

Happy Reformation Day! As we consider the changes that Luther helped initiate in the 1500s, we wonder what it's all about. At its heart, the Reformation was a reforming and restoring of the very way we worship God.

God's people often stray away from right worship of God, and they need correction. We see a vision of this in our reading from Revelation: **“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. 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.”**” Today we learn MESSENGERS RETURN US TO WORSHIP GOD IN CHRIST.

I. The Father sent prophets to return the Israelites to worship God in Christ. Many of the issues Israel faced throughout had to do with right worship. It's not that they didn't claim to worship God. In fact, when the Israelites made a golden calf, Aaron proudly proclaimed, **“Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.”** They thought they were doing this in the name of Yahweh their God.

When Jeroboam broke off the northern kingdom from the southern one. He feared that because people had to return to Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah to worship the Lord, they would ultimately reunite with the southern kingdom. If one calf was good, two was better. He erected an altar at Bethel and instructed his people to worship there.

Throughout the history of the kings of both Israel and Judah, the people strayed and worshipped other false gods: Asherah and Baal, Dagon and Molech. Eventually both Israel and Judah were dragged off into exile because of their false worship. We read of the northern kingdom: **“And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God... and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced.”** The same could be said of Judah's captivity to Babylon.

Nonetheless, the scene from Revelation 14:6–7 kept on replaying in the life of Israel and Judah as God sent prophets to warn them of their sinful ways. These “angels” kept flying across the sky to proclaim an eternal Gospel to those who dwell on earth.

There are chapters and chapters of the Old Testament describing the worship practices of the Israelites. There are chapters devoted to describing the furniture and architecture of tabernacle and temple. Your eyes start to glaze over as you read these chapters, and you start to wish they could have just drawn a picture.

Is all this specificity because God is needlessly picky? No! The Lord gave them specific instructions on how to worship Him so that He could have them draw close to Him and so that He could train them to recognize the coming Christ

who saves His people. God gave these instructions so that His people could worship Him rightly, and draw near to Him, and ultimately to be tied into the eternal Gospel for all people.

Next, II. The Father sent His Son to return the Jews to worship God in Christ. The worship life of Israel had stagnated. It had become overly legalistic. The worship that was training God's people to recognize their savior became overly complicated so that the Jews couldn't see the forest because the trees were in the way.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, **“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”** Many of the Jews of that day were too caught up in rule and regulations, and failed to worship Jesus even when He was standing right in front of them.

God sent Jesus as a messenger to proclaim an eternal Gospel to all people. Certainly Jesus is more than just a messenger, He is the message and the message sender. He is the Word of God incarnate, and He is one with the Father. Jesus' ministry is the Gospel message that needs to be shouted from the rooftops and proclaimed throughout the whole world.

We don't often think about it this way, but Jesus accomplished a Reformation in how God's people worshipped. This reformation was a return to worshipping the true God, to worshipping Christ. We often get confused because we draw a line from modern day Jews to the ancient Israelites and we see Christianity as this offshoot of Judaism, but we have it exactly backwards. In choosing to reject the Messiah, the Pharisees, the Scribes, and the Jewish enemies of Jesus branched off from the path God laid out for them to worship the true God.

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well: **“You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”** The eternal Gospel returns us to worshipping Jesus wherein we can receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation won for us at the Cross and the Open Tomb.

Next, III. The Father sent Reformers to return the Church to worship God in Christ. Luther's pastor John Bugenhagen preached Luther's funeral sermon and argued that Luther was that angel proclaiming an eternal Gospel for all people. He wasn't the first to claim this, and he wasn't the last. Others such as C.F.W. Walther also take this position. Now, we can scoff at how self-serving such a claim is, but at the very least, we need to see that if Luther isn't *the* messenger described in Revelation 14, that he at least is in the long line of messengers who carried that eternal Gospel.

The 95 Theses that Luther posted to the chapel doors in Wittenberg had as their focus a right worship of Christ. Indulgences falsely taught that salvation can be bought and sold.

Furthermore, Luther taught that the false teaching regarding the Mass—around the church's central act of worship—produced many abominations like a queen bee gives birth to maggots. First, the Mass produced the doctrine of purgatory which teaches that souls need to do something extra to cleanse themselves to be in the presence of God. Second, the Mass caused demons to masquerade as saints demanding all sorts of works. Third, the Mass caused the requirement of pilgrimages to pop up, making trips to Rome or other holy sites a key aspect of receiving forgiveness. Fourth, this false teaching of worship has caused monasteries to pop up who devote themselves to saying Masses alone to atone for sins. Fifth, teachings circling around the Mass inspired the teaching of relics, that touching or viewing a holy object can also grant the forgiveness of sins. Sixth, Luther mentions indulgences ultimately being a product of this false worship (Smalcald Articles II II 11–24).

Like the prophets who sought to abolish idolatry, like Jesus who sought to clean out the false teachings and manmade doctrines, Luther sought to restore worship to how the Church ought to be. He sought to make Christ central in worship. That is, He sought to make the eternal Gospel for all men as plain as the noonday sun for all to see and for all to believe.

People make this same mistake. They consider the Lutheran Church to be an offshoot of the Roman Catholic Church, but the opposite is true. The Reformation is a return to right reverence. It is a return to how the Church is meant to be. Don't be fooled by your Roman Catholic friends or family, holy mother church doesn't consist of having the right kind of pointy hats or being able to trace a lineage back to Peter, but it is in worshipping God aright. Look to see if a Church proclaims Jesus and proclaims the Sacraments how they are taught in the Bible. This is the lesson of the Reformation.

Finally, IV. The Father sends messengers to return us to worship God in Christ. As we close out our sermon, we can rejoice over the “angels” who proclaim the eternal Gospel to us. We seek to proclaim the eternal Gospel for all people and to fear God and worship Him.

Look for the Church that worships Jesus aright, not through the right smells and bells or the music that rocks your bones and gives you a burning in your bosom. Look for the Church that gives you Jesus in Scripture sung, read, and taught. Look for the Church that gives you Jesus in His very body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine. Look for the Church that proclaims the eternal Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone on account of Christ alone. Amen!