

A Reformation Day Epistle

Colleagues,

The Reformation drew scant attention in Cleveland, Ohio today, its 500th anniversary notwithstanding. There were no parades in city streets, nor any Lutheran crowds flocking as once they might have to a downtown venue for a jubilant celebration. If any congregations bothered to hold their own muted liturgies, I didn't hear about it. Mine didn't.

After all, it was a working day in America. Then the light faded, and it was Halloween. First things first. The Church's "true treasure," wrote Luther, "is the most holy Gospel of the grace and glory of God" (Thesis 62 of the 95). The kids vastly prefer their sacks of candy. Woe to the parent or pastor who doesn't play along.

Ed Schroeder has written often about Luther's notion of "Platzregen," the Gospel moving like a cloudburst from one place and people to the next. I think I got a glimpse of that phenomenon today. If Cleveland was arid, it showered heavily in another corner of the world I'm familiar with. Tonight, by way of refreshment, I send you a hefty splash from that particular rainfall. I can't think of a better way to honor the Lord who opened the skies over Wittenberg 500 years ago.

Below is a letter from Willard Burce to a throng that gathered many hours ago for a grand Reformation party at a place called Irelya, deep in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, about two and a half miles east of Wabag, a provincial capital. Willard is my father. He was a month shy of his 25th birthday when he and my mother settled at Irelya. The people who invited them there to establish a Lutheran mission outpost had grown up using stone

axes. These days their grandchildren use Facebook. Today's celebration is featured there.

Burce spent 40 years in Papua New Guinea. Almost 30 years have gone by since he retired. He continues nonetheless to be remembered and esteemed, especially around Irelya, as the person who "brought us the Good News." Hence the invitation to contribute his thoughts to the great event today. When I learned of this, I asked him to share what he had sent. I got it this morning. This evening I got his permission to share it with you too.

He asked why I would do that. Here is my answer:

First, because he has an uncanny gift for clear and lucid writing in down-to-earth English.

Second, because his letter is a splendid illustration of the very thing that Luther and his colleagues aimed to achieve: a communication of the Gospel to ordinary, down-to-earth human beings who never outgrow their need to hear it.

Third, because some of you, after slogging through the last three Thursday Theology posts, might still be wondering what Werner Elert meant by "the kerygma." This letter will show you.

Fourth, because it approaches its recipients with the profound respect that "forgiven sinners" are due on Christ's account; and for some of us it may serve as a good example of how to do that.

Fifth, because others might be struck, as I was, by the set of questions at the end. They speak vividly to that "Christian ethos" we've been reading about these past three weeks, that is, to our quality as people addressed simultaneously by the Law and by the Gospel, never other than sinners, never less than forgiven sinners who dare in Christ to face and confess their

sin, and to wrestle with it; who also enjoy God's constant invitation to hear the Gospel and to revel in it.

Sixth, and quite frankly, because I am proud of my father, and honor him, and continue to this day to learn from him.

Finally, I share this letter with you to cheer your hearts as hearts were cheered—God grant—at Irelya this morning.

Thank God for 1517, for Martin Luther, for every other witness to the Gospel. Thank God, this Reformation Day, for each of you.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

**A Letter from Willard L. Burce to the Saints Gathered at Irelya
(Enga Province, Papua New Guinea) on October 31, 2017**

Eau Claire, Wisconsin

U.S.A.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Grace and peace to you all from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for inviting me to celebrate with you the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

In 1949 when Elinor and I came to live at Irelya, we did not know your language and you did not know ours. So we communicated with our new neighbors in Tok Pisin with the help of interpreters, and we remember from those days the faithful assistance of Ete, Lambeane, and Timun.

During the 68 years since then, English has become an official language in your country. Today many of you and your children know English well and speak it and use it in conversation and on your phones far better than I. So I will send you these Reformation thoughts in English, a language we now share. I trust that if needed, you will have someone translate my words, and speak them out strongly like your grandfathers did. May God bless your hearing and your celebration.

My subject is: What would Martin Luther say if he were here with you today?

I think if Luther were with us today, he would not talk much about himself. No, he would lift up the name of Jesus Christ and speak to us about him.

He would take us back into the Old Testament Scriptures and show us how Moses and all the prophets were looking ahead, waiting for the coming into the world of Jesus, the Son of God.

Luther might recite for us these words in Psalm 2: "The Lord said to me, you are my Son. Today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make all the nations your inheritance, and the ends of the earth your possession."

In his speaking to us, Martin Luther would lead us to the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was preaching repentance and was baptizing the people who came to him. But when John saw Jesus coming, he said to the people: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He must increase and I must decrease."

Martin Luther would then recall Jesus' mighty deeds: healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, walking on the water, and even raising the dead.

But even more, Luther would focus our minds on Jesus' words. "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me." "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

And again: "This Good News shall be preached in all the world for a witness to every nation, and then shall the end come."

