

Christ Jesus it is he

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October 20, 2008

In many church traditions, this Sunday is Reformation Sunday—a time for trumpets and triumphalism, for remembering where we Protestants got it right and for justifying our salvation with a vigorous singing of Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” We may even believe that it is we who are the prophets like Moses, the ones whom God knows face to face.

The Reformation period of the church brought about a renewed spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it also ripped the fabric of Christ’s body into tattered, warring shreds, and that’s nothing to celebrate. If anything, this day should call us to repent of our divisions and to renew commitment to the unity of the church.

But don’t cancel “A Mighty Fortress.” Its culminating focus—“Christ Jesus it is he”—is the perfect hermeneutical lens for today’s Old Testament and gospel lessons. Though there is a lot of darkness in Luther’s hymn—mortal ills, the ancient foe, the prince of darkness, devils, rage and doom—it places triumph and power precisely where it should be: in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This gospel is something that the Pharisees put to the test and that we the church have often tested as well. We want to know what, exactly, we must do to be saved. Which commandment is greatest? Which words correct? Which view of the Messiah true?

In his response, Jesus verifies what the Pharisees know to be true: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang the law and the prophets—including and especially those promises that God gave through Moses. So it seems, at least for a moment, that the Pharisees could feel secure in their salvation.

But of course Jesus pushes it to another level. “What do you think of the Messiah?” he then asks the Pharisees. “Whose son is he?” Why the abrupt change? Why does Jesus not simply answer their question and move on to the next distrusting group? Perhaps he wanted to show them the fulfillment of the promise. Just as God showed Moses the promised land, Jesus shows the Pharisees the fulfillment of the promise: Jesus himself manifests all that on which the law and the prophets hang. What was foreshadowed by Moses now stands before them. Jesus points to this heritage in his words and enacts it as he continues, in [chapter 23](#), to teach about authority and obedience—both of which will enable his hearers to share the gospel.

In doing all this, Jesus links himself to the greatest commandments and forces us to think about the unities within God’s promises. The first is the unity of loving God and loving neighbor. One leads to the other; one strengthens the other. The second is the unity of the Father and the Son: Jesus is the way of salvation, God incarnate, the sign and wonder. The third is the unity of the law and the gospel: ours is a heritage connected to God’s chosen people.

Jesus makes us rethink disunity and division—not just among Jews and Gentiles, but within his church. Jesus Christ, the living Word, is the true hope of reforming the church. He is the hope that pushes us toward repentance and renewal, toward unity. And because he is, every Sunday is Reformation Sunday, and every day is reformation day.