

Reformation Means Repentance

It's *that* day again, isn't it? The day we observe the anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation; the day we joyfully sing a number of the grand old Luther hymns, including the so-called battle hymn of the Reformation, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God;" the day the choir presents special festival music with resounding instrumental accompaniment. It is also a day, in recent years, when Pastor Fryer brings me out of mothballs to preach yet again.

The question remains, of course, whether we should *still* be celebrating this *particular* day, this 490th anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his ninety-five theses concerning indulgences on October 31, 1517. Some impartial observers might conclude that we're all living in the remote past, in fact a dangerous past that is better left dead and buried. In this age of ecumenism, of significant movements toward church union, we do well to ask ourselves: Why risk opening up old wounds by commemorating an event that brought about the greatest confessional schism within Western Christendom and that ushered in an iron age of religious wars? Everything depends, obviously, on what we understand the Reformation to have been and on what significance we still attach to it today.

I

What, then, was the Reformation? Clearly that's a very complicated question, and I'll make no attempt to answer it fully. But there is one very popular image of the Reformation that we must dispose of at the outset: the view, namely, that the Reformation was a massive, relentless assault on abuses within the church of the late Middle Ages. On this view Luther was stirred into revolutionary action by the gross immorality of the institutional church, especially on the part of its popes and prelates; and so Luther (and his associates) aimed to reform the church by purifying it of all its filth and corruption.

This popular view receives little or no support from professional historians, not least because they cannot demonstrate that the church in Luther's day was more prone to abuses, or more conspicuously corrupt, than it had been in earlier ages. The most weighty objection to this view, however, is that it gives an entirely false picture of Luther's reforming activity. For it is demonstrably the case that Martin Luther did not intentionally set out to be a reformer, nor did he direct his efforts toward a comprehensive moral renewal of the Christian church and society. He did not, as it were, sit down at his desk one day, survey the bleak scene around him, and then say to himself: Christendom, alas, is a sewer of corruption and I am called by God to change it into a fount of pure, life-giving water. His eyes were not turned outward, but inward.

The great question that constantly occupied Luther the monk and professor was this: How can I, sinner that I am, stand in the presence of the righteous God – the God who searches the heart and knows its darkness? And how can I be certain that *this* God of justice and might is

truly God *for me* – a loving God in whom I can repose all the trust and confidence of my heart and to whom I can look for everything good?

Luther began, therefore, not with the ills of Christendom, but with the precarious situation of his own soul before God. He began not by denouncing the sins and shortcomings of the church, but by confessing his own radical guilt before the holy God and Lord of the church. He began not with rebellion and revolt against the Roman Catholic church of his day, in the name of reforming it of abuses and restoring it to purity. He began, rather, with the call for daily repentance on the part of all Christians, himself included. For Martin Luther, in short, Reformation meant not revolution against the church, but the constant life of repentance within the church.

I know that this interpretation of the Reformation may sound a bit strange, accustomed as we are to think of Luther as the fearless critic of a faithless church. But listen once again to the first, and chief, of Luther's ninety-five theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." In these words Luther gave expression to his deepest concerns.

If it can be said that Luther's famous theses launched the Lutheran Reformation, then it must also be said that this Reformation, in Luther's own eyes, was nothing more nor less than the insistent reminder that the church is to be made up of people whose entire life is one of repentance. For only through such constant repentance can the church be truly the church: God's elect people in Christ who live before God *solely* on the basis of God's own unmerited goodness and mercy.

Even so, if we wish to remember the Reformation today and to claim it as our heritage, we must make it plain that for us Reformation still means repentance: our personal repentance as individual believers and our corporate repentance as members of the body of Christ. It remains to consider, therefore, what repentance truly is and what significance it holds for our life together.

II

The story is told of a present-day bishop of the Church of England who, upon entering the pulpit of his cathedral to preach, mistakenly concluded that the public address system was not functioning. He was heard to mutter under his breath, "There's something wrong with this mike." Whereupon the congregation, well-versed in matters liturgical, duly responded "And also with you."

