

Embrace Reformation's Exclusive Inclusivity

Upsetting the Equilibrium

If I were to walk around the Diag on the campus of the University of Michigan and want to talk about the Reformation, one word would infuriate students. If I would visit the Reformation display in the Hatcher Graduate Library commemorating its 500th anniversary, one word would upset professors so much they may question my sensibilities. If I would proclaim our Reformation 500 worship series to our community loud and clear, one word grinds against our American culture like nails against the chalkboard.

Five centuries ago and still today, the problem has never been about Scripture, faith, grace, and Christ; everyone on the theological spectrum agrees they are important and influential. The central issue on which any person stands is Scripture *alone*, faith *alone*, grace *alone*, and Christ *alone*. That one word – alone – sounds so exclusive. And that's a problem. It flies in the face of worldwide ecumenical services this past week where Lutherans and Catholics tried to mend a five-century-year-old split. It flies in the face of cultural sensibilities to seek diverse viewpoints and include many religious understandings. It flies in the face of those who view the Reformation as a source of endless fractures among church bodies that have continued for centuries.

Nothing upsets our society more than being exclusive. "If you keep proclaiming how Lutherans are all about Scripture, faith, grace, and Christ *alone*, then take your word alone and go back to the Middle Ages where you and it belong! I'll take our accepting, inclusive modern age!" Right then it seems like that word "alone" is the last thing we would want to embrace on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Analyzing the Discrepancy

That little word "alone" seems so small you could just cast it to the side, and it wouldn't make any difference. Massage it a bit so you include Christ along with your enlightened, culturally-sensitive outlook. Include Christ plus a number of other religious paths to God the Father. Include Christ plus your own noble attempts to improve your spiritual self and our pluralistic society. You still have Christ; you just have other things too. What's so wrong with that? That's the beauty of inclusivity.

This question is nothing new; it extends five centuries back into history and years before that to the time of Isaiah. More than being a relic from the Middle Ages, our First Reading seems to be a relic of a primitive ancient world because it screams exclusivity. Five times in this chapter the Lord repeats his thundering statement, "***I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.***" Ouch. The people of Isaiah's day thought that was too exclusive. They lived in an inclusive, syncretistic worship climate where kings of Judah added worship practices of other nations around them, instead of the Lord alone. Two kings during Isaiah's ministry go down as following the Lord – just not wholeheartedly. Another king included all sorts of foreign worship practices to Baal and Ashtoreth from neighboring Israel, because the Lord alone was not good enough. Only one king, Hezekiah, followed the Lord and the Lord alone. It was a mixed bag of worshipping the Lord plus adding in something else.

So when the Lord invites us, ***“Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Declare what is to be, present it—let them take counsel together,”*** human nature from Isaiah’s time, Luther’s time, and our time can’t help but say, “Yeah, I can do that. Let me present to you, Lord, what I’ve added to make that word ‘alone’ less offensive.” So people in Isaiah’s day added in other forms of worship, people in Luther’s day added in indulgences so you could finish off your salvation, and people in our day add in our own nuanced approach to spirituality in a diverse society. To be really sure, you can’t simply say you’re a Christian, you need to act like a Christian! To be really sure, you need find your confidence in how you follow pure Lutheran doctrine and practice to a T unlike those other wishy-washy Protestant churches! And just like that you’ve fallen for Satan’s lie that is over 500 years old: Christ alone is too exclusive. It’s not good enough. You can improve on it and soften it up. You can add in your own efforts or your own steadfastness to pure Lutheran teaching. It’s Christ + something else.

Where does this road lead? It’s a constant pursuit of basing your identity in something in you, and you will never be able to stop improving it constantly. It never ends. That’s exactly the problem: you’ll never know if you have added enough. This is where the flawed inclusivity of Christ + something else gets us. It turns into a trap of dead end after dead end. If you want to soften Jesus’ exclusivity by adding something else to the table, then be prepared to hear this kind of shocking inclusivity, ***“Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God”*** (Romans 3:19). If you want to come knocking at the doorstep God’s mighty fortress, holding on to who you are and what you do in addition to who Christ is and what he has done, then be prepared to be excluded from God for all eternity!

