



**Carmen LaBerge Presentation to the North American  
Lutheran Church  
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I want to begin by recognizing Larry Yoder. At the moment of truth in the ELCA, Larry was so faithful. He was an example for those of us in the PCUSA who worked for similar renewal under similar rising tides of cultural accommodation. It is a privilege to be with him here today with you, sitting under the faithful teaching of his son. Indeed, by your fruit you shall know them! Amen? Amen.

I'd also like to say thank you in this 500th anniversary year of Martin Luther's bold stand. As a Christian in the Reformed tradition, I owe you a debt of gratitude. And as a person who has been personally blessed by the ministry of particular servants of God and fellow Kingdom laborers in this very room, I want to say-thank you.

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation and therefore THE Reformation, we look not only at the very personal act of one man in nailing 95 Theses to the Wittenberg door but we consider the theological, ecclesiastical and cultural upheavals his witness ignited.

We literally would not be here today were it not for Martin Luther. We wouldn't be here - at a Lutheran event - but I dare say we wouldn't be here, in the United States of America. Tanzania, Ethiopia, Norway, Sweden, Germany and the other nations represented here today, would not be what they are were it not for the Reformation. We tend to think of the Reformation as a theological event but the Reformation was a renewal and transformation of culture and the systems governing it.

My good friend and colleague for many years, Mark Chavez, asked that I answer a broad question: **“What do you think will be necessary for all Christian churches to be renewed and transformed to make disciples of Christ?”**

In order that all Christian churches - and therefore The Church - be renewed and transformed to carry out her primary mission in the world of making disciples of Jesus Christ - we must see the Word of God restored to its rightful place in the life of the Church. That restoration will result in a renewal of faith among God’s people, which will naturally produce the good fruit of transformation in families, communities, and culture.

So, in short, what will be necessary for all Christian churches to be renewed and transformed to make disciples of Christ and advance His kingdom in this generation is nothing short of a new Reformation?

Luther found himself at a moment of truth. On countless occasions he found himself facing a moment when reality did not line up with what he knew to be true. There were surely more than 1000 moments of truth before the moment he finally took nails in hand and walked the cobbled streets to Wittenberg. Those 1000 moments of truth are the same kind we experience every day in our current culture. Moments when the Spirit of God pricks our conscious and we say to ourselves “this is not how it’s supposed to be.”

For Luther those moments of truth included:

**Seeing people - who Luther rightly recognized as a royal priesthood of all believers** (1 Peter 2:9-12) - seeing people from whom the church was withholding the Word of God and the means of grace. Luther recognized that the church was misrepresenting God, God’s Word and the Gospel. He could not be silent in the face of the falsehoods being proffered as truth.

- Imagine the moment that a man, not that unlike anyone in the room today, recognized that he would either have to submit to the authority of the church of his day or to the eternal God revealed in the Bible and alive by the Spirit. Would he be an agent of an institution or would he be an ambassador of the Kingdom of Heaven bearing truthful witness amidst the kingdoms of this world?
- He knew he was on enemy territory. He knew he was contemplating what some would view as insurrection. He knew that his actions would be seen by church leaders as insubordination. But the more powerful knowing was knowing God - knowing the reality of who God is, what God has done, what God freely offers to people.
- People. I think that is most likely what finally got to Luther. Isn’t it what gets to us? When we encounter people - precious image bearers of God, broken against the reality of sin, living apart from the knowledge of the Gospel and the liberation offered in Jesus Christ - do not our hearts break? Yes, we care deeply about the honor of God and the authority of God’s word, but it is the plight of the neighbor that moves the heart.

Luther saw God for Who He is - and in seeing God rightly, Luther saw people for who they are. And His mind was aflame.

- Why was the church - which is called to make the Gospel visible and substantial and beautiful - not giving God's Word to the people?
- Why was the church - which was called to lose her life for the sake of the Gospel - enriching herself materially and starving the people spiritually?
- Why was the church - which was gathered and sent into the world to advance the Gospel always in all ways - instead withholding the means of grace as if Christ could be contained and the Spirit of God institutionally controlled?
- By what authority were the church leaders of Luther's day doing what they were doing?
- To whose glory were they living?
- Toward what end were they pressing?
- Indeed what gospel were they preaching?

When considered in this light, it is easy to see that we stand at a similar moment of truth today.

- The churches of Europe are largely empty and the churches of America are largely compromised.
- The places in the world where the Spirit of God seems most energetically on the move are Africa and Asia.
- What will it look like for us to be receptive to their spiritual leadership in this Reformation? What did it look like for Onesimus to return to Philemon carrying the Word of God from the hand of imprisoned Paul?

If we are in Christ then we are new creations. We no longer regard one another from a human point of view. We do not see - or at least we do not respond in the same way - to the differences between us.

When we talk about a new Reformation we're talking about the old Reformation - we're talking about putting the Bible back in the hands of the laity; we're talking about restoring the Word of God to its rightful place in the life of the church and deploying the people of God to do the ministry of God in the world that God so loves. We're talking about humility among the clergy and equipping the saints for the work of ministry. We're talking about something that is intensely local and simultaneously global. We're not talking about Lutherans only and we're certainly not talking about the North American church alone - we're talking about the living into the reality that there is One Church - under the Lordship of One King, saved by grace, sharing one faith, exalting One God and Father of us all - who is in all and through all.

So, how will that happen?

It all depends on God - so do we each of us and all of us depend on Him?

## **The Word of God restored to its rightful place in the life of the Church**

That means that everything, and I mean everything, comes into submission to what God has said. Personal submission and a call to submission are totally counter-cultural. But the truth is the truth and anything preached apart from the truth is millstone worthy lies.

The restoration of the Word of God to its rightful place in the life of the Church will result in a renewal of faith among God's people. It is not only about learn-ed clergy, but a fully equipped, inspired and Spirit-led laity who engage the world as the priesthood of all believers.

What will the fruit of that renewal be?

There's a lot of rotten fruit in the world today and we could each easily chronicle the sins of our generation. That rotten fruit is the natural outgrowth and product of stinkin thinkin and sinful living. People, many who are members of churches but know not God, have their minds set on worldly things and possess neither the mind nor the Spirit of Christ.

But there is good fruit to be cultivated. The good fruit that grows from Spirit-transformed, Biblically-informed, Christ-conformed, God-glorifying lives is substantially transformed families, communities, and culture.

How do we get from here to there? Nothing short of a new Reformation. There is now and never has been no Way other than Jesus.

As the old song goes, "Jesus is the answer for the world today" - He always has been the answer and he always will be. And we now stand and speak at the moment of truth in this generation to make Him newly known - both in the churches of American mainline Christianity and in the world that He so loves.

Nothing short of a new Reformation will do so let us do our part by rightly proclaiming the Word of God, rightly administering the sacraments of grace and rightly holding one another accountable to this great calling.

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