Well, the sobering truth is that there's "something wrong" with all of us, both individually and collectively. Indeed, as a professor of Bible, Martin Luther well knew that the New Testament word for repentance, the Greek word *metanoia*, means literally "a change of mind and heart." Repentance thus begins with the recognition that left to myself, just doing what comes naturally, I am on the wrong road, moving in the opposite direction from God and God's holy will. Luther's well-known description of this state of affairs is that by nature I am wholly turned in on myself, preoccupied with my own well-being, consumed by self-regard, unable and unwilling to love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and mind or to love my neighbor as myself. The poet W. H. Auden once put it this way:

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

The root of sin, therefore, of the unrepentant life, is a combination of pride and unbelief: self-love and the absence of the fear and love of God. Hence repentance is recognition of my disordered existence, heartfelt sorrow over my pride and unbelief, confession of my utter dependence on God's favor and forgiveness, and the resolve to change the course of my life through the power of God's own Spirit bestowed in Word and Sacrament.

I realize, to be sure, that all this talk about the continuing sin and sinfulness of Christian people, and so about our continuing need for sincere contrition and confession, is liable to misunderstanding. It may even sound insulting in some ears. A number of you may well be asking: “Is it really necessary for the preacher to dwell on our shortcomings and failings, not hesitating, indeed, to call them ‘sins’? Is he trying to create in us some sort of guilt complex? Isn’t the Christian gospel the simple message that ‘God is love’?”

Such questions are entirely appropriate. My response is this. We Christians begin each day with the petition which our Lord himself taught us to pray to his heavenly Father and ours: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This petition leaves no doubt that we are and always remain debtors before God, before whom we ever appear as suppliants for his pardon. Even so, in the familiar words of the First Letter of John (1:8-9): “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Yes, therefore, as every sermon preached to this congregation has surely made plain: God is love – love, namely, for self-confessed sinners and so for people who really know what it means to sing the praises of God’s “amazing grace.” And *no*, therefore, such repentance and confession before God are *not* guilt-inducing, not a form of neurotic behavior, precisely because God’s own word of absolution – “Take heart, your sins are forgiven” – liberates the guilty conscience from its entire burden of guilt, freeing it not from this or that sin, but from all sin and guilt before God the maker of heaven and earth. In confessing ourselves altogether sinful before God, we are no less assured by the Gospel that we are altogether pleasing to God for the sake of his Son who has taken away the sins of the world.

All that I have been saying about the Lutheran Reformation and about true repentance could be summed up by saying that the Lutheran reformers were steadfast opponents of everything in the Christian life and church that would give room to *cheap grace*. The phrase “cheap grace” was made famous by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the eminent German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and confessor of the faith who was imprisoned by the Gestapo in April, 1943 and executed at a Nazi concentration camp in April, 1945.

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), Bonhoeffer defined “cheap grace” as follows:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Holy Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

It would be a terrible, and terribly wrong, indictment of the Reformation to maintain that the reformers preached and taught a message of cheap grace. As we have seen, no Christian teacher was ever more insistent than Martin Luther that the entire life of believers is to be one of repentance, and that the boundless grace of God in Jesus Christ is in truth *costly grace* because it cost God the life of his own Son, whom he delivered up for our transgressions (II Cor. 5:18-19, 21; I Cor. 7:23; Acts 2:23). As Luther wrote in his fine hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”:

A father’s heart [God] turned to me,
Sought my redemption fervently:
He gave His dearest Treasure.

If Reformation means repentance, therefore, today of all days is the proper day for the Evangelical Lutheran Church to acknowledge and repent of its own frequent cheapening of the Gospel. For, in fact, there is nothing deader than a dead Lutheranism, which is ever prone to change the biblical good news into a mere word of comfort for the comfortable, a message of divine acceptance for people who have already accepted themselves.

No less is this the proper day for each of us to exercise that true repentance which our Lord calls for and which Martin Luther, a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, again put at the center of Christian existence. By so doing we may be confident that our celebration of this anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation is proper and God-pleasing, because it serves the Gospel of Christ and not our own glory.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.