

Is It Still Worth Being Lutheran?

John 8:31-36

Reformation Day (Observed), October 29, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

The name of our institution is Immanuel Lutheran Church. In our name is the word Lutheran. In our current world that name associates you with an institution that goes back to the Reformation. It associates you with a man named Martin Luther. The association cannot be avoided. It is an historic reality. You have name Lutheran in your name. You are associated with Martin Luther.

Each institution must face a critical question and it must face it not simply once every 500 years, but each and every day of its existence. Is being Lutheran any good? Or to put it another way, is it any good to have a Lutheran Church?

After all we have a plethora of different kinds of church bodies. We have the old Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. We have Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists. We have Baptists of a hundred varieties. We have Pentecostals of a hundred varieties. We have nondenominational congregations which mysteriously all preach and teach the same thing as if they really are a denomination. We have evangelical congregations and emergent congregations. You may have your pick of any of these different groups. Is there any distinction in being Lutheran? Is there any use in being Lutheran?

Even among Lutherans there is a series of choices which you may make. Our congregation belongs to an organization called The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Our congregation does not have to belong to The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Our congregation was founded first and then joined the synod later. There are other Lutheran church bodies with which we may affiliate ourselves. There is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which despite recent splits remains the largest church body in America that calls itself Lutheran. There is the North American Lutheran Church which is the latest thing in American Lutheranism. They just split from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America over a variety of biblical issues, but it is homosexuality that broke the camel's back. There is the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. There is the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. There is The Lutheran Church in Mission for Christ. There is the American Association of Lutheran Churches. There are a series of small Lutheran organizations. One I encountered in Kansas, believe it or not, was the Illinois Lutheran Conference. It was a group of congregations somewhere here in Illinois who insisted that The Lutheran Hymnal was the only hymnal that could be used for worship and the King James Version of the Bible was the only English version that could be used for Christians. One of their members wound up in Holyrood and I met her before accepting the call here to Immanuel.

So with all of this diversity and with all of this discussion about Christianity and what it means to be Christian and with all of these options available to an American public that craves some kind of spirituality and will believe the oddest things an organization like our congregation must constantly answer the question, is there any use in being Lutheran? Is there any use in keeping the name "Lutheran" in the name of our congregation? There are congregations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod who have abandoned the name "Lutheran" in their congregations' names. They are either embarrassed of being Lutheran, or they believe that in their context the name "Lutheran" is off-putting to some people who do not like denominationalism and they want to get people to go to church there and hope that they never find out that they are Lutheran or they have decided that given the current cultural and ecumenical climate that it is no longer necessary or worthy of the time to identify oneself as Lutheran.

Is it any good to be a Lutheran? On the 500th anniversary of the Reformation are you going to celebrate or apologize or hope that it goes away?

The answer is, “Well, it depends.” It depends, dear Immanuel Lutheran Church, on whether or not you remain in the Word of Jesus. If you remain in the Word of Jesus, you are truly the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.

What will the Word of Jesus make you free from? Well, our Lord specifically discusses sin in John, chapter 8. The Word of God will make you free from sin, but if the Word of God makes you free from sin then the Word of God makes you free from death for sin and death are two sides of the same reality and if the Word of God liberates you from sin and death what else is there? It liberates you from your old dead life into a new and living one. It liberates you from all of the slavery that exists in this dark world that seek to enslave you to its evil desires. It liberates you from all falsehood that seeks to divert you from God. It liberates you from everything.

If a congregation remains in the Word of Jesus, then the congregation is liberated no matter what its name may be. If a congregation does not remain in the Word of Jesus, the congregation is not liberated no matter what its name may be.

It is odd to me in my service to member congregations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod that you lay people take one of two extremes on this issue. You either say it is useless to be Lutheran. Other groups have just as much of a shot at heaven as the rest of us. It is a Platonic statement and not really in accord with the Scriptures, but it makes its point about institutions that go by names like Lutheran. Others of you will sometimes ask me questions like this, “Pastor, what is the official position of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod on” and then you list me some hot button issue of the day. This question seems to presuppose that whatever The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has said in convention regarding a given issue that that must be the final word on the subject.

