

Cancel any Celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the 95 Theses.

Colleagues,

Shortly before Christmas, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, (the New York Times of Germany) published an article by Jochen Teuffel, a pastor from the Lutheran church in Bavaria, recommending that the plans already underway for church-wide/nation-wide celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting the 95 Thesis—October 31, 2017—be canceled. Why? Lutheran church life today in Germany is NOT at all what Luther had in mind. So what's to celebrate?

If anything, German Lutherans should scrub any public hoopla and get busy in-house with re-reforming their own church life. "Physician, heal thyself." Which is not far, come to think of it, from the very first of Luther's ninety-five theses: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." So "celebrate" the 500th anniversary of October 31, 1517 with "fruit worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8). There are still 6 years to figure out how to do that. Ditto for Lutherans around the world. Ditto for North American Lutherans.

Marie and I met Jochen in 2004 in Hong Kong. We were on our way to a mission gig in Singapore and stopped in HK to visit dear (and now departed) Crossings-colleague Jim Rimbach, OT prof at the Lutheran seminary there. Jim put me into one of his classes as guest lecturer: "tell 'em about the Crossings paradigm for Bible study." Jochen's wife Nara (from Nagaland in far northeastern India) was one of the students in the class.

Meeting her led to meeting Jochen, which led to continuing conversation, which led to your receiving his FAZ article for today's ThTh posting. Marie and I translated it; Jochen approves of the English words we put into his mouth.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

That's Not What Luther Meant

Protestant worship in Germany today is no longer oriented to Christ, but toward a trivial idea of freedom. The Reformation anniversary celebration might just as well be canceled.

by Jochen Teuffel

In six years (2017) the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation will be celebrated in Germany big time. As a warm-up to the event, already in the year 2008, a "Luther Decade" was declared with distinct themes for each year up to 2017. We can see parallels in the case of veterans' societies, or family reunions: where the past is celebrated with great pomp, things in the present are pretty much passé with any serious activity because the membership is dwindling and the goldy-oldies are just that.

The swan song of the German "Volkskirche" will be the basso continuo for the Luther Decade before we then on October 31, 2017, in Wittenberg put on our performance, a de facto farce, for in this city where the church is disappearing – barely one percent of the populace goes to church on Sunday – here in public view we are going to remember a Reformation event that grounded the identity of the church. The fact that this stage performance can even be put on is thanks to this year's Luther

Decade theme, "Reformation and Freedom." In the religious mentality of today's German protestantism the one thing to remember about the Reformation is liberation from churchly control. That was already articulated by Hegel: "The fundamental substance of the Reformation is this, that humans are by nature created to be free."

Freedom for Christ's Sake

When you speak of the Reformation as an event of freedom, today's German citizens, despite their distance from the church, pay attention. Indeed, the Reformation in Germany did shatter the medieval Corpus Christianum into two different confessions of faith. The previously existing "sacral" unity of church and society was itself the product of a very questionable form of collective Christianization. In the early middle ages the masses were "converted" by following the lead of their tribal chiefs. For more than 1000 years in Europe there was no way to be a citizen without also being a member of the church. Public conformity to the rules of Christianity was in force. One "had to" believe, go to confession, go to mass and submit to church discipline.

It was the Reformation message of justification by faith alone that divested these human requirements within the church of their supposed necessity for salvation. And that, over the long haul, promoted the formation of modern notions of freedom as a right in human society. However, "Christian Freedom" as Martin Luther proposed, was not at all about freedom in civil society nor about do-it-yourself religion. According to Luther the thoroughly sinful human has no birthright to genuine freedom. Humans also have no native right to stand in freedom before the triune God. Whoever declares himself to be free on his own resources in reality has the devil on his back. True freedom is a Gospel-promised freedom "for Christ's sake," a freedom to be

believed over and over again. The only place where such Gospel freedom arises is where we are united to Christ's paschal mystery in word and sacrament, which alone liberates us from human rules and regulations. The apostle Paul said it this way: "Whether the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ."

