

God's Word is our great heritage

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It is no secret that 2017 marks an important anniversary for Lutherans. Five hundred years ago on October 31, an obscure German monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed to a church door in Wittenberg ninety-five theses that he wished to debate. Although the Ninety-Five Theses lack the clarity of thought that we see in Luther's writings only a few short years later, it is customary for us to consider the posting of his theses to be the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, a movement which changed the world. The Reformation brought back to light the scriptural truth that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in our Savior Jesus Christ. It also brought back to light the truth that God's Word is the only source of faith and spiritual life. The Holy Scriptures alone determine Christian doctrine and Christian truth.

Many important events have happened in Lutheran history in years marking the anniversary of the Reformation. Some of these have been good and some have not. In 1917 the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska synods merged to form the Wisconsin Synod as we know it today. This merger was based on complete agreement in doctrine and practice. In 1917 ninety-two percent of all Norwegian Lutherans were also involved in a merger but one based on doctrinal compromise. This merged body became known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church and eventually became part of the American Lutheran Church in 1960 and a participant in the formation of the ELCA in 1988. Thirteen faithful pastors and congregations refused to go along with the merger and in 1918 formed what we know today as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). In 1917 the synods comprising the General Synod, General Council, and the United Synod, South made plans to merge. They formed the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) in 1918. The ULCA became the largest and most liberal Lutheran synod in America. It was the largest of the groups that formed the ELCA in 1988.

In 1817 Frederick William III (1770–1840), the ruler of Prussia (1797–1840), issued a decree which ultimately resulted in a forced merger of the German Reformed Church and the Lutheran Church in his realm. This forced merger became known as the Prussian Union. The union eventually spread to other parts of Germany and helped spark the development of independent, free Lutheran churches in Germany who refused to compromise Lutheran doctrine. Some of these confessional Lutherans emigrated to America and Australia. In 1817 a confessional Lutheran pastor in Schleswig-Holstein, Claus Harms (1778–1855), issued a new edition of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and wrote ninety-five theses of his own protesting rationalism in the churches of Germany and the doctrinal compromise of the proposed Prussian Union. His theses were influential in reviving confessional Lutheranism in Germany and America.

In 1817 a Danish Lutheran pastor, Nikolai Grundtvig (1783–1882), penned a verse which he intended to be a fifth stanza for Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." In English translation and set to a melody by Fritz Reuter (1863–1924) this hymn, "God's Word Is Our Great Heritage," has become a favorite in our synod. Unfortunately, Grundtvig did not remain a conservative, confessional Lutheran in his doctrine of Scripture. In 1824, he articulated what he called his "unparalleled or matchless discovery"—the Bible is not the "living" Word of God. The "living" word is that which has been repeated in the church through the centuries. According to Grundtvig, the

“living” word of God is the Apostles Creed and the words of institution for Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.¹

What will the Reformation anniversary of 2017 bring? Today there are very few Lutheran churches that teach that the Bible is the totally inspired and inerrant Word of God. Few still hold to the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation. Will we see a resurgence of confessional Lutheranism or a further decline?

The theme for our convention this year is a reminder of what we have inherited from the Reformation and from our Wisconsin Synod fathers. It is a statement of thanksgiving, determination, and confidence for the future. This essay will explore our Lutheran heritage, particularly as it is expressed in the *sola scriptura* principle. We pray that by God’s grace that heritage shall be ours forever.

The Bible is the totally inspired and inerrant Word of God

The truth that the Bible is the Word of God is one of the best attested doctrines in the Holy Scriptures. The Old Testament prophetic books repeatedly affirm “the word of the Lord came to . . .” or “This is what the LORD says” or some similar expression.² The New Testament declares concerning the Old, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). St. Peter writes, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 2:21). St. Paul praises the Thessalonians for recognizing the origin of his message, “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the words of man, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The apostle asserts, “This what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Corinthians 2:13). St. Peter equates Paul’s letters with Scripture. “Just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15,16).

