



January 18  
 Festival: Confession of Peter

*Petros*, Peter, which means “rock” made a rock-solid confession, when asked by Christ whom men say that he is, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” This is divine revelation, not given to us by flesh and blood, but by God the Holy Spirit. And our Lord said to Peter, “Upon this rock [petra], I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” [Matt. 16]. But shortly thereafter Christ was rebuking the rock-man when he wanted to resist, with all good intentions, the very rock upon which the church is built: Christ and Him crucified! It is an interesting paradox here portrayed for us in Matt. 16, a very wholesome and worthy lesson for us all. The rock of offense, is the rock upon which the church is built: a bloody, suffering and dying Jesus, scorned and rejected, cross and suffering, not some glorious triumph, at least not in the eyes of the world. Through the deepest and lowliest and most disdainful shame and suffering is how our Lord builds His church. And He uses weak, human vessels, like St. Peter, and the words of His confession. Upon the preaching of the confession of Peter, our Lord continues

to call, gather, enlighten and sanctify the whole Christian Church on earth, and He promises, to the very end, to keep it with Jesus Christ, our head and master, in the one true faith. Praise God for the confession of St. Peter! Glory to Christ for the rock upon which the church is built and for the “rock-men” and “rock-women” who proclaim and share and teach and spread the Word abroad into all the world, in all the wonderful and various vocations given among us! Praise be to God for the confession of St. Peter, the confession of the church throughout all the world.

Painting: To this day, the painting that stands over the altar at the St. Peter and Paul Church in Weimar, Germany, glows with a radiance that takes the viewer’s breath away. It is the most remarkable example of the uniquely Lutheran use of altar paintings to confess the Gospel rediscovery in the Sixteenth Century Reformation.

“A picture is worth a thousand words.” This is certainly true of the centre panel of the altar painting in the church of Sts Peters and Paul, Weimar, Germany. It was begun by Lucas Cranach (1472-1553) and was completed by his son, also of the same name, in 1555. (To distinguish them, they are called Lucas Cranach the Elder and Lucas Cranach the Younger.)

The heart of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation and indeed of the Christian faith, is the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ. This is how Luther expresses it in part 2 of the Smalcald Articles.

“The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification” (Rom 4:25). He alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all” (Isa.53:6). Moreover, “all have sinned,” and “they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood” (Rom. 3:23-25).

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St Paul says in Romans 3, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom. 3:28), and again, “that he [God] himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

If the doctrine of justification is to be properly taught, law and gospel must be properly distinguished. The Formula of Concord of 1577 says (Article 5),

“We must ... observe this distinction with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the Gospel into law. This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort which they would otherwise have in the holy Gospel ...”

That Lucas Cranach clearly understood the central teaching of the Lutheran reformation and the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is illustrated by his altar painting at Weimar.

In the centre background, Moses is shown teaching the ten commandments to the Old Testament prophets. They are standing on a circle of barren path, along with a figure representative of all human beings who are under the law’s condemnation. Man is shown here being chased into the fires of hell by death (pictured as a skeleton holding a spear) and the devil (in the form of a monster wielding a club). The prophets taught, as did Moses, “*Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them*” (Deut. 27:26 ESV, compare Jer. 11:13). Yet it’s not only our actual sins that condemn us, but also the prior sin that we inherit from our parents (original sin). To quote the Smalcald Articles once again,

“Here we must confess what St Paul says in Rom. 5:12, namely, that sin had its origin in one man, Adam, through whose disobedience all men were made sinners and became subject to death and the devil. ... The fruits of this sin are all the subsequent evil deeds which are forbidden in the Ten Commandments ...”

The good news is that God in mercy and compassion saves all who put their trust in His Son. When the people of Israel in the wilderness sinned and were bitten by snakes, God provided a way of escape that prefigured His Son’s death on a cross. All the Israelites had to do to be saved was look at the snake mounted on a pole (Num. 21:4-9). In Cranach’s painting, this is shown in the background on the painting’s left.

Directly in front, Martin Luther is standing with open Bible in hand. His feet and hands are positioned like those of Moses. His message, however, is one of gospel, not law. On his face is a look of steadfastness and serene confidence. He stands on lush grass in which flowers grow, unlike the bare, stony ground on which Moses stands. Of three passages written in German on the open Bible, the third one reads, “*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so also must the Son of man be lifted up, so that all [who believe] in [him may have eternal life]*” (Jn 3:14).

Dominating the painting is Christ on a cross. The amazing message of the Gospel is that by his death, Christ takes away the world’s sin. The message written in Latin on the transparent banner held by the lamb in the centre foreground declares that Jesus is “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn 1:29). His outstretched arms and generous loincloth are also reminders that He is the world’s Saviour. This was John the Baptist’s message, and John is shown standing underneath the crucified Christ on His left side. With right hand pointing up at Christ on the cross and left hand pointing at the lamb, John is shown proclaiming the meaning of Jesus’ death to Lucas Cranach, the painter. Cranach represents all who believe. A stream of blood from Christ’s pierced side splashes on to this head. It is as the first verse on Luther’s Bible says, “*The blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from all sin*” (1 Jn 1:7). Therefore like Luther, Cranach also stands confidently.

There is another verse on the open Bible, to which Luther’s finger points directly. It reads, “*Therefore let us approach the seat of grace with joyousness, so that we may receive mercy within and find grace in the time when help is needed*” (Heb. 4:16). Such approach is possible because Jesus is our victorious high priest. Having paid for sin, He has defeated death and the devil and now lives to intercede for us. Jesus is shown on the painting’s right as the risen One, youthful and full of life, standing on death and the devil, with the staff of his victory flag pushed in the monster’s throat. His gold-edged cloak flows toward the lamb’s banner and the cross. As a result it’s actually both banner and cloak that bear the words, “*the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*”.

“*Believe in God; believe also in me,*” the Lord says (Jn 14:1). From this painting His eyes meet ours, inviting us to believe in Him. The other set of eyes that meet ours belong to Cranach, the painter. His feet face in the direction of Christ. But he has turned from his adoration of Christ to look at us also, inviting us to believe and be saved

along with him.

Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession expresses the heart of Lutheran teaching this way:

“[W]e receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.”

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom. 6:23). This, in summary, is the message of the Lutheran reformation and of its foremost artists, Lucas Cranach the Elder and the Younger.

–Pastor David Buck