

Why the Reformation Matters Today (Part 2)

Last week we sent you [the first installment of some reflections by Felix Meylahn](#), in 2017, about the import of the Reformation for the church's life today. Here is the second and final installment. Keep your eye peeled especially for Pr. Meylahn's understanding of what the church's mission is about. If any of you have feedback, we'd certainly welcome it.

By the way, if you missed last week's installment, do glance at it for some basic information about who our writer is, and where he lives, and what he does.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

Occupy Reformation 500 (Part 2)

By Felix Meylahn



3. Reformation-Hermeneutics

There are dimensions of “Reformation hermeneutics” that we need to rediscover and learn to use again, as they are indispensable for truly understanding the message of the Gospel.

Here we have come to the core of what Reformation theology is about: the Word of God and what that Word does to us. “Theology is for proclamation,” says Gerhard Forde in one of his book titles. That’s one way of putting it. The theologians of the Reformation called the church a creatura verbi, a “creature of the Word”; or to use the metaphor of the potter, if God is a “potter,” shaping us as earthen vessels for the Gospel, preachers are God’s “assistant potters,” helping to shape the congregations through God’s Word—God’s left and right hands, to use the Reformation metaphor for Law and Gospel. This is in essence what Luther was constantly getting at: that salvation—being saved from sin, death and the devil—does not happen on account of some human initiative, performance or action, but on account of God’s Word becoming active in the

lives of the hearers. For this God surprisingly uses humans—preachers (can you believe it?), fallible and weak creatures who doubt and stumble along but are nevertheless used as instruments of salvation by the power of the Holy Spirit (See Romans 10:17: “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”)

How do we then preach? By becoming **poets** who tell **the story of God’s faithfulness** in such a way that we and our listeners can find our/their place and role in the story and live in this story as redeemed/renewed children of God. Walter Brueggemann, in his book, “Finally comes the Poet – Daring Speech for Proclamation” says that Preaching should be “Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World” (*Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989)). And here is Frederick Buechner, in his 1977 Beecher Lectures on preaching:

“The Gospel [Lutherans would differentiate and say, “The Law”] is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it [the Gospel] is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy. And yet, so what? So what if even in his sin the slob is loved and forgiven when the very mark and substance of his sin and of his slobbery is that he keeps turning down the love and forgiveness because he either doesn’t believe them or doesn’t want them or just doesn’t give a damn? In answer, the news of the Gospel is that extraordinary things happen to him, just as in fairy tales extraordinary things happen. Zacchaeus climbs up a sycamore tree a crook and climbs down a saint. Paul sets out a hatchet man for the Pharisees and comes back a fool for Christ. It is impossible for anybody to leave behind the darkness of the world he carries on his back

like a snail, but for God all things are possible. That is the fairy tale. All together they are the truth.” (*Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 7f)

Cast in Lutheran terms, this suggests the following dynamics for telling the Gospel story:

Tragedy: Pain and brokenness, guilt and shame under the Law.

Comedy: The hilarity of the Good News; the Augsburg “Aha!”

Fairy Tale: The creative poetry of being new creatures of God’s creating word.

4. The core teaching of the Reformation: “The justification of the godless sinner by grace alone”

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ities are given clarity and direction by it. It has often been called “the article by which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). If this article isn’t understood well, if it is neglected, if it is derided or set

aside for the sake of any other gains—be it social relevance, political correctness, church growth, popularity or anything else—we will eventually realize that the church no longer has anything to say that others cannot say and are not saying better. Without this article the church should close its doors and give up any claim to being vitally important. And on the other hand, the church of Jesus Christ is the only community/institution/organisation that has the task to proclaim this article and has the means to do it properly, these means being Word and Sacrament.

Let's revisit the formulation of this article in the Augsburg Confession and start from there. I include the article that follows it, because it is an integral part of the whole concept of justification.

Article IV: Of Justification. *Also they teach that humans cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, as they trust that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.*

Article V: Of the Ministry. *That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who trust that they are received into grace for Christ's sake.*

The central insight of this doctrine is that in Christ God's grace is given to us as a free and unconditional gift. This

engenders a response of gratitude, expressing itself in a loving and caring engagement with human beings and the whole of creation.

Now, as convinced as I am about this core of the Gospel rediscovered in the Reformation, it does have some serious problems. To put it simplistically: in their traditional interpretation the two key articles above (CA 4 and 5) reduce the life of faith to the vertical relationship of humans to God. At the time this was necessary and in a certain sense revolutionary. Even today, in societies where the individual does not have freedom beyond the life of the group/clan/tribe/nation, it is a revolutionary message: you are a child of God—your relationship to God is personal and God is directly “interested” in your life. And this caring, gracious relationship does not depend on your performance of works, it is not measured according to your moral, religious or social standing, or your performance. But in a society that has become overly individualistic and focussed on personal fulfilment, this message can become a legitimization of the stark individualism that is lived out egotistically at the expense of the community. So the core teaching of the Reformation needs to be “reformulated in such a way that our identities are given clarity and direction by it.”