God moved human writers with their various life situations, vocabularies, and writing styles to convey to us the very words that he wanted to have recorded for us. Though written by sinful human beings, the Bible is God’s Word. Therefore, it is *inerrant*—it contains no errors. In his great high priestly prayer our Savior says, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). Pointing to a rather obscure sentence in the Old Testament, Jesus declares, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

¹ See *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. by Julius Bodensieck (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965) vol. 2, 964-965. See also A. M. Allehin, *N.F.S Grundtvig: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Aarhus University Press, 1997. Printed in England by Alden Press, Oxford) 105-115.

² e.g. Isaiah 8:1,11; 22:14,15; 40:1,5; 43:1; 50:1; 52:4; 66:1; Jeremiah 1:2,4; 2:1; 3:6,11; 7:1; 9:7; 10:1; 13:1; 14:11, 14; 15:1; 16:1; 18:1,5; 19:1; 21:1; 22:1,11; 23:2,7,15; 25:1; 26:1; 27:1; 20:1; 31:1; 32:1,26; 33:1,10,12,14,17,19,23; 34:1,8; 35:1; 36:1; 40:1; 43:1; 44:1; 46:1,13; 47:1; 48:1,25; 49:1,12; 50:1,10,33; 51:1,39,48; Ezekiel 1:1; 2:1; 3:1,10; Hosea 1:1; 3:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 1:6,8,10; 2:1; 3:1; 5:4; 7:1; 8:1; Obadiah 1; Jonah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; 2:1; Zechariah 1:1; 8:1; Malachi 1:1. This list is by no means exhaustive.

The Bible is also *infallible*—what it says must come to pass. As the Scriptures declare, “God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Numbers 23:19).

Luther does not spend much time trying to demonstrate that the Bible is God’s Word. For him it was not an issue. When he opened the Bible, he was opening God’s Word. When he read the Holy Scriptures, he was reading what God had caused men to write. The Reformer asserts, “We censure the doctrines of men not because men have spoken them, but because they are lies and blasphemies against the Scriptures. And the Scriptures, although they too are written by men, are neither of men nor from men but from God. Now since the Scriptures and the doctrines of men are contrary one to another, the one must lie and the other be true.”³ In commenting on 2 Samuel 23:2 he says,

In the first place, he mentions the Holy Spirit. To Him he ascribes all that is foretold by the prophets. And to this and to similar verses St. Peter refers in 2 Peter 1:21, where he says, “No prophecy ever came by the impulse of men, but moved by the Holy Spirit, holy men of God spoke.” Therefore we sing in the article of the Creed concerning the Holy Spirit: “Who spake [spoke] by the prophets.” Thus we attribute to the Holy Spirit all of Holy Scripture and the external Word and sacraments, which touch and move our external ears and senses.⁴

The Lutheran Confessions also assume and teach the inspiration of Scripture. Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) writes in the Apology,

It is truly amazing that the opponents remain unmoved by so many passages of Scripture that clearly attribute justification to faith and moreover deny it to works. Surely they do not think that the same thing is repeated over and over for no reason, do they? Surely they do not think that these words fell from the Holy Spirit inadvertently, do they?⁵

The Bible is *sufficient*. It contains everything we need for faith and life. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16,17). The main purpose of the Bible is to testify to Jesus and show us God’s plan of salvation. Jesus told the unbelieving Jews, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you believe that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39,40). St. John toward the end of his gospel declares, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). In the story of the rich man and Lazarus Abraham explains the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures.

He [the rich man in hell] answered, “Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not come to this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” “No, father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:27-31).

³ Luther’s Works, American Edition, American Edition (55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), vol. 35:153. Hereafter this series will be designated LW.

⁴ LW, 15:275.

⁵ Apology, IV: 107-108. Kolb-Wengert translation.