Disclosing the Clue to Resolution

Out in the middle of nowhere far from any lights in the city, underneath the dark night sky, on Friday October 13th, a group of us from Redeemer went to the Blast Corn Maze in Dexter. Weaved among a giant corn field is a huge maze. What if you embrace inclusivity – one way through the corn maze is as good as any other? Some of you tried to do just that. It ended up to be unending frustration of hitting dead end after dead end. There is only one way to the end of the corn maze. One way, and one way alone. That’s the whole point. No one there was complaining about how exclusive that is. It actually made it fun for everyone. So instead of trying to go down an endless dead-end pursuit of Christ + something else, maybe Christ alone isn’t such a bad thing after all!

Experiencing the Gospel

Embrace Reformation’s exclusive inclusivity. It’s a mouthful to say, and it seems like a contradiction to understand. It’s just like the corn maze. Reformation excludes all the dead ends in life where we try to add to Christ alone. It shines the spotlight on the only way through life’s maze to the Father: Christ alone. By excluding all our false solutions of who we are and what we have done, every person in the whole world is included in Christ’s saving activity. ***“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”*** No other god and no other spiritual approach can save like Christ can. What distinguishes him the most is not how he asserts himself as better than other gods but how he saves even those people who have followed them. Jesus’ exclusivity is not based on arrogance to puff himself up; it’s based on a selfless love that motivated him to say, “You can’t do this all by yourself. I don’t want you trapped with those burdens and dead-ends. I’m going to do all the work for you.”

When you understand that, the word “alone” ceases to become an embarrassment to apologize for on Reformation 500, and it turns into the word that makes all the difference. It’s a difference between uncertainty and confidence, stress and relief, hell and heaven. Only in Christ can you find your righteousness, strength, and deliverance. ***“They will say of me, ‘In the Lord alone are deliverance and strength.’” All the descendants of Israel will find deliverance in the Lord and will make their boast in him.*** In Christ you are given the righteousness you lack, the strength you need, and the deliverance you long for. The supply is so great only Christ can richly give it to every person on the planet. This kind of exclusivity includes the whole world.

Anticipating the Consequences

High on a hill in northern Bavaria lies a mighty fortress, one of Germany’s largest castles. When my family visited while I was studying abroad, we drove up the steep road, hiked up the last few steps, and then walked through an archway into the impressive courtyard. Though it’s not as famous as the Wartburg Castle, I saw the place that was so instrumental to Martin Luther during a low point in his life. Thirteen years after he posted the 95 Theses as a no-name university professor in a dinky little town of Wittenberg, he sat in the Coburg castle, in life-and-death danger with an imperial ban hanging over his head and separated from all his colleagues who were presenting their faith to the emperor in the city of Augsburg. Lonely and all alone, he received a death blow: a letter that his father had died. On a tour of the Coburg castle, you can see the comforting words Luther wrote on the wall as a daily reminder, one of his favorite passages, “I will not die but live and will proclaim the works of the Lord” (Psalm 118:17).

Five hundred years later, we still feel lonely and isolated, our fathers still die, and we still get depressed. Where will you find your comfort? Find your mighty fortress in Christ alone. The result of Reformation’s exclusive inclusivity is for everyone to focus on Christ, Christ, and only Christ. Today is not about Martin Luther and his 95 Theses. Today is not about the country of Germany or the history of Western civilization. Today is not about thinking that we Lutherans are better than other churches. There is one and only focus for today: Christ alone. That’s a kind of exclusivity we can all embrace today; that kind of exclusivity includes everyone. On this 500th anniversary, flee to that mighty fortress of Christ alone. It’s the safest place you could possibly be. Check everything else at the door. Christ, and Christ alone, will greet you with his righteousness, deliverance, and salvation. Amen.