

Reformation Sunday, Epistle, Year A

SHUT UP!

Romans 3:19-28

Reformation Sunday

Analysis by Chris Repp

19Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

21But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

27Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Authors note: My title has a double meaning that might not be immediately obvious. On the one hand, it refers to the law's silencing every mouth and all boasting, and on the other it is

an expression of joyful astonishment at unexpected good news. (For the latter sense, see this YouTube clip from the movie *The Princess Diaries* [2001]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iJ6Q8BHg5s>, esp. the 1:00 minute mark.)

DIAGNOSIS: Shameless Boastfulness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Unrighteousness

We spend a lot of time and energy comparing ourselves to others. If we are well off, we tell ourselves that we deserve to be. If we are not, we are convinced that those who are have wrongfully deprived us of what is rightfully ours. If we are more beautiful than others, we take pride in that. If not, we know that what we lack in beauty we make up for in cleverness, kindness, or “authenticity.” In myriad ways we seek to demonstrate to ourselves and others our superiority. And on this 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, we Lutherans congratulate ourselves for being on the right team.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Under the Power of Sin

Our self-centeredness betrays our true allegiance. We belong to sin. We are under its power. (See Romans 3:9ff.) Our desperate attempts at self-promotion, both individual and corporate, are business cards for the one we serve. And that one is not God (3:18). Even celebrating Martin Luther’s defense of the gospel can, ironically, become partisan and self-serving.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Wages of Sin

Our misdirected faith has consequences. The piper who has been calling our tune is also the one who pays us our wages, which, as Paul will tell us later (6:23), is death. And that is as true for us corporately as it is individually. Both we who wave the Reformation banner and the movement we think we are leading are

doomed when we make it about us and our faithfulness, because even that pious work will not justify us before God. We need to shut up.

PROGNOSIS: Grateful Humility

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Gift of Grace
The solution to our impotence and hopelessness in the face of the silencing law is God's alone. Jesus Christ takes our hard-earned wages and gives us in exchange the gift of unmerited grace and mercy, which, in a stunning reversal, now silences the law and gives us his righteousness. This is good news beyond anything we could have expected or even hoped for. (Shut up!) This is Luther's "ah ha!" This is the intended point of the Reformation. If there is anything to celebrate, it is this still-unmerited gift.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Redemption
Christ's sacrifice redeems us—purchases us for his own. Now we belong to Christ, in whom we have been baptized. (Alleluia!) Trusting that we are freed from our old master and made right with God, we carry new business cards, advertising the one we now work for. Not Peter, not Luther, but Christ himself.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Righteousness
But it's not really work. We're actually retired from the old rat race. And Christ, the one we now serve in retirement, looks suspiciously like our neighbor, whom we no longer have a need to feel superior to. God's love and mercy has made us loving and merciful. Made right with God, we are now being made right with one another. And with Luther we humbly and gratefully recognize that we are beggars indeed, but beggars fed and clothed with Christ, living out his righteousness in the world for the sake of the world.