The Scriptures contain all we need to know for our salvation. No new revelation, no great miracle, no human strategy can lead people to heaven. Understanding the sufficiency of Scripture is part of our Lutheran heritage. For Luther, the Scriptures are all we need for faith and the Christian life. No other source is necessary or possible. He declares, “The Word of God—and no one else, not even an angel—should establish articles of faith.”⁶ Commenting on Galatians 1:9 Luther writes,

Here Paul subordinates himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters at all to sacred Scripture. This queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should anything be taught or heard in the church except the Word of God. Otherwise let the teachers and the hearers be accursed along with their doctrine.⁷

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther expressed the conviction that guided the whole course of the Lutheran Reformation.

Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves). I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.⁸

Closely related to the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures is the fact that they are *efficacious*. They have the power to accomplish what God wants. The LORD assures Jeremiah, “ ‘Is not my word like fire,’ declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’ ” (Jeremiah 23:29). The writer to the Hebrews tells us, “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Paul declares, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The LORD comforts Isaiah, “As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is the word that goes forth from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10,11).

Luther believed in the efficacy of Scripture. In fact, he not only believed in the efficacy of Scripture, he also asserted that God does not give his Spirit or impart his grace to anyone apart from or before contact with the external Word.⁹ The external Word is the Word that strikes the senses. One cannot separate the Holy Spirit from the written or spoken Word of God. Where God’s Word is read or proclaimed, there the Holy Spirit will be doing his work of creating and sustaining faith. Luther was so certain that God’s Word would never return without accomplishing God’s plan and purpose that he wrote,

Now wherever you hear or see this Word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that . . . “a Christian holy people” must be there even though their number is very small. For God’s Word “shall not return empty.” . . . And even if there were no other sign than this, it

⁶ Smalcald Articles, II, 2, par. 15.

⁷ LW, 26:57-58.

⁸ LW, 32:112.

⁹ SA, III, 8, par. 3-13.

would suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God's Word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's Word.¹⁰

Luther took no credit for the accomplishments of the Reformation. He gave all credit to God's holy Word.

We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26-29] or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it.¹¹

We also confess the *clarity* of the Holy Scriptures. The psalmist proclaims, "Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). If the Bible were a dark and obscure book, it could not be described as a lamp or a light to guide our way. Although there are some things in the Bible that are difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16) and teachings that are foolishness to human reason (1 Corinthians 1:23-27), the basic message of the Bible is so clear that a child can understand. It does not take multiple academic degrees to comprehend, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Paul reminded Timothy, "How from *infancy* you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). Nevertheless, it is only by the power of God that we can believe that message. "For the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

A heritage to treasure

"God's Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever"—with these words, the hymn writer is expressing a prayer, a wish for the future. The hymn gives voice to a determination to preserve the heritage we have received. Our forefathers from the Reformation to the present have left us a wonderful, precious inheritance. But if we take that heritage for granted, if we fail to treasure it, we will lose it. History demonstrates that over and over again.

The people of Israel were faithful to God during the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who served with him, but then we read, "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, there arose a generation who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). How could that happen? Did the leaders of Israel fail to train a generation to succeed them or did the next generation take their heritage for granted? The people of Israel over the centuries repeatedly despised their heritage. Because of that God warned through the prophet Amos, " 'The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign LORD, 'when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD' " (Amos 8:12). Luther made this historical observation:

For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It has been with the Jews, but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it; but when it's gone it's gone, and now they

¹⁰ LW. 41:150.

¹¹ LW 51:76-77.

have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.¹²

Today Luther's beloved Saxony is spiritually bankrupt. Our sister synod, the small Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK), is a lonely voice faithfully proclaiming the gospel against overwhelming odds.

How does it happen that a people or a church body that has God's Word subsequently loses it? Does one generation devalue the importance of Christian education? Does a younger generation take for granted all the blessings God has given them through their forefathers and turn their back on God's Word? Do they begin to think that the teachings of the Bible are old-fashioned and out of date? What happened in Germany and the rest of the Western world? People tired of contending for God's truth. Pietism turned people's attention inward to human experience and away from the objective truths of God's Word. The Enlightenment raised human intellect and reason above God's wisdom. Liberalism declared that, for Christianity to survive, the church must conform its teachings to the prevailing philosophical, scientific, and historical thought of the day. Existentialism and its ill-begotten son, postmodernism, led people to deny any concept of absolute or objective truth and to believe that truth is subjective—the individual determines what is true for him. They claim that what is true for one person is not necessarily true for another. Consequently, doctrine has become a dirty word in our contemporary society.

Toward the end of his life St. Paul warned, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3,4). When people in the visible church deny absolute truth and treat the Holy Scriptures as only a human book where one may or may not encounter God, cults rush in to fill the spiritual void. Through neglect of God's Word people become incapable of countering the false teachings of the cults or meeting the spiritual challenge of Islam. They lose the confidence and certainty that only Scripture can bring.

The Lutheran Reformation was a *doctrinal* reformation. Others before Luther set out to reform morals and church structure. Luther believed that the reformation the church needed was primarily doctrinal rather than moral or ecclesiastical.¹³ He was willing to risk his very life because the doctrine was not his but God's. He knew that God builds his church through sound doctrine not through false doctrine. Doctrine shows the way to heaven and consequently cannot be treated as unimportant or uncertain. In his lectures on Galatians (1535) he explains,

With the utmost rigor we demand that all the articles of Christian doctrine, both large and small—although we do not regard any of them as small—be kept pure and certain. This is supremely necessary. For this doctrine is our only light, which illumines and directs us and shows us the way to heaven; if it is overthrown in one point, it must be overthrown completely. And when that happens, our love will not be of any use to us. . . . Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. "One dot" of doctrine is worth more than "heaven and earth" (Matt. 5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it.¹⁴

¹² LW 45:352.

¹³ Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*. The Penguin History of the Christian Church, vol. 3 (London: Penguin Books, 1972) pp. 13-14. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*. (New York: Image Books, 1992) pp. 56-57.

¹⁴ LW, 27:41.

Why is doctrine so important? It is the lifeblood of the church. “God’s Word is our great heritage . . . in life it guides out way.” God’s Word is our guide to heaven. Apart from his revelation, no one can know the way of salvation. The Bible tells us, “ ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for them who love him’—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9,10). Only the Bible can tell us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Our sins cried out to be punished, but God punished his own Son in our place, just as he foretold, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5,6). Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was the payment for all sins of all people of all time. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). That sacrifice was good once for all (Hebrews 9:26, 10:10). Salvation is ours by God’s grace through faith. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9).

For Luther, the teaching of justification by faith alone serves to guarantee that justification is by grace alone, because justification by faith alone excludes human works and merit.

Furthermore, “All have sinned,” and “they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . by his blood” (Rom. 3:23-25). Now because this must be believed and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us.¹⁵

Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. After Paul demonstrates that we are saved by grace alone through faith, he declares, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). The Bible tells us, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). Luther realized that although in justification faith does nothing but receive what God has promised, in sanctification it is very active.

Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us born anew of God [John 1:12,13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers. . . . O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. . . . Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.¹⁶

God’s Word guides us in our life of sanctification. It shows us what pleases God. The world rebels against God’s law. Our society tells us to do whatever makes us happy. The psalmist expresses a far different attitude. “How can a young man keep his ways pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:9-11).

¹⁵ SA, II, 1, par. 3-4.

¹⁶ LW 35:370-371.

God's Word also guides our way in all the vicissitudes of life. Since we remain sinners living in a sin-filled world, we can expect that problems will come into our lives. Christians are not immune to health problems, financial problems, family problems, or even persecution for their faith. Yet in his Word our Savior promises us, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). We can be comforted by the Bible's assurance, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). We have the certainty that "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how shall he not also along with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31,32).

