

In Nomine Iesu

Reformation Sunday 2023

In Christ is life, and in Him alone – 1 John 5:9-13

“If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whom is forgiveness, life and salvation. Dear friends in Christ:

Today is Reformation Sunday. The actual day on which the Reformation began was October 31, the Eve of All Saints Day 1517, or Halloween as we know it. On that day Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg. These theses were to be the basis of a debate at the university on the matter of the indulgences Rome had allowed to be sold throughout Germany. Luther wanted the debate to be public to bring to light the nature of man's sin and how God, in His Son Jesus Christ, has forgiven all sin.

Teachers come and go. Some teach more accurately, some less. But the truth of God's word remains forever, and Luther – perhaps more than any teacher since the time of the apostles

– taught the saving truth of Christ with clarity and power. He proclaimed before the people that in Christ all sin is forgiven and the gates of heaven stand wide open. St. John in our text says the same thing clearly and simply, “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” With these clear words, let us consider the threefold proclamation of the Reformation: Salvation by **grace alone**, through **faith alone**, as taught in **Scripture alone**.

I

Saved by grace means to be saved by Jesus. Grace and Jesus go together, as St. Paul said, we are “justified freely by [God’s] grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:24) There is no grace, no forgiveness, from God, except in Jesus. Any hope of heaven or peace with God apart from Jesus is a false dream. God’s word has joined Jesus and grace together, and man cannot separate them.

In his own day Martin Luther grew up with the understanding that if you do the best you can, God will take care of the rest. But, of course, that raises a question, “Am I doing the best I can? If not, I must do more. If I am to find God’s grace and be sure that I have it, I must first do everything I can do.” So, Luther’s life centered around doing all that he could. It was a self-centered life. He did his good works so that he could get grace in return. **So, everything he did he did for himself.**

Then Luther discovered in the Bible that Christ alone brought him God’s grace. Jesus doesn’t want us to see him as a new Moses, as if He came into this world to teach a higher, yet more easily attained morality than the Ten Commandments teach. Jesus does not want us to see Him as the encouraging example of how to overcome sin. No, Jesus wants to reveal to our hearts God’s grace. He wants us to look to Him, not as

One who by example teaches us how to bear our burdens, but **as the One who carried the weight of our sin** to the cross of Calvary, and there made **full** payment for our sin, for all sin.

Whenever Jesus preached the law, it was always to prepare His hearers to receive God's grace. Consider the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. He used the Pharisee's prayer to God to show His hearers how pitiful and wanting in God's sight our works are in order to show them the grace of God toward the one who had nothing to offer but sorrow for his own sinfulness, concluding with the powerfully comforting statement that the tax collector went to his house justified, not the Pharisee. God's grace and mercy are more powerful than anything man can do. God's word shows us our sin to prepare us to see and believe that Jesus' life, lived in our place, and His death, offered in our place, earned true righteousness in the sight of God. That is God's grace.

When we confess that we are saved by grace alone we are confessing that we are saved by Jesus alone. Or, as St. John said so simply, **"He who has the Son has life."**

II

St. John said, "He who has the Son has life. He who does not have the Son of God does not have life." So, how does the Son become yours? Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that **whoever believes in him** should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) You cannot possess what has not been given. God must give His Son to you. According to His own words, the Son of God came into this world to do His Father's will for you in your place. He would live the life that you were obligated to live. He would die the death that your sins required. He would make the payment you owe for the sins you have committed

against God and against your neighbor. He would rise from the dead to show that death had been destroyed. He would be given to the world in a way people could receive Him. All this had to be or we could not have Him. His birth, His death, His rising to life again must all have been accomplished, all be historical facts. This is how Christ was given to the world.

But you and I were not at His manger, cross, or open tomb. We are here, now. And it is here and now that Jesus must be given to us. For that reason God the Holy Spirit gives Jesus to us in the gospel in word and sacrament. Our baptism joins us to Jesus. The absolution is Jesus' word of forgiveness spoken to us in His stead and by His command. The Lord's Supper gives us Jesus, the same one laid in the manger, nailed to the cross, and risen from the grave on Easter morning. In other words, He gives us Himself to create faith in Him. Faith is created and grows strong on this Jesus. Faith receives Him where God's word is. God promises this. Faith does not go looking here, there, and everywhere for Jesus. Faith simply receives the Jesus who comes to us in Word and Sacrament. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there Jesus is in all His life-giving grace. **There faith is created and sustained.**

The Bible says, "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:14-17) There is no such thing as generic faith that saves. Saving faith does not believe in a generic God. There is only one saving faith, **faith in the God who became man, Jesus Christ**, who suffered for our sins and was raised for our justification. We are saved by faith in

Him, because He and He alone won our salvation. He cried out, "It is finished." We are saved by faith alone, because He is the Author and Finisher of our salvation. Faith doesn't do anything. It just receives what Jesus has done. Faith believes what God says and does. **He who has the Son has life.**

III

We go to church to receive God's salvation because it is there that the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, is spoken to us. Where the Gospel is, there Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, is given with all His power to save. Faith does not grow in the human heart and mind by our will. It doesn't come from our spiritual consciousness. Faith does not come from inside us. Faith comes from hearing the word of God. **Faith is a gift to us from God through His word.**

To be sure there are many people today who say that anyone who believes what the Bible says, takes it literally, is foolish and naïve. It is also true that the people who say that are often among the most intelligent and sophisticated in the ways of the world. But to accept their judgment about the Bible, that it is not trustworthy, requires that we believe something truly fantastic. We must believe that such people are the wisest, most insightful, knowledgeable people in the world. We must believe that they stand above human history, seeing all things more clearly than any before them, even more than He who calls Himself the Creator of all things, who sent His only Son into the world to save us. We must believe that they, people who have lived seventy or eighty years know and understand all things, the visible and invisible, better than the One who is from everlasting to everlasting God.

But ask yourself, how would we even know anything about God, the origin of man, the nature of the evil that is in the

world – and we all know there is evil in world - unless God chose to tell us? Did God not send prophets who gave us the Old Testament, pointing to what troubles mankind and kills each of us. Did they not point to the Savior who was to come into the world to save man from this very danger? Didn't the Christ, the Promised One, the One who lived and died for us, even as the Old Testament said He would, did He not send apostles who gave us the New Testament that tells us how all that was fulfilled? And yet we are supposed to believe what certain people who live now say about all these things. This truly is unreasonable. **He who has the Son has life. But he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.**

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In Christ is life, eternal life, and in Him alone. Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism in 1528. He did so to say in plain, simple the true, scriptural Christian faith. We do not accept this little book because Martin Luther wrote it. We accept it because it teaches what John teaches, that **in Christ is life, and in Him alone**. It teaches, as John does, that God speaks truth to us, and all who deny His truth are liars, deceiving themselves and all who believe them **instead of God**.

In other words, the teaching of the Reformation we remember in gratitude today is nothing more – and certainly nothing less! – than what the Apostle John said in today's text, "If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. ... He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." Believe God, and all that He promises to you will be given you for the sake of Him lived and died for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria