

Reformation 500: Spirituality, Influences on Culture, Perspectives

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**Dear participants, at first you will find an informative part of our material for today.
Gradually topics for discussions and questions for discussion are added.
I hope you will find it interesting.**

Estonia has taken an initiative in the Baltic countries with the aim to reflect upon several theological, social, cultural and educational impacts which have taken place in our region since the Reformation. A special programme “500 Years since the Reformation in Estonia” to be implemented during the years 2015-2017 is in process. This programme is the central element of all activities the EELC is going to do in the years 2016-2017.

The programme has three main combined elements as focal points: Seminars, Reformation Congress and Publication Activity.

1. Seminars 2016-2017.

This life-long-learning project is prepared for pastors, lay persons and all people interested in Reformation. There are four topics. The basis for the instruction, seminars and reflections is the special material by the Lutheran World Federation *Liberated by God's Grace*. The material is translated today and all 400 pages will be accessible in book form by October 2016. The four topics are:

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| (1) Liberated by God's Grace | April 2016 |
| (2) Salvation – Not for Sale | November 2016 |
| (3) Human Beings – Not for Sale | April 2017 |
| (4) Creation – Not for Sale | October 2017 |

2. Reformation Congress in Tallinn (Oct 25th-26th, 2016).

The title of the Congress *Reformation 500: Spirituality, Influences on Culture, Perspectives* gives expression to a variety of themes from the 16th century until today. The congress ends with a panel discussion and directs our view to the future. The National Library of Estonia is the venue of the congress and lecturers are already at work on their papers. The Congress is at the same time a great public event to celebrate the 70th birthday of the Institute of Theology.

The four parts of the Reformation Congress programme are:

I. Reformation, spirituality and history

The Gospel and the freedom of faith
Reformation viewed from the point of Reformation theology
Beginning of the Reformation in Estonia – events in the 16th Century
The impact of the Reformation on the religious landscape in Estonia

II. Reformation, culture, education

The impact of the Reformation on education
Lutheran Hymnals and Estonian singing festivals
The Birth of Estonian literature

III. Reformation, human being and society

Liberated Human Being and free country
Lutheran understanding of work and occupation
Reformation Spirituality today – seeking for my own self and succeeding life

IV. Reformation, churches and pluralism

Global dimensions of Reformation
Ecclesial plurality and unity: Reformation and ecumenical movements
Reformation, secularization, and the neutrality of the state
Religious plurality in Estonia

3. Publication Activity.

First, the above mentioned special material by the Lutheran World Federation *Liberated by God's Grace* will be publicly presented in the evening of the first day of the congress on Oct 25th, 2016.

Second, a special Edition of the Institute of Theology makes Congress papers available. The lecturers who will have a paper at the Congress will finalize their presentations and give them academic form. Thus the papers will be published as the special issue in May 2017.

After this overview we have to focus on our common activities today.

It is possible to pick up any theme from our Reformation project above including the Congress, ask questions, make suggestions and find inspiration for everybody's own domestic use. It would be a choice A↑.

Before that I will sketch some additional notes for two possible topics – choices B and C:

- B. Liberated by God's Grace – From What, To What?
- C. Reflections on the Understanding of Holy Scripture

B. Liberated by God's Grace – From What, To What?

Is it true that today grace and mercy (German: *Gnade*) have become rare words occurring only in exceptional cases, such as in the "plea for mercy"?

We become aware of mercy when it has disappeared. Merciless dictatorships, terrorists etc! Is there still tremendous need for mercy and grace? Is the world without mercy already reality on a large scale?

It is said (sometimes) at the same time that the very word is suspect. Why?

Martin Luther was by no means an “un-political” / “non-political” person. He appealed to those responsible for his age and called for measures to improve social conditions in his “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520”. “As long as Christians live in this world they are part of society, i.e., the polis, and co-responsible for its weal and woe” (Gottfried Brakemeier).

The other aspect is – the Church of Jesus Christ must beware of being co-opted by party politics. It would lose its freedom as a Church.

The questions:

It is demanded that the Church should not interfere in political matters. People say the Church has to care for people’s salvation and the state for their welfare. Can salvation and welfare be separated so neatly?