What does it mean that we are saved by grace alone, through Christ alone and that faith alone is the adequate response to this saving grace—a response that is engendered by God’s gracious proclamation? We need to unpack this core teaching.

Let’s remember that the initial spark for the reformation “happened” when the fervent monk Luther found himself trying in vain to be religious according to the requirements of the “Law”. He observed the church abusing the impact of God’s Law for its own purposes by riding on people’s bad consciences and enticing them to buy their salvation with money. Now, today there are (hopefully) no churches selling indulgences for plain money, but the idea of having to earn your salvation through some kind of performance/contribution/religious or social action is still around—it’s inside us too—and it’s often used in a very subtle way to manipulate or coerce people into doing/being/performing in a particular way.

5. Living Justified = Living Justly: The Life of Sinners saved by Grace

A socio-political reading of everyday life, both public and private, is needed for identifying God's salvific intentions for the world today.

Is "salvation by grace alone through faith alone, on account of what Christ alone did" merely something that sorts out our personal relationship to God and finalizes where we ultimately land up after this life on earth is over? Unfortunately this is what was mostly thought and even propagated by the church since the Reformation. Reading Luther carefully would very quickly show that this is certainly not what he taught nor, in fact, what the biblical message of salvation intends. Yes, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone on account of Christ alone, through no merit or contribution on our part—but saved from what? And saved what for? Just to get to heaven once the ordeal of this life is over?

We are saved from "sin." Sin is the core attitude of all humans who are born believing that they are the center of the universe and do not need God to rescue them from sin, death and the devil – "I can sort myself out, thank you very much." Through this attitude humans have become *the* problem of creation. The story of Adam and Eve eating from the tree exemplifies the problem God has with all humans: they don't want or need God. Instead they want to be God themselves. This attitude and the actions it engenders has all but destroyed the good creation of God. What we are saved *from*, therefore, is the desire and compulsion to be the center of the universe with all the problems this causes. What we are saved *for* is to be instruments of God's salvation for this world—once we do not have to save ourselves by looking out for Number One, we can look out for everyone else we come across. And this is to happen not only in our private lives, but

publically too. In fact, this is the Christian's witness, that God wants all people to be saved— all to be included in the "Kingdom of God."

The problem is that instead of proclaiming the Kingdom of God in this world—i.e. a community courageously attempting to live the Christ-like alternative in this world—Christians have established the religious institution called "church" that basically sees to its own survival. The name "church" actually implies something totally different from an institution. It comes from *kyriake*, which is derived from *kyrios*, i.e. Lord. *Kyriake* means "those that are of the Lord," as in those that follow the Lord, the Savior, the Messiah, the Christ, bearing the cross for others by loving, caring, and being there for others, especially those on the margins who have been excluded, derided, exploited, used, and abused—as He did!

