

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

The Pastors' Conference I attended this past week was a bit dark as we talked about righteous anger, and whether that has any Biblical support. It was a bit ominous as the closing talk compared Corinth to our modern situation. It was filled with foreboding, as sectionals talked of defending marriage, ministering to parents of prodigals, and protecting our ministry.

The LCMS seems especially in the crosshairs of those who want to destroy Biblical Christianity. It wasn't long ago that a religious liberty case involving an LCMS church and school was decided by the Supreme Court. That case involved whether the church or the government got to decide whom they could hire as ministers in the school. That decision was unanimous for the church. Another case before the Supreme Court now involves an LCMS church and pre-school. It involves the school's application for a scrap tire program for its playground, but it has wider implications, like whether generally applicable services (like fire and police protection) apply to churches; that is, whether the state, by providing such services, is unconstitutionally establishing religion. Personally, I think that's nonsense, but we'll see.

In both of these cases, and in other perhaps more highly publicized cases like the one involving the Little Sisters of the Poor, the state is arrayed against the church—that is, the government, very powerful federal and state governments. The US Commission on Civil Rights has attacked religious freedom recently, and several state commissions have sought to apply their public accommodations rules to churches who hold *“a church service open to the public,”* as if all our church services are not open to the public. Make no mistake: the threat to religious liberty is real; the times are dark. Dr. Gibbs of the St. Louis seminary asked at the end of his presentation: *“Is it getting darker outside?”* He answered, *“I think so.”*

This has application to Martin Luther and the Reformation, I think, although perhaps not the event that we usually use to mark the Reformation's beginning. You've heard about that many times, how on the Eve of All Saints, October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, questioning the church's teaching on penance, purgatory, the sale of indulgences, and so forth. And there is no doubt: Luther was bold. The church led by the Roman pontiff was powerful, and questioning him was fraught. Luther's 82<sup>nd</sup> thesis, for example, said, *“Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial,”* *Luther's Works*, 31:32. That took some courage.

But more ominous for Luther was in April 1521, when he appeared before the government of his day assembled in Worms and before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. He was called to answer for his writings, but that really meant they wanted him to recant, to reject his writings. This took even more courage.

Resolutely, therefore, but likely meekly with a trembling voice, Luther refused to retract any of his writings on the abuses of the church and the papacy: *“If ... I should have retracted these writings,”* Luther said, *“I should have done nothing other than to have added strength to this [papal] tyranny ...”* *Luther’s Works*, 32:110. He implored them: *“expose my errors, overthrowing them by the writings of the prophets and the evangelists. Once I have been taught I shall be quite ready to renounce every error, and I shall be the first to cast my books into the fire”* 32:111.

Luther bravely concluded: *“Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in 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 I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen,”* 32:112.

Luther’s life was shortly in danger. A month later, the Edict of Worms called for Luther to be apprehended and brought before Charles V, likely to have his life ended as another notorious heretic Jan Hus’ had been about 100 years earlier.

So what’s the point? This is my point. We often think of Luther’s conflict as being solely against the Roman church. It was not. The government was arrayed against him, too. To be sure, the Roman church and the state then were closely aligned, but Luther’s “Here I stand” speech was before the “*serene majesty*” Emperor Charles and “*your lordships*” as we have arrayed against us today.

It has become apparent that now is our “Here I stand” moment for “*the hour of his judgment has come.*” The time is now to “*speak of [the Lord’s] testimonies before kings*” trusting that we “*shall not be put to shame.*” The time is now to “*abide in [Jesus’] word,*” for that is how to know the truth, and that is how to live in freedom.

And Jesus’ word does not just mean the red-lettered print in your Bibles. To abide only those words and not all of the God-breathed Scriptures is little different than Thomas Jefferson’s chopping up the Scriptures to remove the miraculous. No! Jesus’ word is God’s word, all of it, and all of it is “*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*” All of it points us to

Jesus, the true theme of the Reformation, and Luther's focus. "*It's still all about Jesus,*" as the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation motto puts it. "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,*" Jesus said (John 5:39). Again, "*[Moses] wrote of me*" John 5:46. Peter preached Jesus Christ whom you crucified but God raised up (Acts 2). Paul preached Christ crucified, the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1), and the righteousness of God that is ours through faith in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3).

To be truly Jesus' disciples is to hold on to all of these words: the words out of Jesus' mouth that are the cornerstone of the church and our faith, and the words of the apostles' and prophets that bear witness to Jesus, and are foundational to the church.

And, to be sure, we Lutherans still have reason to dispute with our Roman Catholic brethren regarding the doctrine of salvation. We cannot give in on it, the teaching that we poor sinners "*are justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith,*" that we are "*justified by faith [in Christ Jesus alone] apart from works of the law*" (Rom. 3).

But the situation is a bit different now than at the time of the Reformation, for today we have common cause with our Roman Catholic, and Orthodox, and Protestant brethren, against our ever more tyrannical government's attempts to curtail our religious liberties or to force us to violate our conscience.

The world looks at the church scornfully, as oppressive and oppressed, rent asunder by schisms and distressed by heresies. And it's true: we have theological differences with these other churches. And the church will continue to dialogue about these differences. But sadly today in the United States the "*toil and tribulation and tumult of [the church's] war*" is with our own government, and we have no Elector Fredrick to protect us. Therefore, it's encouraging that these different communions are beginning to take a united stand against religious oppression.

But more encouraging yet is to live in the eternal Gospel of Jesus Christ, that knowledge that the ultimate victory is ours who have been justified by our just God through Jesus' blood. Living in the forgiveness that Jesus won as He overcame the darkness that sought to overwhelm Him, as it's trying to overwhelm us now—but it lost; the Lord, our Light and our Salvation won—therefore, let us not fear the darkness either; let us not be afraid as we "*wait the consummation of peace forevermore.*" Rather let us boldly take our stand on Jesus and His word of truth, and let us boldly say, "*We cannot do otherwise. May God help us.*"

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