And the inclusive message of Wittenberg in 2017 revealed how little German Lutherans today understand of what the Reformation was about. Modern Wittenberg celebrates Luther as a social justice warrior, a fighter against the oppression of the papacy and Holy Roman Empire. One who opposed the corrupt bureaucracy in Rome, protecting the people from those who took advantage of their pious beliefs.

But modern Wittenberg fails to understand what really mattered to Luther. When Luther stood before the Holy Roman Emperor and boldly refused to recant, even though it would probably cost him his life, he took his stand not for social reform, or fair treatment, but for preaching the pure gospel without compromise. The truth of God's word was at stake.

Luther was a fighter, but he fought for doctrinal truth. That justification before God is by faith alone. That no good work or pious life can satisfy the just demands of the law or earn salvation. Nothing but Christ crucified.

In 1517, Luther addressed the terrible Roman practice of selling indulgences, a teaching that was leading many in his own congregation astray. Papal preachers had come to the Wittenberg area selling plenary indulgences. Certificates stating that the sins of the dead are fully absolved. These indulgences were being sold as part of a fundraising campaign to raise money for the construction of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

And the indulgence preachers taught that buying an indulgence was a good work, a work to satisfy the demands of the law for the punishments of sin, temporal and eternal. As if the pope had the authority to shorten the time supposedly required to purify the sins of the dead in purgatory.

Luther could not tolerate this awful teaching, because it implies that you can buy your way into heaven. It goes against everything in God's word. Galatians and Romans are especially clear: justification is God's gift alone, apart from any good works. God offers forgiveness, life, and salvation freely, without any merit or worthiness in me.

But instead of repenting, the pope and his representatives doubled down against Luther. They rejected his criticism. They accused him of undermining the authority of the church, and they excommunicated him four years later. So a debate over one thing – indulgences – exploded into a raging debate over the central doctrine of faith. The doctrine of justification.

To this day, Roman Catholics maintain that justification involves a treasury of merit, or treasury of grace. They mean that God's grace is like a vast storehouse filled up by the good works of Christ and all the saints. Believers are called by the gospel to contribute their good works, however small, to this treasury. And though no one can contribute enough grace to cover their own sins, God will graciously cover the sins of the faithful from his storehouse.

But Lutherans insist that we contribute nothing to justification. The blood of Christ alone is the propitiation – the ransom payment – to satisfy all the just demands of the law. Jesus paid the full death penalty for the sins of the world. No further contributions are needed or can come from anyone – saints or angels or popes. All sin was atoned for from the moment Christ said, "It is finished." And this is objectively true, whether you believe it or not.

And this is where faith comes in. Because Christ's atonement is real, whether or not you believe it. But you do still need to believe it, in order to receive it as your own. So on the one hand there's objective justification, the objective truth that Christ won forgiveness for the world on the cross. But the blood of Jesus and his precious blood do you no good if you do not believe. So there is also subjective justification, how the forgiveness won on the cross is applied to you. By faith. Faith alone receives and believes the forgiveness of the cross.

This is also where the sacraments come in. By the sacraments, God applies his objective forgiveness to you. The sacraments make the forgiveness won on the cross yours in daily life.

All this is clearly taught in Scripture. As Romans chapter 3 makes plain, by works of the law, such as contributing to a treasury of merit, no man will be justified in God's sight. The law can only reveal our sin to us, to make us seek help. But the true righteousness of God is only through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. We are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus and the propitiation by his blood. It's all received by faith. And human boasting is totally excluded. Excluded not by a law of works, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

For the sake of this precious truth, Luther did not hesitate to reform any bad teaching or practice of the church. And yet the Lutherans were careful not to go too far. They were careful not to get rid of anything wholesome along with the bad. Unlike other Protestants, who threw out everything that seemed Catholic, the Lutherans were conservative. They retained whatever art, music, and practices were beneficial for teaching the faith. Since the Word of God and the gospel is the central thing, they retained priestly garments, church ornamentation, pictures, altars, crucifixes, candles, confession, the sign of the cross, and many other things. These are innocent and in harmony with God's word. In fact, they are useful for teaching the gospel. By retaining them, the Lutheran Reformation proved to be a sincere, Biblical reformation. Not a disorderly revolution bent on division, but a peaceful reformation for the sake of the true doctrine of Christ.

Therefore, our churches still confess what Paul preached in Romans, what the Reformers preached 500 years ago, and what the church must preach to the end of time. We do not celebrate Reformation Day because we are obsessed with Lutheran history, or because we cling to old, irrelevant doctrines. Reformation does not mean reforming our message to conform to the opinions of the world. No, today we celebrate the shining truth of the gospel, the truth of the sacrifice of Jesus that endures and stands, the truth that sets us free by faith alone. We celebrate the gospel that God has ransomed the world by the blood of Jesus, to give his righteousness freely to sinners. The gospel that forgiveness is received by faith alone apart from works of the law. We preach Christ crucified, and nothing else.

Stand firm in this pure gospel, no matter the consequences. If the truth of God in Christ Jesus has set you free, do not submit again to slavery. Do not sacrifice any part of the truth of God's word. Do not compromise or soften any doctrine of Scripture for the sake of ecumenical dialogue or bringing denominations together. And do not compromise or soften the truth that sin is sin, that all have fallen short of the glory of God, and must repent and believe the gospel. For when the law is preached clearly, the gospel becomes all the sweeter.

The world will hate us when contend for this truth. It will hate us for refusing to back down. Times of distress will come, but we will stand firm in Christ. "Though they take our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, our victory has been won, the kingdom our remaineth." Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.