

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

One can be forgiven for wondering what this First Reading from Revelation is doing here among the readings for Reformation. And you can't blame it on the modern lectionaries. It was the epistle in the one-year lectionary in TLH.

You know that one of the themes of the Reformation is the prominence of the Word of God. You're familiar with the VDMA symbol, each letter prominent in a quadrant of the cross. The letters stand for a Biblical slogan of the Reformation: *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*, "the Word of the Lord remains forever," these very words found in Isaiah and First Peter.

We Lutherans sound a hearty "Amen" to this eternal Word of the Lord, but the Revelation to St. John? Matthew declared it to be that moments ago, but in the New Testament church, not everyone was convinced. This book has always been classified as one of the disputed books. Was it apostolic? Did the apostle John write it? Luther knew that the church historian Eusebius wrote that "some of the ancient fathers held that [Revelation] was not the work of St. John, the Apostle" (*Luther's Works*, 35:400). Therefore, Luther said "[b]ecause its interpretation is uncertain and its meaning hidden, we have also let it alone until now" (*LW*, 35:400).

At first, Luther had difficulty finding Christ in the pages of Revelation. Later, however, Luther would say of it: "As we see here in this book, that through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels, Christ is nonetheless with his saints, and wins the final victory" (*LW*, 35:411). This is apostolic teaching ... Christ by His cross and passion defeated the devil, death, and sin, Christ by His resurrection sealed His victory, and, ongoing, Christ gives us the fruit of this victory in our own resurrection.

Okay, so we can agree that the book of Revelation is the Word of the Lord; still why are these two verses being read on Reformation. What do they have to do with the Reformation?

P. E. Kretzmann in his *Popular Commentary*, makes the connection for us today. He says approvingly, "This passage has been understood by Lutheran commentators ... to apply to Doctor Martin Luther and the Reformation." That would be extraordinary indeed, that St. John saw in his vision, however dimly, the events of the Reformation, and the restoration of the eternal gospel that Luther championed. Other Lutheran commentators are not so sure that the "angel with the everlasting Gospel to preach" is "specifically Martin Luther and the Lutheran Reformation," but they just broaden it, saying that this text is about "every movement in the church carrying the clear Gospel to the ends of the earth" (Siegbert W. Becker, "An Isagogical Treatment of the Revelation of St. John the Divine," p. 4).

Either way, this Festival of the Reformation is a Biblical festival, though not marking some major event in the life of Christ, nor marking the coming of the Holy Spirit, nor even celebrating a doctrine like that of the Holy Trinity, for what happened in the 16th century — at least what Luther championed — was based on God’s word. As C. F. W. Walther said, the Lutheran Reformation “was not a disorderly revolution, but a Biblical reformation; for whatever did not agree with God’s Word was unrelentingly cleansed from the church by the Lutheran Reformation even though it seemed to glow with angelic holiness” (Walther, Sermon for Reformation, 1858).

For Luther and others who followed his example, as an angel — that is, a messenger — of the Lord, did indeed bring back and preach the eternal gospel, yes the foundational message of Christ’s Church. Here I’m thinking broadly about that gospel. It first acknowledges: all people deserve God’s righteous judgment for sin, even death; whether you are aware of the law or not, you are a sinner, and you are condemned for it. And knowing the law doesn’t help except to inform you of your sin. Oh, if you could “do the law” (Rom. 2:13), you could be declared righteous before God, but that pesky law just keeps showing you your failure to do it. If it were not for Christ, how depressing would Paul’s words be: *“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one”* (Rom. 3:10-12); *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:23); *“by works of the law no [flesh] will be [declared righteous] in [God’s] sight”* (Rom. 3:20). Every attempt to take credit for your own salvation fails with these truths.

And since God is just — He cannot simply overlook sin — He needed a way to both fulfill the law and punish our law-breaking. The Way was through His own Son, sent from the bosom of the Father down to us, the Son of God coming into our mortal flesh through the flesh of the woman, the giver of the law humbling Himself to the demands of the law. Given the name Jesus in the fullness of time, this Son of God and Son of Man, did fulfill every iota, every dot of the Law and Prophets on our behalf, and taking His innocent flesh to Mount Calvary bearing our sins, He also bore God’s wrath for sin, becoming obedient unto the death of a cross, offering up Himself as an all-sufficient sacrifice, the redemption price for our sins. He who was without sin atoned for the sins of the world. He was buried, but the grave could not hold Him. And all this is by God’s grace alone ... pure gift.

But there’s more to this gift, and there’s more to this eternal gospel. For this Son rose from the dead victorious on the third day, the firstborn from the dead. And He promises life to all who follow after Him; He promises victory to us; we will likewise rise from the dead and live. This, too, is gift. We poor sinners receive God’s gift of eternal life by faith. We are now forgiven, accounted righteous before

God — that’s called justification — and it’s by faith alone, not by works. It’s all credited to us by faith, by “*believ[ing] in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*” (Rom. 4:24-25). This too is the eternal gospel — fear God the Father alone who sent His Son as our Savior; give glory to Him alone; worship Him alone. Boast not in your works of the law. “[O]ne is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

This eternal gospel was rejected by Rome ... the “faith alone” part especially, although Rome also rejected the extent of our corrupt human nature. But they especially rejected salvation by grace through faith alone. They wrote: “to reject human merit ... is to agree ... not [with] the catholic church.” “All Catholics admit that our works of themselves have no merit but God’s grace makes them WORTHY to EARN eternal life.” (*Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, “The Confutation of the Augsburg Confession,” p. 108-9). Rome would not admit “faith alone,” but only faith “working through love” (p. 109). Again, Rome said, “justification by faith alone ... is wholly opposed to evangelical truth” (p. 109).

But no redefinition of the “works of the law,” can get around the fact that our striving and our works contribute nothing to our righteousness. As Dr. Michael Middendorf writes, “Paul counters [the praise of works] in reality, and as with Abraham ... any righteousness that avails before God comes wholly and only *from him to us*. To insert our works into that realm is both flawed and fatal ...” (Michael P. Middendorf, *Concordia Commentary: Romans 1–8*, p. 266).

This is the eternal gospel that had to be restored by God’s messenger Martin Luther and that has been also by others in the Church, for although the Reformation happened back in the 16th century, the Church has had to remain vigilant for this fatal error of inserting our works into the order of our salvation. The Church still does, for the Church falls without this gospel; therefore, the Church must always be reforming, always turning to this gospel alone for our freedom, for our hope. This is the eternal gospel that we hear preached and that we believe, the gospel by which we are saved.

This is what we remember on this Festival of the Reformation; this is why we think on this text on this Festival. “Lord, keep us steadfast in Your word; ...” (LSB655:1).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.