

Reformation 2023

"Is It Time to Declare Bankruptcy?"

Text: Romans 3:19-28

On this special Sunday before Reformation, may the gifts of truth and clarity restored to God's Church through the Reformation fill your hearts with joy and thanksgiving; and may the three pillars of that Reformation – faith alone, grace alone, and Scripture alone – serve to ever support and strengthen your faith in Jesus Christ as your one and only Lord and Savior. Amen.

Dear Fellow Heirs of the Reformation: "Change or die" is, we're told, a common mantra in the world of business. History is full of examples of even huge multinational corporations that went bankrupt because they failed to adapt to changing conditions and stubbornly rode their obsolete products or business models into obscurity. Think Eastman Kodak and Blockbuster Video. Companies that fail to recognize, accept, and adapt to changing times and needs invariably cease to exist. The key, so they claim, is not only to look to the present but to the future, to identify changing needs, and to find a way to supply those changing needs.

"Change or die" clearly applies in the business world. Does it also apply to the Church? There are many really smart people out there that tell us that Christianity will collapse in on itself if we do not adapt to the changing needs of our society – if we do not adjust our "product" to changing "market conditions." We are told, for example, that just as the days of brick-and-mortar retail stores are numbered, so too brick and mortar churches will also become a thing of the past *unless we find a way to adapt*. Obviously these dire predictions raise questions that need to be addressed. As we look back at over 500 years of Lutheran heritage, we need to ask if we too are living in the past – to the detriment of the future. If it is true in business that an entity must change with the times or die, is it also true of the Christian Church? Or have we already failed to so great an extent that we have no option but to declare bankruptcy?

These are the sorts of questions we will explore this morning. The stakes could not be higher. While the failure of a company might be a shame, the failure of Christianity today is disastrously unacceptable by any measure. The good news is that you and I don't need to make these decisions without divine guidance. We have God's Word to provide sure and certain direction in all things. Again then we turn to that Word of God to discover if we truly have just two options: change, or ride a broken business model into bankruptcy. The text that will provide answers is found in the Third Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans:

^{ESV} **Romans 3:19-28** *Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ ¶ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷ ¶ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

This is God's Word, written and preserved down through the centuries for our instruction and growth – also on this Reformation Sunday. That each one of us, personally, might be both strengthened in the present and guided in the future, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.**" Amen.

The Reformation changed the world. Even the godless world around us gets that, occasionally taking the time to examine the cause and effect of the Reformation. They mostly get it all wrong, of course, but at least they take notice. For the record, the idea that the Reformation was all about behavior modification, humanism, or political intrigue (rather than the restoration of the truth of the gospel) is like concluding that pro-life activists are really just upset about the color of the paint on the outside of abortion clinics.

The Reformation was not about personal conduct. It was about souls spending eternity in hell because the only thing that could give them Life – the gospel – was being withheld from them.

That was then, this is now. Is the Reformation still relevant or important to you today? Let's find out with a series of questions. Do you today know what the gospel really is? Do you know what it is *not*? Do you know that you have been *justified* (declared not guilty) by God the

Father for no other reason than that you believe that Jesus Christ, his Son, gave his perfect life as the payment for the sins of the entire world? Do you know that no part of salvation is or can be earned by your good works? Do you know that sinful mankind, having sinned even once, has absolutely nothing to offer to a holy God in payment for that or any other sin? Do you know that it is both useless and sinful to pray to Mary or any of the other saints, that the Pope in Rome is not infallible, that there is no such thing as purgatory, and that prayers and masses for the dead are useless?

You do indeed know these things, and that is what the Reformation was all about. The fact that you know these Bible truths makes you a direct beneficiary of the Reformation. Knowing makes you an heir. Few knew these truths prior to the Reformation. Worse still, God's Word was withheld from sinners so they had no means by which they could learn the truth. Clearly the church of Luther's day was spiritually bankrupt. The solution was not a Chapter 7 bankruptcy (sell off everything and cease to exist) but a Chapter 11 – a major reorganization, new leadership, and a new product line. You and I are present-day beneficiaries of the reorganization that God brought about through the Reformation.

Yet the question still remains: Is it in fact true that Christianity *today* has but two options: change or face an unavoidable declaration of bankruptcy?

