

From the Editor

Anniversaries prompt reflection both retrospective and prospective in our personal and scholarly lives. Historians and anthropologists of religion suggest that anniversaries, particularly celebrations of a new year, provide opportunities for renewal that might be understood even as cosmic in scale.¹ The year 2017 is a particularly important year for Christians as it marks the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. From academic symposia to a dizzying array of travel agencies using the anniversary to spark tourism in Germany to a best-selling Playmobil plastic doll of Martin Luther that has sparked significant controversy,² the Reformation is drawing attention. The editors, therefore, are pleased to provide our readers with special features focused on the anniversary in each edition of *Horizons* in 2017. In addition to the editorial essay by David Whitford in this issue, I invited a number of colleagues who devote significant portions of their scholarly work to ecumenical endeavors to reflect briefly on what the anniversary means for them and for us as theologians, teachers, and preachers. Their responses below provoke renewed thinking on the meaning of the Reformation and prompt us to consider the enduring question, “What does reform and renewal mean for the practice of Christians in the world today?”

* * *

Our context today is far from Wittenberg of 1517, and yet many of the gifts and challenges from the Reformation still leave their deep imprint. Thinking of the Reformation, what comes to mind are the centrality of the Bible for faith, the recognition of vocations in ordinary life, the changing roles of women, the good of universal education, popular hymnody and compelling liturgy, the commitment to social justice and communal well-being, and a bold confidence in the good news of God’s grace. These are Christian values with the power to transform lives and communities even within our secular, technological, and global world.

¹ Though his theories have been subsequently contested, a classic expression of the religious importance of anniversaries is found in Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Williard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

² See, for example, “How a Toy Figure of Luther Sparked Charges of Anti-Semitism,” *The Christian Century*, January 4, 2017, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-toy-figure-luther-sparked-charges-anti-semitism>.

Five hundred years later, we continue to heal from the harsh polemics and divisions of the Reformation. Signs of hope include the Lutheran World Federation's 2010 request for forgiveness from the Mennonites for past persecutions and the 1994 "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to the Jewish Community" repudiating Martin Luther's anti-Jewish diatribes. We celebrate the full communion partnerships that the ELCA now enjoys with the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, and the United Methodist Church, and we value our ongoing bilateral dialogues with other church bodies, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, among others. We desire to "live in harmony with one another" (Rom 12:16).

Commemoration of the five-hundredth year of the Reformation needs to take into account the global dimensions of the church today, where Christians in the Southern Hemisphere are a growing majority. It also needs to be broadly ecumenical and interfaith, as befitting our diverse society. Observance of the Reformation finally needs to take seriously our current social context, in which the gap between rich and poor is widening, in which racial, ethnic, and religious tensions are heightened, and in which climate change affects especially the economically vulnerable. It is here that we stand today, ready to engage fully the world that God so loves.

—*Esther Menn, academic dean, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

This is the first commemoration of the Reformation in an ecumenical age. The task of mending division has a human face. Ecumenical work builds friendships—deep, lasting friendships—across differences. In these relationships we learn to view Christian discipleship through the eyes of another and to recognize the integrity of the other's motivation and vision. Ecumenical efforts toward Christian unity provide a powerful witness to peace and reconciliation in a violent, war-torn world. As Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* states, "We are also mindful that the unity of Christians is today awaited and desired by many non-believers. For the more this unity is realized in truth and charity under the powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit, the more will it be a harbinger of unity and peace throughout the whole world" (§92).

—*Susan K. Wood, SCL, PhD, professor of theology at Marquette University and member of the US Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue*

For quite a long time, the study of church history and lived Christian faith saw Martin Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses" as a dividing line. However, through the events of the Second Vatican Council as well as a variety of

collaborative endeavors both global (e.g., “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”) and more local (e.g., the gathering of Baptists and Catholics at the annual meeting of the College Theology Society), new light has shined on Luther’s momentous act. The five-hundredth anniversary of this occasion serves as a reminder that, among other insights, Catholics are always reforming and Protestants have been always catholic. As a Protestant who mourns the fragmentation of the Body of Christ, I believe these more recent developments offer an ecumenical hope that should be embraced as part of Luther’s extended legacy.

—*Derek C. Hatch, associate professor of Christian studies at Howard Payne University*

It would be blasphemous to deny the tragic results of the Reformation for the unity of the church, the proclamation of the gospel, and the many lives destroyed as a consequence of mutual misunderstanding in the sixteenth century and beyond. The dangerous memory of these tragedies, and all our churches’ mutual responsibility for sins of omission and commission, should be lamented and repented. But given the power of the Spirit of God to draw good even out of human evil, I wonder how Christians 10,000 or 20,000 years from now might look back on these centuries of divided Christianity. Rather than the seemingly intractable predicament in which we feel ourselves today, the reunited church of the future might look back at these centuries as we sometimes look at the Arian controversies in the early church; that is, Christians of the future might lament the real pain of our separation and its consequences, but they also might appreciate some of the surprising goods that the Spirit brought forth from the controversies of the sixteenth century and their subsequent history. These surprising, tragic graces might include a greater clarity about the authority of the Word of God and its expression in the tradition and institutions of the church; an awareness of the complex goods of Christian diversity and Christian unity across liturgical, theological, geographical, and cultural differences; greater thanksgiving for unity in Christ as pure gift, and as a fragile gift requiring careful tending; or reception of the continuing call to Christians as individuals and communities to die to the alluring security of identity over-against another, in order to receive their identity from Christ. In this year of commemoration, I think we must hold on to both our repentance for the tragedy of our separation, and our hope in what that Spirit is bringing to birth in our midst even now.