When the collective memory of German society always comes with the bias of the forced hegemony of a hierarchical church, the Gospel dialectics of freedom don't have a chance. Instead, German folk protestants nowadays, with no conscience qualms, bypass any connection with churchly community and claim Luther as their ancestor in deciding for themselves about religion. In the process they replace the faith that comes by promise with a subjective faith-like consciousness that acknowledges no external authority: the faith that I know to be true for myself I will not allow anyone else to determine for me. Justification by faith for Christ's sake is trivialized. It becomes a confidence in life that needs no liturgy. It draws its intellectual support from a notion that God himself creates such freedom.

When people misunderstand justification of sinners by faith alone as something humans can work out for themselves, and not as something God does, they can then with a supposed good conscience emancipate themselves from any connection to Christian fellowship. What they can think through for themselves does not need communal reinforcement. Self-evidently they can dispense with public worship as well.

Thus protestants are so free that with a good conscience they can prescribe for themselves a (literally) a-social religiosity. Whoever does religion "solo" with no need to go to church is seen as a model for protestant freedom. So it is no surprise that for Sunday services in Germany on average less than four

percent of church members are there and – contrary to Reformation intentions – most often with no Lord's Supper celebrated. And when children are baptized it is a loving event just for the family. If doing your own thing in religion becomes the standard for church life, then the primary concerns can be nothing more than esthetics (for the educated) and entertainment (for the masses).

At best then, in times when crises arise and self-religious coping fails, then the church may be needed – at least at the graveside – for pastoral comfort. However, when it comes to money, there protestant freedom stops. Despite all disconnect from formal religion, the German protestant must pay financial tribute to his own "Church of Freedom" (Wolfgang Huber). In place of freewill offerings, the church exacts a donation in the form of church tax as public legal requirement. The only way to avoid that is by the formal legal process of "Kirchenaustritt" (leaving the church) before secular authorities.

Today's German protestantism operates with a neo-Platonic world view, understanding the church as a service agency for special needs. That has very little in common with the church of the Reformation. When all is said and done, the reformers of the sixteenth century sought primarily to reform the church according to the Gospel, from top to bottom. They had no notion of a do-it-yourself religion emancipated from the church. That is what Luther said in the Large Catechism, that the Holy Spirit "first leads us into His holy congregation, and places us in the bosom of the church, whereby He preaches to us and brings us to Christ." The church is "the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God."

Do-It-Yourself Religion as Dogma

According to Luther, being a Christian is possible only in the

living community of the church. Consequently the constitutions of the Lutheran territorial churches in Germany are juridically explicit about their corporate connection to Christ. Lutheran pastors in their ordination vow commit themselves faithfully to “carry out the office entrusted to them in obedience to God, and also teach in purity the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is given in the Holy Scriptures and witnessed to in the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.” Yet in practice this communal formal commitment is sacrificed to the ideology of do-it-yourself religion. So pastors can say both in church publications and from the pulpit, in all self-confidence, that Jesus’ death on the cross is not a message of salvation, and no one in church leadership will take any action against such de facto violation of the church’s constitution.

As long as people misunderstand the church to be an ideological enterprise, based on an idea that God exists, accompanied by certain religious convictions, they cannot even comprehend what the Reformation was all about. If the protestant church in Germany were honest to itself, the Reformation celebration in 2017 would have to be canceled as a church event. That’s the only way to avoid a tragic self-dramatization of do-it-yourself religion – sadly, costumed in clerical vestments.

That would not have to mean an end for any Reformation celebration in the year 2017 at all. After all, there are congregations in the territorial churches, independent churches, and pietist communities which have remained true to the Reformation heritage. Even the Roman Catholic church itself is taking something from the accents of the Reformation. Rome’s liturgical renewal in the last century is focused on community with Christ. Yes, there are distinct doctrines in the Roman church which protestant Christians cannot appropriate. Even so, with its authoritative teaching centering on Christ the Roman Catholic church is much closer to the Reformation than is any

do-it-yourself protestantism.

Ecclesia semper reformanda – the church always needs reforming in order to remain true to the Gospel. Needed is a complete reform of the church moving toward the congregation as the church's primary locale, without payment of church tax being the criterion for church membership. Apart from such full-scale reform, the so-called Volkskirche [church of the people] will evaporate into pagan civil religion. Then we might have in our churches a helluva good time – but any real life will have come to an end.

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