Luther would then lead us up the hill called Calvary, to the cross of execution, where, on a darkened Friday, Jesus suffered cruel pain and laid down his innocent, holy life for my sins and your sins, and for the sins of the whole world. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Then Luther would take us to the grave where Joseph and Nicodemus laid Jesus' dead body. It is early Sunday morning, and we see that the stone has been rolled away and the grave is empty. We see God's messengers, the holy angels from heaven, and they speak to us: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen, as he said."

Then Martin would lead us up to the mountain in Galilee where our Lord gathered his disciples together after his resurrection, and where he said to them: "My Father has given me all power in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to observe everything that I have commanded you. And look: I am with you always, to the end of the world."

But Martin would not yet be finished. He would take us to Jerusalem and show us the great crowd of people who had gathered there from countries and places far and near for the festival of Pentecost.

We would recognize the apostles, but something had happened to

them: They are filled with the Holy Spirit. Flames like fire from heaven are on their heads, and we hear them proclaiming to the people, boldly and powerfully, the Good News of Jesus, Son of God, Lord and Saviour of the world. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus, so that your sins may be forgiven."

Then we see the apostles baptizing the 3000 people who received the Word of the Lord on that day.

Luther would then remind us how, after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit continued adding new hands, new hearts, and new voices to Christ's flock and his team of witnesses. Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Luke, Mark, Priscilla, Aquila, Phoebe, and Lydia: these are only a few of their names. But the Lord knows them all. In good times and painful times, in persecution, even in death, they were Christ's people and his witnesses to the world.

"This Gospel shall be preached in all the world for a witness to every nation, and then shall the end come."

If Martin were here today, he would lay before our eyes and our minds and hearts the story of how Christ's mighty Word flowed like a river out into the whole world. From Jerusalem the Good News of forgiveness, life and salvation went out to Judea and Samaria, to Asia and Africa, to southern and northern Europe. It traveled across the oceans to South and North America, around the globe to Australia and to the islands of the Pacific and to you, in Papua New Guinea.

Luther would urge you never to forget how the Good News of the grace and peace of Christ came to your country, and how the Lord's witnesses brought it into the mountains and valleys, the forests and villages of the Eastern Highlands, Chimbu, the Western Highlands, Enga, Ipili, Duna, Hewa, and more.

For every person everywhere in this world is a creation of God's hand, whom he knows and cares about with equal great and deep love, and for whom he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life."

"You are my people, the sheep and lambs of my pasture."

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

During his life in the years between 1483 and 1546 Martin Luther was a student, a priest, a professor and doctor of theology, a teacher of children, a musician and a writer of hymns, a preacher and pastor, a translator of the Scriptures into the language of his people, a leader, a husband and caring father. He was a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is Martin Luther's own confession of faith:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, death and the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death, so that I may be his own, and live under him in his Kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from the dead, and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

If he were here with you at Irelya today, Martin Luther might say Amen and end his sermon at this point. But then he might still want to ask you some personal questions about your daily lives, or about your congregations and your life together as Christian people. Here are a few things he might ask about:

Are you baptized?

Do you know the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed?

Do you fear, love, and trust God more than anything else?

Do you know the Lord's Prayer? Do you pray every day?

Do you love God's Word and listen to it?

Do you think about your parents? Do you respect and honor and help them?

Do you care for your children and pray for them every day?

Do you obey the laws of your government?

Do you have a Bible? Do you read and study it?

Do you have a copy of the Small Catechism? Do you take time to study it?

You fathers and mothers, do you have devotions and prayers with your children and the others who live in your homes?

Do you go with your family to worship on the Lord's day?

Do you help to support your pastor and the outreach of your congregation?

Do you love your neighbors, pray for them, and assist them when they need your help?

Do you love and honor your wife, or your husband?

Do you think about the poor people in your communities, and help them?

Do you steal?

Do you use your tongue to lie and to harm others?

Do you confess your sins and ask God for forgiveness?

Do you think about what your Baptism into Christ means for you and your life?

Do you come to the Lord's Table?

Do you look forward to his return on the Last Day?

Amen.

+ + +

My Elinor is now 94 years old while I am only 93. *Mitupela i lapun pinis* [We are exceedingly old]. God gave us an eventful life together as missionaries of the Lord and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

We came to Irelya in February, 1949. We moved to Birip in 1961. From 1967 to 1988 we lived at Lae. Since then our home has been at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, USA.

God gave us seven children: Gregory, Amy, Jerome, Mary, Juliana, Carrie, and Charles. We also have 14 grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

I am not able to send you a video, but I am sending a few recent photos of Elinor and me and of our two older sons, Greg and Jerry.

Please remember us in your prayers, and may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

With much love from Elinor and me and our whole family,

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Willard L. Burce