

SOLUS CHRISTUS BY CHRIST ALONE! REFORMATION SUNDAY

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Romans 3:19–28

On October 31st in the year 1517, a 34 year-old Augustinian monk marched up to the Castle Churches door in Wittenberg and posted 95 theses penned in Latin for the purpose of sparking a theological debate. Martin Luther wanted to talk. He wanted to know why the teaching of his church didn't square with what he had learned from the Holy Scriptures. He wanted to know why, if the pope had the power to free souls from purgatory, he didn't just do it, out of the kindness of his heart. He wanted to know how a piece of paper, an indulgence letter, could take away God's earthly punishments, as though God were a crooked judge who could be bought with a bribe. Luther wanted to know what all this had to do with Jesus who hung dead on a cross one good, dark Friday for the sins of the world.

We need to be very clear on this Reformation Sunday. The Reformation was not about how the Lutherans got it right and Catholics got it wrong. It wasn't about protesting against authority, or the idea of starting a new and better church, or even returning to the apostolic church. The Reformation was, and is, about the Gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ has taken away the sins of the world. By His death, and that for His sake alone we are forgiven. Through faith in Jesus, an otherwise poor, damned sinner now stands justified before God. The Reformation is about how some unknown German monk stumbled across a case of 2000 year-old, 200-proof good news in the church basement, poured himself a good stiff drink, and got so giddy over the Gospel, that he invited everyone to join in the party.

The Reformation is about the Gospel of Jesus, and the Gospel of Jesus is about your justification, your salvation. Romans 3:28: ***“For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law”***.

That passage needs to be engraved in your minds and burned upon your hearts. It's one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible, not for its poetry but for what it says. You - a sinner, a child of Adam who has no case, no defense and no way out - you are justified, declared righteous and holy and innocent in God's court of justice, all on account of Jesus dying and rising, all received through simple faith in Jesus (*sola fide*) and not by any works you do. Not by your commandment keeping. Not by your family values. Not your religiosity. Not by your purpose-driven life. Not by your perfect church attendance, tithing, or whatever.

What got Luther riled up was indulgence letters - pardons from purgatory, signed and sealed by the pope himself. The indulgence preachers used to stand on the street corners and tell the people, *“As the coin in the coffer clings, the soul from purgatory springs.”* Go ahead and buy an indulgence. Spring poor old uncle Otto out of his ten thousand years of purgatory and buy one for yourself while you're at it. Best fund raiser the church ever dreamed up. It beat bake sales and sauerkraut and sausage suppers hands down. They built St. Peter's in Rome out of indulgence money.

Indulgences were not exactly about buying forgiveness of sins. That's a common misunderstanding. Forgiveness of sins came from Christ through Baptism and Penance. But the temporal punishments for sin in purgatory could be paid by indulgence letters. A kind of get out of jail for anything but free card.

Indulgences were a symptom of a deeper problem: merit. It was your merits, your good works versus your sins, held in the balance on the scales of Christ's justice. Luther knew what it was like to be pressed down hard by the Law, to be hemmed in by God. He did everything the church had taught him to do, the disciplines, the fasts, the feast, the penances, the prayers. He did them all so rigorously that even his father confessor was alarmed; afraid that Luther would kill himself trying to be a good Christian. But there was no peace for Luther, no stilling of the storm, no rest. He said he hated God. He found no comfort in the Christ he knew: Christ the Judge, sitting with the scales of justice in His hands.

The whole world stands accountable before God, whether it knows it or not, believes it or not. There are no excuses. And the verdict under the Law is that no one, no matter how good, how religious, how busy with good works he or she may be, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight through the Law. Not Martin Luther, not Mother Theresa, not the Virgin Mary not St. Paul, and not you. The Law will make you conscious of your sin, like a mirror. The Law will amplify your sin, like a magnifying glass. The Law will

make your sin so utterly sinful and so utterly visible that you can't even bear to look at yourself in that mirror. But the Law cannot justify you, it cannot save you.

Luther recognized that; he felt the despair that Law with no Gospel brought. Fortunately, he didn't stop at Romans 3:20. And we shouldn't either. But now a completely different way of righteousness from God, not the way of the Law but the way of the Gospel; not the way of works but the way of faith in Jesus.

There's no difference among any of us. We all have sinned, from the most senior of seniors to the tiniest of little infants, all fall short of the glory of God. All of us without exception! And all are justified freely by God's grace (*sola gratia*) through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ***"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."*** God presented Jesus, His Son, as an atoning sacrifice through faith in His blood. His blood is what cleanses you from your sin - the blood that was shed on the cross, the blood that washed you in your Baptism, the blood He gives you to drink in His supper. That's how a sinner stands justified before a righteous God. Not by works but by the Blood of Jesus.

