

## Why Celebrate the Reformation?

by Robert A. Kelly, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

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We live in an ecumenical age, an age when Christians are working very hard to overcome divisions between churches, yet we Lutherans continue to celebrate the day 490 years ago when Martin Luther began a debate about something called indulgences which led to the fracturing of the church in Europe. Why should we Lutherans go on celebrating an event which led to the division of the church? If all we are celebrating is our separation from the Roman Catholic Church, we should probably stop right now.

Yet Lutherans do have a good reason to celebrate the Reformation — if we remember what Luther's efforts to reform the church were all about. We celebrate because Luther discovered something important about the Gospel that is still important today. We ought not to be celebrating division or our own separateness as Lutherans, but we should be celebrating the discovery that the Gospel is God's unconditional promise in Christ.

This is important because even Lutherans don't always believe what Luther said about the Gospel. We claim to be the church of justification by faith, but perhaps as many as 60% of us think that we are right with God because we are good, moral, hard-working, Bible-believing, church-going people.

I suppose that we really shouldn't be too surprised that most people have never accepted what Luther said about the grace of God. Our whole culture is full of messages to us that we only get what we deserve, that success is based on achievement and performance, that those who work hard rise to the top and those who don't work hard fall to the bottom. One of the fundamental beliefs of our culture is that you get ahead through hard work and positive thinking. Every one of us is affected in one way or another.

Our belief in hard work and positive thinking has its problems. Luther was one of those who saw the problems with the sixteenth century version of this faith. The church in his day taught people that if you did your best, God would lift you out of a state of sin and put you in a state of grace.

Then, in the state of grace, if we continued to do your very best God would give you the

grace necessary to go to heaven. If you sinned, you were back at ground zero — and if you died in a state of sin you went to hell.

The problem with all this, Luther realized, is that once you know about the reward and punishment system, you can't love God unselfishly, the only way is really "doing your very best." You realize that you only love God because if you don't you are damned. You begin to hate this tyrant God who has given you a condition which you cannot fulfill for earning grace.

Luther concluded that the problem is not with God, but with the idea that getting right with God involves fulfilling some set of conditions. For Luther the Gospel is God's unconditional promise in Christ, and faith is being confronted by this unconditional promise and having to live our lives in the light of this radical promise. In Christ God's love and acceptance comes to us with absolutely no strings attached. Because of what God has done in Christ, the future is open to us and is no longer limited by conditions. Christ's life has become our future through baptism.

Personally I celebrate Reformation Day because I need to hear Luther telling me that God's grace is a relationship of unconditional love. I need to be reminded that there is no way we can force God to put conditions on the love given us and all people in Christ. When Luther says we are justified in Christ by grace alone through faith alone he is saying that in Christ God has fully and completely accepted us and has affirmed our worth and given us purpose in life totally and utterly apart from any conditions we might or might not be able to fulfill. I need to hear that message again and again because it is a message I am not naturally inclined to believe.

This message is the whole basis of the Lutheran Reformation and the whole reason for being of the Lutheran church. It was for this message and for this message alone that Luther was willing to risk splitting the church. It was for this message that Luther worked and struggled all his life. If we lose the Good News of God's promise of unconditional acceptance of sinners in Christ, then we lose our reason for being.

I think that we should celebrate the Reformation with great gusto and loud singing, but if we want our celebration of the Reformation to ascend above denominational chauvinism and hypocrisy, then we need to be serious every day about believing, teaching, and confessing the message that God loves us and all people unconditionally, with no strings attached. We need to take seriously, celebrate, and communicate the fact that Christ died precisely for the ungodly and sinners — and we need to let Jesus' death on the cross be the renewal of our worship and life together.