

REFORMATION: Evangelical Preaching and Prayer

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OUR CONFIDENCE LIES IN THIS: that God, the Father of all mercies, is our righteous Judge and a wrathful avenger against all the devils and that God in His gracious kindness has given us His holy, precious Word and His own dear Son. Further, that despite the many blasphemers, His Word is honored and exalted by so many good-hearted, upright people. Inspiring also is the fact that not a few have risked life and limb, property and honor, and are still risking it for the Gospel's sake. The faith and prayers of such people kick the bottom out of the barrel and put an end to the game. As Christ says in Luke 18:7-8, "And will not God vindicate His elect who cry to Him day and night? ... I tell you He will vindicate them speedily."¹

A. God Preached: Martin the *Ecclesiast* for the Care of Souls

1. On the very day Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses, he also wrote a letter to Cardinal Albert of Mainz. His words reveal his deep concern for proper preaching and pastoral care.
2. "Evidently the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters they are assured of their salvation. They are likewise convinced that souls escape from purgatory as soon as they have placed

a contribution into the chest. Further, they assume that the grace obtained through these indulgences is so completely effective that there is no sin of such magnitude that it cannot be forgiven."²

3. And then, Luther states, "The first and only duty of the bishops, however, is to see that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ. For on no occasion has Christ ordered that indulgences should be preached, but he forcefully commanded the gospel to be preached."³
4. Luther began his pastorate at St. Mary's Church in 1515, while his service as professor began at the university in 1508-1509. His care of souls, namely, the preaching of Christ as the only Savior from sin, was his fundamental concern. Pastoral care was his focus.⁴
5. In March 1522, Luther, returning to Wittenberg from Wartburg, preached eight consecutive sermons known as the *Invocavit Sermons*. His preaching prompted peace to the parish once again. Luther realized the power of the preached God.⁵

1 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 43:241. "Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks." Elector John Frederick asked Luther to write an appeal for prayer, since the Turks stood at the door of the borders of Germany (1541). He urged pastors to pray and to "faithfully preach" to the people, and to teach the catechism to the children. "Who knows what God might be able to accomplish through them ... Should the women be led away captive and forced to share bed and board with Turkish men, I would counsel them to submit in patience and endure this suffering for Christ's sake. But they need not despair as though they were damned. The soul is not responsible for that which the enemy may do to the body. Those in captivity are simply in captivity. But God's word and faith are not captive, for Christ has not been taken captive. The preachers should continue to teach and to explain," (p. 239). Hereafter *LW*.

2 *Ibid.*, 48:46.

3 *Ibid.*, 47

4 "In 1517 Desiderius Erasmus was much more influential than the young Wittenberg professor, who simply wanted to explore a question of pastoral care in the normal way academicians explored new ideas in their disciplines by posing theses for debate," Robert Kolb "Luther's Truths, Then and Now," unpublished paper presented at the dedication of the Old Latin School in Wittenberg, Germany, May 2015.

5 "It was Luther's discovery that preaching has always and only been the thing that makes faith, and so justifies ... The classic picture of the Lutheran Reformation is the *Predilla* of the Reformation altarpiece by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) in the Stadtkirche St. Marien in Wittenberg. It depicts Luther dressed in a black robe, leaning out of the old church pulpit in Wittenberg's Town Church preaching with the Scripture opened and with a long finger extended, pointing to Christ, who is in the midst of the assembly, crucified with blood pouring out of His wounds," Steven Paulson, *Doing Theology: Lutheran Theology*, (New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), 9.

