

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Reformation Day (observed) (2022)

Christianity is not for the Faint of Heart

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“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” (Matthew 11:12, ESV)

In the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus reminds us that being one of His followers is not easy, saying, ***“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence” (v 12)***. John, as the forerunner of Christ was constantly challenged by the religious powers of his day. As do all Christians, John lived with one foot in the here and now and the other in the yet to come: the end-time fulfillment of the resurrection. However, the reality of the here and now for John was a dank, dirty cell in Herod’s prison. Because of his defense for the truth of God’s Word John had become the victim of a violent man. Here is shocking evidence that God’s eschatological reign can and will be resisted, that evil men can and will resist the will and Word of God and thereby bring violence upon the Church, the Body of Christ. So incidents such as this clearly speak to the truth that *Christianity is not for the Faint of Heart*.

Today we celebrate the Reformation a day early. According to history, October 31st 1517 is the day on which the sainted Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, beginning the Reformation. In the face of grave danger and with the defense of the Gospel as his guide, he called the Church to repentance and renewal. Therefore, today we celebrate this bold act by Martin Luther, but we’re also reminded that there were several other men at various times in various countries who were forerunners of Martin Luther and the Reformation. Men of courage who proved that *Christianity is not for the Faint of Heart*, as they defended the true Church and the Gospel. Men such as:

The OT prophets and those of ancient Israel who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. The writer to the Hebrews tells us, ***“Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” (Hebrews 11:36–40, ESV)*** These OT individuals, faithful to the Word of God and His promise of salvation through the seed of Abraham, did not receive the promise of the Messiah in their lifetime, but like John, they will receive God’s promise at the resurrection.

Speaking of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and led by the Spirit, he fearlessly prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus meeting death at the hands of an evil man: Herod. Then there is Stephen, the church’s first martyr, who was stoned to death by men who rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ as they clung to the Law for salvation. Stephen’s faith never wavered even as he was facing death. With his martyrdom only moments away, he reminded those who would kill him of their history of violence against God and His people, saying, ***“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous***

One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” (Acts 7:51–53, ESV) After Stephen there were the apostles who welcomed death at the hands of unbelievers rather than deny their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. These men and many more, filled with faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, the Messiah, were martyred in horrible ways at the hands of unbelievers and evil men. Such is the history of Christianity, Christ’s Church persecuted and slaughtered by the hands of unbelievers. But as we get closer to Martin Luther, we begin to see men martyred, not by unbelievers, but by the leaders of a corrupted Church.

In the twelfth century Peter Walden of Lyons, France recognized the errors of the Church at Rome and felt constrained to bring the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to lost souls. His preaching had remarkable success; but his followers, known as Waldensians, were persecuted, tortured, and died by the thousands at the hands of the establishment of the Church at Rome. In England, John Wyclif opposed the godlessness of the monks, spoke emphatically against indulgences, the adoration of relics, and many other errors of the Church. This godly man during his ministry translated the Bible into English with the hope of bringing the revelation of the Son of God to the common people of England. But he, too, incurred the wrath of the Church at Rome and was martyred in 1384. Not long after Wyclif, and a hundred years before Martin Luther, John Hus of Bohemia, boldly lifted up his voice against the prevailing abuses of the Church at Rome. Excommunicated for his defense of the true Church, he was undeterred and continued to preach the Gospel in Prague. For this, and his refusal to recant, he was tried by the Council of Constance and condemned to the stake in 1415. These men, like those before them, through their fearless testimony willingly met their deaths at the hand of the executioner, bringing a stark revelation to those who call themselves followers of Christ, showing that *Christianity is not for the Faint of Heart*.

Thus, throughout the history of the Church, she gives us more than ample witnesses of men who refuse to deny their faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, even in the face of death. Such courage is not only to be commended, but also to be expected. Our Lord Jesus said, ***“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11–12, ESV)***

Christ is clear, all who refuse to give up the orthodoxy of the Christian Church will be reviled and persecuted. We see this from the beginning when in the ancient Church we witness those who refuse to accept heresy and heterodoxy. Some men led by their false understandings of Scripture, their ego’s, and Satan, had convinced themselves they were the true Church, and begin to teach false doctrine. Faced with these threats to the truth, the Church held fast to the Word of the Gospel and rejected the heresies of men. Centuries past by and the errors of men continued to creep into the Church. This was the situation Martin Luther faced in his day. The Church which called herself Christian, had rejected the purity of the Gospel and had succumbed to the rule of men. The Church had reverted to the religion of obeying the Law for salvation. Thus, God in His gracious mercy raised up one man and filled him with the Holy Spirit to challenge the erring Church of his day. Led by the Spirit, Martin Luther challenged this false Church, but as Christ had prophesied, for his effort Martin Luther was reviled, persecuted, and threatened with death. But also, as the saints of old, Martin Luther refused to succumb to their threats, or their excommunication. Led by the Spirit, he persevered, he challenged the false doctrine and errors of the Church at Rome, and with the help of God, he sought to reform and renew the Church, thus the Reformation of the Church begins.