In death God's Word is our stay. Unless our Savior returns first, all of us will die. Many in our world live as if they will never die and face judgment. Many deny the eternal nature of the punishments in hell. Many believe that the various religions are simply different paths to the same god and trust that so long as they do their best and try their hardest, they will make it to heaven. Others believe that though they will die, they will be reincarnated. They think that they will always have another chance. The Bible, however, tell us, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Our life is our time of grace. There is no second chance after death.

Christians, however, need not fear death. We can face death with the certainty that our Savior has conquered death for us. He assures us, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25). He promises, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). The assurance that Jesus gave the penitent malefactor on the cross is intended for us as well when we die—"today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). On Judgment Day Jesus will bring with him those who have died before us. The dead in Christ will rise first; then those who are still alive will be caught up to be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18). In heaven we will be free forever from sin and sin's consequences. In the life to come "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 20:4).

We can be certain because God's Word declares it. That is our Reformation heritage. Those who have gone before us have passed down to us the certainty that the Bible is the totally inspired and inerrant Word of God. The Bible does not and cannot lie. Its message is clear. It contains everything we need for our faith and spiritual life.

Many who go by the name of Lutheran have lost that Reformation heritage. That can happen to us, too. We retain our heritage by God's grace alone. That is why we pray, "Lord grant while worlds endure, we keep its teachings pure, throughout all generations." It is a sad fact of history that the man who penned those words succumbed to false teaching only a few years later.

Satan attacks the divine authority of Scripture because without it we have no certainty of salvation. Every modern error denies one or more of the qualities or characteristics of Scripture (verbal inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility, clarity, sufficiency, efficacy). Those who have lost their Reformation heritage often have done so because they have raised human reason or human emotions or human experience above God's Word. Since the fall into sin, human reason has been corrupted. Reason can serve in spiritual matters only in a ministerial role, always submitting to God's Word. It must never be used in a magisterial way, raising its own thoughts and opinions above what God says. Paul reminds us, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretention that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5). The Bible is the Word of the almighty, eternal, all-knowing, all-wise God. That calls for appropriate humility on our part. "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word

of God. For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever.' And this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23-25).

Luther was skeptical of human reason because of the corruption of original sin. He recognized that Scripture is not irrational but super-rational—God's wisdom often goes beyond our ability to comprehend. He contrasted faith and reason.

For faith speaks as follows: "I believe thee, God, when Thou dost speak." What does God say? Things that are impossible, untrue, foolish, weak, absurd, abominable, heretical, diabolical—if you consult reason. For what is more ridiculous, foolish, and impossible than when God says to Abraham that he is to get a son from the body of Sarah, which is barren and already dead?¹⁷

Adolf Hoenecke (1835–1908), the great theologian of the Wisconsin Synod, reflects Luther's attitude and echoes his words. In speaking of the apparent paradox between God's will to save all and Scripture's teaching of a particular election, he said,

One may ask: Can you make sense of that for yourself?—What then?—God wants to save all, but again: He has elected only a few who alone are saved?—No I can't make sense of that for myself. However, has God revealed his truth to us so that we should make sense of it for ourselves? No, exactly the opposite, we believe it as he has revealed it to us.¹⁸

Neither can we raise human emotions or inner experience above the Holy Scriptures. Feelings fluctuate. They change from moment to moment. They cannot bring me any certainty. Only the Word of God can give confidence because that Word centers in Christ and his accomplishments. Luther puts it this way,

If you are not ready to believe that the Word is worth more than all you see or feel, then reason has blinded faith. So the resurrection of the dead is something that must be believed. I do not feel the resurrection of Christ, but the Word confirms it. I feel sin but the Word says that it is forgiven to those who believe. I see Christians die like other men, but the Word tells me that they shall rise again. So we must not be guided by our feelings but by the Word.¹⁹

Luther was brilliant, but he did not let his brilliance move him to exalt his reason above the Scriptures. His two catechisms are masterful summaries of the basic teachings of God's Word, but in humility he always remained a student of the catechism. He returned to it every day. He wrote,

I, too, am a doctor and a preacher. . . . Yet I continue to do as a child does that is being taught the Catechism. Mornings, and when I otherwise have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I like, but must remain a child and student of the Catechism.²⁰

¹⁷ LW, 26:227.