6. In May of the same year, he began signing his letters with the title “Preacher” (*Ecclesiast*). And the same time, he began a series of 23 sermons on 1 Peter.
7. “The word ‘Gospel’ signifies nothing else than a sermon or report concerning the grace and mercy of God merited and acquired through the Lord Jesus Christ with His death. . . . It is an oral sermon and a living Word, a voice that resounds throughout the world and is proclaimed publicly, so that one hears it everywhere. . . . It does not tell us to do good works to make us pious, but it announces to us the grace of God bestowed gratis and without merit, and tells us how Christ took our place, rendered satisfaction for our sins, and destroyed them, and that He makes us pious and saves us through His work.”⁶
8. How was the Reformation remembered and celebrated? “As mentioned, the Festival of the Reformation was also often reckoned as belonging to the local feast days at that time, insofar as it was often celebrated on the days on which the Reformation had been introduced, i.e., on which an Evangelical sermon had first been preached or the new church order had been accepted, or it was in some places celebrated together with the day of the consecration of a church [*Kirchweihstage*], which was likewise a local feast.”⁷
9. Luther’s last sermon — preached three days before his death — is all about Christ. “If you want to teach Christ to me, I shall gladly listen to you, otherwise not, even if you were an angel from heaven, as St. Paul says in Gal. 1[:9], ‘Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.’”⁸

B. Evangelical Prayer

1. Martin Luther signed his letters as “Martin *Eleutherius*” from November 1517 to summer 1518. This was an expression of his new evangelical outlook toward Holy Scripture and the Christian life. To the second letter that he signed this way (Nov. 11, 1517), he added the irony that he was in truth a slave and captive,⁹ which became a prelude to his *The Freedom of a Christian*.¹⁰

⁶ LW, 30, Foreword.

⁷ Paul Graff, Trans, Benjamin T. G. Mayes. *Geschichte der Auflosung der alten gottesdienstlichen Formen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1:144–45. Bugenhagen’s church orders were accepted in Braunschweig in 1528, in Hamburg in 1529, in Lubeck in 1531 on the Feast of the Trinity and in Lauenburg Church Order in 1585 on the Sunday after the Feast of St. John, because on this day in 1531 the first Evangelical sermon had been preached. Permission granted.

⁸ LW, 51:383.

⁹ Martin Luther, Philip Melancton, *Christian Freedom: Faith Working through Love: A Reader’s Edition*, Edward A. Engelbrecht and Charles P. Schaum, eds. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 13.

¹⁰ LW, 31:333–377.

2. Context of the treatise on Christian freedom: Luther had been accused that his new theology would lead to lawlessness and a neglect of good works. This concern had the backdrop of the Roman Catholic’s teaching of *fides informis* (raw faith because it lacks works) and *fides formata* (made complete by love).¹¹
3. In spring 1520, Luther wrote his *Treatise on Good Works*,¹² which was his initial defense of justification its relation to the Ten Commandments.
4. “In this faith all works become equal, and one work is like the other; all distinctions between works fall away . . . For the works are acceptable not for their own sake but because of faith . . . a Christian man in this faith has no need of a teacher of good works, but he does whatever the occasion calls for.”¹³
5. “We should pray not as we do now, by turning over many pages and counting beads, but by fixing our mind on some pressing need, desiring it with all earnestness, and thereby exercising faith and confidence toward God and not doubting that we shall be heard.”¹⁴
6. “For the monk genuine Christianity looked like monasticism. It would be the church’s conscience, an ideal in the midst of Christian mediocrity.”¹⁵ Luther’s re-discovery of the priesthood of all believers placed holy works — those done by faith — squarely in the middle of vocation, one’s daily calling made holy by Baptism. What does genuine Christianity look like? Look in the mirror as He works His work through you and your vocations!
7. “Prayer, therefore, is a special exercise of faith, and faith makes the prayer acceptable that either it will be granted or something better than what we ask will be given in its stead.”¹⁶
8. In November 1520, Luther wrote *The Freedom of the Christian*. People around him wanted him to write an irenic letter to Pope Leo X as with his *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* where he attacked the stranglehold the priesthood exerted through the Sacraments.¹⁷ Luther lays out for the pope a simple, evangelical confession of the Christian life: “I shall

¹¹ “For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy,” Ap IV 56. Also, “We cannot set our own love and our own works against the wrath of God,” (Ibid., 81). See Ap XX 1, 5: “In the twentieth article they expressly state that they reject and condemn our statement that people do not merit the forgiveness of sins by good works . . . The opponents on the contrary, teach that God place our iniquities not on Christ but on our works.”

