

God's Great Reformation – for me!

† Watch out for deceptions. (vv.5-8)

† Stand guard on God's Word. (vv.9-11)

In the name of Jesus, the Lord's Christ and Savior of all, dear fellow forgiven sinners:

Isn't it amazing how quickly the Lutheran Reformation becomes an item when a Baha'i believing politician wants to discredit a Confessional Lutheran to get votes? "Your church says the Pope is the Anti-Christ!" "It does not! That's bigotry!" You can read the answer on the WELS website referenced in our bulletins for a "wealth of information on doctrine, denominations, daily living." You can also listen to the Popes. Each claims to be "the Vicar of Christ" on earth. A "vicar" is a substitute. The Latin preposition for "substitute" is "anti-." "Vicar," "substitute," "anti-Christ" – all mean the same thing. "Anti-" in the sense of "against-Christ" comes from the curses the Pope put on Martin Luther with his papal bans, and from the Council of Trent after Luther's death which still condemns to hell everyone who believes we are justified by faith alone. (Session VI, Canon 9) That curses us who trust in Christ alone.

Some politicians will lie, all will make mistakes, and every Christian needs to understand that the real reformation God wants begins right here in our own hearts. That was the first of the *95 Theses* that Martin Luther nailed to the church door, the community bulletin board in Wittenberg, Saxony, Germany, on October 31, 1517: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' He willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance." Rather than bogging down in political or denominational debates, let's follow our Lord Jesus who has no substitute on earth or in heaven. Before I go forth as His disciple and ambassador as He calls us on His mission, I want to consider **God's Great Reformation – for me!**

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Did you ever look at your checkbook and get all excited because it said you had enough money to shift into overdrive? But then you discovered a double deposit which really meant you were stuck in overdraft. Financial deceptions don't just come from corporations and credit card companies. We bring them on ourselves because of things we just want to believe. Sadly, this is also true in our eternal souls.

Jesus' disciples were sitting on the Mount of Olives, backs to the Garden of Gethsemane, looking across the Kidron Valley at the awesome temple of Herod, one of the wonders of the ancient world. Earlier they had said, "*Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!*" "*Do you see all these great building?*" *replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another, every one will be thrown down."* That would make me want to come and ask Jesus about this overdraft on excitement!

You may know enough history to remember the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy only about forty years later when the Roman general Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Christians recalled Jesus' words and fled the city in time to escape starvation during the siege. But it's interesting that Jesus does not give more details about that physical destruction. Instead He launches into some serious warnings for all His disciples to **Watch out for deceptions.** This is **Reformation – for me!**

"Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains."

Jesus warned that there would always be imposters claiming to be the Christ of God or His substitute of some kind. Didn't it happen with our first parents in the Garden when Adam and Eve fell for Satan's deception that they could be like God if they just disobeyed God? Our own sinful nature is "anti-

Christ” with whoever makes me feel good. The fact that it took God’s own Son to take away my sins with the sins of the entire world is proof of how evil I am by nature. I cannot contribute to my salvation.

Years ago a WELS member attended instruction classes with her husband’s Roman Catholic priest. She was distressed that he and the children were of a different faith than she. Weeks later she sheepishly told her Lutheran pastor about it. She was surprised when instead of scolding her, he said, “Good! What did you find out.” “You weren’t just making up that part about the work-righteousness,” she replied. I could only go to one class because the priest was leading away from Christ instead of to him. The Pope’s church says God gets you started, then you must finish being saved with God’s grace. Our Augsburg Confession (Article XX) points out that faith and works is more comforting for souls than the works-alone preaching they used to do. But the Bible tells us salvation is **“a gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.”** (Ephesians 2:8f) God’s Word allows for no work-righteousness at all.

The Holy Spirit inspired John to write in his First Epistle: **“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come.”** (1 John 2:18) This is not politics, but a matter of faith. John explains: **“Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.** (1 John 2:22f NIV)

I’m grateful the Pope does not deny the Father, Son or Holy Spirit in the way the anti-Trinitarians do. Because God’s Word is taught and Christ’s sacraments (Baptism, Lord’s Supper) are administered among Roman Catholics to this day, we can live in peace as good neighbors. Together as God-fearing citizens we oppose the perversions of our society and stand up for God’s gift of life. Some of our most active WELS members were raised in the terror of Roman Catholicism. But when they heard the Good News of sins forgiven by Christ alone, they kept coming to hear more of this pure Gospel. They now help our sometimes lazy Lutherans get to work for Jesus and share His love by word and deed. Just **Watch out for deceptions**, our Lord says as He reforms our hearts with repentance today. That means we must...