¹⁸ *Verhandlungen der Versammlung der Deutschen Evangel.-Lutherischen Synode von Wisconsin und anderen Staaten, 1882*. 33-34. English translation by Schroeder, "The Contribution of Adolf Hoenecke to the Election Controversy of the Synodical Conference and an Appendix of Translated Articles." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, vol 17 #2 (October 1999) 22.

¹⁹ Luther, Sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:1ff, March 31, 1529; quoted in Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989) pp. 116-117.

²⁰ Large Catechism, Preface of 1530, par. 7-8.

God's Word is our great heritage. How do we as individuals show that we treasure it? We can imitate the Bereans. The Bible tells us, "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:10,11). We will study our Bibles. We will gather for worship and Bible class. We will regularly review the truths we learned in confirmation class. We will make sure that the cares, concerns, and worries of this life do not distract us from the one thing that is needed (Luke 10:42), listening to the Word of God. Northwestern Publishing House offers many excellent aids to assist us in our studies.

As a synod, we will continue to place a priority on the thorough instruction of our pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. Those who are in the public ministry have to be able to "correctly handle the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). False teachings and teachers will arise. That calls for patient instruction and attempts to win the errorist over to the truth. While we will want to take everyone's words and actions in the kindest possible way, we know that those who cling to error after patient instruction in God's Word must be removed from our fellowship. The Bible warns us that false teaching "will spread like gangrene" (2 Timothy 2:17). The church body that fails to exercise moral and doctrinal discipline in accordance with God's Word will eventually lose the gospel. If it does not make any difference what we do or what we believe, who needs the Savior or his Word?

Historically, false doctrine has often entered the visible church through seminaries and institutions of higher learning. Those whom we call to teach our future pastors and teachers have an awesome responsibility. As Paul encouraged Timothy, "The things that you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). We will always want to call to these offices those who fit this description: "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). We want them to be biblical theologians, not speculative theologians or those who think that they are wiser than God's Word. We want men who will heed Paul's directives: "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2,3).

God's Word is our great heritage. If we treasure it, by God's grace it will be ours forever.

A heritage to share

God's Word, however, is not meant to be a possession that we keep to ourselves. It is an inexhaustible treasure that is meant to be shared. That is why we sing, "To spread its light from age to age shall be our *chief* endeavor."

That sharing begins with those who are closest to us. God commands parents to bring up their children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). In the Old Testament he decreed, "These commandments that I give you this day are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road" (Deuteronomy 6:6,7). Because the people of Israel were not always faithful in carrying out this responsibility, the psalmist expresses a renewed determination to do what God commands.

O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden from of old—things we have heard and known, things our fathers have taught us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our

forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands (Psalm 78:1-7)

We train our children by our example. They see our attitude toward our Savior, his forgiveness, his Word, and worship. When they are young we can read and discuss Bible stories with them before they go to bed or sing some of the great hymns of the church. As they grow, we can review the catechism with them and refresh for ourselves those precious truths that are written in language so simple a child can understand. We can make sure that our actions match our words.

Our congregations assist parents through Sunday schools, preschools, vacation Bible schools, Lutheran elementary schools, area Lutheran high schools, confirmation classes, and youth Bible classes. Christian education is not cheap, but it is well worth the expense. If we do not train the next generation, who will?

