

God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his

John 8:36

A Sermon for Reformation Sunday

It used to be that Lutherans nationwide would wear red on Reformation Sunday and have special music and adult forums to mark the Sixteenth Century Reformation. That tradition has fallen by the wayside in many Lutheran churches. Nevertheless, we want to remember this particular event and what it meant to the history of the Christian Church.

506 years ago on October 31, 1517, a monk named Martin Luther nailed Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. The theses were in Latin and thus not for public discussion. Not too many people could read. But he was raising the question of salvation, and what was happening in the church of his time.

In 2017 there was a worldwide celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. There were festival concerts and lectures series lifting up the Reformation and debating its significance: Is the Reformation over? Or does it have continuing significance?

In 1999 the Vatican and Lutheran (LWF) leaders jointly signed a document (*The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*) that claimed to heal the breach between Lutherans and Catholics. Some Lutherans have said: "That solved everything." But in fact, that agreement did very little, if anything.

Two examples: First, Lutherans and Catholics can still not commune together. In the official Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in this country, ten scholars on each side get together twice a year to discuss where their two traditions agree and disagree. Despite the claimed agreement on justification between the Vatican and the LWF, when these top scholars meet, they continue not able to celebrate communion together.

Second, Catholics refuse to lift their condemnations against Luther. In 1967 the Roman Catholic Church lifted its condemnations from 1054 against the Orthodox Church. In 1992 the Roman Catholic Church lifted its condemnations against Galileo for saying the earth was not the center of the universe. Despite these actions, the Vatican continues to refuse to lift its condemnations against Martin Luther. We have to ask ourselves: What does it really mean? What is going on?

First of all, what happens at this time of remembering the Reformation is that people talk about Luther. He is famous as a world figure, particularly for standing up and saying at the Diet of Worms in 1520: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and good reason, I cannot go against my conscience. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."

What Luther meant by this is easily misunderstood. In no way was he saying: "I hold to the Bible alone," in a way that was something new. The slogan *sola scriptura* had been used

widely for two or three hundred years. He was talking about the Word of God as the pure proclamation of Christ and only this.

Second, he was not saying “my conscience is absolute.” When he was said that he could not go against his conscience, he was saying a person has a right to his own integrity.

When we look at what has been published in Christendom, after Jesus Christ himself, more is written about Luther than anyone else. In the year 2000 when everyone was celebrating that millennium, people asked: “Who were the most important people in the last 1,000 years?” Many of the lists had Luther second or third. He has been an important figure, and yet he didn’t want himself to be the focus. He didn’t want himself to be thought of as a saint, of all things, just the opposite.

What’s it all about? It’s important to say what it is not about. It was not primarily about a reform of morals in church and society. Those kinds of movements had been around for a hundred of years. For example, a famous reformer in England hundred years earlier had been Wycliffe. And in Central Europe there was John Huss. In Italy about forty years before Luther’s Reformation was Savonarola. And during Savonarola’s time there were reformation movements in Spain and Italy.

The purpose of the Reformation was also not about making a pure church. In fact, Luther understood that the end of the world was coming in his generation. He is like the text in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 where Paul writes that there are going to be those who are still alive at the second coming, that is, in his generation. Luther also did not think of himself as building a pure church because he understood that effort would be the work of the devil. It would be giving into the temptation to think that we are kingdom builders, that we can and should build the kingdom of God on earth.

Over against that he said we’re working just so we can keep things together and proclaim the Gospel because the end is coming. Let’s proclaim the Gospel; that’s what’s important. He called “keeping things together” a kind of gradual improvement or betterment of living conditions, and even then he didn’t think things were going well.

A famous story from about 1541 is that Luther became so depressed that he took to his bed for three or four days, wouldn’t eat, and couldn’t sleep. Finally his wife Katie put on her funeral garb and walked around him in mourning. He was startled. What had happened? What was she doing? She said, “You are acting as if God is dead.” And that jolted him out of this kind of thinking. He was not expecting the Reformation to transform society. He just thought he had to keep things going until the end came.

What difference did the Reformation make? To be sure, there was a difference in the lives of the people that did join in this movement. They were freed from the required daily

masses, the stress on indulgences, the cult of the saints. These were no longer a problem for people who were part of the Reformation.

