

Does the Reformation still matter? Do we really need a special service to remember what the Reformation was all about? Oh, I suppose it's helpful to remind us that Martin Luther is not the African-American civil rights leader from the 1960's! The Martin Luther we remember today is the man who lived in Germany 500 years ago and helped reform the Church. It's certainly useful for knowing who we are as Lutherans, a bit of our history. But does the Reformation really matter beyond that classroom exercise of keeping people straight and our tradition alive?

At first glance, the answer is no. You see, the Reformation wasn't so much about Martin Luther as it was about **righteousness** and **certainity**. How could we be right with God? How can anyone be **certain** of eternal life? Those were the questions the Reformation wanted answered.

In the United States today, most people aren't too concerned about those questions. An article by D. A. Carson in the magazine *Moody* says that most Americans don't think much about heaven or hell. In fact, most don't believe there is a literal place called hell. Neither do many believe there is a personal demonic being called Satan. As for heaven, not many get excited about the topic. The article says that we are not hungry, sick, or persecuted enough to look forward to a much better life. Overall, life is pretty good in our country.

But, of course, people still believe in life after death, which means that at least every so often a person has to stop and think about what happens next. "What happens once you die?" But when asked, just about everyone says they're going to heaven. Americans believe in happy endings. Americans are eternally optimistic. So, if everything will ultimately turn out all right anyway, why worry about whether you're right with God or wonder how you can be certain about eternal life?

As an example of this happy optimism, after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, I remember, someone drew a picture of the buildings, with the smoke billowing up and out. Out of the smoke were figures, people rising up to heaven. Standing above the smoke was Jesus, larger than the buildings, the smoke, and all the people. He had his arms open wide, welcoming everyone into His loving embrace.

It's a wonderful picture, but is it accurate? Did everyone who died in that attack—except the terrorists, of course—end up in Jesus' loving arms and in heaven, as the picture seems to say? Does getting killed in any kind of terrorist attack automatically qualify you for heaven?

No, not according to St. Paul in this Romans passage. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), he says: stockbroker, pilot, custodian, airline passenger, husband, wife, child, friend. It doesn't matter how you die. It doesn't matter if you are young or old, sick, or healthy, whether death came quickly or days later. It doesn't matter if death comes at the hands of a terrorist, a drunk driver, cancer, or old age. All are sinners. All have fallen short of the glory of God.

If we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory, then who *is* welcomed in the arms of Jesus and who *isn't*? ***That is the very question that makes the Reformation so important. How can I be right with God so that I can be certain I'll end up in heaven?*** American optimism or wishful thinking just ***won't do***. We need to know for sure, and that's why the Reformation still matters.

Those eternal questions were answered by Martin Luther and the other reformers by turning to God's own Word, the Bible. Their answers weren't made up to make everyone feel good, nor guided by what most people believed. Rather, the Reformation answers were to stand on Scripture alone.

The Book of Romans was pivotal. We've already heard how all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. But that's not the last word. Scripture adds that righteousness comes from God, that we are justified freely by God's grace through Jesus Christ, gifted with a new status, righteousness, free of all guilt before God.

Being right with God is His doing. Grace alone saves us. God reaches down with His amazing, unmerited grace and makes our relationship with Him right and good. Nothing of our own do we bring; only His unmerited love for us in Jesus, and Him alone, gives us the righteousness that we need for eternal life.

That's where the picture about the terrorist attacks has it right. Standing above everything is Jesus. If anyone from that terrorist attack was going to heaven, it was because of Jesus. He hung on a cross to restore a right relationship between God and us. Eternal life comes from His death.

And certainty comes from His resurrection. Jesus welcomes people with His loving open arms because the grave could not hold Him. Death had no lasting power over Him. Only Christ our Savior can guarantee that life after death will bring heaven instead of hell, a loving Father instead of Satan.

Christ alone is the Reformation's answer, the Bible's answer, God's answer to those questions of righteousness and certainty. And faith alone ***holds onto Jesus***, onto God's grace in Him. Our faith stands on Scripture alone, grace alone,

Christ alone. And this Reformation certainty about God's righteousness in Jesus **still** matters.

Next Sunday is All Saints' Sunday. Together as a congregation we will remember and give thanks to God for all of the members of First Lutheran who have died this past year.

We will also pause to remember **all** of our loved ones and friends who trusted in the Lord Jesus and have also gone to be with Him in the paradise of God. Whenever you or I lose a friend or a loved-one, then death becomes **intensely** personal and not just something awful that you hear about happening to complete strangers miles and miles away.

When death—and life—get **personal**, too close to ignore, too near to rely on American optimism and wishful thinking, **that's** when the Reformation still matters. And the Reformation's answer to questions of righteousness and certainty in such personal and up-close moments is **Jesus**. We can be at **peace** knowing our loved ones who have died in the faith are at home in heaven. Jesus willingly and lovingly died for them. God's grace reached into their lives at Baptism, which connected them to Jesus' death and resurrection, gave them faith to **hold onto** Jesus, and He brings them home to heaven safely.

Yes, death is still personal, and that's why the Reformation still matters. Without God's grace, I know I would be without hope of ever seeing my loved ones and friends again. For **all have** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, no one deserves eternal life. Nor does anyone have eternal life merely because they have some vague, optimistic, belief in an afterlife. No, it's by God's grace alone that we can have this certainty, this blessed assurance. Jesus brought righteousness and life to people like my father, my uncle, my brother, my mother, and my father-in-law, all who died this past year. Jesus brings righteousness and life to **all** who have faith in Christ, to people like you and me. Yes, the Reformation **most definitely** still matters, because righteousness and certainty come from Jesus and Him alone.

In the person of Jesus, the Son of God personally took our sin and our death upon Himself, and because of that, we truly can be at peace, now and for eternity. Jesus personally loves you, and He wants you to live both now and forever.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word;  
Curb those who by deceit or sword  
Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son,  
And bring to naught what He has done.

O Comforter of priceless worth,  
Send peace and unity on earth;  
Support us in our final strife  
And lead us out of death to life.

Amen!