

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.⁷ He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” (Revelation 14:6,7)

What is the Heart of the Reformation?

On February 22, 1546, virtually the whole town of Wittenberg gathered and heard the words I just read to you. They were not spoken by Luther. They were spoken by a man named Johannes Bugenhagen, the pastor of the Town Church and a professor at the university. But they were spoken about Luther. You see, he had died four days earlier in the town where he was born. His body had just arrived in Wittenberg for burial. His wife and sons and the students of the university and the prince and virtually everyone else in Wittenberg had gathered for his funeral. Bugenhagen declared that Luther was “without doubt” the angel written about in Revelation 14.

What do you think of that interpretation of the prophecy? Do you think that God was specifically pointing to Luther when he gave us these words? Not even many Lutherans would be willing to go that far today. Most would probably excuse Pastor Bugenhagen for a little overstatement in his grief. But we wouldn't declare that Luther was *the* fulfillment of these words. However, any Lutheran worthy of standing in the pulpit would absolutely insist that Luther was *a* fulfillment of these words. In these words, we have a picture not of one man, but of all the pastors and teachers that God has sent into this world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. An angel is a messenger. In this vision, the angel represents the ministry. Today, as we celebrate the Lutheran Reformation, 498 years after Luther first nailed the 95 Theses to the castle church door in Wittenberg and started an avalanche that would change the world, we do well to remember what it was all about. It wasn't about Luther, as brilliant and bold as he was. It wasn't about politics or money or celibacy or saying mass in Latin. So what was it about? **What is the heart of the Reformation?**

I.

Having the eternal gospel. John saw an “angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel.” Your pastors and teachers need to have the eternal gospel. Not just that we can proclaim it, but that we know it and trust in it and apply it to ourselves as we stumble through life. You know, there's nothing that underlines your own sin and failure more than being called to be an example to the flock. We preachers need the gospel. You need preachers who have the gospel. That gospel is eternal. It's the message of God's love, the message that he would move heaven and earth to save us, that no sin is greater than his forgiveness. It's the miracle that the very Son of God became man so that we will live. God planned that to happen before time began. Long after this world has ended, we will be singing God's praises for that great act of rescuing us from death and hell.

In the second verse of the reading, we hear exactly what the angel proclaims: **“Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”** Does that sound like gospel to you? Doesn't it sound just a little threatening? “Fear God and give him glory because the hour of judgment has come.” You have to understand the way that God looks at our faith. When Jesus spoke of Judgment Day, he spoke of Christians doing things, like visiting the sick and feeding the hungry. In the same way the angel speaks of us giving God glory and fearing him. Why? Because those things show that faith is real. A person who claims to believe in Jesus but who never shows that faith in their lives is a liar. Real faith always changes us.

Real faith has a deep and abiding reverence for God. No unbeliever feels that. You see that in our society. Even small children will say, “O God!” without even thinking about it. There is no religion that you can mock and abuse publicly except Christianity. If you're an aspiring artist, the best way to gain street cred among the artistic set is to make some blasphemous representation of Christ and claim that you're speaking out against the intolerance in Christianity. Luther knew exactly what he was doing when he taught us “we should fear and love God that we” do all that the Ten Commandments say. All true ministers of the gospel strive to instill reverence for God in his people by striving to reinforce their faith in Christ.

If that faith and that reverence are there, what do we do? We give God glory in all that we say and do. Let me ask you a question: do you act differently in church than you do at home? I don't mean being quiet while other people are praying or trying to get you kids to sit still for twenty minutes during a sermon. I mean, is your language different here than it is at home or at work? Is profanity acceptable in your car as you fight your way through traffic to work, but unacceptable here? Do you act pious when you're here, but your kids never see that at home? Do you drag your family to church but never talk about your faith at home? If so, which is the real you? What impact do you think the difference will have on your kids when they choose how they're going to act when they're not in church?

The angel with the everlasting gospel proclaimed that the hour of judgment has come. That is an essential part of the gospel: this world in its present form is passing away. Things that seem so important here really don't matter in the life to come. In heaven, it isn't going to matter if you lived in a mansion or a shack here. If you have the gospel, you know that what we're waiting for is better than the best that we could have here. We have our eyes and our hearts focused on Christ. Is that you? Or do you have to admit that all too often, your eyes are totally focused on this life, on the pursuit of the most comfortable lifestyle, on the thirst for popularity and approval by those around you? Do you have to admit that six days a week, your words and your actions are different than when you come into this building and they don't necessarily give God glory? Is your heart reverent? Do you fear and love God so that you keep his commandments?