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Where do we get these foolish ideas that people will love us if we just tell them God’s truth? That’s like expecting your bank to give you money for your pretty smile. Jesus warns us, not just about pagan unbelievers, but about super religious church people: **“You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.”** (Mark 13:9-11 NIV)

So it happened to Dr. Martin Luther, the lowly Augustinian Catholic monk, who dared to speak God’s truth even against popes and councils and master theologians who set themselves up against our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. As Luther made his way across Germany to the city of Worms for the imperial meeting (“Diet”) in 1521, crowds cheered him. The Emperor’s safe conduct got him to the city, but everywhere the propagandists posted pictures of a goose to remind everyone that the last man who said such things was burned at the stake. That was John Hus whose name in Bohemian means “goose.” As Luther entered the imperial hall, the Spanish guards of Emperor Charles V hissed, “Burn him! Burn him!” And what could Luther do when the pile of books on the table were indeed all his, but no discussion was allowed to the demand, “Do you recant?” He asked for time. Overnight was granted.

Remember Jesus’ words? More literally He says: **“Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at that hour, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.”** Luther could not rely on his own genius which even his enemies still acknowledge. He was trembling in prayer all night long. You know the feeling when you speak up for Christ and have to hold onto the chair in front of you and breath deeply to still your racing heart. But

to **Stand guard on God's Word** as our Lord Jesus commands in **God's Great Reformation – for me!** Luther's answer needs to be my answer and yours:

“Since I am a man and not God, I cannot provide my writings with any other defense than that which my Lord Jesus Christ provided for His teaching. When He had been interrogated concerning His teaching before Annas and had received a buffet from a servant, He said: ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil.’ If the Lord Himself, who knew that He could not err, did not refuse to listen to witness against His teaching, even from a worthless slave, how much more ought I, scum that I am, capable of naught but error, to seek and to wait for any who may wish to bear witness against my teaching.

“And so, through the mercy of God, I ask Your Imperial Majesty, and Your Illustrious Lordships, or anyone of any degree, to defeat them by the writings of the Prophets or by the Gospels; for I shall be most ready, if I be better instructed, to recant any error, and I shall be the first in casting my writings into the fire. . . .”

Thereupon the Orator of the Empire, in a tone of upbraiding, said that his [Luther's] answer was not to the point, and that there should be no calling into question of matters on which condemnations and decisions had before been passed by Councils. He was being asked for a plain reply, without subtlety or sophistry, to this question: Was he prepared to recant, or no?

Luther then replied: “Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted [convinced] of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning, I stand convicted [convinced] by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.

“On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”¹

That was enough for the Pope to put Martin Luther under the papal ban, making him an outlaw and fair game for anyone to hunt down and kill with the blessing of the church in Rome.

Stand guard on God's Word. Jesus warns there will be trouble and heartache for every sinner who sees his sins forgiven and follows Christ Jesus. But our Lord has also promised that in the end, **God's Great Reformation – for me!** brings eternal life by grace alone, through faith alone, as provided by Scripture alone in Christ alone. This faith will stand against governments and denominations – any that set themselves up against the Christ of God. You and I will rejoice with everyone who claims Christ by faith and trusts in Him alone for salvation. I'm glad that so many of my Catholic neighbors share a childlike trust in Christ along with many other Christians around us. We still must testify to the truth, come what may. But God is working His miracles of faith as He promised by water and the Word. That is enough to keep us looking forward to Christ's return in glory when all who opposed Him will crumble, and all those who trembling trusted in Him will inherit His free and gracious gift of eternal life.

Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us – and grant us Thy peace. Amen.

¹ *Martin Luther: Excerpts from his account of the confrontation at the Diet of Worms* (1521) [The translation is from H.C. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (1903), based on Luther's *Opera Latina* (Frankfurt, 1865-73) http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~lyman/english233/Luther-Diet_of_Worms.htm

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New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church
180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126