

We Are Lutheran: What Does This Mean?

On June 25th, 1530 the Lutheran Church had its birth. It was on that day that German princes went to the Augsburg to take care of business. But, more important than that taxes or land or property, the business they had before them was to confess their faith. Their task was to explain the truth of God's word to their Emperor, Charles V. The Emperor did not want to hear about their faith. He did not want to hear them explain what they knew to be true from God's word. So, he ordered the princes to stop allowing this "new" Lutheran teaching to be preached. Then, the Margrave George of Brandenburg stepped forward and said: "Rather than deny my God and suffer the word of God to be taken from me, I will kneel down and have my head struck off."¹ The Emperor didn't know what to do with this. He was used to people rebelling against him. He was used to people saying 'yes' to his face and showing 'no' behind his back. So, he was utterly unprepared to see a man willingly give up his life, but not give up his soul. And even though he knew very little German, he told this man at his feet: "Nit Ab." "Not off."

The Emperor was bluffing. But the Margrave George of Brandenburg was not. He was ready to give up his life. And the question we ask is simple: why. Why would he be so willing to stand up to Charles' bluff and for his Savior?

To answer that question we need to understand these words we have before us this evening. In Romans, chapter 10, the Holy Spirit moved Paul to write: "*Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: 'The man who does these things will live by them.'*"²

In order to understand the actions of the Margrave of Brandenburg, we need to look at the professor in Wittenburg. Martin Luther lived in a much different world than we do. When Luther was in high school in one week half of his classmates died of the plague. And the church's response to this tragedy was a very complex and misleading theology. They taught that God is up in heaven. He is Holy. He is sinless. And he hates sin. On the other hand, we are down here. We are down here. We are sinful. We are horrible. And God is good to us in that he baptizes us in the church and then gives us the *ability* to do acts that will please God. And by doing these good works, we will make God happy. And when God isn't happy with us he has ways of showing us this. He kills half of our classmates in a week.

That is what the church of his time taught. Have you ever been in a cave that is pitch black and you don't know the way out? Have you ever taken a test where you and no one else knew the answers? Now, imagine a man who is terrified of death. And the church tells him two, horrible teachings: 1) They tell him that he has to do good works to keep God from being angry. 2) The works that they say are good don't make any sense.

As the months and years progressed, the Holy Spirit taught Luther two important, amazing teachings. The first we find here in these words "*The man who does these things will live by them.*"³ Luther realized what God's word plainly said. If we want to get to heaven the path to heaven is pretty clear. We just need to make sure that we are perfect. If we don't sin—even once, then we can get to heaven.

You see, the first teaching that he discovered was the *law*. Now, when I say 'law', I don't mean taxes and speeding laws. I mean the commands that God gives to us in his word. Luther discovered that God gave us these laws not as a ladder by which we can climb up to heaven. No, he gives us these commands to show us that we *can't* get to heaven by ourselves. Earlier on in the book of Romans, Paul writes: "*Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*"⁴

This was Luther's first discovery. And it almost killed him. He saw no way out. He saw that no matter what he did, he could not take away his own sin. And thankfully, the Holy Spirit watched over him. And, when he learned what the law was, he then learned what the gospel was. Here again, in this same letter to the Romans, Luther found these words: "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption*

¹Concordia Triglotta, p. 23

²(Romans 10:5 NIV)

³(Romans 10:5 NIV)

⁴(Romans 3:20 NIV)

that came by Christ Jesus."⁵

The Holy Spirit taught Luther what these words plainly say. We continually fall short of God's glory. But! God has declared the whole world 'not guilty.' And just how is it that God can declare the entire world 'not guilty?' Because of his grace—his undeserved love. And where do we see that love? In Jesus who redeemed us. he paid for all our sins on the cross.

Luther rejoiced in these words. Luther clung to these words like a log in the middle of a raging river. It was this truth that gave him the courage to stand alone. In 1521 he went to the Diet at Worms. There he was in front of bishops and cardinals, princes and even an emperor. And when he was told to recant, to take back what he had written, he took his stand and said that he could not go against God's clear word.

On that day the Margrave George of Brandenburg was silent. And Luther was alone. But in the years that went by the Margrave read Luther's New Testament in German—in his own language. And he yearned for the opportunity to stand with Luther. He yearned for the opportunity to stand before the Emperor and gladly give up his earthly life so that he would not give up his eternal soul.

So then, if we say: *We Are Lutheran: What Does This Mean?*, in these two men you find the answer. Lutherans believe that the whole world is cursed by sin. Lutherans believe that God declared the entire world 'not guilty' through Christ's work. Lutherans believe that God's word is true and worth for and even dying for.

One cannot look at the stand that both Luther and the Margrave George took and compare it to today. And, as we do so it deeply saddens us. Last summer the members of the ELCA voted to approve and endorse the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. We look at this with such great sadness. But, my brothers and sisters, this is the symptom, not the cause. The cause is that they didn't follow in the example of Luther or the Margrave of Brandenburg. Several generations ago they gave up on idea that God's word was true—that **all** of it is true. And then, slowly the cancer spread. Law and gospel are rarely preached in their churches because their pastors are taught that God's word is not true.

I mention this tonight for two reasons: 1) The Lutheranism you see today is not the Lutheranism of 400 years ago. 2) It gives us a reason to pray for Lutherans in the ELCA. For, if God could take people out of spiritual darkness as he did in Luther's time, he can do the same today.

We are Lutheran: What does this mean? It means that we trust in the truth of God's word: All people are sinners and slaves to sin. Our Father declared all people 'not guilty' in Christ. He gives this salvation to people as a free gift of grace—his undeserved love. This is the truth that the Margrave was willing to lose his head for. This was the truth that Luther was willing to be burned at the stake for. And this is the truth we cling to still today. Amen.

⁵(Romans 3:23–24 NIV)