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Editorial office:  
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,  
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,  
314-996-1202

Published by The Lutheran Church—  
Missouri Synod.

Please direct queries to  
[journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org](mailto:journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org).

This journal may also  
be found at  
[www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission](http://www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission).

Member: Associated Church Press Evangelical Press Association (ISSN 2334-1998)  
A periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Offices of National and International Mission.



# FROM REPENTANCE TO REJOICING

by Albert B. Collver III

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy (χαρά) before the angels of God over one sinner who repents (μετανοοῦντι)” (Luke 15:10).

## Introduction

WITH THE APPROACH of the 500th anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, the entire Lutheran world as well as a significant portion of the Christian world, including the Roman Catholic Church, has pondered how to celebrate, commemorate or at least acknowledge this milestone Reformation anniversary. Not without justification, the Reformation has been associated with Martin Luther, which at times has caused the Reformation to be portrayed as nearly indistinct from the person of Martin Luther. In the polemical battles between the Protestants and Roman Catholics, the image of Martin Luther often determined how the Reformation itself was viewed. For instance, in 1529, Hans Brosamer created an engraving of a seven-headed Luther to identify Martin Luther as the seven-headed beast prophesied in the Revelation

13. If Luther were a servant of the devil who rose up from the sea as a false prophet to lead people astray, then his movement, the Reformation, also must be from the devil. Each age has held a view of Martin Luther and of the Reformation that reflected the *zeitgeist* of that period. The rationalist, the age of Enlightenment, the Marxist, the Communist, the Nazis, the nationalist and just about every other *-ism* has viewed the Reformation through its own lens. The Reformation celebration of 1617, the first significant celebration of the Reformation, led to the execution of the 24 nobles in Prague who followed the Reformation and began the Thirty Years War.<sup>1</sup> The Reformation of 1817 instituted the Prussian Union, which was commemorated by the Luther statue here in Wittenberg. The 1817 Reformation was the birth of the

union church and the loss of the Lutheran confession and Lutheran identity, a reality that still plagues the Lutheran churches in Germany and most of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) today.

The Reformation celebration of 2017 will be the first “ecumenical Reformation.” The Luther Garden here in Wittenberg memorializes this ecumenical Reformation by having the five central trees around the cross of the Luther rose held by the Roman Catholic Church, the

Orthodox Church, the Anglican Communion, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council.<sup>2</sup> Churches from all denominations are participating in this Reformation celebration.<sup>3</sup> Yet ecumenism that does not acknowledge distinctive confessions of faith as it works toward unity is nothing other than a modern enthusiasm that slowly extinguishes the Holy

Scriptures as the ultimate authority.<sup>4</sup> In light of the often tragic history of Reformation celebrations, we should ponder how to celebrate the 500th Reformation anniversary rightly.

The remembrance of the Lord’s Church shows us the times of reformation where the Gospel flourishes because repentance abounds.

<sup>2</sup> German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation. “Luthergarten: List of All Trees,” 2015. <http://luthergarten.de/list.html>

<sup>3</sup> Luther 2017 International. “The Luther Garden in Wittenberg.” *Luther 2017 500 Years of Reformation*, 2015. <http://www.luther2017.de/en/orte/luther-garden-in-wittenberg>. “Churches of all denominations from all over the world are invited to become ‘godparents’ for one of the 500 trees in Wittenberg and to plant a second tree in the area of their home parish.”

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Ecumenical Anniversary: Ecumenical Enthusiasm,” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, trans. Peter Petzling, vol. 3. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015). Kindle location: 5749. “But this enthusiasm slowly extinguishes what is still left over of the churches of the Reformation ... For all these churches Holy Scripture served as the ultimate authority. This is being lost through modern enthusiasm. Together with the authority of the Confessions, the authority of Scripture is in decline”

<sup>1</sup> Albert B. Collver, “Theological Observer: A Vision for Lutheranism in Central Europe,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 78 (2014): 2.

A helpful guide toward celebrating the Reformation rightly comes from a sermon from 1630 for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Hoe van Hoeneegg, the senior court preacher of Dresden, provided the definition for a Reformation celebration in his sermon:

[F]irst as a “remembrance festival,” at which we remember a great historical event; second, as a “praise and thanksgiving festival;” third, as a “miracle festival” concerning God’s miracles; fourth, a “prayer festival” at which we “desire to pray for the preservation of the divine Word;” and fifth, as a “festival of repentance,” at which we pray for the forgiveness of our sins in the despising of the Word of God, “and that we should begin and strive for a new life with greater zeal for and devotion to his preached Word as doers of the same.” Then the festival becomes a “festival of rejoicing and jubilation in heaven” [Luke 15:10].<sup>5</sup>

The Reformation celebration “remembers” the great historical event when the Lord delivered His people. The Reformation celebration “repents” of our sin of despising the Word of God. The Reformation celebration rejoices and gives thanks over the sinner who repents. The International Conference on Confessional Leadership in the 21st Century hopes to encourage, “Celebrating the Reformation Rightly” by remembrance, repentance and rejoicing.

