

“From the days of John the Baptizer until now the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent assault it [and all who like John are willing to bear the assault].”

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

How does Matthew 11 begin but with John the Baptizer imprisoned, because he is willing to suffer violence for the sake of the message of salvation entrusted to him. John was in the prison of the violent one ready to assault him for Jesus' sake. The chapter ends with Jesus' invitation to everyone who labors or is heavy laden to come to Him, who Himself is meek, but who will suffer great violence to save us. Jesus is our Rest. He is, in His person, the furthest thing from violence.

Luther says that they who endure violence are the persons who hear the Gospel in such a way that they do not permit any power whatsoever to remove them from its blessed influence. Rather would they sacrifice their very life than deny the Gospel. These are the persons who suffer violence and by force of standing firm in the Truth, intend to break the door which false teachers have barricaded. They have the will to be saved.

Today we think about the task of preserving the Truth. Consider the first hundreds and even thousands of years and remember the offspring of Adam and Eve. Think of how that family grew, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren over and over in the years leading up to the Flood—all those who died in the Flood were part of Adam and Eve's family. Preserving the Truth is not an easy task.

After the Flood the children of Noah were no better. This time God scattered them. How did the Truth then fair among the children of Abraham? Jesus came to His own and His own received Him not. God was not happy with most of them, first in the wilderness wanderings, then in the holy city of Jerusalem.

This preservation of the Truth is serious stuff; must it always end in failure? Jesus started over once more [isn't that what you have to call it?], with twelve proven disciples and a large group of faithful women and Paul. Sad to say, by the time of Martin Luther 1500 years later, even this host known as Christians! upon whom the Holy Spirit was poured! who had the gift of Baptism and the blessed Meal of Christ's presence—along with New Testament Scriptures!—had all but lost their way. How many souls died in ignorance because priests failed to read and proclaim the simple message of the Gospel of forgiveness in the churches?

The plain truth of Romans is summed up in a couple verses of chapter 3:

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Again, “We are declared righteous as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God set in place as a Propitiation through faith in His blood...”

How is it that this plain truth of Romans was such a huge discovery for Luther and all of Christendom that its proclamation in the 95 theses and then in his Bondage of the Will, then the Small Catechism and finally in the Augsburg Confession once again changed the world—this time the world of Christ's church? The answer is painful: the Truth had not been preserved. The church's teaching needed REFORM.

But when did it change? Only when God moved men “to hear the Gospel in such a way that they did not permit any power whatsoever to remove them from its blessed influence.” That was Luther, by God's grace! Rather would he sacrifice his very life than deny the Gospel. Luther was a person who used a sort of violence against violence, as if he intended to break the door. His teaching became a battering ram against the gate of heaven itself, which the Papacy had barred shut from the outside. Indeed, Luther had the will to be saved, not his own will mind you, but he had the mind of Christ given him by the Holy Spirit through the Word.

Luther put the whole matter this way: “The beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of the promising God, who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy, takes the initiative and offers us the word of His promise. ‘He sent forth His word, and thus healed them.’ NOT: ‘He accepted our work, and thus healed us.’ First of all there is God's Word. After it follows faith; after faith, love; then love does every good work, for it does no wrong, indeed, it is the fulfilling of the law.”

Luther confesses here the Christian faith. When Dr. Luther writes what it means to believe in Jesus,

“Jesus Christ true God begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man born of the Virgin Mary is my Lord, who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil; HOW? Not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I – yes, maggot infested sinner I – might be His own”

--when Luther wrote that He was not writing something new. He was writing what all true Christians of all times believe. When He wrote that Baptism “works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this,” Luther was not giving a new “Lutheran twist” to

the Word of God. He was confessing simply what the Word of God has always taught regarding Baptism and what it always teaches, because it does not change. This is the Christian faith. The same can be said of the Sacrament of the Altar. The true Christian teaching is that it “is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself.”

Now I ask you, only 500 years after the Reformation, looking at all of Lutheranism, do you see how far away from the Truth even Lutherans have fallen? Dr. Carl Braaten was one of the most “progressive leaders” [in the worst sense of that term] in Lutheran reform in the ELCA. Dr. Braaten observed, "Lutherans today are rapidly joining the parade of Protestant pluralism and the agendas of today: therapeutic religion, church growth, multiculturalist ideology, inclusivity quotas, New Age spirituality, entertainment evangelism, lowest common denominator ecumenism, liberationism, crusades of every ilk, and a plethora of 'politically correct' concerns." Speaking of ELCA lay members, he asserted, "They are asleep while their church is being taken hostage by a belief system incompatible with the Christian faith."

Within our own Missouri Synod we labor and fight against the anti-Christian, yes, anti-biblical practice of Open Communion [perhaps initiated first by the heretic Arius], for it fails to take the actual confessing of the faith and of Jesus' name seriously. Pastor William Weedon has summarized it well:

We in the LCMS do not accept denominationalism. We do not believe in the branch theory of the Church. We recognize that our practice of closed communion is exactly what would be appropriate for the entire visible Church on earth. We believe that what we believe is precisely what every jurisdiction/communion SHOULD believe, because it is - we hold - nothing other than what the Scriptures teach.

In other words, we don't regard those who hold to a different Confession as just "another denomination." We regard the other confessions to the extent they differ from ours to be falsifications of the truth. As offensive and prideful as that may sound, it's not intended to be anything less than what (until very recent times) EVERYONE believed about their own confession.

So we act in our communion discipline *as if* we were the legitimate heir and successor to the Catholic Church of the West. That's a self-understanding derived from our Lutheran Symbols. We do not claim to be the only jurisdiction in this Catholic Church of the West, purified by the Gospel. We recognize other particular churches around the globe in whom the same faith resides - from the churches of the Archbishop of Latvia, to the churches of the Archbishop of Kenya and the Bishop of Southern Africa and the President of the LCC, and a bunch of others. . . .

President Walther wrote in a Reformation sermon long ago, “*suppose Luther, after learning the truth, had indeed borne testimony for it to his immediate associates, but had not entered into conflict with the Papacy because of the great abominations which it had introduced into the Church, what would have happened? Christianity would have remained under the soul tyranny of the Roman Antichrist, and we all*

should still be subjects of it. There is no question, then, but that both, yes, both these efforts are necessary: to defend the truth and to oppose every doctrinal error.”

To open the altar of the Lord to members of other denominations with other confessions of faith, as is done regularly throughout the Missouri Synod today, is to invite error to the altar and to destroy the unity of the true faith. Let Reformation move us to hold fast to the first objective of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in its Constitution, Article III: “The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall – 1. Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith...and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Romans 16:17), and heresy.”

There are those today who suffer violence because they hold to the Truth. Consider the faithful pastors who battle for the True teaching and practice and the laymen who drive miles and miles to reach an orthodox parish. Can we expect in our own time that the Lord will Reform His Church once more of division of doctrine and practice, let alone 1000 years from now? Having worked so gloriously among us, giving us every opportunity to hear, read, mark and learn His Word of Promise in the years of Christian orthodoxy through the Lutheran Church, what more can we expect in our day? As the faithful dwindle, as they always do over the centuries and thousands of years that have passed, will God raise up His Church once more—or will Jesus return?

The answer is the Lord’s. Ours is to take note of what we have been given and hold fast to it in the face of any and all force against it. If need be to suffer violence, for the sake of generations to come. For that which we defend is Jesus’ Gospel of the forgiveness of sins granted solely through faith in His resurrection from the dead. That Gospel alone delivers the life-giving message of reconciliation and peace with God, without which all are lost and condemned to an eternity in hell. *Soli Deo Gloria* PTO