Don't we all struggle with those questions? We're sinners and we break those commandments over and over again. When Judgment Day comes, not one of us should be on the right hand of Christ. But, my friends, we will be! Jesus himself will tell us to come into the kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the world. He will say we did all these wonderful things and we'll say, "When, Lord? When did we do all that?" Because we'll know how much we sinned while we were here. But Jesus will look at our faith and at all the fruits that came from that faith, fruits that so often we don't even recognize. He will see the new man that he planted in our hearts trusting in him and striving to live for him, and he will call us holy and perfect and bring us in.

Why? Because of that gospel that lies at the very heart of the Reformation. That gospel says that Jesus lived a perfect life in our place. His heart was perfectly devoted to God. His life showed that every second of every day he lived here. And God gave us the credit for what Jesus did. Then Jesus died and he paid for all the times and all the ways that we fell short – for selfishness, for hypocrisy, for talking a good game but not living up to it. Jesus died and he paid for every sin we've ever committed and for all the sin in our hearts. Once it's paid for, it's gone! So he rose and God calls us holy. He rose and God calls us perfect. He rose, and God promised that we will live him forever.

That gospel is the heart of the Reformation. We have it when we know that God was talking to us. We have it through our baptism and through the Lord's Supper and through the word that we hear in sermons. God works in that gospel and gives us faith in Jesus. Only when we have that faith do we fear God and give glory to him. But when we do have that faith, we do live that new life, even when we feel like we could do so much better, because that life itself is a gift of God, too.

II.

The reason the angel had the gospel was to proclaim it. Luther grew up without the gospel. He grew up afraid of God and the punishment the Lord would surely inflict on a sinner like him. But when Luther learned that God just gives us the righteousness of Christ, that God declares us holy and righteous in his courtroom, heaven was opened to him. And he had to share that message. God made him a tremendous preacher and teacher of that truth. He was an angel, a messenger, of the everlasting gospel. But Luther wasn't alone. God has given the gospel to us, too. **What is the heart of the Reformation? Proclaiming the gospel.**

The angel had the gospel to proclaim to every nation, tribe, people and language. God intended this message to reach the entire world. The Lutheran Reformation is sometimes criticized for a lack of interest in reaching out to the lost. It is true that Luther never commissioned missionaries to go to Africa and even after he died, it took a while for Lutheran churches to start doing that work. But from the moment Luther rediscovered the gospel, he wanted to share it. He was not alone in that desire. Sometimes, when he preached, people sat in church copying down the sermon and then ran to the printers to publish it! Those early Lutherans wanted the whole world to hear the good news and flooding Europe with Luther's writings was the best way they could think of to make that happen. Untold thousands of people read those works and understood the gospel for the first time.

Even if later generations of Lutherans took a little prodding to really get into mission work, today, we are working all over the world to spread the gospel. In the United States, we have a unique opportunity because the whole world is coming here. There is a committee of our mission boards exploring ways to work through immigrants who are here back to their home countries with the gospel. Mission work is central to proclaiming Christ. Every one of us here is a part of that work, through our prayers and our offerings. But proclaiming the gospel is not only reaching out to the lost. Most Christians live for decades here on this earth. Teaching God's people to give glory to God, nurturing their faith with the good news, comforting them in tears and sorrow, deepening their knowledge of all that Christ has taught us – that, too, is proclaiming the gospel.

The angel commanded, **“Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”** The Church worships God, starting here in this life and then going on for all eternity. The book of Revelation has a number of pictures of the saints worshipping God, both in heaven and on earth. Do you know what the heart of that worship always is? The gospel. Sure, they sing it. Sure, they praise the Father and Jesus for doing it, for winning our salvation. But in the process, they repeat the message over and over again: the Lamb was slain! He washed our sins away in his blood! He draws people from every nation and tribe and people and language! That's what they sing! Real worship is not just saying over and over again, “I love Jesus!” or “Praise the Lord!” Real worship is recounting what Jesus has done for us. It's another way of proclaiming the gospel.

That praises our Savior. But in every hymn and every sermon that tells you about Jesus, God is working in your heart to strengthen your faith so that you can give glory to God with your life as well as with your voice. The key to conquering our sinful nature and living our faith not just here but at home and at work and at school and on vacation is hearing what Christ has done for you. That gospel is the power of God. It is the heart of the Lutheran Reformation.

Johannes Bugenhagen may well have overstated the point just a little bit. Luther was not *the* angel of the everlasting gospel in Revelation 14. But he was one of them. He was a messenger who had the gospel, who knew it and trusted and lived it. That made him one of the greatest proclaimers of that gospel that church history has yet revealed to us. 498 years from now – if the world is still here – Lutherans probably won't remember us or our efforts like we do Martin's. But we don't serve God to be remembered. We proclaim the gospel because we have that gospel. We know it. We trust it. And we want to share it. That is God's gift to us. That's what the Reformation was really about. Live your Reformation heritage! Be angels of the eternal gospel! Amen.