### From repentance to rejoicing

In 1524, in “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” Dr. Martin Luther wrote, “For you should know that God’s word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been.”<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther’s prophecy about the Gospel passing away from one land and going to another appears to have come true

<sup>5</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Thoughts at the Eve of the Reformation Anniversary of 1967,” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, trans. Charles Schaum, vol. 3. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works: The Christian in Society II*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 352.

for Germany, Europe and North America. A 2009 article from *Christianity Today* about Christianity in Germany reported, “The Protestant state church is fairly dead. The percent of committed Christians in Germany is maybe at 3 or 4 percent.”<sup>7</sup> In North America, mainline Protestantism is in steep decline, even hemorrhaging.<sup>8</sup> The *New York Times* in a 2012 article noted, “This decline is the latest chapter in a story dating to the 1960s. The trends unleashed in that era — not only the sexual revolution, but also consumerism and materialism, multiculturalism and relativism — threw all of American Christianity into crisis, and ushered in decades of debate over how to keep the nation’s churches relevant and vital ... Practically every denomination — Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian — that has tried to adapt itself to contemporary liberal values has seen an Episcopal-style plunge in church attendance.”<sup>9</sup>

The Church grows and expands by the proclamation of the Gospel, yet in this world it exists under the cross where our own sin and the attacks of Satan and the world can hinder it.

In the 1960s, two-thirds of Americans considered themselves Protestant. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, less than 50 percent of Americans called themselves Protestant. In the twenty-first-century United States, the largest religious group after the Roman Catholics are the “nones,” or those who identify with no particular religious group. The sustenance and growth of Roman Catholicism within the United States has not been driven

by either births or conversions, but rather by the immigration of Roman Catholics from Latin America. Despite the alarming statistics about the state of religion in the United States, North Americans are still twice as likely to be affiliated with a religious group than Europeans.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Germany’s ‘Cold Religion,’” *Christianity Today* (November 2009). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/novemberweb-only/145-11.0.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Ed Stetzer, “3 Important Church Trends in the Next 10 Years: Christianity in the United States May Look Very Different in 10 Years,” *Christianity Today* (April 2015). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/april/3-important-trends-in-church-in-next-ten-years.html>. Mainline Protestant churches are defined as United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), American Baptist Churches, United Church of Christ (UCC) and The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). “Trend #1: The Hemorrhaging of Mainline Protestantism ... Mainline Protestantism is in trouble and in substantive decline.”

<sup>9</sup> Ross Douthat, “Can Liberal Christianity Be Saved?” *New York Times*, July 15, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/opinion/sunday/douthat-can-liberal-christianity-be-saved.html>.

In comparison to Europe, the United States is still a religious nation. If the demographic trends continue, North America will catch up to Europe regarding religious attitudes within a few decades. Meanwhile, as Protestant Christianity declines both in North America and Europe, Islam increases. Some demographic projections look exceedingly bleak for the Christian church, particularly Protestantism, in the West.

Christopher Wright notes, “More Christians worship in Anglican churches in Nigeria each week than in all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Britain, Europe, and North America combined. There are more Baptists in Congo than in Britain. More people are in church every Sunday in communist China than in all of Western Europe.”<sup>10</sup> According to “Missiometrics 2008: Reality Checks for the Christian World Communions,” 91 percent of all new Christians can be found in Africa, Asia or Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps even more alarming is how evangelism has been conducted in the West, primarily in the United States and Europe. “91% of all Christian outreach/evangelism does not target non-Christians but targets other Christians, many in wealthy World C countries and cities.”<sup>12</sup> What this means in practical terms is that many to most of the congregations whose membership is increasing within the United States are simply taking members from other congregations and/or denominations. This is particularly apparent in the mega-church movement within the United States, whose members largely come from the membership of other congregations or lapsed Christians rather than from new baptisms or conversions. One might say that evangelism in western Protestant Christianity is akin to the reshuffling of the deck chairs on a sinking ship.

Significant amounts of ink have been spilled over the past couple of decades, attempting to explain the shifting tides of world Christianity and highlighting demographic and social changes. A common theme attributes this shift as a post-Constantinian time when the Church, as in the Early Church, did not have the institutional and legal support of Caesar or the government. This theme

also highlights a distrust of institutions, including church denominations and seminaries. It tends to emphasize how doctrine supplanted practice. One suggested cure is to return to how the Church operated in the Early Church before the Constantinian era, before the Church became institutionalized. Some books suggest that the Church needs to reclaim the gifts the Early Church possessed. The tremendous growth of the Church in places like Africa, Asia and Latin America is attributed to how these churches follow the pattern of the Early Church. If western churches could rediscover this formula or pattern of the Early Church and of those rapidly growing churches in the global south,<sup>13</sup> it is suggested that they, too, could grow again.

