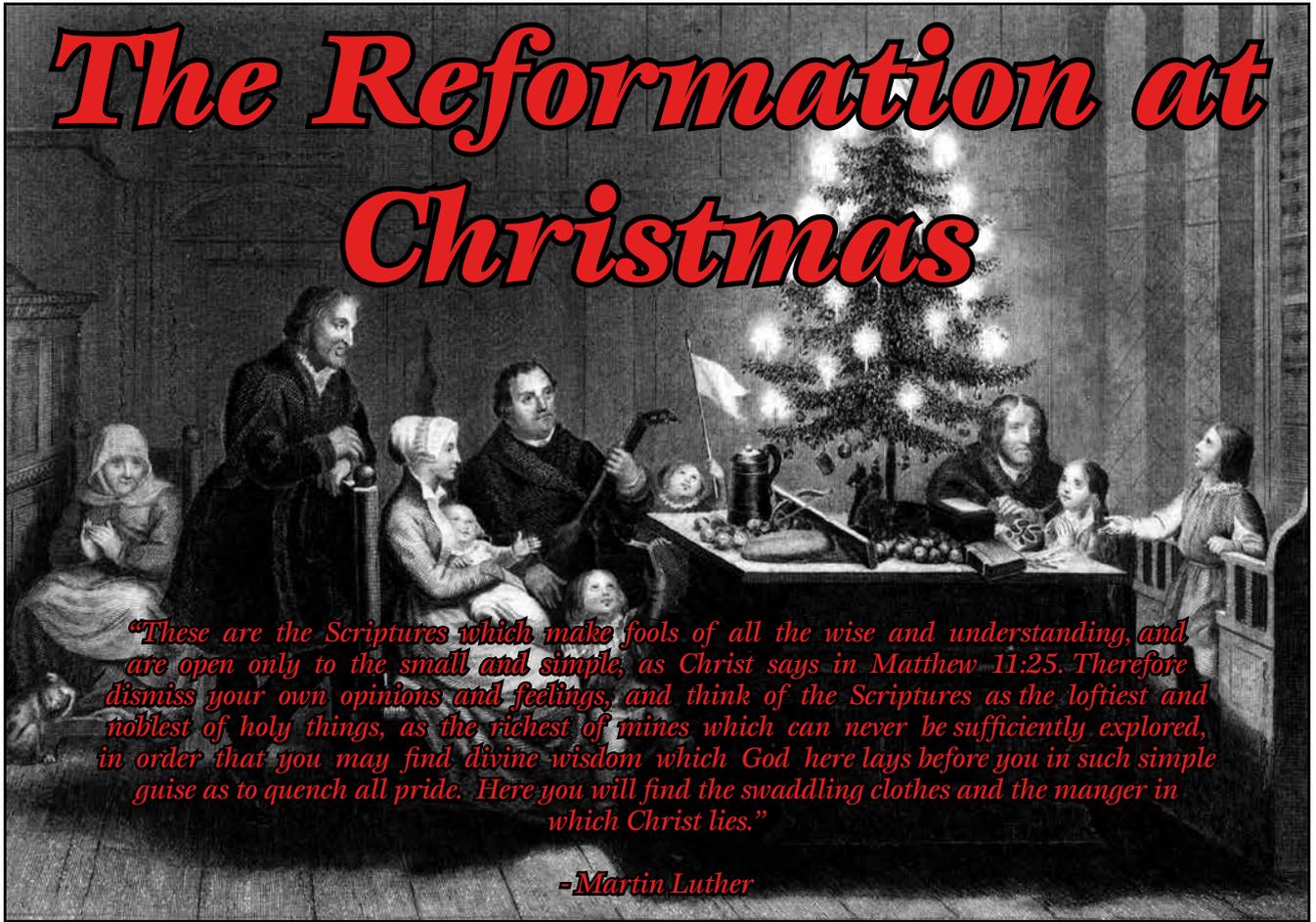


The Reformation at Christmas



“These are the Scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11:25. Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.”

- Martin Luther

by Kelly Klages

What do the Reformation and the celebration of Christmas have in common? Well, Lutherans love them. The music is great. There’s that legend about Luther promoting the first Christmas trees. Perhaps the slightly cynical might say that, with the much-vaunted 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, the two upcoming observances share one other, more dubious distinction: everyone talks about them or even celebrates so much ahead of time that we might fear a burnout or anticlimax by the time the day comes!

But how can we not celebrate? On the one hand, you can probably have too many gingerbread cookies, sleigh bells, Christmas concerts, and shopping sprees. You can, perhaps, eventually grow weary of an overabundance of Luther biographies and Reformation-

themed kids’ crafts. But we know that these aren’t what the holidays are really about. In reality, they are all about Jesus, the power of the Word of God coming to the people of God, enlightening us with the beauty of the Gospel of grace. And we can never get enough of that!