Initially, his efforts were aimed at the Church in Rome, but as time progressed and other groups arose, with their less than orthodox doctrines, Martin Luther rightly turned his focus onto

them. His hope was to unify where possible but only by holding to the doctrine Holy Scripture, unity could not come at the expense of the Gospel. Following St. Paul, who told the Church in Corinth, ***“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment,”*** (1 Corinthians 1:10, ESV) Martin Luther sought unity. Unity can be loosely defined as walking together. But Christian unity is defined as having one true faith and one true profession that defines that faith according to the Word of God. Therefore, unionism is rejected because it is a mockery of Christian unity. True unity leads to Church fellowship and Church fellowship leads to altar fellowship, and without Church fellowship there can be no altar fellowship.

For Martin Luther and the Lutheran reformers, the Church is described by St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, ***“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*** (Ephesians 4:4–6, ESV) The Church is the Body of Christ who in unity hold fast to all the articles of faith revealed in Holy Scripture. Now some today would call this legalism, but it is nothing more than what our Lord Jesus and Holy Scripture require.

Truth is that the church never runs out of enemies or opponents. Satan hates it, and for this reason he plots against it in various ways and stirs up perils of every kind. However, the hatred of Satan for the Church does not alter who she is: She is the queen of mercy, life, salvation, and all things salutary. She reigns over sin, death, and the devil, over all the terrors and evils of men. But she does not do this by her own strength or merit, but solely by the merits and worthiness of the Bridegroom, Christ Jesus. Furthermore, because of her Bridegroom, she promises a blessing to those who befriend her.

The one holy Christian Church will be and remain forever. She is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. Therefore, true unity of the Church requires that the Gospel be preached in full conformity to its pure understanding and the sacraments be administered according to the Divine Word (AC VII). Again, St. Paul reminds us, ***“There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”***

This is the foundation of the Reformation, one Church who rightly understands the Gospel and the Means of Grace: Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, and Absolution. Disagreement on these revelations of God’s Word leads to disunity and disharmony. This is what the Lutheran confession of 1530 speaks to in the Augsburg Confession. What is the Church and what are the Sacraments. These articles of faith were not accepted by everyone who called themselves Christian, therefore, Lutheran theology and doctrine was reviled and persecuted by many who also called themselves Christians. However, such revilement and persecution did not stop Martin Luther or those who followed his theology. And today, because of the efforts of Martin Luther and the Lutheran Reformers, the Lutheran Church is one of the largest Christian bodies on earth with nearly 80 million members.

Trusting in the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, who wrote: ***“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s***

righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins . . . For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” (Romans 3:21-25, 28, ESV)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church believes, teaches, and confesses that the doctrine of justification is the central doctrine of Holy Scripture. Believing that we cannot obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God by our own merits, work, or satisfactions, but rather we receive the forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God solely by His grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith. Furthermore, we believe, teach, and confess that Christ suffered for us and that for His sake our sins are forgiven, and that righteousness and eternal life are given us through faith. For God regards and reckons faith as righteousness.

Our Lord Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the Altar of the Cross paid the penalty for our sin in full. Therefore, by His holy suffering and death He redeemed us and freed us from all our sin. Thus, with Holy Scripture, we confess that, ***“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)*** This blessed truth cannot be sullied by adding the work or merit of men to this formula. Martin Luther firmly rejected such teaching and so does the Evangelical Lutheran Church today.

Although we celebrate the anniversary of the Reformation today, we are reminded by the culture of our day that danger lurks at every corner, the devil, our flesh, and the world are all opposed to Christ and His Church, and they will stop at nothing to pull you into the world of apostasy, heresy, and heterodoxy. Facing this constant threat, we can confidently say, *Christianity is not for the Faith of Heart*. So, we pray that by the help of the Holy Spirit we will hold fast to the truth of Holy Scripture, which teaches that we are justified by *Faith Alone* in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we are saved by God’s *Grace Alone*, God’s gracious mercy through Christ, and that through *Scripture Alone* we are brought to this blessed truth. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.