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# THE MESSAGE OF THE REFORMATION

by Matthew C. Harrison

On May 3, 2015, LCMS President Matthew C. Harrison preached for the dedication of the Old Latin School at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

*In Jesu Namen! Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren! Oder als wir Amerikanern sagen, "Meine lieben Freunde, und ganz besonders die großzügigen Freunde hier im Stadt und Pfarrkirche St. Marien, unsere Freunde von der Evangelischen Kirche in Mitteldeutschland, und von der Selbständigen Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland: Wir möchten sie herzlich begrüßen und danken Ihnen, daß Sie mit uns diese Einweihung und diesen Gottesdienst feiern. Im Namen der 2.2 Millionen Glieder der Missouri-Synode und vieler anderer weltweit möchten wir unserem Dank dem scheidenden Oberbürgermeister Naumann und dem neugewählten Oberbürgermeister Torsten Zugehör aussprechen, Dank für die Fürsorge und Pflege dieses Schatzes, der Lutherstadt Wittenberg und ihrer Reformationsstätten. Dafür danken wir Gott.*

*Verzeihen Sie mir mein schwaches Deutsch. Leider muß ich auf Englisch predigen, damit sowohl Sie als auch ich meine Predigt verstehen können!*

**I**N THE NAME OF JESUS. Our Savior said, "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden this from these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children." Our theme is the theme of this dedication event, and of the conference, which follows. Remember, repent, rejoice. Indeed, as confessional Lutherans celebrated the great anniversaries of the Reformation, this theme was a recurring one. And for good cause. Habakkuk 3 states: "O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy."

Luther preached his last sermon in Wittenberg, from the original pulpit just over there. It was Jan. 17, 1546. "In contrast to all the clever heresies, he urged people to have a simple, childlike faith in Christ."

Melancthon prayed as Luther left town with his three sons. It would be his third trip to attempt reconciliation in his hometown, Eisleben. The dukes of Mansfeld were at each other's throats over property and other issues. The copper miners were at odds with the dukes about the confiscation of their property and mining rights, and to top it off, there was great conflict about who had the right to call preachers. It was a "porcupine with more quills

The first of Luther's 95 Theses, written right by the font in this church, states, "When our Lord and master Jesus Christ says 'Repent,' He wills that the entire life of the Christian be one of repentance!"

than a porcupine," Luther complained.

At Halle they could not cross the ice-swollen Salle River. Luther joked that the river Sally was an enormous Anabaptist lady who wanted to re-baptize him! On the 28th, Jonas joined him as they made it across the river to be met by 60 horsemen from Eisleben. He suffered dizziness and pain in his chest and arm along the way. He had described himself as "old, cold, lame and one-eyed" the previous year.

His last letters to Katie are beautiful testimony to his confidence in Christ and love for his wife. He calls her "Madam Sow-meister and Madam Brew-meister" as he encourages her to read the catechism. "At sixty three he considered himself a very old man." "For him, his sense of age came from having seen the devil's ass [rear end] and from being able to testify to his wickedness." The negotiations dragged on for two weeks. He despised the lawyers and got into a heated fight with one of them. He was confident in Christ and ready to die. "If I go back to Wittenberg I'll lie down in a coffin and give the maggots a fat doctor to eat."

Finally there was light. The "porcupine was slaughtered," and agreements were signed February 16. He was too weak to participate on the final sessions on the 17th.

He preached to celebrate the resolution of the conflict.

His text? “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and revealed it to babes.” The sermon is characteristic Luther and picks up on the same theme he preached in last in Wittenberg.

The Lord here praises and extols his heavenly Father for having hidden these things from the wise and understanding. That is, he did not make his gospel known to the wise and understanding, but to infants and children who cannot speak and preach and are not knowing and wise. Thus he indicates that he is opposed to the wise and understanding and dearly loves those who are not wise and understanding but are rather like young children.

But to the world it is very foolish and offensive that God should be opposed to the wise and condemn them ... For they are always exerting themselves; they do things in the Christian church the way they want to themselves. Everything that God does they must improve, so that there is no poorer, more insignificant and despised disciple on earth than God; he must be everybody’s student, everybody wants to be GOD’s teacher and preceptor. This may be seen in all heretics from the beginning of the world ... ;they are not satisfied with what God has done and instituted ... .

