

Reformation Day (observed)

John 8:31–36

October 30, 2022

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Jn 8:36



Truth Fills the Gap

Dear brothers and sisters: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One warm June day in 1505, outside the university city of Erfurt in what is today the modern state of Thuringia in Germany, a young man walked down a trail on his way back to school after a quick trip home to Mansfield.

Mansfield was a mining town, and the young man's father, whose name was Hans, was in the mining business. Although Hans found the never-ending requirement of raising capital and managing debt a constant challenge, overall he experienced a level of success. He and his wife Margarethe were able to provide financial stability for their family—no small thing in the late Middle Ages—but they had no interest in their son going on into the family business. No, he was destined for greater things. And so off he went to law school in Erfurt, so that someday he could perhaps find a place at a major university, or perhaps become an advisor to a royal court, or even maybe

something more exciting. However, the young man struggled against this vocational choice. He was always more interested in those things that transcended business contracts and lawsuits. He was always interested in God, the things above, and so he lived on the one hand under the expectations of his father who wished for him to become a successful lawyer, and on the other hand what he felt were the expectations of God, who called him to live a life dedicated to Christian spirituality. The young man therefore was living with and in a gap, between a life he felt others had chosen for him, and a life he thought God required of him.

Well, surely by now you know the young man I speak of is Martin Luther. That warm day in June in 1505 ended with dark storm clouds gathering as Luther trudged back to school. A summer storm began, and as he passed within half a mile or so of a small village called Stotternheim a bolt of lighting flashed into the field beside him, knocking him onto the ground in terror. In a moment of fearfulness for his life, the gap between what he was doing with his life and what he wanted to do with his life snapped shut. He determined to become a monk, to enter into a vocation which the church at that time said was the best way to know God, and to seek his salvation. He determined to enter a monastery, because at that moment, because of a literal bolt out of the blue, Martin Luther knew he wanted God more than anything. The question was how to obtain Him? What lay before him now was not just a vocational question, but a question of eternity. What lay

before him now was another, wider gulf, the gap between God and man, between heaven and earth. He thought he could find the answer in the strict regimens of the Augustinians.

It didn't work out that way. In fact, it only got worse. You see, Luther was instructed according to church teaching that the way to God was found within himself. You were to do your best, to seek what was within you, to follow God's Law, to confess your sins, to do your penitential duties, and then God would give you credit, he would give you the merit of Christ. The way to bridge that gap between God and man, according to the church of the late Middle Ages, was through works righteousness. Luther tackled this task with everything he had. He did everything he was supposed to do. He was a monk among monks, all the Is were dotted and all the Ts were crossed. And yet still he felt that the gap was still there. Actually, he felt that the gap was getting worse. If God says that I should do what is within me in order to earn grace, how does one know if that is ever enough? If, in order to be justified, to be counted as righteous, God wants me to keep and follow not only all the things that are prescribed in the Scriptures but also the things that popes and councils have decided are also necessary for salvation, what happens if one can't do all those things, or fails? In this gap between God and man Luther came to view God as a harsh judge, as a God who sought to punish us in our sins, whose standards for righteousness were too high. Later on in his life Luther would look back on his days in the

monastery and provide some insight into his heart at this point in his life.

He wrote about how he felt always at war within himself. He daily breathed a spirituality which made him constantly examine himself for even the slightest transgression, to remember his own unworthiness, and to despair of his own abilities to be good enough for God.

You see, what Luther would eventually figure out is that the Law of God is not the way to bridge the gap between God and man. In fact, the Law is the means by which God shows us where that gap is. The Law shows us our sins, and it always accuses. Later on Luther would write this about the Law in a part of our Confessions called the Smalcald Articles: “Here we maintain that the law was given by God, in the first place, to curb sin by means of the threat and terror of punishment and also by means of the promise and offer of grace and favor. All of this failed because of the evil that sin worked in humankind.”¹ Further: “The foremost office or power of the law is that it reveals inherited sin and its fruits. It shows human beings into what utter depths their nature has fallen and how completely corrupt it is.”² This thinking is directly taken from St. Paul. We heard this from the Epistle to the Romans today: “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes

1 SA III,2,1.

2 SA III,2,4.

knowledge of sin.”³ Sin has brought forth the gap that now exists between man and God, between heaven and earth. God created us without any gaps, he created us in his image, to know him only as our Father, to worship only him, to glorify only him, and to live in harmony and fellowship with him and with his creation. All that came to an end in the garden.

