The Heart of Lutheranism:

Justification by Faith Alone

God has declared sinners righteous. That’s the chief article of the Christian

faith. What moved God to make that declaration was not sinners’ obedience to

his commands—because they could only merit a judgment of condemnation

—but exclusively his astounding grace (Rom 3:24). For the sake of the perfect

life and innocent death of his Son, offered on behalf of all, God has justified a

world of sinners (Rom 4:25). Those who trust in Christ for the forgiveness of

their sins, by the work of the Holy Spirit, have through faith the righteousness

that counts before God on the day of judgment. They need not live in fear

that God will punish them for their sins here or hereafter (Rom 8:1), because

Christ’s righteousness has been credited to all who, despairing of their ability

to produce a righteousness that would please God, cling to Jesus.

We are justified through faith alone, apart from any works we have done. That

central teaching of Scripture stands at the heart of Lutheranism. As Lutherans,

we believe, teach, and confess the astounding truth of the gospel restored to

its proper place at the time of the Reformation: we receive the forgiveness of

sin by God’s grace, for Christ’s sake, through trust in Christ’s perfect work in

our place. Because the God who never lies and is never mistaken has declared

us righteous, we are free from the pressure of doing some great work to

attract God’s attention or show ourselves worthy of his love.

Lutherans Stand on Scripture Alone

The Bible is the inerrant Word of God and contains all we need to know for our

salvation and the Christian life. No other source of Christian teaching is

necessary or possible. Luther declared, “The Word of God—and no one else,

not even an angel—should establish articles of faith” (Smalcald Articles II:2:15).

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, the great Reformer expressed the conviction

that guided the whole course of the Lutheran Reformation.

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear

reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or councils alone, since it is

well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves),

I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive

to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything since it is

neither safe nor right to go against conscience (Luther’s Works 32:112).

Just as Lutheran teaching is bound by Scripture, Lutherans are also certain

that the Holy Spirit will always accomplish his purpose when we proclaim his

Word. As God has promised, my “word . . . will not return to me empty, but

will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it”

(Isaiah 55:10, 11).

We take our stand with confidence because God’s Word cannot fail. That

confidence inspires faithfulness in holding fast to Scripture and faithfulness in

our proclamation of God’s Word to the world.

Lutheran Living

Martin Luther was often criticized for not teaching good works. Others felt

that if people were told that salvation was free, no one would have the incentive

to do good works. People would simply take advantage of grace.

Luther strongly encouraged Christian living. However, he put it in the proper

perspective. Good works follow faith. He repeatedly said that we are justified by

faith alone, but faith is never alone. It is a living, busy, active thing, seeking to

serve God and neighbor.

Unlike the church of his day, Luther stressed that living our faith is not

something done only by those involved with church work. You do not have to

take a special vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience to truly live your faith.

God places opportunities before us in our daily lives to live as his people, serving

others in our various “callings” or “vocations”: in families and among friends; at

school and in the workplace; in the marketplace and in our communities.

True “Lutheran living” recognizes that we produce fruits of faith in a variety of

simple ways as we go about our daily living. And through us, God cares for

others and for his creation. “God’s people please God even in the least and most

trifling matters. For He will be working all things through you; He will milk the

cow through you and perform the most servile duties through you, and all the

greatest and least duties alike will be pleasing to Him.” (“Lectures on Genesis,”

Luther’s Works 6:10).

The Significance of October 31, 1517

For more than a year Martin Luther had privately questioned the value of

indulgences. Indulgences were certificates that freed people from performing acts

of penance the church required to show sorrow for certain sins. Indulgences were

never intended to let people “buy forgiveness.” They were supposed to express

people’s inner desire to turn from sin. However, many medieval priests and popes

distorted the original intent of indulgences. Now Luther found out some people

were saying sorrow for sins was not necessary if you bought an indulgence.

Although he wasn’t calling for the total elimination of indulgences, Luther was

convinced indulgences were being abused and people were being misled. When

Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on October 31, 1517, he had no idea these

statements would lead to the Reformation. He wrote them in Latin and not for

public consumption. Luther was calling for an academic discussion. In these

theses Luther did not suggest breaking with the Catholic Church. At this time,

he still believed in purgatory and other teachings he would later reject. This was

a beginning point, not a fully developed reform.

In his theses Luther emphasized two points. “Our Lord and Master Jesus

Christ, in saying ‘Repent,’ wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of

penitence” (Thesis 1). “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of

the glory and grace of God” (Thesis 62). Repentance and the gospel—here

Luther sowed the seeds of the Reformation. The harvest came later.