Every Christian has the privilege of telling others about their Savior. St. Peter, writing to the *elect* (believers) living throughout the region we know today as Turkey, declares, "But you are a chosen nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). To praise someone is to tell others the praiseworthy things he has done. To praise God means to tell others that he sent his Son to be the sacrificial Lamb who lived and died to take away the sins of the world. To praise God is to tell the repentant sinner that although he deserves to be punished forever, God has forgiven his sins in Christ Jesus. That gospel message brings people into the kingdom of God. That message is the key which opens heaven. Every Christian is a priest before God (universal priesthood of believers). Every Christian has the authority and the responsibility to seek the lost and the erring and to speak Christ's words of admonition and forgiveness.

Our Savior encourages us, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). As we live our life of faith, there will be opportunities to speak of God's forgiveness in Christ. St. Peter tells us, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15,16). At the very least, when confronted with a question that we have difficulty answering, we can follow Philip's example and invite the person to "come and see" (John 1:46).

No one will be saved apart from faith in Jesus. Our Savior himself tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:16-18).

The proclamation of the gospel is vitally important. For just as no one will be saved apart from faith in Jesus, no one can come to faith apart from the proclamation of the gospel. The Bible makes that very clear.

As the Scripture says, "Everyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who

bring good news.” . . . Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:11-15, 17)

At the heart of the Reformation was Luther’s desire for the certainty of salvation. He wanted peace of conscience and peace with God more than anything else. Listen to his description of his discovery of the gospel, or perhaps more accurately, his discovery of the distinction between the law and the gospel. His eyes were opened as he came to understand that God’s righteousness not only means that he demands perfect obedience of us, it also means that he credits perfect righteousness to us for the sake of Jesus.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly mourning greatly, I was angry with God and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without God adding pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who is righteous by faith shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.²¹

Luther could not keep quiet. He wanted everyone to have what he had. He was willing to put his life on the line for the sake of the gospel. He faced the fury of pope and emperor, the greatest powers in Europe at the time, to proclaim the only message that can save people eternally. He attacked every false teacher and false teaching that stood in the way of the clear proclamation of the gospel. Commenting on 1 Peter 1:16, Luther explains the Christian’s responsibility:

For here nothing else is necessary than faith, that I give God his due and honor and regard Him as my God, who is just, truthful, and merciful. Such faith liberates us from sin and all evil. Now when I have given God this honor, then whatever life I live I live for my neighbor, to serve and help him. The greatest work that comes from faith is this, that I confess Christ with my mouth, and if it has to be, bear testimony with my blood and risk my life. Yet God does not need the work; but I should do it to prove and confess my faith, in order that others, too, may be brought to faith.²²

When a person understands all that God has done for him, he cannot keep quiet because he wants other to share in that joy. In an extended sermon on John 14 Luther writes:

For once a Christian begins to know Christ as his Lord and Savior, through whom he is redeemed from death and brought into his dominion and inheritance, God completely

²¹ LW, 34:336-337.

²² LW, 30:32-33.

permeates his heart. Now he is eager to help everyone acquire the same benefits. For his greatest delight is in this treasure, the knowledge of Christ. Therefore he steps forth boldly, teaches and admonishes others, praises and confesses his treasure before everybody, prays and yearns that they, too, may obtain such mercy.²³

Commenting on Genesis 45:9 Luther encourages us tell others the good news that they, too, may be saved:

“Therefore tell it to my father, to his whole household, and to his neighbors.” Just as Christ commands His disciples, saying, “Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel” (Mark 16:15), so Joseph sends his brothers, saying, “Hurry. Do not tarry, but spread abroad what you have heard.” For when we have learned to know God in the Son apprehending the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, who clothes our hearts with joy and with the freedom from care because of which we despise sin and death, what is left? “Go, and do not keep silence, in order that the rest of the multitude may be saved, too, not you alone.”²⁴

The great Reformer understood the need to send preachers to the heathen. You cannot expect the heathen to come to you. You must go to them. His exposition of Psalm 117 makes that clear.

