

Stand Firm in Gospel Freedom

✠ Not yoked under slavery (vv.1-4)

✠ Eagerly waiting and working in Christ (vv.5,6)

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Church's Head, dearly redeemed heirs of the Lutheran Reformation:

From ancient times faithful civil rulers have been under fire for their faith. 500 years before Christ in our FIRST LESSON today the Jewish civil servant Daniel is falsely accused by his rivals. By this time he has survived the fall of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Empire. Darius' Medo-Persian Empire transferred Daniel into a high ranking position in the new regime. But jealousy for Daniel's rise to what we might call "president" or "prime minister," sent his political enemies scouring his past for something against him. Finding nothing, they saw only his faith to use against him. God helped Daniel to "**obey God rather than men!**" (Acts 5:29 NIV) He kept on praying in spite of the new law, and was thrown to the lions for it. But morning came and his anguished king discovered the power of God's love. Our Savior shut the mouths of the lions for Daniel and opened them for his enemies on the way down the lions' den.

Daniel is a fine example of God's message for us on this REFORMATION SUNDAY. It has never been easy. But the stakes are too high to give in. Therefore, **Stand Firm in Gospel Freedom...**

✠ Not yoked under slavery (vv.1-4)

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." Though we cherish our freedom in America, we rejoice most of all that Christ has set us free from sin, death and hell. In Christ alone, we **Stand Firm**.

"Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." Can you understand the anguish of someone imprisoned by guilt? Years after the Reformation, Luther recalled his bondage under the law:

"Those who keep the Law do not keep it. The more men try to satisfy the Law, the more they transgress it. The more someone tries to bring peace to his conscience through his own righteousness, the more disquieted he makes it. When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule...Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: 'You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession.' Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it. In this way, by observing human traditions, I transgressed them even more; and by following the righteousness of the monastic order, I was never able to reach it. For as Paul says, it is impossible for the conscience to find peace through the works of the Law, much less through human traditions, without the promise and the Gospel about Christ."¹

Luther was not like so many foolish American who try to picture God as a toothless old grandfather who only wants us to do our best. Martin Luther was raised Roman Catholic. And on that score they were right. God is holy. We are sinners. Sin cannot inherit heaven. He wrote in a famous hymn: *"Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; Death brooded darkly o'er me. Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my mother bore me. Yet deep and deeper still I fell; Life had become a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me."* (CW 377:2)

¹ *Luther's Works*, American ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 27:13.

This is what so disturbed the Lord's Apostle Paul about the Galatians. As a rising star in Judaism, Paul had trusted in his own righteousness until Jesus Christ tore down his self-righteous pride. Not the outward act, but God's law demands "***circumcision of the heart.***" (Romans 2:29) with the foreskin of pride cut off. Without perfect holiness of the heart we cannot save ourselves. Paul sounds so stern because his dear Galatians were in terrible danger: "***You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.***" Again, Martin Luther explains:

*"You are no longer in the realm of grace.' For just as someone on a ship is drowned regardless of the part of the ship from which he falls into the sea, so someone who falls away from grace cannot help perishing. The desire to be justified by the Law, therefore, is shipwreck; it is exposure to the surest peril of eternal death."*²

Years later Martin Luther still wished for Christ's church on earth to be visibly united. For this he would even have been willing to submit to the Pope.³ But Bible passages like this prevented him because the Pope makes it mandatory. The papal bull, *Unam Sanctam*, still demands allegiance to the Holy See and threatens "anyone who dares resist..that he must bear the wrath of Almighty God."⁴ But no matter what the manmade law – papal authority, Friday fish, immersion, or alcohol ban – we dare not give in as if God requires human traditions. By legalism they lead away from Christ to everlasting condemnation.

✠ Eagerly waiting and working in Christ (vv.5,6)

New life in Christ is found another kind of righteousness beyond man's feebleness. Luther discovered in Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Romans. "***A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.***" (Romans 3:21-22 NIV) Not "to all who do, or say, or think or feel," but "***to all who believe.***" Our hearts naturally feel God will be more favorable if we are good. But we're like sailors swabbing the deck of the *Titanic*. Captain Edward J. Smith may like our work, but it won't hold up before Almighty God our Judge when the icy deep envelopes us.

