

“Will No One Have the Guts to be a Sinner?” –Preface and Ur-text

Colleagues,

- 1. The congregation I serve is going to celebrate the Reformation this coming Sunday. So will lots of other Lutheran churches in the U.S., and elsewhere too. Whether and how joyfully they do it will depend heavily on their pastors' opinions about the merits of what happened in 1517 and thereafter, and, more to the point, about the value of a distinct and vivid Lutheran identity for the mission of Christ in the world of 2015. There's dispute about this in most every U.S. Lutheran camp today, whatever its cultural leaning, to the right as well as the left. For her part, the ELCA's Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton knows value when she sees it. Ever since her election two years ago she's been working hard to shove some steel up the Lutheran spines of her large, unruly flock. [Her latest effort along these lines](#) appeared a week or two ago in the October issue of *The Lutheran*. You'll want to read it if you haven't yet. May it whet your appetite for things that follow here.*
- 2. From the solemn to the silly: [Old Lutheran](#) is an enterprise that peddles sub-cultural kitsch, chiefly via the Internet, from its base in Moorhead, Minnesota. They used email this Monday to push their latest product, a zinfandel from the Borra Vineyard of Lodi, California, available in "limited supply," which is simply to say, "Buy today!" The wine's label? You guessed it: [Zin Boldly](#), the words broadly emblazoned over a*

representation of Luther's seal. The attending ad copy includes the famous dictum, Luther to Melanchthon: "Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly..." So sin with zin, shall we? It would be churlish, I suppose, not to chuckle over this, at least a little; though if we failed to grind our teeth when the chuckle died away—that, I'm sure, would be foolish.

3. Better still if we grind our teeth a lot. I submit on this eve of the Reformation's 498th anniversary that Luther's heirs have lost their grip, if ever they had one, on his key anthropological insight. Having done so, they're trashing Christ, damaging the Church, and cheating neighbors of the Gospel God wants them to hear. One sees this going on at the close, personal level of interactions within a congregation. One sees it just as vividly in the operations of our church bodies. When we're forced by time or circumstance to flash our deepest convictions, we prove over and over that we're Lutheran in name only. Scrape away the label, and you'll find a simmering Calvinist, a frothing "evangelical," here and there a bit of closet [Tridentine](#)Catholic. OK, I'm exaggerating—though not as much as I wish I were. What does it say about us when the most we're willing to make of Luther at his best and most distinctive is a little joke for insiders on a bottle of wine?
4. This is, of course, a weighty charge, too weighty by far to deal with in a single post. So what I send today is nothing more than a preface for some posts to come, two or three of them at least, maybe more. They'll arrive in serial form under the title the present post bears: "Will no one have the guts to be a sinner?" This, I'll argue, is the question of the hour that Lutherans ought to be pressing for the sake of a church and a world that keeps tearing itself to pieces in the sinner's mad, incessant

quest to be deemed righteous on one's own account. We Lutherans are by no means strangers to this madness, nor can we be; though were we serious about the astonishing gifts of faith and insight that the Holy Spirit surfaced through Luther and his colleagues, we'd be able at least to spot the madness, and name it, and struggle against it. I, for one, see little or none of that going on among us. Struggles there are, and in grievous abundance; but they're invariably of the kind the madness itself induces, where the fight boils down to who is right and who is wrong, woe to the latter, bennies to the former, Christ-for-us-all being more or less beside the point. Christ always lands in the trash when sinners refuse to own their sin. He's gotten far too familiar of late with Lutheran dumpsters—or again, so I plan to argue.

5. I've been stewing on this for some years now, ever since the fellow walked into my office to say that he couldn't come to communion because that would mean communing with a sinful church. I'll tell that story when I launch the first episode. For now I merely point to it as the slap in the face that got the wheels churning. Around that time I stumbled by sheer accident across an incidental bit in the massive corpus of Luther's output—however did the man manage to get all this on paper?—where he says something about sin that took me by surprise. It seemed blithe and cavalier. I could think of no one else who had dared in my hearing or reading to talk that way. The wheels turned faster. Not long after my title emerged. I mean that question about having “the guts to be a sinner.” I wrestled for a time with “the guts.” It's crude. It sounds careless. “The nerve” would be less offensive. But then it occurred to me how guts are featured in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has them, and in a double sense, not only the English one of “courage,” but

also in the New Testament Greek conception, where churning bowels are a signal of pity and compassion. So gutsy Jesus sits with sinners, and feeds them, and is crucified for them; and in and through all this, God “[is making] him to be sin who knew no sin,” as Paul describes it (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus being sinner-for-us was, first to last, about God-in-Christ having the guts to get the job done. It still is. “Receive the Holy Spirit...”, Jesus said. I got this far in my thinking and returned to my original title. If it scrapes and offends, so be it.

6. Back to Luther. The line about sin that startled me some time ago was not the famous one that Old Lutheran abused for its wine label. I heard about “sin boldly” in my seminary days. The same was true, I’m sure, for all my classmates, though we caught it in passing, and few if any took the time to track down the source and read it in context. Had we done so we might have noticed, already then, how flagrant Luther gets in his recognition of sin as a condition we’re obliged to face, admit, accept, and, with Christ in view, to live with more or less cheerfully. It may be that some or many of you have yet to see the passage, so I pass it along as this year’s Reformation gift, though also as a key piece of grounding for the reflections to come. The date is August 1, 1521, barely two months since Charles V issued the [Edict of Worms](#), making Luther an outlaw. Luther, then, is holed up in the Wartburg Castle. Even so he’s both receiving and responding to a stream of reports and letters from Wittenberg. The latest news is about two disputations that his colleague Karlstadt has undertaken, one about whether priests, monks, and nuns can abandon vows and get married, and the other about making the sacrament available to the laity in both kinds, wine as well as bread. It’s with these in mind that Luther now writes to

Philip Melanchthon. After propounding his current views in both matters, he swings abruptly to the following, behind which must surely lie a pastoral concern for a friend who is staring at the challenge of advocating moves that others will denounce loudly as wicked and sinful. "Break a vow? Are you kidding?" Says Luther:

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. **Be a sinner** and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] **we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness** but, as Peter says, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It is enough that by the riches of God's glory we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. **No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day.** Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner. (Letters I, Volume 48 of Luther's Works, American Edition, p. 281- 282; emphases added.)

7. This was radical stuff. It still is. I can't help but think that had Luther said these things at the Diet of Worms under the grilling of John Eck, he'd have been clapped in irons on the spot and burned at the stake the next day. I'm pretty sure that were someone to talk like this in today's Lutheran assemblies without mentioning Luther as source, he or she would be shown the door, and that right smartly.

But more on this in coming weeks or months, though not immediately. We have some fresh work from Ed Schroeder that awaits your perusal. Look for a first installment of that two weeks from now.

*Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce*