

Revelation 14:6–7: The Enduring Value of a 500 Year Old Gift

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It was more than 300 years ago, closer to 400 years, that Lutherans first began to observe the Lutheran Reformation of the church. For the last century and a half Lutherans have observed the Reformation regularly. This year our Reformation celebration is something extra special. It marks the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth. For an appropriate sermon study we look to the historic epistle lesson for the Festival of the Reformation, Revelation 14:6,7. May it remind us of the extraordinary gift which the Lord gave to his Christian Church on earth centuries ago in the person of Martin Luther. At a time when much Reformation celebration fosters unionism and false ecumenism, may this sermon study keep alive in us all that for which Luther stood firm and fearlessly contended.

In choosing Revelation 14:6, 7 to observe Luther's birth we do not mean to identify the angel mentioned with Luther or any particular person. Among the various interpretations of the 14th chapter of Revelation, especially by older Protestant theologians, the three angels referred to in the chapter are identified as John Wycliffe (v 6), John Huss (v 8), and Martin Luther (v 9). Such interpretation is more specific than the context allows. The context speaks of the proclamation of the gospel throughout the New Testament age. We prefer to think of these angels as the sum total of God's messengers sent to proclaim the gospel until the end of the New Testament era, until the day of judgment.

Without a doubt Martin Luther stands at the head of the list of such messengers since the days of the apostles. We are in full agreement with the church fathers who chose this as the epistle lesson for the Festival of the Reformation because it does have another, a very special, fulfillment in the person of Luther.

It is generally accepted, at least within our circles, that since the days of the apostles there is no theologian who ranks with or above Luther. The same must also be said of Luther as a preacher. Though we today are only able to read his sermons and do not hear him preach, there is much to suggest that Luther as a preacher ranks with Luther as a theologian. A quotation from Fritz, *The Preacher's Manual* (page 139), in which he quotes from his own essay, "Luther as a Preacher," written for the 400th anniversary of the Reformation, says it well:

Luther preached much. Sometimes he preached four sermons on a Sunday and two or three during the week. He was much in demand as a preacher. The people heard him gladly. He was, in a good sense of the word, a popular preacher, a preacher of the people. Luther had rare gifts, which served him in good stead as a preacher: a thorough knowledge of the Bible, a good acquaintance with the writings of the Church Fathers and the classics, a mind well informed as to the facts of history and filled with stores of knowledge on many subjects, a keen perception of human nature, an abundance of personal experiences, a perfect understanding of the conditions of his time, a happy faculty to address himself to all classes of men, a masterly use of the German language, and combined with all this, a heroic faith, an undaunted courage, a good judgment, an untiring energy, a fervent zeal, an enduring patience, an alert mind, a keen insight, a remarkable memory, and a sympathetic charity.

Luther learned to know, truly appreciate, and preach faithfully the gospel proclaimed by the angel in the vision given to John.

Chapter 14 of Revelation stands between the revealing of the dragon and the beasts, Satan and the antichristian forces including the Roman papacy raging against Christ and his church, and the revelation of the seven plagues and seven bowls of God's wrath poured out upon the godless inhabitants of the earth. The chapter offers words of comfort, strength and consolation to all the members of Christ's church. It begins with the vision (4th) of the Lamb and the 144,000 on Mt. Zion (vv 1–5). All the saints in heaven are joined about the throne of the Lamb, God's eternal Son, singing the "new" song of the redeemed in praise of him who has come

and paid the ransom for sin. The chapter concludes with the 6th vision (vv 14–20), the gathering of the harvest at the end of the world. In the midst of this chapter, verses 6–13, is the 5th vision of the three angels. The second angel (v 8) proclaims the fall of Babylon, the anti-Christian empire of the two beasts of chapter 13. The third angel (vv 9–11) sounds a loud warning of the eternal punishment of God upon anyone who “worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand.” The text of our sermon study (vv 6–7) are the words of the first angel.

Verse 6

“Then I saw another angel flying in midair...”

John saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven. Commentators have had trouble pairing the word ἄλλον. The last mention of an angel was in chapter 10, verse 1. Therefore some simply omit the ἄλλον, as certain manuscripts have also done. One has a third choice—pair it with the two angels to follow in verses 8 and 9. Then it simply distinguishes this angel from the two to follow. John saw an angel. Though the usual meaning is a spirit of God, angel also is used simply as a messenger, which makes better sense here. The angel, God’s messenger, flew in the midst of heaven, out of reach of the dragon and the beasts upon the earth.

“And he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.”