Alan Hirsch, one such author who seeks to transform the twenty-first century Church, argues that the decline of the western Church (apart from external factors) is a problem of ecclesiology. He states that the failure of western churches to be missional can be found in ecclesiology. He writes:

Clearly one of the biggest issues in the church today is the discussion about what it means to be missional. We believe that how we deal with this will determine the future viability of the Church in the West. But we fear that so many of these vital conversations are doomed to frustration because the people in them are unwilling or unable to reconfigure ministry to suit the missional context. Although many buy into the concept, they are unwilling to recalibrate the ecclesiology. Christendom has been run on a largely shepherd-teacher model, and because it has had a privileged position in society, it has been inclined to dispense with the more missional or evangelistic ministry types (apostle, prophet, and evangelist).<sup>14</sup>

Hirsch essentially argues that the western Church went off the rails after Constantine embraced the Church and gave it a favored position with the state. He claims that at that time the Church became institutionalized, which locked the Church into a “shepherd-teacher” model to the detriment of the other spiritual offices established by Christ. Hirsch bases his view on the interpretation that

<sup>10</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, “An Upside-Down World: Distinguishing between Home and Mission Field No Longer Makes Sense,” *Christianity Today*, January 2007. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/january/30.42.html>.

<sup>11</sup> David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, “Missiometrics 2008: Reality Checks for Christian World Communions,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32:1 (January 2008): 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012). Kindle location: 685. “The early church, various movements over the centuries, and the developing world now (especially India and China) have displayed this same vitality. These are all great expressions of the apostolic movement.”

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle location: 1048.

in Ephesians 4, St. Paul mandates a five-fold ministry for the Church called APEST (apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd (pastor), teacher). Hirsch states, “All five are needed if we are to be the authentically missional church as Jesus intended us to be.”<sup>15</sup> He developed a method using sociology and psychology to identify if a person is an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd or teacher. Not only is Hirsch’s conception of the Holy Ministry against the teachings of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, particularly Articles V and XIV of the Augsburg Confession, but neither ecclesiology or the ministry, or returning to an imagined conception of the Church as it might have existed before the time of Constantine, will save the Church or cause it to grow. The kingdom of God grows and expands as the Augsburg Confession, Article V, confesses: “He works faith, when and where it pleases God in those who hears the good news.”

The Church grows and expands by the proclamation of the Gospel, yet in this world it exists under the cross where our own sin and the attacks of Satan and the world can hinder it. This indeed is the great mystery of Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*, that the all-powerful and eternal Lord allows His Church to suffer in this world and His Gospel to be hindered by sinful men. For this reason, as Luther taught, when the people of God no longer have gratitude for the Gospel and fail to repent, the Gospel moves to another place as a passing rain shower. As the first thesis of the 95 Theses states, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>16</sup>

Often times it is said that 50 years ago no one predicted the decline of the western Church.<sup>17</sup> This observation is not correct. On the Reformation in 1960, fifty

Church history demonstrates that both gratitude for the Lord’s gifts and repentance are lost when dogma is lost.

years after the Edinburgh mission conference, Hermann Sasse noted, “Entire churches that once played a role in the world are disappearing ‘... One needs to ask, however, what has taken place of these ecclesiastical communions? The answer is union churches.’”<sup>18</sup> He also noted that the creed would become interpreted in a liberal way and even the name of the Holy Trinity would only become a liturgical formula for some. Although perhaps it is true that no one could have predicted precisely what exact configurations the decline of western churches would have taken, the seeds for their decline had already been planted by the end of the nineteenth century.

A portion of this conference theme is “remembrance.” It would do us well to remember the salvation history of God’s people. Throughout the Holy Scriptures, the Church has had a pattern of orthodoxy, decline, error and reformation.<sup>19</sup> For Melancthon, and most of the Lutherans who followed him, the history of the world was “sacred history,” which told the story of how the Lord pre-

served the Church on earth, from the creation of the world until the end of the world when Christ would return. The history of the world shows those who were the Lord’s witnesses to the truth throughout time, but also how the Lutheran Church is the continuation of the Lord’s ancient Church.<sup>20</sup> One of the most significant purposes or applications of Church history is

for the Church to learn how the Church in the past fell into sin so that the Church today can repent of her own sins and give thanks for the forgiveness given in Christ Jesus.

