

Recommit to Reformation

October 15, 2017 - by Peter Meier



These days much is rightly made of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. ***God used Martin Luther as His servant to reform the church and restore the Gospel to its rightful place.*** As we celebrate and praise God for the good works of Dr. Martin Luther, it's also good and right for us to ask ourselves a serious question:

What sort of reforming work needs to take place among us today?

There are two words that need to be a part of every church's vocabulary.

The first word is ***healthy***. Churches are healthy when they are able to adapt to cultural change, when they have healthy family systems and when they know how to maintain vitality as they age.

The second word is ***missional***. While not everyone appreciates that word, it does describe an essential characteristic of healthy churches. *They are able to think, plan, and act in alignment with the Great Commission.* They understand their community and are engaged with it for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel.

What connects these two words is God's mission (*missio Dei*). Healthy churches know that they are sent. 'Sent' is the meaning of the Latin word '*missio*.' The members of these churches know that they are part of God's missionary force, called, gifted and sent by God to make more disciples who make still more disciples who then gather into groups of disciples. Their vision is to make and multiply disciples. That's why God put us Christians here in the first place.

As we celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, we give praise to God for His work through Dr. Martin Luther. ***Let's consider what the great Reformer had to say about God's mission as lived out by His people, the Church.***

Luther encouraged the **prayers and missionary work** of God's people in his exposition of John 14:12-14:

*When a Christian comes to know Christ as his Lord and Savior, who has redeemed him from death, and is brought into His dominion and heritage, his heart is thoroughly permeated by God; then he would like to help everybody attain this blessedness. For he has no greater joy than the treasured knowledge of Christ. So he begins to teach and exhort others, confesses and commends his blessedness before everybody, and sighs and prays that they too, may come to this grace. He has a restless spirit while enjoying rest supreme, that is, God's grace and peace. Therefore he cannot be quiet or idle but is forever struggling and striving with all his powers, as one living only to spread God's honor and praise farther among mankind, to cause others also to receive this spirit of grace and through it also to help him pray. (Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, vol 2. Concordia Publishing House, 1955, page 959).*

In a letter written in 1522, Luther gets to the **heart of the missionary task**, that is, a heart that knows the preciousness of Christ for itself and simply cannot keep it to himself or herself:

This noble Word brings with it a great hunger and insatiable thirst, so that we could not be satisfied even though many thousands of people believe on it; but we wish that no one should be without it. This thirst ever strives for more and does not rest; it moves us to speak, as David says: 'I believed, therefore have I spoken.' (Ps 116:10) (Plass, page 959).

In his lectures on Genesis 45:9-11, Luther says that those who have come to know God's salvation must **make it their business to tell others**:

After we have learned to know God in His Son and have received the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, who endues hearts with joy and with the peace of soul by which we look with contempt on sin and death, what remains to be done? Go, and do not be silent. You are not the only one to be saved; the remaining multitude of men should also be preserved. (Plass, 960).

Two more quotes will show Luther's conviction that the best way a Christian can serve his or her neighbor is to **bring the neighbor to Christ**:

We live on earth for no other purpose than to be helpful to others. Otherwise it would be best for God to take away our breath and let us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe. But He lets us live here in order that we may lead other people to believe, doing for them what He has done for us. (Plass, 961).

No one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be [a] priest, as Christ says, John 6:45 and Psalm 45:7... as Peter says too, 1 Peter 2:9, You are a royal priesthood so that you may declare the virtue of him who called you into his marvelous light... Here again it is certain that a Christian not only has the right and power to teach God's word, but has the duty to do so on

pain of losing his soul and of God's disfavor. (Volker Stolle, Klaus Detlev Schulz, trans. *The Church Comes from All Nations*. Concordia Publishing House, 2003, page 21).

In his book, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church*, Mike Newman notes that the first Lutherans in the United States carried this gospel zeal and mission understanding with them. During the first 100 years of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, one new church was started every week on average (Newman, *Gospel DNA*, page 37). Newman also notes that from 1870 to 1917, the LCMS was adding on average, about two churches every week. During some years in the 1870s through the 1890's a new church was added every other day! (Newman, page 76). The Lutherans of the new Missouri Synod took their evangelistic work seriously.

From 1917 through 1937 church planting slowed to an average of one new church every two weeks. But from the late 1930's through 1960, the pace picked up again, so that one new church was added every four and a half days (Newman, page 79f).

In the early 21st Century, ***statistics suggest that it is time for a new Reformation.*** The culture is post-church. According to [research](#) by the Public Religion Research Institute, 49% of young adults under 30 are unaffiliated or adherents of non-Christian religions. The church often appears helpless to make a difference in the lives of its neighbors and even its family members. The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation calls us to re-ignite a passion for making disciples who gather together in new groups and new churches.

The Reformation work God performed through Martin Luther is not merely an historical event to celebrate 500 years later. ***Luther's call for every Christian to share the life-changing Gospel message of Jesus with their family, friends, and neighbors is the ongoing re-formation work needed today.*** Making disciples who make more disciples who make still more disciples who gather in groups of disciples (planting new churches) is the task of every Christian and Christian church in this day as it was in the late 19th and early-mid 20th centuries.

Begin with your personal recommitment. Share this challenge with your small group or friends in your church. Ask the following questions:

- Who are my neighbors? Do I know them by name?
- Who are my church's neighbors? Do we love and care about them in ways that are meaningful to them?
- How could we begin to reconnect with our neighborhood as part of our reformation recommitment?
- Where will I start? Who will I talk with?
- What is the "why" that drives this reformation? (Hint, recall the great

Reformation Solas!)

As we celebrate 500 years, let us do so with vigor and thanksgiving. Let us also recommit ourselves to sowing Gospel seeds which will result in a great harvest of new disciples and new churches! This is our purpose as those who follow the Great Reformer, Martin Luther, and as those who bear the name of our Lord Jesus, "Christians."



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Questions for Discussion

Personal or Group Reflection

1. As you celebrate the Reformation, for what are you most thankful?
2. What "re-forming" do you think needs to take place in the church today? In your own congregation?
3. Since God is the one who "forms" His church, how would God use us (you) to "re-form" the church today?
4. What would you say is the greatest Reformation Heritage we possess? What are we doing with that heritage?
5. What does our heritage as Lutheran Christians have to do with church multiplication today?