



ARE WE CAPABLE OF REFORMATION? REFORMATION DAY 2010 By Rev. Steven D. Spencer

John 8:31–36

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

There is a saying in Latin: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, the Church is always being reformed! That saying is true; for the Word of God is not a dead letter, but a living, active, Spirit-filled Word. That Word does things to its hearers, the Church. The Word kills and it makes alive. It works repentance, which is both a painful and joyful experience at the same time. The Spirit of God is always blowing the breath of life over the smoldering coals of your faith, fanning faith into a flame, causing the Church's prayers to rise as clouds of incense before the Father. The Church is always being renewed and reformed by the Spirit of God through the Word.

The question facing Lutherans today, particularly in America, is this: Are we still capable of reformation? Are we capable of being reformed ourselves? Will we continue to abide in the Word of Jesus and be shaped by it? Or have we become like the Jews in our text who once believed in Jesus - and become stubborn and unteachable, boasting only of liberty. Do we likewise claim "We have Luther as our father, and we have never been in bondage to anyone?"

The Reformation is not an occasion for boasting on the part of the sons of Luther – not when Lutherans are more divided and fragmented today than ever before in our history – not when every congregation today seems to do what is right in their own eyes without any peripheral vision for the Church's unity – and not when the good news of God's free and unbounded grace in Jesus Christ is overshadowed and even obscured by modernism, secularism, pietism, rationalism, pop-psychology, and an institutional obsession with growth at any cost even willingness to use secular means.

I'm not entirely sure how it happened, but we have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten that Luther never intended to create a new Church, let alone a protestant Church body which bears his name. We have forgotten what the Reformers confessed in the Augsburg Confession in 1530 when they said, "...nothing has been received among us, in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or to the Church catholic" – that we retain the Mass and celebrate it better than our opponents every Lord's Day and festival day; that we Commune only those who are instructed, examined, and absolved; that we retain private absolution and consider it wicked to remove it from the Churches or allow it to fall into disuse, that no one preaches or administers the Sacraments in our Churches without call and ordination; that we retain the traditional liturgical forms, the lessons, the prayers, and the vestments.

I'm afraid what's happened in our day is that we have neutered and housebroken the Reformation, made it palatable to protestant America, packaged it into a tidy little denominational box, stamped a purple corporate logo on it, and turned it into a franchise operation with locations in all fifty

states. We have forgotten the vitality of what Lutherans have always been - a movement within the Church confessing the truth, not just one more bland Protestant denomination.

Synods and Church bodies come and go. They're always a bit wobbly, always uncertain, always in need of reformation and renewal. The same is true for congregations. Congregations spring up by the will of God, and fold for the same reason. Only the Lord and His Word stand forever. Only the true Church - the one holy, catholic and apostolic - which rests on the prophetic Word, whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ, the crucified, risen, and reigning Son of God, whose building blocks are the Baptized sons and daughters of God, only that Church can withstand the gates of Hell itself.

Jesus said, ***"If you abide in My Word, you are My disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."***

To abide in the Word is to abide in Jesus Himself, for He is the Word made flesh. God the Son, the Word through whom all things were created, was preached into the ears of the blessed Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit, and thereby was conceived and born as our Savior Jesus. That Incarnate Word was nailed to the cross for the life of the world, raised from the dead to make us right with the Father. Jesus, the Word made flesh, now reigns over heaven and earth so that all who believe in Him partake of His glory. To abide in the Word, then, is to rest in Jesus – in His death, His resurrection, and His ascension – believing that His cross was for you, and that He is now your Life, your Glory, and your Salvation.

Abiding in the Word, therefore, involves several things. First and foremost it means remaining in your Baptism. Baptism places you into the death and life of Jesus. You put on Christ and are made a member of His body, the Church. You are washed with the water and the Word –immersed in the Word and Name of God. You are clothed with Christ in Baptism, and covered with His righteousness. To abide in Jesus' word is to abide in Jesus' Baptism.

To abide in the Word is also to hear the Word – to cling to it in faith. We cannot abide in Jesus' Word unless His Word abides in us. That's why St. Paul says: ***"Faith comes by hearing."*** Hearing requires preaching, and so God has called and ordained preachers to speak the Word in a living and active way. The preached Word is one of the lasting legacies of the Reformation. Once again, preaching was heard in the Churches, as it had once been in the ancient Church. As Luther put it, the Church was to be a "mund haus – that is the mouthhouse for the forgiveness of sins," a place where the Gospel would be preached and heard.

To abide in the Word is also to abide in the Scriptures, which the Holy Spirit caused to be written and collected for our learning. The invention of the printing press and Luther's translation of the Bible into the common language of the people brought the Scriptures to people in a new way. Never before was the Bible so accessible. But there is an inherent danger here, and Luther recognized it. He saw the danger of the Scriptures becoming unbuckled from the Church. He was concerned that every person would become his or her own "pope" and begin interpreting the Bible however he or she saw fit. You hear it all the time, whenever someone disagrees with the Church's teaching. They say: "That's your interpretation, Pastor." That's why there are now thousands of protestant denominations, all claiming to have the true and correct interpretation of the Bible.

