

The Enduring Power of the Reformation is the Eternal Gospel!

Dear Children of the Reformation,

It started with the swing of a hammer: Halloween, 492 years ago - a nail, a church door (the community bulletin board of the day), and a piece of paper. On that piece of paper were 95 theses, 95 items for debate and discussion among the university scholars, posted in Latin, so the intended audience was clear. Martin Luther, former monk, now a priest and university teacher, wanted to get the discussion going among the church's leaders to reexamine some of the church's practices like indulgences (the *selling* of forgiveness for money), like the absolute authority of the pope (who was claiming authority OVER the Scriptures). Luther wanted to get back to what Scripture said about things like forgiveness and grace. But those theses, those statements for thought and study soon did more than just provoke a few discussions. They changed the world.

Within days, those 95 theses had been translated into the common tongue of the people – German, and then copied on that miracle of so-modern invention that was less than a lifetime old – the printing press. More than just university scholars were talking about the truths he brought up. The world that had known only one allowed church – THE Roman Catholic (and took what she said as truth) – soon realized that something was missing there. Soon, Luther's pleas for discussion on the unscriptural practices of the church - his questions that challenged some church *traditions* that contradicted God's Word - landed him under the ban – excommunicated by the pope and marked “Wanted: dead or alive” by the emperor.

Still, thousands of congregations of Christians (mostly in northern Europe) chose to follow Luther's teachings based on the Bible rather than the pope's, based on the authority of “the church”. Luther called his followers “evangelicals” – gospel people, but his opponents called them “Lutherans” – a name we gladly and proudly bear today.

You see, we are children of the Reformation. But truthfully, we're not here to celebrate a man, not history, or even our heritage. We are here to celebrate the gospel, the power of the Reformation. We are here to celebrate the fact that the gospel is ours in its truth and purity – that we realize that our salvation is not *our* doing, purchased by our works or effort – but God's gift. We celebrate those so-Lutheran truths, those solas: We are saved *sola gratia* – by grace alone, *sola fide*, by faith alone and *sola Scriptura* – by Scripture alone. And don't forget that all this was accomplished *solo Christo* – through Christ alone and *solus Deo Gloria* – to the glory of God alone.

Yes, we thank God for the way he used Martin Luther, but even more, we thank him for what he used in Luther's hands to accomplish so much, we thank him for what it is that Luther rediscovered, because we still have that same gift today. We're not here to celebrate Luther. We're here to celebrate the gospel. You see, the **enduring power of the reformation is the eternal gospel.**

Our text comes from the vision our Savior gave the apostle John, where he was given a glimpse of the spiritual reality behind our physical world. We'll read from chapter 14, verses 6-7, but a look at the context of these verses is important. In the chapter leading up to this, John had witnessed the enemies attacking from all around – Satan, pictured as that dragon, ready to destroy the offspring of the woman – a beast from the sea picturing all the world governments that do so much harm to the work of the church, a beast out of the earth, those enemies of the truth from within organized religion. It looked hopeless. It looked like a loss. But the dragon was hurled down, and even though those beasts attack violently – John saw the lamb, giving victory to his own – who had been called to His side, and then this – this picture of victory for those of us who are still here. ***“Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. 7 He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”***

Do you know why this text is read at so many Reformation services? The date was February 18th, 1546. Justus Jonas, dear friend of Luther's, sensed that the end was near, and asked a question: “Reverend Father, will you die steadfast in Christ and the doctrines you have preached?” “Ja!” cried that loud voice for the last time. Then, at nearly 3 in the morning, a most improbable thing happened. The professor condemned to the stake by the world's most powerful churchman and condemned to an outlaw's demise by the world's most powerful nobleman, that professor died of entirely natural causes. The beast out of the sea and the beast from the earth had failed to overpower him. The Lamb took his servant home at just the right time.

Two days later, Luther's pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, ascended the pulpit of that same church where the 95 theses were originally posted and preached a funeral sermon to all those people who were surely asking "What now?" He used this text. Luther had been that angel flying in midair, he said, proclaiming the eternal gospel – a messenger above the fray, untouchable by those who wanted to stop him, proclaiming to every nation, tribe, language and people. But notice the comfort for those hearers: Luther's death did not mean the end of that. It is an ETERNAL gospel. It would not and could not be silenced just because death had stopped Luther's lips.

It has been said that the second greatest treasure of the Lutheran Reformation is the rediscovery of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers (the Scriptural truth that God has given the power of His gospel for all of his believers to use). That Scriptural truth opens our eyes to see in the angel, the messenger of Revelation 14:6, every Christian who faithfully proclaims the eternal gospel in the New Testament age. The enduring power of the Reformation isn't rooted in one man's efforts, not even in an entire denomination's collective will. The enduring power of the Reformation has been and will always be rooted in the eternal gospel itself.

Luther himself fully understood this. He is quoted as saying, "Take me, for example. I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip of Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all."

So, what does that word say to us today? Look at the message: "**Fear God and give him glory... Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.**" That's the message we live by, right?! Fear God – worship the one who made it all. We do that, right? Sometimes. But aren't there times when you get caught up looking down? You see the enemies out there and start to feel a little overwhelmed. You get busy, giving honor first to the kids' sports schedule, or the TV Guide, or sleep. You fear the recession more than the God of eternal wrath for those who don't put him first. If worship is showing someone or something what they are worth to us – examine your schedule, your priorities, your budget. What's it all worth to you? A true analysis and we find ourselves "worshipping" anything but God each time we fall short of that standard of absolute perfection...each time we make a decision according to our selfishness. Oh wow. When I think about it, doesn't it sometimes seem that the dragon of Revelation 12 has claimed us away from our God?

That's why we must come back to our text. That's why we must, in a loud voice, proclaim what God has given you messengers, you angels – to proclaim – the eternal gospel. No matter what age or land, no matter what challenge or dilemma – the eternal, enduring gospel is that that dragon has been cast down. The victory belongs to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The gospel message of God's great love for you in Jesus that removed all your failures and replaced them with His good, the gospel message of the eternal God that became the lamb of sacrifice to pay your full ransom price, the gospel message of the one who called you here and called you his, who washed you in the waters of your baptism and feeds you forgiveness in his body and blood in with and under the bread and wine – the gospel message of our salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, by Scripture alone, in Christ alone and to the glory of God alone... that Gospel message must and will be proclaimed to all nations – because in that gospel message is victory, in that gospel message is life, that gospel message is the power of the eternal God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Can you hear it? Even better, look around, do you see it? There you are – another angel flying in midair, with the eternal gospel to proclaim to all those who live on the earth. That's why we celebrate the Reformation. The enduring power of the Reformation is the eternal gospel.

Proclaim it.

In Christ,

Amen.