Both of these groups are mistaken and misguided according to the Word of Jesus. It is misguided to think that it does not matter what kind of denomination to which you belong. It does matter. It matters because that denomination and its member congregations are going to have to take positions on the Word of God. They have no alternative but to take positions on the Word of Jesus. Even if they decide to ignore the Word of God they are still taking a position on it. Some denominations will embrace the Word of Jesus of Nazareth and some will reject it. Some will embrace some of it and reject other parts of it. The denominational scene that we see particularly in the United States is the result of the denominations trying to figure out how much of the Word of Jesus they are going to embrace and how much they are going to reject. This is done in spite of the fact that Jesus does not speak of His word in parts. One cannot simply reject one part and keep another consistently. You can do it, but you cannot do it consistently. Eventually the Word of Jesus will expose your hypocrisy. Then to compound the problem each individual congregation within each denomination makes up its mind how much of the denomination’s beliefs it is going to embrace and how much of it, it is going to reject. It does matter, but it does not matter because I want or you want the Lutherans to be right. It matters because Jesus of Nazareth has given us His Word and His word sets us free and how much of that Word is preached by your congregation will determine whether or not you get set free from your sins and consequently also, death.

It is also misguided to think that The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is always right and always will be right. Some people seem to want to know the official position of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as if that carries some kind of authority in the face of God. Folks do you know that it is the official position of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod that the Synod itself can err? The official position of our church body is that the official position of our church body can be wrong. I can site you

examples of official publications of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod endorsing abortion. Popes and councils can err, people. That means that district and synodical conventions can err.

What is a Lutheran to do in such a situation? It seems like Pastor is saying that I am doomed if I remain a member of Immanuel “Lutheran” Church because we could be wrong. It also seems that I am doomed if I leave Immanuel “Lutheran” Church because the rest of them might be wrong. What is a person to do?

“Remain in My Word!” That is what your Lord says. “Remain in My Word.” My Word will set you free. My Word will guide you into all truth and into all righteousness. Remain in My Word! And as long as any church body remains in the Word of God it will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

There have been numerous times throughout Church history when the official confession of the Church at large or member congregations was wrong. The 1500s at the time of Martin Luther was nothing new. This had happened many times in the Church’s long history beginning with the apostles. The apostles themselves had argued among themselves about which of them was the greatest. The congregation at Corinth had been wracked by splits in the congregation over doctrine and practice. The Galatian congregations fared no better. The apostles were constantly working to keep themselves and God’s people on the Word of God so that they would be free. Even Paul had to correct Peter.

And so the 1500s represents one more time in Church history when the Church had left the rails of God’s Word and had gone off on its own. Not paying attention to the Word of Christ by neglect or by faulty translations which had come about through such neglect, the Church herself had begun to preach and to teach that we are saved by our works. Once the Church believed and taught that we were saved by our good deeds, the Church began to invent good deeds for people to do in addition to the ones that God wanted done. The Church began to teach these good deeds that she had invented as if they were good deeds that God wanted done. Then after a while the Church told people that they could pay money to the Church and the Church would forgive them of sins that they had committed or would commit in return for their payment of money. This practice was called the sale of indulgences.

This is a small part of the problem that Martin Luther faced. And once the problem came to his attention he addressed the problem according to his vocation as a teacher of theology in the holy catholic Church. He paid attention to the Word of Christ and the Word of Christ made him free. It made him free from his sins. It made him free from his death. It made him free from all of the rest.

Martin Luther began to share the Word of Christ with his students. Then when a preacher of indulgences by the name of John Tetzel came near where Luther was teaching, Luther went public with his ideas and published the 95 Theses. These were 95 statements for academic debate. The controversial thing about them was they began to confess the Word of Christ in that if salvation and forgiveness were free gifts that God gave to people for Christ’s sake, then it was wrong for the Church to sell them. Since the Church at the time generated huge revenues from the sale of indulgences Church officials wanted Martin Luther silenced. Luther would not be silenced. He saw beyond the sale of indulgence. He saw beyond the immediate abuses of the Church. He saw the root problem. The root problem was that the Church had once again embraced that pernicious lie that people save themselves by their own good deeds. This led to self-righteousness and all other kinds of evil. Luther had to have seen beyond all of the abuses to the larger issues or when asked to risk his life he would not have done so, but on pain of death when he was asked by imperial and ecclesiastical authorities to recant, he would not do so. He said, “Unless I can be shown by Scripture and plain reason and not by popes and councils which have so often

contradicted each other, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I cannot and will not recant anything. Here I stand, God help me. Amen.”

Luther stood upon the Word of God when he made his great confession before Charles V. Do you, Immanuel Lutheran Church, stand upon the Word of God? If you remain in His Word you will know the truth and the truth will make you free. And if our institution that we call Immanuel Lutheran Church remains on that Word of Christ, then it is worthy to be Lutheran and worthy for people to belong to our congregation.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.