

Opening Reflections for Committees: October 2017

Witness and Fellowship Ministry Team

Reformation

On October 31, we celebrate the 499th year of the Reformation. The question arises, as we will surely have many festivities this next year to celebrate the 500th year—why such a big fuss? Does the Reformation have any impact on us today? I would argue it does still have an impact because of how we use one simple word: but.

There are countless sermons where, at first, it seems as though you are hearing the pure Gospel. The preacher will say wonderful words of God's unconditional grace: "Christ has taken all of your sins," "He gives You His full forgiveness," and "By His wounds you are healed." When the preacher is toward the end of the sermon, he looks like he will finish with a hearty, joy filled, comforting Amen. However, almost out of nowhere comes the word but. It hits your ears like the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard. "But you must receive Him as Lord and Savior" or "But you have to make this faith personal" or my favorite "But God has faith in you to do your part." To add a but statement is not Gospel. This is essentially the same issue that Martin Luther had to fight in the 16th century. If we add anything to the cross, we make the cross only partly effective, and in essence, null and void.

I have also heard this kind of talk within our own churches and, to be honest, in my own heart. We baptize a baby and remind people of the promise, "Baptism now saves you." In the background, you can almost hear people whispering to one another, "But... do they really understand?" Or when the pastor stands up and says, "By Christ's authority, I forgive you all your sins..." and people say in their hearts, "But... what if they haven't truly repented?" Or we give the blessing after communion, "Go in His peace, you are forgiven" and quietly people look at others and wonder "But...it doesn't look like they take their faith seriously."

The but instead of the Amen is the reason why the Reformation still matters 499 years after Martin Luther posted the 95 Thesis. The central doctrine of the Christian faith, which made the Reformation a seismic event in history, is justification. Justification calls us to not put a but where there should be an Amen. We do not need to add to God's work, for Christ, crucified and risen, has done it all. As the Augsburg Confession states, "Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith..." Augsburg Confession, Article IV. We stand on the truth proclaimed during the Reformation and cling to promises of Christ—no ifs, ands, or buts!

Prayer: We give thanks for those who have gone before us and who have delivered to us the Good News that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. We humbly receive this inheritance. Rejoice in it. Draw comfort from this great Good News. But above all on Reformation Day, give thanks to Jesus. Amen