Church history demonstrates that both gratitude for the Lord’s gifts and repentance are lost when dogma is lost. Hermann Sasse notes:

The modern Ecumenical Movement is the child of an undogmatic Protestantism. The condition of our churches should be a serious warning for us to

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Kindle location: 1066.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works: Career of the Reformer I*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Tennent, “Megatrends That Are Shaping Twenty-First Century Missions From Moratorium and Malaise to Selah and Rebirth,” in *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*, Invitation to Theological Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 15–51. Kindle location: 92. “None of these developments were predicted fifty years ago. Today, as I survey the landscape of contemporary missions and missiological reflection, it is clear that those who live in the West are facing a serious crisis concerning missions and Christian identity within the larger global Christian movement.”

<sup>18</sup> Sasse, “Ecumenical Anniversary: Ecumenical Enthusiasm.” Kindle location: 5856.

<sup>19</sup> Phillip Melancthon noted this pattern, as elaborated by Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum; the Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Genève: E. Droz, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> Alexandra Kess, *Johann Sleidan and the Protestant Vision of History* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 132. “Two decades after Frank and Melancthon elaborated on the idea of a chain of God’s true witnesses throughout the centuries, culminating in the Protestant Church, this concept was taken up by Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75).”

examine ourselves in the depth of our conscience as to whether we have perhaps lost, with the dogma of our church, also the ability to think dogmatically. And it could be that one can no longer understand the Gospel if one no longer understands its dogmatic content.<sup>21</sup>

When the teachings of the faith are lost, so, too, is the Gospel itself.

The western churches that have forgotten the history of the Lord's people and who have ceased to repent, not only are in danger of being in the wilderness for forty additional years but are in danger of total apostasy and the final judgment of the Lord. The western churches, which led the missionary drive at the beginning of the twentieth century to reach every people group with Christ, today in many cases have departed from the faith once delivered to the now rapidly growing churches of the global South. Nearly every western church that accepted the ordination of women against the teachings of the Holy Scriptures today accepts not only the blessing and/or marriage of same-sex couples but also are now in the process of accepting the ordination of practicing homosexuals. The hermeneutical connection between these two positions is well established but almost entirely denied, hidden behind the cloak of social justice.<sup>22</sup> The western Church faces a great danger that the wilderness will become Gehenna. Yet even in the wilderness, the Lord preserves a remnant who lament and repent.

### **“Let the bones that you have broken rejoice.”**

In the history of the Church, a Reformation from apostasy flowed from repentance. The message of the Reformation is one of repentance. As the Psalmist says, “Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight ... Let the bones that you have broken rejoice” (Ps. 51:4, 8). Rejoicing comes from being restored in the forgiveness won by Christ on the cross. The remnant of the Church of Christ in the West rejoices in the forgiveness of sins and in seeing the working of Christ in the churches of the global South. In the western churches, where the sight of baptisms are relatively uncommon in compari-

son to some places in the world, the broken bones rejoice when they see the baptism of several hundred to a thousand people at one time in Africa. Among those from the western churches, where many magnificent church buildings go relatively to entirely empty Sunday morning, the broken bones rejoice when they see hundreds and thousands of people worshipping for three hours in the global South. In the West, where few unbelievers are converted and where most church growth comes from transfers or sheep stealing, the broken bones rejoice to see new congregations appearing on a weekly basis in the global South. The witness of the Church's vitality in other places provides for mutual encouragement of the brethren. It bears witness to the words of Jesus that the gates of hell will not prevail against the truth. Perhaps those in the West could be tempted by a theology of glory or those in the global South be tempted to triumphalism, which is why the entire life of the believer must be one of repentance.

In the history of the Lord's Church (both that of the old Israel and the new Israel), a pattern of apostasy, reformation and orthodoxy can be seen. This is the passing of the rain shower from one place to another. The remembrance of the Lord's Church shows us the times of reformation where the Gospel flourishes because repentance abounds. It also shows us apostasy and extended times of wandering in the wilderness. Perhaps in the past the Church at large, separated by vast distances, was not aware of simultaneous moments of apostasy of the Church in one place while a great flourishing, growth and reformation occurred in others. Yet today we live in a time when the people of God — who are entering into the wilderness because of their sin, lack of gratitude for the Gospel and failure to repent — can seek the mutual consolation of the brethren from the churches experiencing orthodoxy, vitality and reformation. As the Body of Christ, we bear one another's burdens. As the western Church enters the wilderness, the remnant receives joy, seeing the rains of the Gospel pour on the churches of the global South. Meanwhile, the churches of the global South can see their brothers and sisters in Christ passing on the horizon into the wilderness. Remember us in prayer and pray for our repentance, so that “the bones you have broken may rejoice.”

<sup>21</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Fifty-Five: From New Delhi to Helsinki—Lutheranism in the Chaos of the Ecumenical Movement,” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, trans. Holgar Sonntag, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015). Kindle location: 7373.

<sup>22</sup> See John T. Pless, “The Ordination of Women and Ecclesial Endorsement of Homosexuality: Are They Related?” in *Women Pastors?* 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014).

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