

Jonathan E. Schroeder

The 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation of the Church

WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts

Carthage College • June 14, 2017

Romans 3:19-28 • Here We Stand

It provided the perfect place to build the monument. In medieval times, defensive stone walls and a water-filled moat surrounded the city of Worms, Germany. Eventually made obsolete by modern warfare, the city fathers removed the walls and filled in the moat, but they decided to preserve the moat area as a park. So as you walk through old town Worms today, you find this lovely green ring of leafy parks that follows the path of the old city walls. Right in the center of that moat shaped park, stands the world's largest monument to the Lutheran Reformation.

Inspired by the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*, the monument has crenellations along its castle-like walls, the four towered corners are mounted by statues of the great men of the Reformation. Frederick the Wise holds his sword, scholars and early reformers surround a central pedestal, rising out of the fortress which holds Dr. Martin Luther, in a defiant stance, his proud eyes looking to the south. Inscribed at his feet are the famous words he spoke there in 1521: Here I stand.

The Reformation sprang to life in Wittenberg at the doors of the castle church in 1517. But Worms is where the Reformation had come to die. Summoned to an imperial diet, Luther had two options: recant his books and teachings, or the empire would declare him an outlaw and the Church, a heretic.

Luther stood before men holding dizzying levels of power: before a church that claimed absolute authority over the spiritual lives of every Christian in the west, and before an emperor whose holdings stretched from the eastern edges of Europe across the Atlantic to the Spanish new world. But in the face of such ecclesiastical and imperial power, Luther stood

in the truth of Scripture, and so he could not and did not recant. The Reformation lived on.

Luther's words that day are rightly remembered, but often forgotten is the chilling response of Emperor Charles V. The most powerful man in the world responded: "I have decided to mobilize everything against Luther: my kingdoms and dominions, my friends, my body, my blood and my soul."¹ The Church of the Reformation would live on, but they would have to fight for it.

What could be so important that the reformers risked life and limb to stand in opposition to the emperor and the pope? Understanding where the church has stood is key for us, the heirs of the Reformation, key to determining where we *will* stand. They stood on a truth worth dying for.

The Reformers called our reading from Romans chapter three a presentation of the first and chief article of the faith.² This is where the church of the reformation has stood for 500 years—proclaiming the continuing relevance of Paul's answer to the question: How can I be right with God?

That question drove a young Luther to a fruitless search in monastic life. That same question drove a learned Luther into the scriptures that held the answer he sought: the breathtaking realization that a person is justified, declared righteous, by faith apart from observing the law.

The Gospel makes the radical claim that our status before God has nothing to do with how we live or what kind of people we are. It rejects mankind's biggest assumption about God: that he loves good people. And it also rejects the big assumption we churchly people make about God. We know that the world is wrong—God loves *all* people.

Deep down, however, we face different temptation; we harbor a more subtle assumption in our hearts. We think that God tends to favor people

¹ Oberman, H. (1989). *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.

² SA II

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who can get their life together, compared to all those people around us, whose brokenness is on public display. We think that God favors people, well, like you. Church musicians, pastors, teachers, honor choir teens.

We hear what Paul says, that there's no difference—all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. But in our hearts, we know that some fall farther short than others, and we rewrite the universal condemnation to say, There's not **much** difference-- but there's some, we think.

When we harbor that assumption in our heart, we reject the word "freely" that God uses to describe our justification here. Undeservedly—that's the part that's hard to swallow for churchly folks like us, gathered in august assembly. You are here, and God love you, you have your life pretty much together, don't you?

Except...except no one knows the brokenness that you hide within. We just do a better job of keeping our brokenness quiet. But you know the jagged edges of your inner life, don't you? You know the dark and shattered pieces that you keep locked away. You may not let others see them. But you know them.

God knows them too. Every one of them. The sins that make you burn with embarrassment. The sins that make you hang your head in shame. God knows them. And what can we say? What excuse can broken people like us offer?

Every mouth may be silenced. The whole world, even us...especially us... held accountable to God.

Paul here draws the unavoidable conclusion that when it comes to the righteousness of my life, there is no difference between my brokenness and the acts of the wicked. All of us have fallen short of God's approval. All of us have fallen short of his glory.

How can I be right with God? I can't. No amount of monkish activity, no amount of new year's resolutions, no amount of decisions, commitments to

Jesus, no amount of life coaching is going to fix my brokenness.

But...But... But now, Paul says in a glorious pivot from despair to hope³, A new age has dawned, because a righteousness from God, apart from what I do, has been made known. The beating heart of scripture is the fact that God declares the sinner to be righteous, undeservedly, by God's grace.

God's brilliant Gospel promises reach down and pull us up from our brokenness and say, "undeservedly, I declare you righteous. So put your guilt, your doubt, your fear away. Stop burning with embarrassment and hanging your head in shame. You can stand before me, you can be right with me, because I declare it in the face of your unworthiness.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

To describe the fullness of God's radical grace, Paul uses the language of the law-court, of the slave market, and of the temple. He says, we are justified, redeemed, atoned. (Bruce, *Romans*, 107).

In the divine court of heaven, we have been acquitted—we are not liable to be punished for our sins. A verdict like that makes no sense. Did God go soft on sin? Is he like the strict father who had many rules for his young children, but when he becomes a grandfather, all of sudden you can take juice in the living room and climb on the table?

That wouldn't be just. Justice says that God must punish sin. And he did. He just didn't punish us. You are justified, because you have been redeemed. Paul's word takes us to the slave market and reminds us that a slave's freedom can be bought, he can be redeemed. But while there were many slaves redeemed from the slave-markets of Paul's day, here he refers to the one redemption above all others, the

³ Lockwood. *1 Corinthians*, 568.