They think they have to do something too, in order that they may be a bit better than other people and be able to boast: This is what I have done; what God has done is too poor and insignificant, even childish and foolish; I must add something to it. This is the nature of the shameful wisdom of the world, especially in the Christian church, where one bishop and one pastor hacks and snaps at another and one obstructs and shoves the other, as we have seen at all times in the government of the church to its great detriment. These are the real wiseacres, of whom Christ is speaking here, who put the cart before the horse and will not stay on the road which God himself has shown us, but always have to have and do something special in order that the people may say: Ah, our pastor or preacher is nothing; there’s the real man, he’ll get things done!

... Things are in a fine state, indeed, when the egg wants to be wiser than the hen.

... Lo, this means that the wise of this world are

rejected, that we may learn not to think ourselves wise and to put away from our eyes all great personages, indeed, to shut our eyes altogether, and cling only to Christ’s Word and come to him, as he so lovingly invites us to do, and say: Thou alone art my beloved Lord and Master, I am thy disciple.

This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that.<sup>1</sup>

At this Luther was overcome with pain and came down from the pulpit. He was taken to a home across the street. On the night of the 17th after supper, he went to the window about 8:00 p.m. to pray, as was his custom. Soon he suffered deep pains in the chest. At 1:00 a.m. he woke with another attack of pain. He was certain of eternal life and repeated John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Jonas asked him if he was ready to die trusting in the Lord Jesus. He said, “Yes.” He said, “Lord, let your servant depart in peace. Amen.” He died on Feb. 18 at 2:45 a.m.

After he died, Aurifaber found a scrap of paper in Luther’s pocket. It was the last thing he ever wrote. “Let no one think he has sufficiently grasped the Scriptures, unless he has governed the church for a hundred years with the prophets.” “We are beggars: This is true.” *Wir sind Bettler: Hoc est verum.*”

Sasse called this *Luthers Vermaechniss on Christenheit*, Luther’s great legacy to Christianity. Under the law, we are beggars. We only receive.

First Commandment: You have idols; you are discontent. Second Commandment: You misuse the name of God. Third Commandment: Your worship and prayers falter. Fourth Commandment: You despise authority. Fifth Commandment: You hate your neighbor. Sixth Commandment: Your sexual thoughts words and deeds are a stench. Seventh Commandment: You steal, and you are miser and lack generosity. Eighth Commandment: You say what ought not be said. Ninth Commandment: You want what is not yours. Tenth Commandment: You desire everything but God.

The first of Luther’s 95 Theses, written right by the

The message of the Reformation was above all a message of repentance.

<sup>1</sup> LW 51, Martin Luther, “The Last Sermon, Preached in Eisleben, Matthew 11:25-30,” 15 February 1546. AE 51, 383-392.

font in this church, states, “When our Lord and master Jesus Christ says ‘Repent,’ He wills that the entire life of the Christian be one of repentance!” The message of the Reformation was above all a message of repentance.

Are you repentant? Are you a sinner? Then rejoice. I have good news in a simple message.

Jesus was slain from the foundation of the world for you. Jesus was foretold by the prophets for you. Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary for you. Jesus was born for you. Jesus was circumcised for you. Jesus taught the scholars in the temple for you. Jesus was obedient to His parents for you. Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan for you. Jesus was cast into the wilderness for you. Jesus came preaching, “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand” for you. Jesus healed the blind, the lame, the demon possessed, for you. Jesus fed the thousands for you! Jesus said, “Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest” for you. Jesus raised Lazarus for you. Jesus rode into Jerusalem for you. Jesus instituted His supper on the night when He was betrayed for you. Jesus was betrayed

for you. Jesus was tried for you. Jesus was shuffled back and forth between Pilate and Herod for you. Jesus was beaten and mocked, wore a crown of thorns and purple robe for you. Jesus carried His cross to Golgatha for you. Jesus was nailed to the cross for you.

Jesus said, “Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do” for you. Jesus said, “It is finished for you.” Jesus’ body lay in a tomb for you. Jesus rose on the third day, bodily, for you. Jesus proclaimed victory in hell for you. Jesus appeared to Peter and all the rest for you. Jesus ascended into heaven for you. And Jesus will come again at the last day for you.

Remember, repent, rejoice. This shall be our message in everything we do in this city and around the world.

This is the simple Christian faith. Jesus rejoiced (*exhomo goumai soi*) that this has been revealed to the little children and hidden from the wise. And we rejoice this day to be little children with the simple faith of Luther and Jesus. Remember, repent, rejoice. This shall be our message in everything we do in this city and around the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

.....  
*The Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison is president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.*