Understand, first of all, that the question is not "*Do individual Christians need to change?*" Of course we do. Even those who have already been brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ often need change in their lives *because of the gradual degradation that tends to creep into the life of every Christian*. Often it's not so much "change" as "change back." You yourselves know that to be true. I'm guessing each of you has experienced a time when your faith and conduct deteriorated. You didn't necessarily lose your Christian faith, but at times you may have grown comfortable with sin, loved this world more than you should, or grew cold and loveless as you amassed treasures for none but yourself. Christians tend to readily acknowledge this sort of need for change. Yet the greater danger is the ever-present pressure to change that which we cannot, and to innovate or adapt where we have no right to do so. The key is knowing the difference, and here is where God's Word again provides perfect, divine guidance.

The world would have us believe that we need to find both a new product and a more effective way to market that product, or we will be out of business. Many Christian churches have now bought in, essentially declaring a Chapter 11 reorganizing sort of bankruptcy, and have emerged with a new product line. Their thought is that since society no longer

seems to want doctrine (law and gospel) we need to give them what they want if we are to survive. Their new product line includes things like social gospel, food pantries, book exchanges, social justice, entertainment, and unconditional approval and support of sinful lifestyles.

The problem, of course, is that we don't get to decide what our product is. God does. God did. In his Great Commission, Jesus himself laid out our business model: ^{ESV}(Mark 16:15-16) "***Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. ¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.***" Again in Matthew 28 Jesus first established his right to dictate such things by saying, "***All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.***" He then went on: "***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.***" Notice that our Lord didn't burden us with the task of trying to figure out what we should and shouldn't ourselves believe and present to the world. He told us simply to "***teach them to observe all that he has commanded us.***" In fact the last verses of the Bible offer this dire warning to all who would even attempt to alter our product line in any way: (Revelation 22:18-19) "***I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.***"

The bottom line then is that we not only *shouldn't* look for a new product or message, *we cannot*. The God that we seek to serve has forever established our life's work. We are to share his messages of law and gospel with the world. That will never – *can never* – change. It's God's Church, not ours.

Eastman Kodak Corporation failed because the world no longer wanted their one product: film cameras. They were replaced by something infinitely better and cheaper: digital photography. Blockbuster failed because DVDs were replaced by streaming content. Yet even universal rejection of the Christian faith will not render what we have to offer either obsolete or unnecessary. There simply *is nothing better, nothing else that actually works*. Our text makes that clear from the very start: ***Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may***

be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰
For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. This speaks not only to God's view of the law but to the lack of any substitute and to the utter foolishness of trying to repurpose the law. God's law, his unchanging standard of what is right and what is wrong, always condemns, never saves. Yet this is *exactly* what modern Christianity now advocates with its new business model of social gospel and tolerance. They teach that the law should not be used to condemn but to save. Feed the poor, protect the earth, don't condemn anything as sinful, and God will both love you and reward you with heaven.

Our text also spelled out for us God's definition and intended use of the gospel: **"(We) are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... to be received by faith. (God is) the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.** ²⁷ ¶ **Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.** ²⁸ **For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

The greatest gift that God gave to mankind through the Reformation is the return of the truth of how any human being can escape hell and enter God's heaven. We cannot earn this by our works; it is God's undeserved gift to us through faith in Jesus Christ. That means that while bankruptcy is never an option for the Christian Church, it is the *only* option for individual Christians. The Reformation returned to mankind the universal truth that we have zero assets with which to pay our debt of sin. Apart from Jesus Christ, our own personal balance sheet could not look any worse – all debt, no assets, and no hope of generating any sort of income to pay our debt. Here we don't need a reorganization under a Chapter 11, we need a Chapter 7 – total capitulation, complete insolvency.