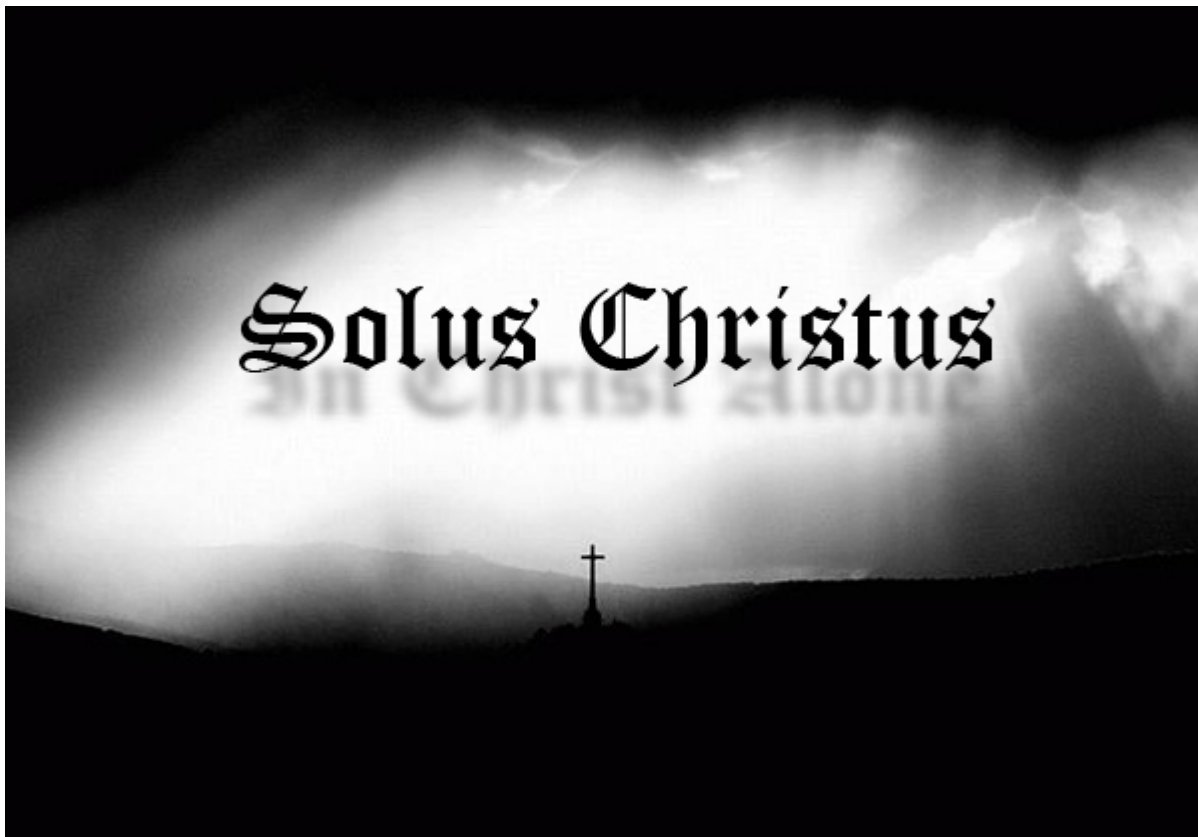
We celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and yet most people, even the theologians, are oblivious to the radical implications of the discovery that was made by the Reformation. To put it in a nutshell: if we are justified by God's grace, then our lives become just. This cannot merely be something like God ignoring our sinfulness or closing his eyes to the consequences of sin. Rather, God justifies us in order to change, transform, and put right what is wrong in the world. If we ignore this, we are not taking grace seriously at all. God forgives our sins and thereby implies that we can now live differently. Of course we'll sin again, perhaps even in the same way; but this should not make us complacent or resigned to staying the way we are. Yes, God loves us and saves us while we are still sinners, but this love certainly won't leave us the way we are. Through the gifts of the Holy Spirit it will engender good works in and through us, it will let the new creation, which we are in Christ, arise. Saved life is not a

life of anxiously running around trying to fix ourselves or the world, but a life of joyfully living out of the grace we have received and gratefully giving to others of the love we have so abundantly been given. And this changes the way we deal with each other also in the public spheres, in politics and our economy. Luther for one, was adamant that the banking system that was just starting to flourish in his time was critically flawed because it was based on usury (*Wucher* in German), and he wrote a series of scathing indictments of this practice. But these were conveniently forgotten soon after his death by most of the Lutheran Christians.

Allow yourself to be challenged and questioned by a set of theses which were written by a group of theologians who have come to realise that celebrating the Reformation means more than just a sentimental remembering of the “good old days”. See [“Radicalizing Reformation – Provoked by the Bible and Today’s Crises.”](#)

The idea here is not to agree with everything proposed in this thesis, but to provoke rigorous debate about what Reformation theology can mean today.

6. We need to develop new institutional forms of a critical praxis of discipleship by which one listens to congregations and the world in which they want to be Christian Communities.



After we have gone through the basics of our faith as it has been passed on to us from the Reformation

fathers and mothers through the various traditions of mission and church work, we need to ask the rather mundane question: So what? If we have realised that the Reformation cannot just be celebrated as a fondly remembered milestone that was reached 500 years ago, but that it was an impulse that calls for continuous reformation (the classic Latin expression is *ecclesia semper reformanda*), then we need to ask: how can we be the church of the Reformation today?

I mentioned previously that despite this reformational impulse of continuous transformation, the churches that have developed out of the Reformation have become institutions with a rather ponderous and often completely inflexible and hierarchical apparatus and structure that hinders and in some cases even actively prevents any transformation toward being church in the world today.

In view of this inability or unwillingness to change, we need to creatively seek ways to prompt or provoke change by asking the

difficult critical questions: Does our church— our faith community—in any way still understand itself as a healing, salvific alternative to the way the world lives? Or have we become a religious version of society (western capitalism), that however unknowingly and perhaps unwillingly stabilises the status quo, the society in which competitive consumerism ultimately determines our attitudes and actions. Yes, we're binding up the wounded of this society (for example, through pastoral care and a caring attitude within the congregation), but we are no longer aware of the true calling of discipleship: to build an alternative world by creating a community that is radically different from this world, based on the following four faith convictions:

- 1) We and all people are justified by grace alone.
- 2) We are called to follow the way of responsible freedom and loving service to all.
- 3) God's affirmation that all humans are equal in dignity (the anti-hierarchical and non-discriminatory thrust of Christian discipleship).
- 4) The message of the advent, i.e. the "nearness" and coming, of the "kingdom of God".

What would such a community look like? The book of Acts describes such a community in the context of life in the Roman Empire during the first century AD. What are we called to be in the context of the global empire of competitive consumerist capitalism?

—to be continued.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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