



From the *Messiah Messenger*, October 2008:

The Gift of the Gospel

October is a very special month for Lutherans because we celebrate the birthday of the Lutheran Church on October 31, which we call Reformation Day. Actually, it is too much to call this the “birthday” of our church because Lutherans never intended to create a new church at all. The doctrine Lutherans believe, teach, and confess is the doctrine clearly taught in Scripture and in the Creeds of the Church. But October 31, 1517 was the beginning of a wonderful movement in history that resulted in the formation of the Lutheran Church. On that day Martin Luther publicly posted his ninety-five theses for debate on the subject of indulgences. The world has not been the same since.

The major controversy between Luther and the Papal theologians centered in the doctrine of justification. Luther’s eyes were opened by Romans 1:17: “In it (the Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.” Prior to his awakening, Luther had understood the “righteousness of God” to be God’s essential righteousness by which He judged the nations. The revelation of THAT righteousness would obviously have been only law. The thought that he would have to stand and give account to a just and righteous God only terrified Luther, as it should terrify any sinner. But Luther finally understood that the righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel is not one by which God judges and condemns sinners, but a righteousness by which He mercifully saves sinners. It is a righteousness which He offers freely to sinners, one that is received by faith alone. Thus, the righteous shall live (eternally) by faith – not works.

This concept of God’s righteousness revealed in the Gospel is closely connected to the doctrine of justification. The verb “justify” is a verbal form of the adjective righteous. The Latin derived word, “justify,” is a union of two words, justus and facio, meaning “to make righteous” or “to establish as righteous.” The Roman Catholics taught – and still teach – that justification is God’s act of grace by which He makes the sinner righteous by infusing in him the power to do good works. The good works that the Spirit empowers in the sinner’s heart are the content and substance of a believer’s righteousness before God. Luther, however, understood that this was not the concept taught in Scripture. Rather, the righteousness that the Gospel reveals and offers is a righteousness “apart from the law” (Rom 3:21). In other words it has nothing whatever to do with our works, whether empowered by the Spirit or not. The righteousness of God is the perfect obedience of Christ who fulfilled the law for us (Rom 5:19). His righteousness is imputed to the sinner and received by faith. Thus, the sinner does not work himself into righteousness, but “believes into righteousness.” Through faith (trust or confidence of the heart) the perfect obedience of Christ is credited to the sinner and he is robed with righteousness. God COUNTS HIM righteous.

It can be very difficult for us to grasp this concept because all we see and experience in ourselves and in others is sin. How am I to believe that God looks at me as a perfectly obedient son? I am to believe and not doubt it because His Word declares it to be so! "Christ was delivered for our transgressions and raised again for our justification" (Rom 4:25). By His resurrection God has declared a verdict. The debt for sin has been paid in full. The world has been forgiven. God has declared the world INNOCENT in Christ! Our faith simply receives and appropriates what Christ has done as our substitute.

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours. Therefore the Apostle calls it "the righteousness of God" in Rom 1:17. Finally, in the same epistle, chapter 3:28, such a faith is called "the righteousness of God": "We hold that a man is justified by faith." This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ. ... This righteousness is primary; it is the basis, the cause, the source of all our own actual righteousness. For this is the righteousness given in place of the original righteousness lost in Adam. It accomplishes the same as that original righteousness would have accomplished; rather, it accomplishes more. (From Luther's Sermon, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," 1518)

The Gospel is the greatest blessing that we as a church body have. Come and join us to celebrate this gift each year on the last Sunday of October (Reformation Sunday) through the beautiful musical and liturgical heritage of Luther's German Mass.

Blessings in Christ!

Pastor Huebel