The message of God’s angel is the eternal gospel. The term, gospel, is used in its wider sense. Verse seven contains the message itself. It is called an everlasting gospel. It is ever the same, never changing (Ga 1:8–9). It exists for one purpose, that it might be proclaimed to those who live on the earth. The noun and infinitive of the same root stem, εὐαγγέλιον, emphasize the idea of news which is good, truly great. It is a glorious message to be shared with all who live on the earth. The angel uses the verb κάθημαι as opposed to κατοικέω in 13:8,12,14, indicating sojourners over against those firmly attached to the earth. To be included are every nation, tribe, language, and people (10:11, 13:7).

Verse 7

“He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory...’”

Verse seven begins with yet another present participle tying the two verses together. John saw another angel, *flying* in midair, *having* the eternal gospel to proclaim, and *saying*. Two aorist imperatives follow immediately. Fear God and give glory to him. Both are a call to repentance. Fear God. It is the same use of the word fear which Luther repeats in his explanation of the First Commandment. What this involves is shown in his explanation of the First Petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Men cannot make God’s name holier than it already is or add to the glory of his name. But we, as children of God, do make his name holy and glorious among men when we preach and teach it in truth and purity and live a holy life according to it.

“because the hour of judgment has come.”

The reason to fear God and glorify him follows. The verb is in the emphatic position. The hour of judgment is not only the last day, but it is now (Jn 3:18, 16:11). It is not to be limited to any one point in time but is the entire time from the fulfillment of Revelation 12 when the child of the woman “was snatched up to God and his throne” (v 5). God’s judgment follows continually upon the dragon and the beasts as announced by the third angel (vv 9–11).

“Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

The message of the first angel concludes with a third imperative. Worship! The thought matches Jesus’ words to Satan in the wilderness. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Mt 4:10). Fear, glorify, worship. Προσκυνέω means to fall down before, prostrate oneself, do reverence, welcome respectfully. Worship

is the repentant sinner's expression of allegiance to God who alone is worthy of praise, honor and love. Worship him "who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." Creation and judgment are mentioned side by side in the verse. He who made all things is the judge of all. Judgment belongs to him. The inclusion of fountains of waters enables us to understand better the words of 8:10 and 16:4, where rivers and springs of water are mentioned as instruments of God's judgment.

Homiletical Suggestions

Following are two basic outlines:

The Enduring Value of A 500 Year Old Gift

- I. *A gift according to an urgent need v 7*
- II. *A gift of infinite blessings vv 6–7*

We Remember Luther

- I. *A man sent by God in the church's darkest hour v 7*
- II. *A man who under God and by God's grace restored the eternal gospel (light) vv 6–7*

With slight variations the thoughts which follow in the expanded outline could be used with either of the basic outlines. Either way, part two of the expanded outline (especially B and C) should receive the greater emphasis in our preaching.

- I. *A gift according to an urgent need v 7*
 - A. In view of condition in the church of Luther's day
 1. A church which defiled its worship: salvation by works, infused grace, sacramental system, indulgences.
 2. A church which gave glory to men: the papacy-antichrist, "mother" church, mariolatry and veneration of saints, celibate life
 3. A church which invited God's judgment: adulteration of gospel, terror of souls, penance, purgatory
 - B. In view of condition of man's heart
 1. Man's sinful nature: the fall, original sin, every nation, tribe, language, people
 2. *Opinio legis*: man's natural bent, man's fruitless striving
 3. God's judgment against sin
 - C. An urgent warning (application)
 1. What was lost we have—pure Word taught by apostles
 2. No occasion for boasting, only sober reflection to
 - a) Remind us of our own inner depravity and blindness because of sin.
 - b) Warn us we can lose our blessed heritage by despising it, taking it for granted.
 - c) Urge us to thank God for his 500 year old gift
- II. *A gift of infinite blessings vv 6–7*
 - A. Luther—God's gift to the church (*a fulfillment of text*)
 1. Early life
 2. University to monastery to priesthood
 3. Doctor of theology—vow
 4. The Bible in Luther's early life, interest, study
 5. Luther the preacher
 - B. Luther's discovery from the Bible, teaching which fears God and gives glory to him
 1. Salvation by grace (*sola gratia*)

2. Justification by faith (*sola fide*)
 3. Distinction between law and gospel
 4. Reason for the greatness of his preaching
- C. Luther's Reformation based upon the Word of God (*sola Scriptura*)
1. 95 Theses
 2. Diet of Worms
 3. In debate
 4. Lutheran Confessions
- D. Lasting results of the Reformation
1. Spread of Reformation: nation, tribe, language, people (not only a German Reformation)
 2. Over the centuries—Lutheranism today
 3. blessings today—our own Synod
- E. Remember Luther (application)
1. Not loyalty to a man, or men, but to Scripture
 2. Luther-like love for God's Word
 3. Willingness to confess the eternal gospel