That's why Luther wrote the Small and Large Catechisms. They were to serve as a roadmap to the Scriptures. That's why he published a little booklet entitled, "A Brief Instruction On What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels" distributed with his German translation of the New Testament. That's why Luther said that the preached Word was more effective than the written Word. Luther knew that

even though Scripture alone was the Source and Judge of all teaching, yet Scripture is never alone. It is preached and heard and lived out in the community of believers called the Church. It is understood only through the death and resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of sinners. It is clear only when God's wrath and His mercy – the Law and the Gospel – are properly distinguished. The written Word was never intended to make preaching and the Liturgy obsolete – but rather to complement them. The Scriptures leads us to the Church and the Church leads us into the Scriptures.

In our own day, we've fought long and hard to defend the Scriptures against liberalism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other – and we've paid a great price. Most of Protestantism and many who call themselves Lutherans no longer believe the Bible is the Word of God. Those who do are ridiculed as primitive, out of touch, superstitious, and unsophisticated. But yet for all the battling we've done, Biblical literacy among Lutherans remains embarrassingly low. ***We do not know the Scriptures, which are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*** It's one thing to have an inspired, inerrant Bible, but quite another to hear and heed what that Bible says. It's one thing to lay claim to the Scriptures, but quite another to be claimed by them. We need to read the Scriptures daily – to learn, mark, and "inwardly digest them."

To abide in the Word is to abide in the spoken Word of forgiveness in the gift of Holy Absolution. Here again, we Lutherans are in dire need of reformation. We have neglected one of the greatest treasures of the Reformation - the evangelical understanding of the third sacrament of Holy Absolution. The Lutheran Reformers did not do away with confession, they reformed it. They put the Gospel back into it. Gone was the requirement to recall every sin. Gone was mandatory confession made once a year under threat of excommunication. Gone were works of satisfaction and the buying of indulgences. Now the free forgiveness, won by Jesus' death on the cross, could be freely spoken with hand laid on head by the called and ordained servant of Christ. Now the penitent could hear the "for you" of the Gospel as surely as if Christ himself were speaking to him. To abide in Jesus' word is to abide in His forgiveness.

To abide in Jesus' Word is also to eat and drink His Supper. ***"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me," Jesus says, "and I in him."*** With His words He gives us His own body and blood to eat and to drink. His words speak to us in our need, ***"given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins."*** We eat His body and drink His blood. We abide in Him by faith, believing His words. And so He abides in us with His body and blood.

Those who do not abide in Jesus' Word are the ones who have forgotten their Baptism, who tune out preaching, who leave their Bibles unused high on the shelf, who ignore Absolution, who receive the Lord's Supper infrequently, or merely go through the motions. But to those who abide in His Word, who rest upon it and continue in it, Jesus gives a wonderful promise: ***"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*** Jesus' Word of truth brings freedom. But before you can know freedom, you first need to know the nature of your slavery. Jesus utterly destroys any illusion of freedom we might have for ourselves when He says: ***"Whoever commits sin is a slave to sin."*** He gives the chains of the Law a rattle - idolatry, blasphemy, neglect of His Word, disobedience to authority, murder, adultery, theft, gossip, coveting. Try going the rest of this day without doing any of these in thought, word, or deed. Try loving your neighbor as God loves you for just a single day. You will quickly discover how free you really are – not very.

Jesus came to free you, to give you true and eternal liberty. He is the free Son who became a slave so that we slaves might become free sons and daughters. He purchased your freedom two thousand years ago with His death. And now He offers and applies this freedom to you here and now

in His spoken and Sacramental Word of truth. "You are free," Jesus says to you today in so many ways. And if the Son makes you free, you are free indeed. You are free from guilt and punishment of the Law, for "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Brothers and Sisters, In Christ, you are made to be God's free children. You have the freedom to worship God without fear, holy and righteous in His sight, all the days of your life. You have permission to pray "Our Father," as dear children coming to their dear Father in heaven. You have the freedom to come into God's presence along with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven. You have the freedom to live under Jesus in His kingdom, and to serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. In short, you have a place in God's family.

Freedom in Christ means freedom from fear, for nothing ***in all of creation can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Quoting Luther's most famous hymn:

"Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us, –
We tremble not, we fear no ill, –
They shall not overpower us. –
This world's prince may still scowl fierce
as he will, He can harm us none, –
He's judged; the deed is done; –
One little word can fell him."

That one little Word my fellow redeemed is Jesus – the crucified, risen, and reigning savior for you. He is the truth and He alone has set you free. Solus Christus Victor. For Christ alone has gained victory over sin, death and the devil. Our victory has been won the kingdom ours remaineth. Paid in full with Jesus blood on the cross! To Him (†) be all glory, honor and dominion, now and forevermore. In Jesus name, Amen and amen!

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
AMEN*