Now if all the heathen are to praise God, this assumes that He has become their God. If He is to be their God, then they must know Him, believe in Him, and give up all idolatry. . . . And if they are to believe, they must first hear His word and thereby receive the Holy Spirit, who through faith purifies and enlightens their hearts. One cannot come to faith and lay hold on the Holy Spirit without hearing the word first, as St. Paul has said (Rom. 10:14): “How are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard?” and (Gal 3:2): “You have received the Spirit through the proclamation of faith.” If they are to hear His Word, then preachers must be sent to proclaim God’s Word to them, for not all the heathen can come to Jerusalem or make a living among the small company of the Jews. Therefore the psalmist does not say: “Come to Jerusalem, all heathen!” He lets them stay where they are and calls upon them, wherever they may be, to praise God.²⁵

Isaiah in speaking of the future glory of the church, says, “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. You will spread out to the right and to the left” (Isaiah 54:2,3). Luther explains,

So he says here, “Your place is so small, and you are so few, that you should be contained in a small house. But I say to you, ‘Your people and your tent will be expanded into all the world.’ ” . . . Today we would speak of the construction of a house. Summary: It is as if he were saying: “My church, make your building so broad that your habitation will be advanced into all the world. Do not be led astray by appearances, by the great number of enemies and by the small number of your people.”²⁶

Luther and his followers had a mission mindset. Those who think otherwise do not really understand the Reformation, its history and attendant circumstances. Luther used the opportunities available to him. He preached and taught where he could. Regions that were closed to

²³ LW, 24:87-88.

²⁴ LW, 8:45-46.

²⁵ LW, 14:9.

²⁶ LW, 17:235.

him by Roman Catholic rulers were penetrated by his publications. Printers flooded Europe with his writings and through them many were brought to saving faith in Jesus. Those who studied under Luther at the University of Wittenberg carried the gospel far and wide.

We have that same mission mindset. We look for the opportunities God places before us. We have already spoken of the obligations God gives us to instruct our children. We also have a responsibility toward our other relatives, our friends, and the people we work with.

We gather in congregations to reach out with the gospel to our communities. When I was a young mission pastor, telephone canvassing was a quick and easy way to contact people. Today so many react negatively to telephone solicitation that telephone canvassing is probably neither wise nor profitable. Besides, with the advent of cell phones and the decline of landlines, it is not so easy to target a given area, neighborhood, or community. Today God presents us with other ways of reaching the lost. Social media and other Internet resources have opened some remarkable possibilities for outreach.

God has presented amazing opportunities before our synod to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Forty years ago, no one would have believed that we would be able to support mission efforts in former Iron Curtain countries or nations where Islam or a resurgent and hostile Hinduism are the dominant religions. The Internet now carries the gospel into areas closed to missionaries. English speakers in our own country and around the world can access sermons, Bible studies, and sound essays through various websites. Our Multi-Language Publications provides good, Lutheran resources in hard copy or electronic format in an ever-increasing number of languages. At one time, world mission work almost exclusively meant sending expatriate missionaries to establish mission outposts in other lands and on other continents. Today groups of Christians in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world have approached us to train their pastors and church workers. They recognize how God has blessed us with the purity of the gospel and doctrinal integrity and they want what we have. Immigrant groups in America present real mission opportunities. Many of those we reach demonstrate an admirable drive to take the gospel back to their homeland. Through the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference we are able to encourage and assist isolated Lutheran groups around the world and they, in turn, provide encouragement to us.

The fields are white for the harvest. The only question is whether we will continue to have the will and zeal to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities God presents to us.

Many important events have happened in Lutheran history in years marking the anniversary of the Reformation. Some of these have been good and some have not. What will future generations say about the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation? Will they say that those who celebrated were Lutheran in name only, or will they be thankful that 2017 marked a return to the doctrine and spirit of the Reformation? Will 2017 mark a resurgence of confessional Lutheranism or a continued decline? Will we be as diligent in the study and proclamation of God's truth as Luther was?

We really can do no less. "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). Our forefathers have left us a tremendous heritage. If we treasure that heritage we will do everything in our power to preserve it for succeeding generations and will make every effort to share it with others.