¹² LW, 44:15–114.

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵ Erik H. Hermann, “Reformation Remembered,” unpublished paper, 5, presented at the Reformation Coordinating Committee meeting, April 2015, at the International Center, St. Louis.

¹⁶ LW, 44:58.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36:3–126.



Our High Priest

“The Father accepts your prayers as if they are prayed by Jesus for — connected in Baptism — you and Jesus are one.”

set down the following two prepositions ... A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”¹⁸

C. Faith’s activity and power lies in its receptivity!

1. Contra to those who believe they need to get more disciplined, become better prayer warriors, etc.,¹⁹ when one speaks of faith, as the Scriptures do throughout, then one speaks of the posture of the absolute impotency and failure of all self and the surprising ongoing reception of the King’s royal treasure of gifts. Jacob was at his best in failure when in his weakness he defeated the Angel (Gen. 32:22–31). It was not Jacob’s bulging biceps or disciplined life but his God-given faith and prayer, and by these and these alone God was conquered! God wants to be — and is only — conquered only by these means.
2. “If He does not want to listen, knock at the door of the room; raise and shout! For this is the highest sacrifice, not to cease praying and seeking, until we conquer Him. He has already surrendered Himself

to us so that we may be certain of victory, for He has bound Himself to His promises and pledged His faithfulness with an oath, saying (John 16:23): ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, He will give it to you in My name’ ... These promises will never disappoint you, unless you refuse to follow and seek.”²⁰

3. Prayer’s power is not in your exercise of it but in Jesus’ use and work with and through you (Phil. 2:13; 1 Thess. 3:2; 1 Cor. 2:9, “God’s fellow workers.”) and in His promises freely pledged to you. That One stands before the Father’s throne as your High Priest. This Lord rules the world and all events for the sake of His Church and His mission, and He hears your counsel for Him. His Word reveals and foretells what He is up to both then and now.
 - a. Jesus exercise His lordship — the giving of Himself for us in heaven — *precisely* as our High Priest before the Father. He petitions the Father on our behalf and with us present (Heb. 9:24; 7:25) as baptismally bound priests. As blind Bartimaeuses who now see, we cry out to the Father with and through Jesus, petitioning help for everyone.
 - b. Jesus exercises His lordship — the giving of Himself on earth — *precisely* at the pulpit, font and altar with the pastor as His house servant doing His bidding. Making a holy place by establishing a Word and Sacrament ministry — establishing churches — is putting a stake into the ground. A church building is not merely for utilitarian purposes!

¹⁸ Ibid., 31:344. Luther cites Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 3:21–23; 2 Cor. 12:9 and Phil. 2:5–8 for the Christian’s lordship. Luther wrote this in fall 1520 before he had received the *Exsurge Domine* (“Arise, O Lord”), a papal bull threatening him with excommunication (issued June 15, 1520).

¹⁹ “If you’ll focus on your possibilities, your faith can cause God to show up and work supernaturally in your life. Your faith will help you overcome your obstacles and allow you to reach new levels of victory. But it’s up to you. It depends on your outlook. Are you focused on your problems, or are you focused on your God?,” (Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* [New York: Time Warner Book Group, 2004], 74–75). And then compare John Kleinig’s insight on prayer and the Christian life: “The experience of frustration and failure is far more important to our growth and development as people of prayer than popular Christian literature recognizes,” *Grace Upon Grace* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008.) 153.

²⁰ LW, 6:140.

