

Reformation 500 Pastoral Letter to the Congregation

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This month, we Lutherans celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. That event is regarded as the beginning of the Reformation. During the month of October, the teaching and preaching in Bible Class and Divine Service will center on the precious truths brought to light by God's servant, Martin Luther, beginning 500 years ago.



It was during the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century that God graciously brought to light a truth long hidden, the truth that enlightens us and clarifies for us everything God teaches us about everything. That truth, which lies at the heart of our faith, is the teaching of justification by faith alone. To be justified is to be reckoned by God to be righteous or just. We cannot justify ourselves. God justifies us by imputing to us the righteousness of Christ. Apart from this gracious imputation we would remain guilty as sin and under the condemnation of the law. But because of this gracious reckoning we are righteous. The

righteousness we have is not our doing. It is what Jesus Christ did for us when he obeyed God's law perfectly in our stead and suffered on the cross to pay for our sins. It is not our doing. It is Christ's doing. It is God's gift to us. We receive the gift through faith alone. We do not become righteous by obeying the law. That is legalism and it is a denial of the gospel. We become righteous, not by doing good deeds, but through faith alone in the gospel.

To understand faith we need to understand sin. There is no Savior from sin unless sin is real. Jesus will mean nothing to us if our sins mean nothing to us. When people define away sin they soon tire of the Savior. Jesus becomes unnecessary. When people define away their sin they no longer see their need for a Savior who suffered and died for them. Jesus' blood and righteousness is set aside.

That's what's happening in the church today. During the Reformation of the 16th Century people were looking for salvation. The debates between Rome and the Evangelical Lutherans were serious stuff because the eternal destiny of souls was at stake. Today, many no longer believe in hell or if they do they don't seriously think that real people will actually go there. Sin is excused as of little import. God's law is dismissed as irrelevant.

Does the law apply to us Christians? Antinomianism is a fancy word for the teaching that it does not. Now it is true that the gospel fulfills the law and we do not trust in the law to save us. We trust in Jesus who fulfilled the law. It is true that Jesus rescues us from the curse of the law, so we cannot do anything to rescue ourselves from what he has already rescued us. He bore the sins that we commit against the law. Does this mean that we can do without the law? By no means! We need to hear the law! Faith is born in the penitent heart and the penitent heart listens to the law of God and repents of the sin that God's law reveals. Where sins are no longer identified and where sinners are no longer called upon to repent of their sins there is no gospel. There is no forgiveness for sin. There is rather license to sin.

After thoroughly explaining and defending the doctrine of justification by faith alone in his Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul writes in [Romans 6:1-4](#):

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

The gospel is not license to sin. It is forgiveness from sin. It gives a new life that is lived in union with Christ's death and resurrection. The teaching of grace is not a teaching of license. Grace is not cheap. It cost the most holy obedience and bitter suffering and death of God's only begotten Son. This we treasure as our greatest good in this life here on earth, for it is what will see us to heaven some day where there will be no sin or temptation to sin, but only the pure love of God.

As we rejoice in Luther's rediscovery of the gospel and the freedom from legalism that the gospel grants us, we pray that God will deliver us from antinomianism as well, that we may never regard God's grace as license to sin, but will rather rejoice in the new life God has given us to live and when we fail to live it will return to our baptism to reclaim that holy life as our life.

Your brother in Christ
Pr. Preus