On the other hand, within the Roman Church there was reaction against the Reformation called the Counter Reformation. The Catholics held a council, the Council of Trent (1545-1563), during which they corrected some abuses but they also put an even greater stress on the saints and particularly devotion to Mary. There were more masses, more indulgences.

Then came the French Revolution in 1789. This upheaval also created a huge reaction within the Roman Church that led a hundred years later to the First Vatican Council (1869-70), which established the doctrine of the absolute supremacy and infallibility of the Pope.

Some will say, yes, but in the Twentieth Century the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) changed things. At first glance the Second Vatican Council seemed to help the Catholic Church to be more democratic and not require the same unanimity as in the past, but when we look at what has happened not only in Vatican II, but also by the popes since then, finally it is always the council of bishops with the pope and the pope is the final authority. That raises the problem of saying: What is it today to be Catholic?

Many will say: "Well, I know a Catholic who doesn't follow the rules on this or that." But what American Catholics do is not determinative for Rome. Rome isn't thinking about 70 million American Catholics over against one billion, 200 million Catholics worldwide. That doesn't determine what Catholics are or are going. What is decisive is what Rome thinks, and Rome thinks in terms of centuries, not in terms of what's happening this year or next. Rome is going its own way as it has before.

What is it all about? That's what we want to celebrate on Reformation Sunday. It's not about Luther. It's not about creating a "pure church." Rather, it is asking about "pure Gospel" and "the truth of the Gospel."

In Galatians 2:5 and 14 Paul says what was at stake among the confused and compromising Galatians is "the truth of the Gospel." At the time of the Reformation, it was the same problem. Luther and the Reformers stated in the Augsburg Confession, Article 7, that it is sufficient for unity among Christians that the Gospel is "preached purely." What is that about?

It is best illustrated by the turning point in Luther's life, which is not posting the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the church in 1517, but three or four years earlier when he was teaching and studying the Book of Romans, and he came to that place in Romans 1:16-17 and realized and discovered that the justice talked about there, which is normally thought of as the justice God demands, is actually the justice God gives, that God is not laying a burden on us, but through the cross he has given us salvation. Luther describes this

discovery later saying: "I felt that I was altogether born again, and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me" (LW 34:337).

The Bible became a different book for Luther after that.

There are three things that his amazing rediscovery of the Gospel does not mean, which we need to point out because we can easily go astray. First, it doesn't mean that there is some hidden meaning in the Bible that the Reformers discovered. That idea of finding a "hidden meaning" became big trouble in the second and third centuries in something called Gnosticism, the belief that I have the secret meaning, and you don't and this is what it is about. No, Luther's rediscovery was about the Word of God as the preaching of Christ and him crucified.

Second, the Gospel can't be reduced to an idea. We often do that. We say: What it means is God's love. No. Of course God loves us, but what's at stake is that he came and did something about it through the cross. It can't be reduced to an idea.

Third, it can't be Gospel-plus. Some say: Yes, the Gospel, but you also have to have a Pope. Or yes, the Gospel, but you must have clergy in Holy Orders. Or you must have a conversion experience. Or you must have good works. That's not what it is about. As Luther famously pointed out, using Paul and the New Testament, salvation is not about good works.

The most important thing about Luther was not that he was a religious genius, but that he was honest. He was ruthlessly honest. Everybody who said: "Well, it's good works," he would say: "You're not being honest with yourself," because it's really that we are always caught in our own selfishness and pride.

Luther said we can be saved without love but not without pure doctrine (LW 27:41) because people get caught in thinking it's really about love and that doctrine doesn't matter. Pure doctrine is another way of saying pure Gospel. Without pure doctrine we're in danger of falling into the abyss. Luther also understood that doctrine is not a head-trip, but it is like a road sign on a mountain highway at the edge of the cliff, saying: "Watch out. Danger. Don't go there." The sign is not salvation, but it's really important to have that warning sign.

The Gospel is what God does, and what he is doing. What he is doing is summarized beautifully by saying: God in Christ died and rose for you and me.

Another way of putting it in more traditionally Lutheran language is to say: God chose you and chooses you through the word of the cross. That's it. That gives us both certainty and freedom because it doesn't depend on our feelings, or our thinking, or our works. It depends on his promise which doesn't fail. It can be summed up neatly by a quotation from Luther in 1525:

“Since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion, but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or adversaries to be able to break him or to snatch me from him” (LW 33:289).

Amen