From Spark to Firestorm: Reformation Events after 1517

Introduction

What do you remember about the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017? What did you like about it? What did you not like about it?

Historical Background of the Heidelberg Disputation (1518)

Christians around the world celebrated the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation on October 31, 2017, which commemorated Luther’s posting of the 95 Theses at the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Most people view this as the date of the Reformation, yet the Reformation is more accurately a movement or a period, not a singular date. When John Tetzel began selling indulgences in Luther’s territory to support Pope Leo X’s rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, Luther was asking for a scholarly debate about indulgences in his 95 Theses. He never received the scholarly debate he asked for. Instead, Luther’s Latin theses (the language of the theological university) was translated into German (the language of the people), and the common people started to question whether they should be buying indulgences. Luther’s views quickly started to spread, and something needed to be done.

In addition to his role as professor at the University of Wittenberg, Luther was an Augustinian monk. As such, Pope Leo X asked Gabriel della Votta, the general of the Augustinian order, to deal with the situation. He delegated it to Johann von Staupitz, the head of the German order of the Augustinians and a mentor of Luther from his time in the monastery. The Augustinians met every three years for a meeting on Jubilate Sunday, the Third Sunday after Easter. On April 25, 1518, they met in the city of Heidelberg. Most of Luther’s friends did not want him to go, but he left on April 11. Staupitz let Luther preside in a debate of theses, a “disputation,” along with a fellow Augustinian, Leonard Baier. This was rather unusual since the chairman (Staupitz) would typically have written the theses – although Staupitz did ask Luther to avoid controversial topics. Luther prepared 28 theological theses and 12 philosophical theses for the Heidelberg Debate. These were not based on the 95 Theses but

gave Luther the first public opportunity for him to present his “new theology.” The result of the debate was a split decision. While many older people were not convinced, some younger people were drawn to Luther, including John Brenz and Martin Bucer, who later would play key roles in the Reformation. Most importantly, the Heidelberg Disputation is a key text for Luther’s “theology of the cross,” noted as one of his most important breakthroughs and legacies.

Discussion of the Heidelberg Disputation
Read the quotations for each section below. Then discuss.

Theses 1-12: The Problem of Good Works
1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.
2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.
3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.
4. Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.
5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.
6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.
7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.
8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.
9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.
10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.
11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.
12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal. (LW 31:39-40)

Give some examples of theses #3-4. What are human works that seem good but are really sinful? What are divine works that seem evil but are really good?
Theses 13-18: The Problem of Will

13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.
14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.
15. Nor could free will endure in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.
16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.
17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.
18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ. (LW 31:40)

Agree/disagree: “People have free will.”

In light of thesis #18, respond to a Christian of another denomination: “Lutherans focus on the law too much. They make people feel so bad. We prefer to focus on the love of Jesus. We want people to feel good about themselves.”

Theses 19-24: The Theology of the Cross

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20].
20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.
22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
23. The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4:15].
24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner. (LW 31:40-41)

Key Terms

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<th>Theology of the Cross</th>
<th>A teaching that Christians will have difficult lives of suffering for following Jesus</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theology of Glory</td>
<td>A teaching that Christians will inevitably have good and even perfect lives for following Jesus</td>
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In light of theses 19-20, 22, give some examples from Jesus’ life, “God hides his presence in suffering.”

Theses 25-28: God’s Work in Us
25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
26. The law says, “do this,” and it is never done. Grace says, “believe in this,” and everything is already done.
27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work and our work an accomplished work, and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.
28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it. (LW 31:41)

These theses explain the difference between the two main messages of the Bible, law and gospel. Consider what the law says and does and what the gospel says and does. Besides thesis #26, how are law and gospel different?

Applying the Theology of the Cross Today

Give some examples of how churches teach, support, or imply a “theology of glory.”

How, in Luther’s words, are those examples, listed above, calling “evil good and good evil”?

Envision this scenario. Your congregation is small and struggling. Your pastor is competent, but he definitely has his weaknesses, and people know it. Some want a better, more gifted, more enthusiastic pastor. Some complain about his weaknesses in private. To no one’s surprise, he doesn’t get along with some members of the congregation, and he doesn’t always help the situation either. For years, young people have been leaving. So the congregation focuses more on engaging with the youth, but this past year, the same small handful are as active as before. They do more work to try and regain members who are drifting away, but those additional discipleship contacts lead to more people being removed from membership. They realize they have not always been zealous in outreach, so this year they decide to do more outreach for Christmas. However, when they did no outreach last year, two people from the neighborhood randomly stopped by. This year, when they sent out thousands of invitations, no visitors came. More work, less results. “I thought this was supposed to be easier,” a church friend says to you. How would you respond?
Conclusion

Use what you learned about the Heidelberg Disputation today to respond to someone struggling in the COVID-19 pandemic. “Where is God in a world of suffering? People are sick and dying. I’m lonely and stuck at home. My job is up in the air. If God really cared, he should give me an easier life.”