- c. He baptizes you in this holy place and gives you the language of faith; it is where He talks to you, preaches His glad tidings into your ears and touches your blood-drenched lips. And now those lips are synced to Jesus' lips as He praised and praises the Father — speaks and sings of thanksgiving, petitioning for others — and so does royal priesthood. You have “put on” Jesus (Gal. 3:26–27) and are dressed by Him in His righteousness (Is. 61:10; Phil. 2:9; Eph. 5:14). He has put you into His shoes, walking in a holy, royal and priestly vocation to give of self to others, loving them more than you love yourselves.
 - d. The Father accepts your prayers as if they are prayed by Jesus for — connected in Baptism — you and Jesus are one. Access²¹ (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:18; 3:12) is through Jesus and because of Jesus, who bears the divine name (Ex. 20:24; 23:20–21; John 1:12; 5:43; 12:28). He alone ascends and descends from heaven (John 3:13). The baptized — who also bear the divine name through Holy Baptism — ascend on His back.²² This is the prayer team: the royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6) of His fellow “brothers” (Heb. 2:12), sanctified by a “single offering” (Heb. 10:14), which is His blood.
 - e. The four Gospels are one description of Christ's holy life of faith, obedience and prayer, loving God and loving the neighbor. He always placed others before His own self. God loves others more than Himself, and this is displayed in full-color by His crucifixion.
 - f. Baptismally connected to Him, the four Gospels are the one description of the Church's ongoing life of faith, obedience and prayer. This is displayed in full-color in the sacrificial giving to the neighbor, in words, prayer and deeds.
 - g. The life of prayer is a cross-shaped life, a life that owns a hidden power.²³
 - h. John's perspective of the hidden power and life is revealed in Jesus' lifting up on the cross (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34). He sees this event as the moment of God's judgment upon the death of sin and death itself. How ironic that in the Jews' lifting up of Jesus on the cross, intended as mockery in making Him King and Judge, the Father in heaven agrees.
 - i. Moved by faith in Jesus, you pray for others. Jesus praises those who prayed for others (Matt. 8:8–10; 15:22–28). Having no right to approach Jesus, one simply and gladly banks on His mercy, which causes a joyous confidence in petitioning. “And this is the confidence that we have towards Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us” (1 John 5:15).
- D. Abraham as type of Christ — and the Church — interceding for the cities (Gen. 18:16–35).
- 1. Abraham as “friend,” the King's counselor/advisor.
 - a. His status of election, as befriended by God Himself.
 - b. Sons of Abraham, the King's counselors/advisors.
 - 2. The triune God did not conceal His plans of destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from Abraham, and He hears and considers Abraham's petitions for the sake of the righteous, those who are righteous by faith. He justifies and declares sinners righteous and, for the sake of those He justifies — the Church — He considers their counsel as He stewards His world.
- E. In Summary: Reformation 2017: It's (*Still*) All About Jesus
- 1. Luther's colleagues' funeral sermons reveal their view of him as a preacher of the Gospel. “Luther's colleagues knew that all in all Luther's message might be summarized as an announcement and exhortation of ‘Hear Him.’ Melancthon suggested that the best way to honor Dr. Luther was to continue what he had been doing in the *Predigtamt*: ‘ascending’ to be fed and served by the Lord in the Gospel, and ‘descending’ to serve, preach, and live out that Gospel.”²⁴
 - 2. The preacher is to hear God's Preacher in the sacred text and preach God's Preacher from the sacred text; this is the *Predigtamt*! The laity hears God's Preacher by hearing God's preacher and prays with God's Preacher/preachers, advising the Father on His stewardship of the world.

21 “Like favored subjects approaching a king's throne or children with intimate access to a prestigious father, we have the privilege of approaching the Father to have our petitions answered and to receive His gifts,” Thomas Winger, *Concordia Commentary: Ephesians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 328.

22 Martin Luther writes: “In His skin and on His back we too must ascend” (*LW*, 42:23).

23 The story of the gang's sign in Albuquerque, N.M., where two fingers point to the chest and one to the head: You cross me and this is what happens — two shots into the chest and one into the head — Jesus' gang sign.

24 Naomichi Masaki, “Hearing the Voice of Jesus Together: Luther — Memoria in His Funeral Sermons,” 13, unpublished paper.