And ever since that day humankind has been obsessed with the question of how to bridge the gap. Today most people would say there is no gap, because there is no God, there is no heaven, there is no sin, these are all merely constructs of superstition and folk lore. Well, that’s one way to bridge the gap, just deny that it exists. Others, as we have heard about in the Medieval catholic church, sought to bridge the gap through works. But this wasn’t just happening in the 1500s in Germany. This is the primary story of human religious endeavour ever since the fall. Surely there is something I can do to “get to heaven?” In Luther’s time the Christian church had even turned those things things expressly given by God as signs of his grace and mercy—the Sacraments—into works of man. The temptation is always there, to give up on God and turn inward, to look to mere human inventions, and to cast aside what God had brought forth through his Son Jesus Christ. This is sinful, it is a violation of the First Commandment, for in doing this man makes himself to be God. It’s just another spiral into the never-ending requirements of a righteousness before

³ Ro 3:19–20.

God based on works. So we hear Jesus says to His opponents who insisted that their works as sons of Abraham would put them in good stead with God: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”⁴ Today however there is a third way which is perhaps even more popular, especially among certain Christians, as a means to bridge the gap between God and man. This third way deals with emotion, experience, an inner compass that seeks to climb up to heaven on the back of sappy praise songs and pop psycho-babble preaching. Today the concern is not how the Holy Spirit comes to us, but how we are to get to the Holy Spirit on the back of what we are feeling today. But now there is a whole new set of uncertainties: how do I know if I have the Holy Spirit? Is it good enough? What can I do? This just leaves the person still floating in the gap between heaven and earth, now with a new laws to obey, now with a new set of anxieties and hypocrisies.

So whether by works of the Law or through emotional experience or human reason, all of these attempts to bridge the gap rob Christ of His glory.

Anytime man takes on some effective role in achieving or obtaining salvation, that salvation is no longer free, and therefore it is uncertain and doubtful. So we know that in his own search to bridge the gap, having exhausted himself physically, emotionally, and spiritually, Martin Luther turned to the Holy Scriptures, and there he found the truth he had been

⁴ Jn 8:34.

looking for. In the Word of God he found the Incarnate Word made flesh who came to take away our sins. He found Christ, who tells us, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”⁵ The gap, the gulf that has separated us from God, indeed the very chasm between death and hell on one hand and heaven on the other, is now bridged. Truth fills the gap. Not because of anything you have done, not because of anything you have experienced or felt, but only because Christ came into our flesh and died on the cross for your sins. When you and repent of your sins and are Baptized and believe that Christ is the Son of God who died for your sake, then the righteousness of God is now yours, your sins are passed over, and you are justified in the sight of God. We hear again the familiar words of St. Paul: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his 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.”⁶ In Christ there is no distance between us and God, and by faith we grab hold of this promise. This is the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures. This is the gift of the Reformation, and this is why we celebrate this once a year at the end of October. God is with us. God is for us. We know and believe this by faith.

Then where do we get such faith? The Reformation was also about returning to the clear teaching of how God bridges another gap, only this is

⁵ Jn 8:31–33.

⁶ Ro 3:23–25.

a gap in time, the two thousand years that have passed since Christ Jesus was crucified, died, was buried, resurrected, and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. By the preaching of the Gospel and by the Sacraments Christ Himself has instituted—Holy Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and Absolution—we who are in the here and now appropriate—just a fancy word for grabbing hold of and making our own—the benefits Christ won for us on the cross many centuries ago. What are those benefits? The forgiveness of sins. Peace with God. Eternal life. The Means of Grace, not works, not emotions and reason, are how we receive Christ, how we know that God is with us, that God is for us. The Divine Service bridges the gap. Today there is no gap between the heavenly Christ and His very Body and Blood, for He imparts Himself to us here at this altar. The Words “given and shed for you” refer both to Calvary and to what is happening here this morning. They are not the same event, but they both impart the same treasure. To have Christ is to have Him as He gives Himself on the cross, and as He gives Himself today under the bread and the wine. We can’t have what we receive today without what He did for us those many centuries ago, and His Words speak His truth, and our hearts rejoice in faith that comes by and is strengthened in this hearing and in this eating and drinking. There is no gap between Christ and this Sacrament of the Altar.

God surely used men like Martin Luther to reform his Church, to once again

place the pure Gospel message, in both the form of the preached Word and the Sacraments, front and centre right where it belongs. Today we simply remember and rejoice that we are “justified by faith apart from works of the law.”⁷ Today we simply remember and rejoice that the Words of Christ are Truth, and by and in those Words we are set free from sin and placed into the kingdom of heaven, here and now, and unto eternal life. Amen.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Kirk P. Radford

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⁷ Ro 3:28.