—*Brian Flanagan, associate professor of theology and religious studies at Marymount University, Virginia*

Perhaps the most significant slogan to emerge from the Reformation is *ecclesia semper reformanda*, “The church is always being reformed.” The passive voice leaves open the question of who is doing the reforming of the church, and we pray that it is God who is the active subject. Even with that being the case, though, there is an implicit posture for those who live and lead in the church. Not only is that posture one of receptivity to change; it is also one of principled self-criticism. If God is always reforming the church to be adequate to its calling in ever-changing circumstances, then we as members of the church need to be asking, at every moment, where the reform may be necessary. In other words, we need to be asking where the church is becoming inadequate to its calling. We hold that in tension, of course, with the confidence that the Body of Christ is God’s agent for witness and wellness in the world, and that God can work through it effectively even when it is flawed. Such confidence must be carried with humility, not becoming hubris or arrogance about the church’s perfection.

The achievement of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” in 1999 demonstrates that the Roman Catholic Church can recognize Luther’s criticism as a Catholic self-criticism, as most Lutherans are taught that it was. The adoption of more episcopal forms of leadership and the use of the threefold offices of ministry by many North American Lutherans in recent years demonstrate that the challenge of reform continues within the church and can accommodate changes that were once thought anathema because of their papist character. The best grounding for an ecumenical future may lie not so much in specific doctrinal concurrence as in the common adoption of an ecclesial posture that recognizes self-criticism as a key virtue. Then we can look to other faithful members of the one Body of Christ, particularly those with whom we disagree, as partners and sources for our self-critique, embracing the diversity of the body’s parts with an intentional pluralism that affirms God’s oneness as the source of our unity.

Indeed, we among God’s people in Christ might even find courage to risk such a posture with regard to God’s people in Torah, the Jewish people, and others to whom God has reached out in yet other ways. For it is not only the church that God is always reforming, but creation itself, until it shall come to its fulfillment in the kingdom.

—*Rev. Dr. Peter A. Pettit, associate professor of religion studies at
Muhlenberg College*

Remembering Martin Luther as a reformer is a step toward identifying church history as reform history, however messy it may be (and it is). Many, perhaps most Catholics would be riled even after fifty years of a very

fruitful Lutheran-Catholic dialogue to hear (let alone accept) the statement, “Luther was a good Catholic.” The positive attitude behind that statement reflects an ecumenical and scholarly sea change, of course, and we are indebted to a half century and more of material led especially by Gerhart Ladner, Yves Congar, Heiko Oberman, and John O’Malley, SJ. Specifically, the pivot to personal reform as the *sine qua non* of true reform is often lost when we discuss Luther, Vatican II, or any other moment in church history. Inner change is far more crucial than outer change. As Pope Francis put it in an interview a few months after his election in March 2013, “The structural and organizational reforms are secondary—that is, they come afterward. The first reform must be the attitude.”³ Without a change of heart, which is the very essence of personal reform, even the most well-thought-out plans for structural reform will not take root. That is the most important lesson in remembering reform as one of the few constants in church history.

—*Christopher Bellitto, professor of history at Kean University*

As an Evangelical professor teaching at an Evangelical liberal arts college, I think the Reformation serves as a touchstone for our sense of place within Christian history. The five solas shape our ecclesiology, soteriology, and piety, emphasizing the priesthood of all believers and Bible reading by the laity. Some of these emphases are found in Vatican II writings, which create openings for conversation. Understanding each other could lead to working more closely together, which I think will become increasingly necessary as Western society becomes more secular, and the church becomes centered in the Global South.

—*Lynn Cohick, chair of the Department of Biblical and Theological Studies and professor of New Testament at Wheaton College*

For almost five hundred years, many Western Christians have looked upon the Age of Reformation—from the posting of Luther’s “Ninety-Five Theses” to the promulgation of the Council of Trent—as having provided the Church with a litmus test for distinguishing the justified saint from the damned heretic. When I look upon it from the vantage of our Ecumenical Age, I see things differently. I see in the Reformation a twofold inheritance. The first is a salutary warning about what happens when we members of Christ’s Body cease to reverence Him when He speaks to us through one another. The second is a sacred call to transcend the tragedy of our division and together embrace what the Reformers, Evangelicals, and Catholics truly

³ Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, September 30, 2013, <http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

sought: a Church so renewed in its faith that it may be the living proclamation of God's saving love for the world. "May all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21). This is what *this* anniversary of the Reformation means to me.

—Russel Murray, OFM, Animator General for Evangelization and
President of the Service for Dialogue of the Order of Friars Minor

* * *

With this edition, I thank most sincerely the members of the editorial board who have served *Horizons* faithfully since 2013, and I welcome the members of the new board who are now listed on our masthead. It is an honor and a privilege to be associated with all these colleagues who passionately pursue the tradition of "faith seeking understanding" in both careful writing and the art of teaching.

As always, I thank our authors for sharing their scholarship with our readers, and I thank all the members of the editorial team for their inspiring creativity, diligent work, and unwavering commitment to excellent scholarship.