



The Gospel Rediscovered

Try to imagine all the changes that have occurred during the past 500 years of history. Add to this a picture of life in Wittenberg in Luther's day, especially 1517. There are many words that could describe the massive changes in our world. In summary, many changes have been good, even lifesaving. Many other changes have been bad – very bad. Sin has not changed since Adam and Eve's fall into sin. Most importantly, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the same "yesterday, today and forever." The Gospel of Christ is the changeless Word in a changing world.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This is the spark that ignited the Reformation. Note that word, Reformation. Luther's desire at that time was to reform the Church and rid it of all false doctrine, abuses and lies. However, as the Reformation moved forward, it changed the world.

By posting the Theses, Luther's intent was to begin a debate. Here are the words of introduction to the Ninety-Five Theses: ***"Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter."*** The first of the Ninety-Five Theses stated: ***"Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said repent, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance."*** That alone is a

profound statement in 1517, and the Ninety-Five Theses spread quickly, far and wide.

Martin Luther was a man of the people – a true pastor who worked diligently, preaching almost every day. He was bold and confident, a highly intelligent theologian and student of Scripture. He consistently pointed the people to Jesus Christ and His cross in his teaching, preaching and writing. However, he was not always that way. As a monk, he tried over and over to do enough to please God, but he always felt that he had not done enough to save himself from eternal death. One day, as he studied the Scriptures, he realized that the message of the saving Gospel had been lost under the traditions, and false interpretations of the Bible. When the truth of the Gospel was rediscovered, as he deeply searched the Scriptures, Luther was ecstatic. He felt that he had become a new man and had entered through an open door into Paradise itself.

There is a Lutheran distinctiveness that permeates all that we believe, teach and confess. This is not a boast, but a statement that what we believe is the truth of God's Word. There are many distinctive Lutheran teachings that highlight Lutheran theology. Here are two examples that show the distinctive teachings of the Lutheran Church, based on the clear word of Scripture.

The central teaching of the Lutheran Church is the doctrine of justification. This simply means that our salvation does not depend on what we do for God, but on what God has done and is doing for us. Jesus Christ by His sacrificial death

on the cross absorbed the wrath of God against sin. God demands the perfect keeping of the Law, which no human being can do because we are all sinners. Jesus kept the Law perfectly and gave His life on the cross so that we can be forgiven.

When we confess our sin and repent, God, for the sake of Jesus, forgives and no longer remembers those past sins. When we are forgiven, the Holy Spirit works through the Word and the Sacraments to nourish our faith and lead us in a life pleasing to God. Because we are sinful, we still sin, but our Lord “daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers” (Small Catechism, 3rd Article explanation).

The two high points of the Divine Service are the Word and Sacrament. We do not believe that the elements of bread and wine are mere symbols of the body and blood of Christ. Nor do we believe that the earthly elements of bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, which means the elements are no longer bread and wine. In the Lutheran Church, we confess the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament. This means that “in, with and under the bread and wine” we receive the true body and blood of Christ Himself. This is why you hear these words as you receive the Sacrament: “the body of Christ for you; the blood of Christ for you.” This is referred to as the Sacramental Union, and is why we are strengthened in our faith each time we receive the true body and blood of Christ in this Sacrament. Luther also stressed the importance of Baptism as the power of the Holy Spirit to create and sustain faith in our hearts. Therefore, we can daily return to our baptism, as did Luther, who in difficult times would say “I am baptized.” Again,

our faith is nourished as the Spirit works within us through Word and Sacraments.

Martin Luther’s lifetime of preaching, teaching, writing and pointing people to Christ enabled him, by God’s grace, to contribute countless blessings to the Lutheran Church, blessings that we celebrate on this 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Luther loved music, and he wrote text and tune for hymns and liturgy, so that the people could sing in their language. His hymns and liturgy are still used in our Church today. He wrote the Small and Large Catechisms for teaching the faith to pastors, laypeople and their children. He used the newly invented printing press so that the Gospel and all its parts could reach out beyond Wittenberg.

Much more could be said about Martin Luther. More books have been written about him than any other person, except Jesus Christ. During this anniversary month of October, we give thanks to God for His servant and for all that Luther said and did. God used an unknown monk in a small town to do the important work of bringing forth the Gospel of Christ, ultimately to all the world. Luther’s fame spread far and wide, and he is still honored and held in high esteem today. He would want us to remember that he was a humble pastor, who wanted to serve the Lord to the best of his God-given abilities. Just before his death on February 18, 1546, he spoke these words: “I pray Thee, Lord Jesus Christ, receive my poor soul into Thy hands.” His earthly life ended as he was received into paradise. Though he is dead, he still speaks to us today: to God alone be all honor and glory!

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