What Luther and so many others have discovered in God's love letter, the Bible, is a free seat in the life raft with God's own Son at the helm. We never would have dreamed up heaven's solution to our sin, but God's mercy did. He gave us His Son as the perfect Substitute to live a holy life as our Righteous One under God's Law, then die an innocent death in our place. By raising Jesus from the dead, the heavenly Father universally justified every sinner before or since. (Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:19) By giving us His Holy Spirit through Word and sacrament, God personally guarantees the full inheritance of joy in heaven. (Ephesians 1:13) God's grace keeps us standing firm, **Eagerly waiting and working in Christ.**

Could you **Stand Firm in Gospel Freedom** with Luther before the Holy Roman Emperor and papal legates at the Imperial Diet at Worms, Germany? Those books on the table are yours. You can't deny it. You beg to explain your answer to the second question: "Do you recant?" No discussion! You beg for time to pray. Imagine Luther's anguish that night. Imagine God's grace in the morning. "Unless you can show me from the Holy Scriptures that what I have written is in error, to recant anything would be neither right nor safe. I cannot and will not recant. Here I stand! I can do no other. God help me!" And for that, dear Lutheran, you are still condemned to hell by Rome.

Roman theologians still insist that a Christian's love is doing the work and that our love is necessary first before God will justify us. But listen again what is working according to God the Holy Spirit: "***But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.***"

² *Luther's Works*, American ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 27:18.

³ *Luther's Works*, American ed. "Lectures on Galatians," 1535, 26:225f.

⁴ Papal formula quoted in *Luther's Works*, American ed. 26:225.

Luther speaks of faith as a theologian, judge and commander of the intellect. He describes hope as a captain, battling against feelings under tribulation and the cross:

“Faith is nothing without hope” and “hope without faith is presumptuous about the Spirit and a tempting of God; for since it lacks the knowledge of the truth or of Christ, which faith teaches, it is a blind and rash fortitude. First of all, therefore, the believer must have a correct understanding and an intellect informed by faith, by which the mind is governed amid afflictions, so that in the midst of evils it hopes for the best things that faith has commanded and taught....”

“Yet in all of this [tribulation and temptation] we neither faint nor falter; but we encourage our will bravely with faith, which illumines, instructs, and rules the will. And thus we remain constant and conquer all evils through Him who loved us (Rom. 8:37), until our righteousness, in which we now believe and hope, is revealed.

“Thus we began by faith, we persevere by hope, and we shall have everything by that revelation....

“Hope is nothing but theological fortitude, while faith is theological wisdom or prudence....So these three abide (1 Cor. 13:13): faith teaches the truth and defends it against errors and heresies; hope endures and conquers all evils, physical and spiritual; love does everything good....Thus a man is whole and perfect in this life, both inwardly and outwardly, until the revelation of the righteousness for which he looks, which will be consummated and eternal.”⁵

Many Catholics today believe in Christ alone in spite of Rome, for God’s Word is so powerful that it creates trust in God through His Holy Book, the Bible, trust that can never be shaken. Faith keeps **Eagerly waiting and working in Christ**. Good works naturally flow from faith before the Law even commands us and in many ways of which we are not even aware. Faith in Christ alone keeps things in the proper order. It is no more complicated than this: ***“We love because he first loved us.”*** (1 John 4:19)

God protected Luther by having him kidnapped to the Wartburg Castle where he translated the entire New Testament from its Greek original into common man’s German of the day. God protected Luther and the Reformation by Muslims, then called Turks, battering the gates of Europe through Vienna. The Pope and his Roman Catholic rulers were too busy to put down the rebellion until after it was firmly established. And God continued to protect the proclamation of full and free forgiveness in Christ even after Luther’s death. When the German Lutherans were losing the Thirty Years War, a Swedish Lutheran King named Gustavus Adolphus saved God’s truth from across the water. Remarkable, God’s mercy!

Here alone can we **Stand Firm in Gospel Freedom** by faith alone in Christ alone as the one and only Savior. But faith is never alone. It keeps energetically glorifying God and helping our neighbor. ***“For in Christ Jesus...the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”*** Let us exercise our earthly freedom and our gratitude for religious freedom by praying and voting and praying especially during this election week. We can help save the lives of innocent unborn Americans to live in Baptism and new life in Christ. Express your faith through love in Christ alone. Amen.

⁵ *Luther’s Works*, American ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 27:22-25.