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Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

The Festival of the Reformation

October 29, 2023

Text: John 8:31–36

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

During his extraordinary revelation of the Lord Jesus, the apostle John sees an angel flying between heaven and earth. This singular angel has “an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people” (Revelation 14:6). Shortly after Martin Luther’s death in 1546, some proclaimed that Luther was that angel proclaiming Christ’s eternal gospel to the world. I certainly admire their “Lutheran” spirit even though I reject their Biblical exegesis. Martin Luther was not the angel of Revelation 14. But the 16th century Reformation and the Lutheran Church share a common theme with the angel of Revelation 14: the Gospel of Jesus Christ is intended for every man, woman, and child in every nation and culture.

Just over 500 years ago, on October 31, a young Augustinian friar nailed 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Nailing theological theses to the church door was pretty ordinary stuff in those days. Luther was a theological professor. The 95 Theses were statements published for debate among the theological faculty of Wittenberg. They were written in Latin so most of the townspeople couldn’t read and understand them.

The Reformation grew out of a preacher’s concern that God’s people weren’t being rightly served with Christ’s Gospel. So, Luther did what professors do; they publish, debate, and reason through their subject. That’s all Luther had in mind. Is the Gospel being served by the practice of indulgences, the selling and buying of the release from temporal and eternal punishment for sins. Indulgences had been around for hundreds of years. They were established by

canon law, the Roman Catholic magisterium, and Church tradition. It's just what the Church did; it felt like the Church had always done this.

But Luther wasn't sure the trafficking of indulgences was serving Christ's Church properly. Luther, at this point, didn't want to get rid of them. He wanted to talk about whether they were being used properly for the sake of the Gospel. Well, one thing led to another. Eventually, Luther's concern for rightly understanding the Gospel and serving God's people with that same Gospel spread throughout Germany, Christendom, and the world.

Luther was hardly a radical revolutionary. He didn't want to split the Roman Church much less start a "new church" bearing his name. His desire was that the Gospel be preached rightly and that God's people be served with the truth of the Bible. From October 31st forward, Luther's task was to reform the Church through the saving Gospel. His work was conservative in nature. Don't think about "conservative" as it's used today to describe politicians and citizens as either conservative or liberal. Luther was conservative in that he wanted to keep (conserve) the things in the Church that were pure and served the preaching of the Gospel.

He had no interest in throwing out the established Church and starting over. That's what the radical reformers did after Luther began his conservative Reformation. I've heard a number of times that our Lutheran services are just like the Catholic worship services. That's partly true because the Lutheran Church wants to keep that which serves the Gospel. So we keep the liturgy, the lectionary, the church calendar, the wearing of vestments, the singing of hymns, faithful preaching, the regular celebration of the sacraments, etc.

What's different between the Lutheran Church and Roman Catholicism (and other Christian traditions) is that we have kept those things which serve the Gospel while removing anything that detracts from the Gospel. Our worship is similar to worship offered in Roman Catholicism. But it's different in that we've removed the prayers to the saints and the language of resacrificing the body and blood of Jesus for the living and the dead from the service of the

Lord's Supper. Those practices, and others like them, are not based upon the teachings of the Bible. And they shift the focus away from Christ's complete work of atonement onto the good works of the Christian. There is always one question that permeates decisions made about the worship life of this congregation: does this practice promote the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ so that His people can know for certain their sins are forgiven and they remain children of God through faith in Jesus.

The truly conservative Reformation churches are those that have retained the historic, Biblical practices of the Christian Church used for almost 2,000 years! By contrast, the churches of the Radical Reformation are those who have thrown out the liturgy, vestments, sacraments, etc. My fear is that much of the Gospel's beauty and power were thrown out too! For example, most of the churches in the Protestant, evangelical world have retained the practice of regular, Sunday after Sunday preaching. That's good! But the free Gospel of the forgiveness of sins wasn't retained as being primary. The radical reformation replaced the regular, Sunday after Sunday celebration of the Lord's Supper and replaced it with non-Biblical practices like altar calls and other revivalist techniques.

I can speak autobiographically here. I grew up in the panhandle of Texas, part of the Bible belt. But I was not raised Lutheran. In the Pentecostal Church I attended for over 12 years, I can remember observing the Lord's Supper twice. We never, not even once, prayed the Lord's Prayer collectively as a congregation. I went to church a lot in those years, twice on Sunday, once on Wednesday. But the holy things of Christ had been set aside. The body and blood of Jesus given and shed for the forgiveness of sins was not offered; the prayer Jesus gave was relegated to being a pattern of prayer but not an actual prayer used in corporate worship or daily life. Please consider the gravity of these decisions! Christ Jesus commanded these things be done in the Church for the good of His people! But these divine commands had been thrown out for fear of being too Catholic, too formal, to whatever. And the Gospel was diminished.

Lutheranism, by contrast, has always striven to be conservative: retain that which promotes and serves the Gospel of Jesus, remove that which hinders the Gospel. I would never claim this congregation or Lutheranism in general has done this perfectly. But that impulse is deeply embedded within our sensibilities. The Gospel must be heard; prominently, clearly, powerfully, and with great joy and beauty. It's the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. The Lutheran Church is a Gospel Church established in the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we Lutherans recognize that the work of the Gospel is never done on this side of eternity. The Church is never done conserving and proclaiming the Gospel. Jesus, in John 8:31–32, said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The on-going nature of Christian faith and life is indicated in the phrase, “If you abide in my word...” This speaks strongly to the necessity of continuing in Christ's Word. Abiding in God's Word, living in it. God's Word is where we make our home and find comfort and security. Christian discipleship is marked by continual living in Christ through His Word.

Abiding in the Gospel is the constant work of the Church. The need for preaching is on-going, life-long. The need for Christ's body and blood will remain until the day of the Resurrection. You never leave the saving, transforming grace of your baptism. The Bible describes the Christian's baptismal life as the daily taking off of the old, sinful nature through repentance and being clothed moment after moment in the righteousness of Jesus. This is the transforming righteousness described in today's epistle reading “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Romans 3:22). Notice it isn't for those who believed – a past, one-time action – but for those who believe – a present, on-going faith – in Jesus Christ. It's that righteousness of Christ that covers you and makes you saints in the Father's sight.

Dear saints of God, that's what this Lutheran congregation is all about. I am not the angel of Revelation 14 nor is this congregation. But we are active participants in the world-wide proclamation of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what it means to be Lutheran. We aren't followers of Martin Luther. We are disciples of Jesus who abide, day after day, year after year, in the words and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ. We conserve the good news of the Gospel – your sins are forgiven, you are justified before the Father because of His Son's death and resurrection, you are living temples of the Holy Spirit awaiting the glory of the resurrection on the Last Day.

While conserving this saving Gospel message, we cling to the Gospel's promise stated in vs. 32, "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." It was this Gospel promise of freedom from guilt, judgment, condemnation that compelled Martin Luther to do his work of Reformation. We 21st century Lutheran Christians rest in those words too. The truth, particularly the truth of the Gospel, sets us free in Christ through faith.

That message didn't begin in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. It goes all the way back to those first few hours after Adam and Eve's original sin when God promised freedom and salvation through a Savior who would crush the devil's head. The conservative Lutheran Church didn't invent this message; she is but a servant in conserving and proclaiming that message: eternal freedom is given to all who abide in Christ's life, death, and resurrection through faith. Sins are forgiven, guilt is removed, peace with God and man is restored in and through Jesus the Christ.

May this eternal Gospel be conserved and cherished in Christ's Church, in this Lutheran Church, unto the Day of our Lord's return.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

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