Why must we actually talk about God’s mercy? Is a humane world not possible without God? Many say that we should abolish religion in order to create peace in the world. What needs to be said in this regard?

C. Reflections on the Understanding of Holy Scripture

God speaks to people in different ways and acts in mysterious ways.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things (Hebrews 1:1-2).

When we communicate with others, we express our own selves in addition to any information being conveyed. When God communicates with people, God expresses, reveals and thus shares Godself with them.

So God is bound to God’s Word; God is bound to it – the Word.

God did not only reveal Godself in words, but also in creation, the history (of Israel) and the life and works of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, **texts** are the central medium for our relationship with God. What matters for Christians is to read, interpret and understand Holy Scripture in such a way that it unfolds its potential to be the Word of God, speaking to us.

As we focus on Holy Scripture, we will need to bear in mind the close connection between Holy Scripture and God’s Word.

Lutheran principles:

By scripture alone (SOLA SCRIPTURA)

The primary principles of Christians should thus not be anything other than the divine words;

the words of men should however be conclusions derived thereof, which must then be traced back to and held up to them.

(M. Luther, quoted from *Liberated by God's Grace*, p. 43)

Luther insisted that one has to read and study the Bible as had been the case in the early church, when one could not refer to any interpretations of theological or ecclesiastical authorities. Luther did not wish to base his reading and interpretation on the history of its reception.

The Protestant principle of SOLA SCRIPTURA is a church process used to address specific matters and problems that arise in church doctrine and practice.

With its exclusive SOLA SCRIPTURA, it seeks solutions to problems that are chiefly or solely based on tradition and the interpretation history of Holy Scripture and thus not on Scripture itself.

Objections to SOLA SCRIPTURA?

Wherefrom does Holy Scripture derive its authority? Luther raised the postulate of *autopistia*, the self-authentication of Holy Scripture, which stipulates that Holy Scripture has no other guarantors of its own authority than itself.

Also the church derives its authority from Holy Scripture.

What about many unclear areas in Holy Scripture? Luther was well aware of it and distinguished between the external and internal clarity.

External clarity was plain to see for those who could read the original biblical languages. But if you speak of internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God.

Luther's theology was founded on taking the biblical message seriously in a radical manner, inasmuch as they had as their content Christ and the gospel founded in him.

- As the Bible, the texts are a religious book and a historical source
- As Holy Scripture, in the usage of the church, the Bible is the source and principle of understanding of its doctrine and practice
- As God's Word, the biblical texts are the means through which God expresses Godself to people and hence communicates life and salvation (as a source of life) (Hans-Peter Grosshans - *Liberated by God's Grace*, p. 50)

As to the principles of interpretation, emphasis has been laid in particular on what "was Christum treibet" – what promotes Christ.

How to interpret the Holy Scripture?

The Reformers emphasized the literal sense of biblical texts. Under the assumption of the completeness and comprehensibility of Holy Scripture, that Scripture could be understood on its own. It is expected that reason, though limited, should be used.

Accordingly, a methodically developed interpretation of Holy Scripture thus did not need only one but often several plausible interpretations of biblical texts.

The interpretation of biblical texts can only truly achieve its goal if people hear God speaking to them through these texts and are touched existentially by them.

Holy Scripture is one of the means through which God communicates with people in this world, and is indeed the main medium for this communication.

The interpretation can succeed once interpreters are not only able to ascertain what the text actually seeks to express, but also when the text reveals the human condition in all its variety to readers and interpreters and raises the question of whether the life varieties expressed therein could be their own.

It is part of the overall interpretation process that believers from different situations and contexts share with one another the insights that they receive from their individual and collective listening to God's Word.

The questions:

What experiences do you have when you read or hear a biblical text?

Do you expect the passage to tell you something meaningful for your personal life and your understanding of the world?

How does God speak to us through the Bible?

What is crucial in the interpretation of a biblical text, in sermons or Bible studies?

Should the interpretation of biblical texts be adapted to contemporary understandings?

How should we deal with different interpretations of the same biblical text in evangelical churches?

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