I was commissioned by The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod to compose a hymn as part of a series of services they were making available for the Reformation anniversary. My hymn was to be used for the first of their services, on November 10th – the birth of Luther (see page 15).

It was a curious prospect. For one thing, although I knew the date of Luther’s birth and have heard mention of it in Lutheran circles in a commemorative sense, I’d never heard of such commemoration coinciding with a church service. The

church is more likely to remember the death of the saints—their “birthday into heaven” as it were. Also, it was very clear that they weren’t looking for some sort of straight ode to Luther. Our hymnody may mention and give thanks for the saints, but the hymn itself is never ultimately all about them. So, how to approach writing a hymn like this?

If you’re a Lutheran, there’s only one thing to do—forget everything else for a minute and write about Jesus instead. Put aside the birth of Luther and think about the birth of Jesus. If we do that, the incarnation of our Saviour will tell us all we need to know about our own birth, our own flesh, our own *raison d’être* as God’s people. That is how this hymn, “Jesus Came a Babe Among Us,” ended up bringing together the Reformation and Christmas:

JESUS CAME A BABE AMONG US

*Jesus came a babe among us,
Born to heed the Father's call.*

Scripture tells us that Christ was “made like his brothers in every respect” (Hebrews 2:17), sharing in the suffering and weakness of our own flesh. In this way He truly became Immanuel, God with us. His birth was for us in perfect accordance with His Father’s will.

*God's own Word, who spoke creation,
Cried for mercy for us all.*

The same all-powerful Word of God, through whom all things were made, took on the voice of a crying infant. He shared common infant needs and fears, but His voice was more than ours—it was the sound of salvation for the world.

*Jesus served us by the Gospel
In His life and in His death,*

Jesus’ death and resurrection are the cornerstones of our faith, but His birth and the events leading to His crucifixion are obviously critical as well. All of these events reflect Jesus’ service to His people and the proclamation of the Gospel.

*And proclaimed His full forgiveness
With his final dying breath.*

From Jesus’ first breath to His last cries on Calvary, our salvation was His goal for us.

*With our first breath, we as infants
Greet a strange and wondrous place,*

The drawing of the first breath is an all-important reality of birth. How does our experience compare with Jesus’?

*Crying out against the darkness,
Helpless children needing grace.*

We, like Jesus, had needs and fears, but we were helpless to save ourselves in the face of a sinful world.

*God, in mercy ever-living,
Formed our bodies in the womb;*

The theme of creation returns with the acknowledgement of God’s personal hand in giving life to each tiny individual.

*At the font He has re-formed us
By the cross and empty tomb.*

Our rebirth as God’s people is also His work through the waters of Baptism. There is a hint of a pun in the word “re-form” with an nod to the “reformation” that is worked through faith.

*You have called us, blessed Father,
By Your name so strong and true.*

All believers are called into the family of God through the Baptism of the forgiveness of sins. This gives us kinship with the saints of all times and places.

*You give ev'ry generation
Tongues to speak Your Word anew.*

Luther was one of those saints and confessors. We remember him and many others, as well as recalling that we too are to be saints and confessors of God’s Word. Indeed, the same words spoken by the Word of God Himself are given to us to carry on our own breath.

*Give us boldness to confess You
In our life and in our death,*

You and I—not only the heroes of old—are called to the boldness that faith inspires.

*That, by grace, we trust Your promise
With our final dying breath.*

Jesus’ breath is the active, life-giving Word, a Word planted in us that will save us (James 1:21). It bears fruit in both good works and in the confession of that Word. But we are called to trust the promise, not our works. Our breath is frail and our part in attaining salvation is passive. Indeed, we receive the gifts

of God like little children, from our first breath to our last.

*Glory be to God the Father,
Son and Spirit, Three in One.*

This doxological verse emphasizes our collective baptismal identity.

*We with saints who came before us
Singing the vict'ry You have won.*

Our worship is with “angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.” Commemorations of confessors like Luther remind us of the joy we have in the communion of saints.

*In Your Word our hope is founded,
And a people yet to be...*

The foundation of the Reformation is the Word of God, a lasting and unchanging Word that will always bind God’s people together.

*...Shall sing praises to Your glory
With Your Church eternally.*

The story doesn’t end with the confessors of the Reformation or the confessors of the present day. The torch is passed on to future generations. Those who have yet to draw their first breath will join us in everlasting praise to God.

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Luther spoke of the Scriptures as the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ lies. The Word of God may seem simple and unimpressive. It is delivered by flawed and sinful messengers, weak and wavering voices, humble water and bread and wine. But therein we find the great and mighty surprise of Christmas—and of the Reformation. The Word of God comes like a mustard seed, a small amount of yeast, a helpless baby in a manger. And all history is changed.

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