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Christ Jesus redemption, a ransom so great that it required God's blood and demanded divine death. He purchased me, not with gold or silver but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. Justification comes freely, but never make the mistake of thinking it cheap.

Finally, Paul takes us to the temple, behind the curtain, into the Holy of Holies, the place that only high priest could come, only once per year, and only with blood. Paul calls Jesus the place where atonement is made. In the temple that was the mercy seat, the atonement cover where sacrificial blood made atonement for Israel. God presented Jesus as the sacrifice that turns aside the wrath of God over sin. Himself the victim and himself the priest, Jesus offers and is the once-for-all-sacrifice that restored what was lost since Eden, communion between God and man.

God presented Jesus to the world as proof of his justice by punishing sin, and proof of his love in justifying sinners. Atonement means God's Law and Gospel both stand, because God's justice and God's love both meet in the person of Jesus Christ.

And so, we maintain that a person is justified by faith, apart from observing the Law. That is the first, chief article of the faith, and that is a truth worth dying for.

Five hundred years later, here we've stood, Holding a righteousness from God and preserving the message of radical grace for the world. The question for us today, as the Church of the Reformation soldiers on toward her 600th year, is, where *will* we stand?

In the Smithsonian Natural History museum in Washington DC, sitting a shelf in a display case you can see the very first digital camera. Bulky, awkward,

a cassette tape bolted to the side. But as Isaacson notes⁴, it disrupted an entire industry.

The Eastman Kodak Company had created personal photography for the masses in the 20th century and by the 1960s Kodak was making a billion dollars per year. They owned 70% of the market in photographic products.

That first digital camera on display in the Smithsonian, it was invented in 1975. Twenty-five years before digital cameras became popular, an employee of Eastman Kodak created the forerunner of every selfie, Snapchat, or Instagram. Kodak had a 25-year jump on the industry when it came to digital photography. The trouble was, they didn't do anything with it.

They let the digital camera gather dust in the R and D department, because they misunderstood their core business. Kodak thought that they were in the film business. They got caught up in the process, in the material, rather than in their core mission of capturing memories and recording moments. Today over 1 trillion digital images are captured each year. Kodak had everything they needed succeed in the new age of digital photography. They simply didn't value it and didn't implement it. Looking back, it's easy to see that they made their stand in the wrong place. In 2012, Kodak, inventor of the digital camera, went bankrupt.

Could it happen, that we, the church of the reformation, could lose sight of our core mission and take our stand in the wrong place? Could we begin to think that we are in the growth business, or the relevance business, or the millennial business, or the change our community business? Could we be tempted to leave the familiar old truth of radical grace in the dusty corner of our R&D department? Could we could begin to think success in our church isn't found

⁴ Isaacson, W. (2017). *Developing Disruption*. Retrieved April 15, 2017, from Dell Technologies Trailblazers: <http://www.delltechnologies.com/en-us/perspectives/trailblazers>.

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in radical grace but in the strategies and paradigms, in programs or funding models? Could we get so caught up in the process or material of church that we forget our core mission, our reason to exist as Christ's Church: to be proclaimers of a righteousness that is from God and is by faith? Years from now, will someone look back in our history and say, "They had it; they just didn't value it. They didn't implement it."

Brothers and sisters, we have what we need for the next 100 years—we don't need to discover anything new. But we cannot leave it sitting in a dusty corner of the R&D department. To value it, to implement it means recognizing that we have been invited by Jesus to share in his mission of calling the elect to faith through the Gospel. It is a call to action for our generation. Celebrating the reformation isn't just about where we've stood, it's about where we will stand.

Our battle today isn't against imperial armies, but against every effort to sideline our reformation heritage, the truth of the gospel rediscovered in little Saxony and announced with hammer strokes that reverberated throughout the world and shook the church to its foundations.

The battle today is for our church's future. Will we still stand where the Reformers stood? We will proclaim unchanging truth to a people adrift on a sea of relativity? Will we engage a culture that trumpets inclusivity with the exclusive message of salvation in Christ Alone? Will we have the audacity to storm the gates of hell with the gospel truth that sinners are saved by his grace through faith alone? Church of the Reformation, where will we stand?

Let's not be a church that known for what we're against. Let's be a church that leans into its core mission. What would be like if your congregation became known in your community as the church that's known for proclaiming the radical grace of God. The church that serves grace neat. Other churches

preach grace, but it isn't alone. They preach faith, but require a decision. They preach Scripture, but think it says too little about modern times or far too much. They preach Christ, as a way, not as the One and Only. Let us be the church of God's great Alones.

If you ever get to Worms to see that Reformation monument, take a moment to notice where the Luther statue is looking. Those proud eyes and defiant stance face south. If you walk along the statue's line of sight, a couple of hundred feet, you'll see what he's looking at.

The bishop's palace where the Diet met inside the old city walls is long gone. All that remains is a little gravel path in the shadow of the cathedral, and next to the path a very simple set of pavers set into the grass. No signs, no statues, but in the center of those pavers lies a mossy edged stone with this inscription, "Here, before emperor and kingdom, stood Martin Luther, 1521⁵. This was the spot.

Those simple little paving stones meant more to me than the world's biggest reformation memorial. That huge monument with its fortress walls and giant pedestal allows you to stand and admire greatness of what God did through them. But the humble stone pavers at your feet, they invite you to stand with them and pray for what God will do through you.

Here we stand. We can do no other. God help us. Amen.

⁵ *Hier stand vor Kaiser und Reich Martin Luther, 1521*