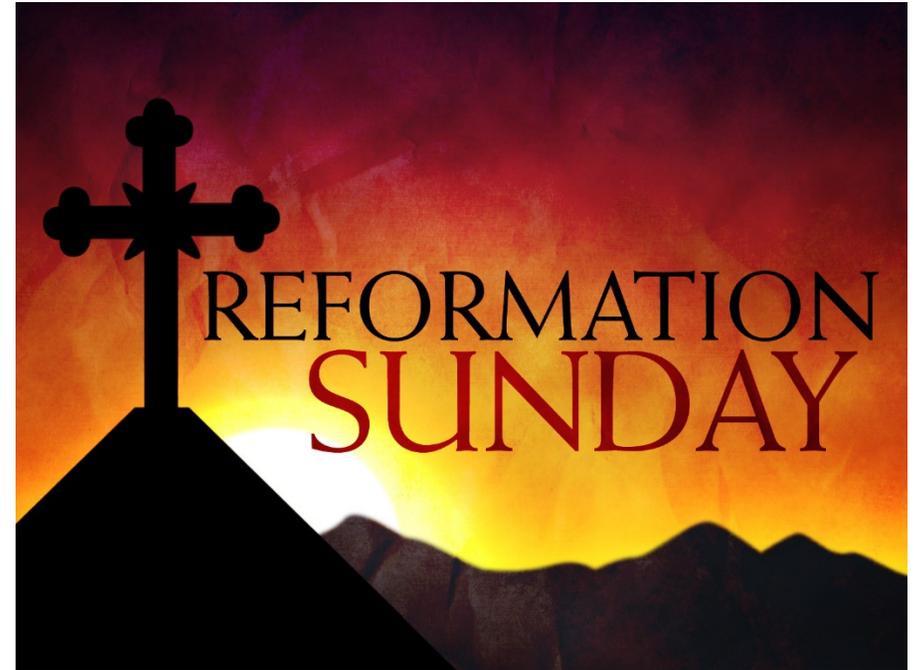
Then we look to Jesus, and we recognize that the payment he made on the cross has paid for every single one of our sins. Every. Single. Sin. God the Father has declared our debt to have been paid by his Son. Forgiveness is ours not by earning it (we had no way to do that) but by God's grace through faith that Jesus has earned it for us. That's the heart of the gospel truth that God returned to his Church through the Reformation.

This truth you now know and believe, which means you personally have benefitted from God's Reformation. You now not only *know* the one path to eternal life, you are on it. Thank him for that. God's plan works. Trust it. Trust him. Amen.

ESV **Revelation 14:6-7** Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷ And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

ESV **Matthew 11:12-19** From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear. ¹⁶ ¶ "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷ "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

ESV **Romans 3:19-28** Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ ¶ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷ ¶ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.



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Reformation Sunday – October 29, 2023

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 266 (Red Hymnal)

"O God, Our Lord, Thy Holy Word"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Revelation 14:6-7) Our first lesson on this Reformation Sunday is included because many Bible scholars believe that it represents a prophecy of Martin Luther and the Reformation. While God could well have had this in mind when he verbally inspired these words through the Apostle John, this cannot be verified from Holy Scripture. The fact remains that it is God himself who provides messengers to proclaim his gospel truth. God has in fact called each one of us to that very work.

Psalm 91 (Supplement page 33) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Matthew 11:12-19) In our second reading Jesus condemns the unbelievers for their rejection of God's Word. In Jesus' day they rejected John the Baptist, together with his message, because he was too stern and unyielding. They then condemned Jesus and his teachings as one who was too permissive and lax in his conduct and discipline. The fact is unbelievers always find a reason to reject the Word and will of their Savior God. Learn to recognize this temptation in your own life.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 775 (Stanzas 1-3, 6) (Brown Hymnal)

"Thy Strong Word"

The Sermon – Text: Romans 3:19-28 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"Is It Time to Declare Bankruptcy?"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 774 (Brown Hymnal)

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 261 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (35) Average (43)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-6:00 p.m.	– Reformation Service in Jamestown
	-7:00 p.m.	– Fellowship Meal in Jamestown
Monday	-9:00 a.m.	– Study Conference in Jamestown
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Class
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor David Reim is considering calls to the newly formed dual parish of Calvary of Marquette and St. Peter's of Iron River. Immanuel of Mankato has called Pastor Luke Bernthal.

Baby Shower – A baby shower for Haley Strege is planned for Sunday, November 12 during the fellowship hour. See Hope Meyer for more information.

Joint Reformation Service – The annual Joint Reformation service in Jamestown is scheduled for this evening at 6pm with a fellowship meal to follow. Please see Pastor Roehl if you would like to attend.

Tickets Available – Two free tickets are available for a Bluegrass concert this evening at the Belle Mehu Auditorium. They were sent to us by members in Lemmon who are unable to attend. Please see Pastor Roehl if you are interested.

Christmas Flowers – Today is the deadline for ordering Christmas flowers. See the sign-up sheet on the mailbox table or address any questions to Sandy Roehl.