Doesn't that make you want to shout for joy? You're innocent before God! Not because of what you do, but because of what Jesus did and does. You're free. ***"If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed"*** (John 8:36). Doesn't make you want to tell someone? Nail it to every church door in town? A man is justified by faith apart from observing the Law.

So why don't we get it? Why do 57% of Lutherans surveyed agree with this statement: "Good works contribute to our salvation." 57% thought that good works are rock solid, biblical Christianity. Why do the majority of Protestants today believe that we are saved by our decision to be saved? Why do people, pastors even, leave the Lutheran church for churches that deny this central teaching, "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the Law?"

Because the old Adam loves man made religions, that's why. Luther once said, "the human heart is an idol factory", churning out religions 24/7. Everything from pyramids to temples to ritual baths in the Ganges, pilgrimages and holy wars, not walking under ladders or having black cats cross your path or knocking on wood for good luck and never step on a crack; "step on a crack, break your mother's back." We'll do anything to cut a deal, a transaction, a bargain with God and the forces of nature. The old Adam is a control freak - he wants to be in control of all the chips, pull the salvation strings, hold God under obligation. "You owe me God, look at all I did for you."

The teaching that a sinner is justified by grace through faith for Jesus' sake is at heart of the Christian faith and the Reformation. It sets Christianity apart from every other religion or "spirituality" in the world. No other religion in the world comes close to teaching it. In fact, every religion in this world teaches exactly the opposite, the way of the Law. You have to do it. "If it's meant to be it's up to me!" Oh, God may help you, and empower you, and equip you, but you have to do it. Morals, prayers, disciplines, temples, liturgies, sacrifices - you can have your pick of religions, they all have them. That's the religion of God helps those who help themselves. But free forgiveness, pardon, acquittal, where a righteous Judge pronounces the verdict "innocent" over the guilty, there's only one place to hear that - in the faithful Christian church.

I must confess to you that there are times when I get more than a bit depressed over the state of the church. I see and hear too much for my own spiritual good. I suspect if Luther were around, he'd pick up his pen and hammer another set of 95 theses on some church door. I read and hear reports from the field of sermons that never once mention the name of Jesus, let alone His atoning sacrifice and resurrection, or hymns that say nothing of sin and grace or the blood of Christ and His cross, and liturgies, liturgies that go "we, we, we, we" all the way home, drawing our attention to ourselves and our feelings, anything but Jesus and His cross.

And then I realize that though we Lutherans, small in number and relatively invisible to the movers and shakers of religion, we have an important place. We are the heirs of a great tradition that recognizes the centrality of Christ's justifying work. It's the chewy nougat center, in the middle of everything we believe and teach and confess.

It's the hub around which the whole wheel turns. It's like a bicycle wheel. You can break a spoke or two, an article or two of your doctrine can be out of whack, but as long as the hub is in place, the wheel may wobble a bit, but it still spins. Christ is the hub, the center. Justification is in the middle of everything. Grace alone. Faith alone. Christ alone. Nothing else in the middle. That's what the Reformation was about. Luther called the church back to her center, where Jesus is. And 494 years later, the church, so easily distracted, so prone to forget, must continually be called to her center. The world clamors for strong spiritual drink, and we have it by the grace of God - 2000 year old, 200-proof good news. Let's pour it straight up, not dilute with soda pop and ice. Listen to some of Luther's thoughts and words.

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord and your Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

I believe that I cannot by my reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me, and each of you, by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith, just as He does for you and for the whole Christian church on earth.

I believe that the Word of God does what it says, that Baptism creates faith, even in the heart of the littlest ones, that it actually is our new birth in Jesus. I believe that the Lord's Supper actually is the sacrament of Christ's true body and blood, in, with and under the bread and wine, locally present. I believe that the word of forgiveness actually is God's forgiveness spoken personally to us.

We aren't justified by being Lutheran. We aren't justified by the purity of our doctrine, the rigor of our hymns, the precision of our liturgies, the piety of our prayers, or all the good works we are given to do. ***"We hold that man is justified by faith apart from works of law."*** You are forgiven. You are justified. You are free. All for Jesus' sake. ***"And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed."*** This is the Gospel of the Lord and all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit for Jesus sake and in Jesus name alone (Solus Christus), amen and amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!

