

Out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publicly discussed at Wittenberg under the chairmanship of the reverend father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and regularly appointed Lecturer on these subjects at that place. He requests that those who cannot be present to debate orally with us will do so by letter. (The Eve of All Saints' Day, 1517)

It seemed like a good idea at the time! Five hundred years later, we know that event unleashed a feud between “reverend father” Luther and the pope. This was all about the sale of indulgences. It bothered Luther because people believed that buying indulgences erased guilt over trespasses and transferred souls suffering in purgatory to heaven. Soon, with more to get off his chest, the “reverend father” was feuding also with others, like reform-minded religious leaders once inspired by him. Incessant feuding spawned more and more doctrinal disputes, showering the lands with adherents to each disputed doctrine. I call it “the Big-Bang period” of church growth.

The Christian witness lost credibility, criticized for resembling an orchestra of capable musicians all following the same conductor, but each playing from a *different* score. Instead of facing the music, the various denominations became zealous and clenched tighter and tighter the doctrines of their beloved forebears. This partisan zeal became an indicator of congregational vitality.

By the middle of the 20th Century, an emphasis on reconciliation arose, energized by a reform movement within the Catholic Church known as Vatican II. In response, the Lutheran Church, and mainline Protestant church bodies, recognized a need to be reconciled regardless of doctrinal differences; reconciled despite years of self-righteous distrust; reconciled instead of standing separately in the hope of standing out individually.

Reconciliation efforts over 75 years have shaped a present-day ecumenism that goes beyond symbolic gestures, while rooted in a reform movement that began on the Eve of All Saints' Day 1517 and never went away. Need proof? Consider that at this 30th assembly of the NPS followers of Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Ludwig von Zinzendorf, Henry VIII, and John Knox are formally seated as voting members. 500 years after Luther's 95 Theses saw the light of day, the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod – ELCA gathers in assembly, boldly inserting the words “repentance” and “common witness” into our effort to be reconciled with the Catholic Church. Paul's words in Romans 8:14 speak of a truth come to light: *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God [and] it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God....*

So much has transpired since “the reverend father” Luther went public with his spiritual grievances. “Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and regularly appointed Lecturer”, he was prepared to defend his grievances. He was not, however, prepared for what would be asked of so many for so long as the impact of his grievances persisted and spread. All of the historical significance attributed to Luther would make him *more aggrieved*.

So aggrieved, I think, that if standing here now, he would exclaim, “You 21st Century Christians are shortsighted and fools to mark my All Saints' Day 1517 debate challenge as the start of the Reformation.” He would further observe that 500 years are too few to contain the perpetual efforts made to reform the church. “Go back 800 years,” he would contend, “and observe Pope Gregory X's attempt at reformation by addressing

the East/West split in the church and by addressing various church abuses. Two hundred years before me, there was John Wycliffe, and a century before me, Jan Huss.

So, has it been 500 years of reform...or 800 years...or 1,960 years of reform, going back to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans? For Paul, the gospel unleashed God's power to save by faith all who believe – the same all ... *who are led by the Spirit of God [and] are children of God*. His appeal to believers was expressed with words meant to nurture a church abundantly gifted for the sake of repentance and reconciliation, for the sake of common witness.

Review church reform over the course of 500, 800, or 1960 years. You'll find some consistent dynamics. Circumstances unsettling the church at any given time were generated within – despite Paul's appeal. No one called in a consultant to strategize how the reform should take place; reform erupted. Often, though not always, it coalesced in a person or group. And it was, more often than not, painful because of the way relationships were bruised in the process. So, after 500, 800, or 1,960 years of reformation, this is a bruised church.

The bruising reform effort commemorated this year arose in the course of a common practice of the time: one teacher/monk venting his spiritual grievances for the sake of public conversation about them – nominally about indulgences, doctrinally about justification. The debate probably never took place as Luther imagined it would. In its place, back-and-forth verbal sparring ignited, quickly escalating into an all-out, continent-wide bar fight. Within a decade northern Europe was facing political, economic, and social upheaval, as well as religious turmoil that would last the better part of a century. It left the world a bruised habitation.

Do we really want to mark the anniversary of an event that produced such a conflicted state of affairs? Because we are marking it, let us do so in thanksgiving for all reformers, including those in our time who continue the effort at repentance, reconciliation, and common witness. They courageously bear witness to Paul's appeal in Romans. *[I]t is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.* Paul's words make it clear that all the church's reform, reconciliation, and common witness are lodged in the bruising, suffering, and dying of Jesus.

In the bruised Jesus, God offers repentance, reconciliation, and common witness for the sake of a bruised church *and* a bruised world. This is our hope, as God's children in Christ Jesus, wondering when this bruised church will be reformed *finally*, and how much reconciliation it's going to take to mend this bruised world. Not that our humble efforts at repentance, reconciliation, and common witness should be discarded, but that without being rooted in thanksgiving to God for the reconciliation that is ours in the bruised Christ Jesus, our efforts have no traction.

To a bruised world: God the Holy Spirit set this ever-reforming church into motion, and is prepared to endure whatever embarrassment it might produce because God the Creator loves this bruised world. To you, a bruised church: there is an intention for our cacophonous symphony; an intention defined not by a well-honed but disputed doctrine, but by the cry of one irrepressible Mary Magdalene: "I have seen the Lord!"

Alleluia! Christ is risen!