

Sermon Draft

Text: Revelation 14:6–7

Sermon: Reformation Day 2022

It might seem strange that our churches take a Sunday every single year to recall the Reformation. We don't remember St. Matthew or the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist unless such days perhaps fall on a Sunday, but we consistently transfer the remembrance of the Reformation to the prior Sunday! This might seem parochial, but it's a wise practice. We tend to underestimate the doctrinal darkness of the centuries prior to the Reformation, and the danger to consciences, and so also underestimate the privilege of the gift of the clarity of justification *sola gratia* and the careful distinction between Law and Gospel. This is not some Lutheran quirk; rather it is a powerful gift of God's mercy bestowed upon the entire world.

Revelation 14:6–7. That's the historic Epistle for the Reformation of the Church. Says St. John, ***“I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.”***

Most every Lutheran before the last century believed that the angel or the messenger referred to here in Revelation 14 is the blessed reformer Martin Luther not that it can be applied to him but that it is, in fact, a singular and direct reference to the man named Martin Luther. Here is what Johann Bugenhagen preached at Luther's funeral in 1546: ***"This angel who says, 'Fear God and give him the honor,' was Dr. Martin Luther. And what is written here, 'Fear God and give him the honor,' are the two parts of Dr. Martin Luther's doctrine, the Law and the Gospel."***

C. F. W. Walther preached in a sermon just 177 years ago: ***"These words from the Revelation of St. John are, as you have already learned on other occasions, a prophecy of the Reformation of the church established by God through Luther three hundred years ago. The angel, the one sent by God, who flew through the midst of heaven is Luther, and the eternal Gospel that he preached is Luther's doctrine"*** ("Reformation Sermon on Revelation 14.6–12 (1845)," *Treasury of C. F. W. Walther*, tr. Joel R. Baseley, vol. 4 [Dearborn, MI: Mark V Publications, 2008], 112).

Here's something interesting. If you look at sermons and commentaries from the last one hundred years, and you won't find a single Lutheran who actually still believes that Revelation 14 refers to Martin Luther. That may be the reason that many Lutheran churches no longer use Revelation 14 on the Festival of the Reformation. It's not as persuasive to them, and, after all, Romans 3 does, in fact, capture the theology of the Reformation in a beautiful way.

However, this change is not, I don't suppose, so much that we finally have a better understanding of the verse. There is no new data or insight. Rather, it is that Bugenhagen and Walther and Lutherans in those days didn't consider it silly or strange or parochial to say that an event as momentous as the Reformation could have been prophesied in the Scriptures. Especially Lutherans at the time of Luther actually believed that Luther, by the power of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, had set them free from utter bondage.

And that is no small thing.

Walther characterizes it this way: “Before [Luther’s day], nearly a thousand years of spiritual darkness had settled over all of Christianity. . . . The light of the pure Gospel was lost nearly everywhere. . . . The Book of Books, . . . the Holy Scriptures, lay in the dust, right in the midst of Christianity. . . . All of Christianity was under the yoke of slavery. . . . The anti-Christ, foretold in Scripture, the Pope in Rome, ruled on his throne of Satan. . . . Christianity languished in fearful despair and anxiety. Thousands had, in their previous predicament of sin, cried out in vain, ‘What must we do to be saved?’ But there was no answer” (Walther, 110–11).

It was really bad. Worse even than war. Worse than food shortage. Worse than nakedness. Our fathers in the faith recognized that it does not get worse, more desperate in this life, than when a man does not know, cannot find, the gracious God revealed at last in the Gospel that Luther discovered in the Scriptures and proclaimed so clearly.

For Luther, the whole anti-Christian system of infused grace, conditional penance, mitigated forgiveness, mystical and philosophical gunk could not satisfy his yearning to know that God was his friend and not his enemy.

The Roman Catholic system at the time was well arranged to raise money but not to deliver to a man under the burden of the flesh a clean conscience and confidence with God.

Therefore, God blessed Luther with an especially penetrating desire to understand the Bible, the heavenly message, and there, not without diligence but surely by God's grace, Luther was relieved at last. Christ is his Savior from sin. God the Father declares him righteous in love. And Christ is your Savior. His death on the cross has taken away your sin, given you eternal life, despite your sin, entirely apart from any works of yours. No credit belongs to us poor sinners, but all glory for our salvation, our standing, and our confidence belongs to God alone. That was Luther's preaching.

Thus, it's not a stretch to conclude, as many Christians have, that Luther was the angel, the messenger, who preached to the entire earth—to "every nation and tribe and language and people." Today, we give thanks to God specifically for Martin Luther and his teaching which reformed the Lord's Church, of which we are members. We thank God for Martin Luther and the doctrine he proclaimed with such clarity in his day and ours.

Imagine that you were transported fifty or a hundred years into the future and learned that scientific advances had completely eradicated all disease—COVID-19, cancer, flu, heart disease, everything. But imagine you found that the people fifty or a hundred years from now, living without the fear and loss of such things, had nevertheless forgotten the stunning discovery of such breakthroughs and went about their lives as though nothing had changed. They had forgotten how difficult and sometimes tragic it was to live with disease and viruses.

Perhaps this is something like the way it would be if the old Lutherans were transported to our day and learned that we had largely sidestepped the great light and clarity of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. They find that we still have it. We still benefit from it. But we think lots of other things are important and that Law-Gospel is ordinary and just a given. They would be dismayed, I think.

In a certain sense, this is okay. Our lives should not be dominated by viruses and disease on either side of their extinction, nor must we generate artificial excitement over the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, when what is most important is that we use it and benefit from it.

That said, occasional remembrances of the former darkness and the present clarity are helpful.

Whether he is the angel in these verses might be up for debate, but we don't need to mitigate the importance of the Reformation; after our Lord's life and death and resurrection, after the courageous work of the apostles, the most important event in Church history is the Reformation. We do well to remember it with thanksgiving to God.

Amen