

Jesus Christ gives Eternal Life

Today we celebrate what we call the Reformation. Historians say that this Reformation was begun by Martin Luther, when he posted 95 statements to debate on a cathedral door (common practice then, like putting garage sale signs on power poles now). Since the printing press had been invented not too long before this, these were printed and distributed throughout northern Europe with many people agreeing with Luther. This finally led to division in the Roman Catholic Church with especially German-speaking people becoming Lutherans and other Europeans becoming Protestants (this is oversimplifying what happened, but this is to be a Christian “Message”, not an article about history).

However, history has to be recognised, as it shows that Luther didn’t really begin this “re-formation” of the church. There had been other “reformers” in previous centuries, who had preached against various abuses and false theologies. Among them were St. Francis of Assisi, Savonarollo, Jan Hus, and John Wycliffe – their efforts started already back in the 1200s. Luther recognised the efforts of at least some of them, and also recognised them as fellow citizens in God’s kingdom and so part of “the communion of saints,” which we confess each time we speak the Apostles’ Creed.

“The communion of saints” is the whole family of God through faith in Jesus as Saviour: those now alive in this life and those who are alive beyond death in eternal life. “The communion of saints” is sometimes called “the Church on earth and the Church in heaven,” because the Bible teaching is that if you trust in Jesus for forgiveness, you are already a “saint,” one of God’s children. “Saints” are not only in heaven; they (including us) are also here on earth – our challenge is to live as a saint, as much as possible, since this Christian life is praise to God.

The “communion of saints” is what Hebrews 12:22-24 is all about. There, the writer proclaims, “*Rather, you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to tens of thousands of angels in festal gathering, to the assembly of the first-born, whose names have been written in heaven. You have come to the Judge, the God of all, to the spirits of righteous people who have been made perfect, to Jesus, the Mediator of the new testament and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.*”

This is what we already are a part of, even though still sinners here on earth. This was the God-given truth which the Reformation made clear again, just as the writer of Hebrews was inspired to make clear to the Christians of Jewish background then.

No one knows for sure who wrote Hebrews, but we do know why. Many Jews had become Christians, in fact, in those first months only former Jews converted to faith in Jesus as the Promised One who had come – only gradually did even the apostles reach out to non-Jews (Gentiles) with the Gospel. As the number of believers grew, they began to be persecuted – by the Jews and then by the Romans. However, in some of these persecutions only Gentile Christians were attacked – Jewish Christians were not.

And so many Jewish Christians were being tempted to give up their faith in Jesus and just be satisfied with the Jewish religion. Hebrews was written to try to keep them from falling back into that unbelief, that rejection of Jesus as God’s Promised Saviour.

In order to explain this in ways these former Jews could most easily understand, the writer of Hebrews took rituals and incidents, which they knew from Scripture (our Old Testament, their “sacred Scriptures”) to explain to them the “new covenant” (in Jesus – in contrast to the “old covenant”, which God had established at Mt. Sinai.

In the Exodus the Israelites had experienced God’s Presence with great fear. Mt. Sinai apparently became an active volcano: “*burning with fire, darkness, gloom and storms ... a trumpet blast,*” a mountain not even to be touched by human or animal under threat of death (12:18-20). In explaining the meaning of the commandments Luther wrote: “We should fear and love God” – the Old Testament believers sure had the “fear” part of it! By the way, should we obey God because we “fear” Him? I remember being taught that this “fear” actually was “respect.” But in reality, it is “fear” in that if we just want to insist on our own instead of God’s way, then we had better “fear His wrath and not act contrary to” His commandments. Of course, in these days who even cares about what God says – or threatens? Unbelievers don’t care at all! We care, but we act out of “love” for God, thanking Him for His love in Jesus, not because of “fear” (although at times we may need the “slap” of God’s threat to turn us away from an evil we may really want to do – such as hating, or refusing to forgive some one). Anyway, the Old Testament people of God mostly had that reaction of fear, carried over from Mt. Sinai.

In contrast, Hebrews says, “(we) *have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*”, meaning that we have an eternal blessing, which we enjoy looking forward to already, since – through faith – we are a part of that eternal experience already in that it is assured to us.

But how can that be? I sin! I still sin! Even though I don’t want to, yet I do! I sure don’t always live like a saint! So how can I be part of that holy assembly of God’s people, that “communion of saints”?

I can’t! Right! You can’t! Not on your own! Instead, we are accepted, since we have come “*to Jesus, the Mediator of the new testament and to the sprinkled blood*” of Jesus! This reference is to the Old Testament practice of sprinkling blood from the sacrifices especially on the altar, but also somewhat on the people. Realistically, not many of the people were touched by that blood, so the assurance of forgiveness might be doubted (am I forgiven?). Now with Jesus there is no doubt! His blood is sprinkled over all my sins and touches me so that “*the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin*” (1 John 1:7). Now there is no doubt: Jesus did pay for me, my debt, my imperfections, my rebellions; so God does forgive me, and God has already counted me in that number of “*the spirits of righteous people who have been made perfect,*” perfect in God’s Judgment, because He counts the blood of Jesus, the sacrifice of Jesus, as sufficient to take away my sins. Therefore, He sees instead, the perfection given to me from Jesus.

Eternal life belongs to us, not by any of our own efforts, but only through the sacrifice of our Saviour, Jesus Christ!