

“Celebrating what Luther Celebrated”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
For the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

Romans 1:1-7,

October 29, 2017

See the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

It's been 500 years since Luther posted his list.¹ Celebrate!

Celebrate what? Luther?

There are some 900 million Protestants —Adventists, Anglicans, Baptists, Reformed, Presbyterian, Methodists, Pentecostals and so on. We're all around the world.² We're Luther's spiritual descendants.

Luther was a character. He revelled in bathroom humour. He enjoyed his marriage bed, and recommended such pleasures to others.³ He loved beer! The collection of his writings is 120 volumes. Four of these are full of things he said at the pub.⁴ He was a master of insults. There is a website of them. Check it, if you dare.⁵ Luther was fun.

Luther was vicious. When long-suffering peasants rose in armed rebellion, he cheered on the authorities as they killed tens of thousands.⁶ He was terribly anti-Jewish. What he wrote against them fueled antisemitism into the 20th century, and even today⁷

Celebrate him?

His influence is enormous.

- We have Bibles in our homes, read them in our own languages (not just Latin), and worship in our own languages too . . . thanks to Luther.
- We don't need to go through special religious people to pray to God. All believers are priests to each other. We know that . . . thanks to Luther.
- Clergy can get married . . . thanks to Luther.
- One man doesn't rule the whole church . . . thanks to Luther.
- Salvation being bought and sold was exposed as a lie . . . thanks to Luther.

¹ Certainly Luther's *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* (aka, "95 Theses") was distributed widely. He sent it to the Archbishop of Mainz. Whether it was posted on the church door is debated, and the evidence is mixed. Still, it's a great story!

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestantism_by_country

³ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2015/06/luther-on-sex/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weimar_edition_of_Martin_Luther%27s_works

⁵ <http://ergofabulous.org/luther/>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Peasants%27_War "Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants" was a pamphlet Luther wrote.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_and_antisemitism

But celebrate Luther?

The Reformation he started was necessary. So much about the Church had gone wrong, was corrupt and spiritually poisonous. Luther called “foul!”

The Reformation was necessary, and also a tragedy.⁸ Luther did not want to split the church. He was Roman Catholic, a monk-priest-professor, and he wanted to stay one. But with what he started, brothers and sisters in Christ were soon splitting from each other, slandering each other, hating each other, killing each other, damning each other. Praise God, those wounds are healing. Protestants and Roman Catholics are closer together than in five centuries. But still.

Celebrate Luther? Here’s what he said about that!

... people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. . . . How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?⁹

Celebrate Luther? “No way!” he said.

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Celebrate, instead, what Luther celebrated.

He was an anxious man. That’s what drove him to the monastery. It didn’t help. One phrase captured his fear: “*God’s righteousness*” (or “*God’s justice*”).

God is righteous: awesome, holy, and perfectly good. God made us in God’s image, to live God’s ways. What does God tell us? What’s the greatest commandment? Jesus said, *Love God with everything about you, and love your neighbour as if they were you.* Beautiful!

How are you doing at it? Do you love enough? How much is enough? Those times you haven’t acted with love — yes, all of them! — what will God do with them? With you? God is justice, righteousness. We’ve proven not to be. What have we got coming to us? What would be justice?

⁸ Historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, “Partisans on both [Protestant and Catholic] sides have difficulty acknowledging the Reformation was indeed a tragic necessity. Roman Catholics agree that it was tragic, because it separated many millions from the true church; but they cannot see that it was really necessary. Protestants agree that it was necessary, because the Roman church was so corrupt, but they cannot see that it was such a tragedy after all.” Quoted in the introduction to “The Five Solas: A Service to Mark the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation” produced jointly by the Christian Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church in Canada. <http://presbyterian.ca/downloads/38631/>

⁹ Quoted in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1988), 53.

Does this start to sound like not-so-good-news?¹⁰ Luther thought so, and agonized.¹¹ The righteousness of God terrified him. He hated God.

III

Luther was pondering the Scripture we just heard. It talks about the gospel (that's "good news") and God's righteousness (which made him despair). He's wondering . . . "How?" Then he sees. God's righteousness is God's faithfulness, God's love, God's mercy on us who are not lovely. God's righteousness *is* good news.

With that one glimpse, Luther began seeing a whole new landscape. Here it is, in a sentence: *We are **justified as sinners** by **grace alone**, through **faith alone**, in **Christ alone**, on the basis of **Scripture alone**, to the **glory of God alone**.* That is the fire that ignited the Reformation. We could spend weeks unpacking it. Here's the nutshell.

God **justifies** us.

Righteous, justice, justify: they are basically translations of the same Greek word. To justify is to make someone right. As wonderful and necessary as forgiveness is, it doesn't in itself change us. Forgiveness deals with our wrongs. Justification makes us right.

God justifies us. Luther realized that we cannot make ourselves right. We try, and end up making things worse. God does it. Only God can. And God does: makes us right, justifies us.

It's God's gift: **grace alone**.

We don't gain it. We don't accomplish it. We don't earn it. I didn't even ask for it. I didn't even know I needed God's grace. (Part of sin's delusion is the lie that we can do it ourselves.) My justification is God's gift to me, unearned, with no strings attached, no qualifying exam, no hidden fine print. It is by Grace alone.

All I can do is believe God, trust God, have faith in God. **Faith alone**.

I've feared God (like Luther), I've doubted God, I've hidden from God, I've ignored God. Into my darkened soul, faith was that unbidden sunrise, and then I saw. Faith is a gift. I believed. I trusted. That's all, through Faith alone.

Luther discovered this from **Scripture alone**.

The Reformation unleashed the Bible into the Church again. It is the source and the

¹⁰ David Zahl, "Justify Yourself," *Christianity Today* 61.1 (January/February 2017), 36.

¹¹ The word Luther used was *anfechtung*, which means dread, despair, a sense of foreboding doom, assault, anxiety. George, 60.

test of all we know about God, ourselves, the world. All other knowledge is measured against it. The Bible alone gives the good news we need.

God has justified us, making us right. So we can finally live as God makes us to, for **the glory of God alone**.

With God the Holy Spirit now working in us, our lives become ripples of celebrations of God, washing through our neighbours, our neighbourhoods, our world. We are now finally free to serve, with love. No worrying about what we'll get back; we have all we need. No worrying about being good enough; we're already justified. Just to love; that's our motive, our compulsion.

Do we act with love perfectly? No. Too often far from perfectly, much less than adequately. Luther said, *we are at the same time justified and sinners*. A sinner, I am very much a work in progress. Justified, I need not fear. I know the work begun in me will be completed, and I trust the One who is doing this good work in me.

IV

If you are following along, you noticed I missed one.

My faith, my trust rests in **Christ alone**.

In the monastery, Luther drove his superior crazy. He'd come to confess, then come back, then come back, always worried he'd forgotten something or hadn't been sincere enough. (Remember, he was terrified of God.) His confessor broke: *"Brother Martin, if you are going to confess so much, go do something worth confessing! Kill your mother or father! Commit adultery! Quit coming in here with such flummery and fake sins."*¹² Then he gave more helpful advice. *"Martin, look to the wounds of the most sweet Saviour."*¹³

Christ alone.

Trust in what Jesus has done for you, in his life, his resurrection and, particularly his suffering and death on a cross. Jesus forgave your sin. It's done. He did it. Jesus broke your guilt. It's done. He did it. Jesus defeated your evil. It's done. He did it. Jesus destroyed your unrighteousness. He let himself be wounded, to make you whole, right, justified.

Martin Luther got this, but we don't celebrate him. With him, this we celebrate.

The great news of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

¹² George, 65.

¹³ Ibid.