

THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Revelation 14:6,7

Depth Perception

I'm not endorsing everything on Saturday Night Live, but one old skit kept coming to mind as I studied Revelation 14: "Mr. No-Depth Perception." Many of you young people—imagine that, me saying young people, but I guess that's what turning the big 2-9 does to you—may not remember the skit, but Mr. No-Depth Perception's name says it all. Having no depth percept led him into all kinds of humorous danger. He'd drop things, run into things, whisper things to people twenty feet away, and probably shot free throws like your pastor.

This chapter of Revelation, like the Reformation, is about depth perception. St. John shows the depths of sin and its consequences and the heights of God's love in Christ. He shows us how far we are from heaven on our own and how near heaven has come to us on the cross, in the Crucified. Depth perception.

Lutheranism's biblically grounded grasp of the gospel rightly encourages us take lightly what is meant to be taken lightly, seriously what is meant to be taken seriously, and not to confuse the two. The Reformation was not about new law or more law, but about rediscovered gospel. Some churches might take your beer, euchre cards, and dancing shoes, or add an inch to your already modest dress, but it's not necessarily because God would do so. It's because they've gone farther than our Reformers and, more importantly, than Scripture, and, thus, fallen into the same mess as the Pope and the Pharisees, sweating the light stuff and losing sight of the serious. Scripture itself, which is to be taken most seriously, teaches the new freedom of the gospel in which we can enjoy what God has not forbidden with a clear conscience and in moderation. "*Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*" The only time the light things become serious things is when we start to value them and pursue them as we should only the serious things, so that the lesser gifts are desired more than the greater.

Christ, wrapped in the Scriptures and proclaimed in the gospel, for whom our hearts are prepared by the law: this is the greater gift about which there is no compromising, concerning whom there is no wiggle room. We don't play with the devil and we don't play with Christ. We drown the first and cling to the second. We flee from the first and flee to the second. And depth perception is most necessary in all of this, because the Lutheran knows God's law kills and His gospel makes alive, but only when properly applied.

"*Fear God,*" the angel cries. To the one in sin, "fear God" is a threat, pronouncing God's wrath for the sinner. The fear demanded in this way by the law is the terrifying and paralyzing fear of one who recognizes his or her impending and inescapable doom. And that is what hell is for the sinner: impending and inescapable. Everyone who has sinned has earned sin's wages. "*Be afraid of God,*" the angel's words say to those in sin. And that is what the masses of Luther's day were: afraid of God and His wrath. They knew their sins all too well and longed for an escape from them, so much so that they were willing to pony up the hefty price for which the papacy sold what cannot be sold: forgiveness.

Perhaps we face the opposite problem now, trading fear for indifference, winking at sin more easily and nodding more readily, like some sort of blinking bobblehead, so that

we've begun to view this hour as what we do because we've always done it, or mom and dad did it, or we want to play basketball, or we just to keep Pastor off our backs; so that we view this time as anything less than the desperately needed visit of a dying man to God's emergency room, knowing that, whether or not we always want to go, we need to go, not for God's good, but our own, not because we're healthy, but because we're sick, not for entertainment, but for healing. But why should we pine for that for which we don't feel the need? Why should we fear falling, if we don't see the depths to which we might fall?

Have we changed since the first century, since the sixteenth? Sure we dress funny now and carry more contraptions, but is our sin any less sin, our mess any less putrid? Or do we rather do harm more efficiently, cheat more deceptively, consume more excessively, gossip more rapidly and glossily, instant messaging what we ought not say, with keyboards for our lust and Ipods to serenade our sinful desires? Have we perhaps become even more foolish, taking the light things more seriously than ever and the serious things more lightly?

If the sickness is the same, and perhaps even less concealed, ought we not tremble with the same fear with which they trembled in the first century, in the sixteenth century, and seek the same medicine? "Fear God," the angel cries, but do we cover our ears? God does not make idle threats any more than He makes empty promises.

Many seek to numb the pain of such thoughts, dressing up the unpleasant realities of a sinful world with euphemisms, pleasantries, and a dumb smile. But numbing the pain does little good. Painkillers mask the problem; they don't treat it. No one has ever been healed by Vicodin. Numbness just softens the body's frantic cry for treatment. The Church does a disservice when it numbs what she is called to heal. Faithful pastors must not numb the pain, but fan into flames to make the danger clear, stripping off euphemisms and wiping away dumb smiles. The disease must be exposed to be killed—crucified and buried with Christ.

By God's grace, the Lutheran Reformers, like St. John, saw both the horrible reality of our sickness and the sweet face of our cure in and on the cross of Christ. Though there is no escape for the sinner, there is a Rescuer, casting His own hand into the very fires of Hell to pull us out. But we must leave our sins in that fire with the devil and his crushed head, where they belong. The Rescuer only wants us. And on Calvary He's stretched out His arms to take us, turning our frightened fear into the reverent fear of the believer, which is the grateful love and humble trust of which the Catechism speaks, the forgiven fear, this faith, that alone worships as the angel advocates, that gives God the greatest glory He desires, by receiving the greatest gift He has given: His Son, our Savior.

Today, as we stand at the marvelous precipice of Christ's resurrection, we can rightly marvel at the depths from which we've been rescued. Thank God for such depth perception, and be sure to never lose it. Let our worship be worship and our play be play. Let God's law be His law and His grace be His grace. Let us receive His lesser gifts as lesser gifts to be enjoyed to His glory as His greatest gift of all as the greatest gift: His gospel in Word and Sacrament, where He brings to us what He gave for us: the Crucified, whose wounds are our refuge and whose words are our hope. May God always raise up messengers to sound that message clearly when its ring has been muffled. Amen.