Celebrating the Reformation?

On Monday, Oct. 31—Reformation Day in the Protestant tradition—Pope Francis I joined with representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and leaders from across the Christian church in a remarkable ecumenical service at the Lund Cathedral in Sweden. Coming one year ahead of the 500th year anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of the 95 Theses—a day many Lutherans regard as the birthplace of their church—the worship service both commemorated the Protestant Reformation and expressed a hope for closer relations between Protestants and Catholics.

Clearly, the service at Lund was a landmark event, a significant step in a long ecumenical journey. In 1999, after 50 years of ecumenical dialogue, Catholic and Lutheran theologians summarized their shared understandings in a document, "Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification." More recently, a joint publication, "From Conflict to Communion," concluded with five ecumenical commitments, each pointing toward the restoration of fellowship that has divided Protestants and Catholics for half a millennium. Now, as we near the culmination of a decade-long national celebration of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, the highest authorities in the Catholic and Lutheran churches have publicly expressed a desire for reconciliation. Christians around the world should enthusiastically celebrate and encourage these steps toward unity in the body of Christ.

From a global church perspective, however, all this focus on the Reformation looks a bit different.

First, we should be reminded of some basic numbers. Of the roughly 2.4 billion Christians in the world, half are Catholics. Another 300 million or so are members of various Orthodox churches that have no particular connection to the Reformation. Then there is the fact that neither of the fastest growing groups in the world of global Christianity—Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, which number around 650 million adherents, and African Initiated Churches (AICs), with some 84 million members—identify in any particular way with the events in 16th-century Europe. In the meantime, those groups most closely associated with the Reformation—so-called "mainline Protestants"—are facing precipitous losses in membership, particularly in Europe and North America.

Second, the majority of Christians in the global South inhabit theological worlds far from the mainstreams of Western universities and the dominant narratives of church history textbooks in which the Reformation looms so large. From their perspective, the central theological issues of the 16th century Reformers—debates over the freedom of the will, for example, or justification by faith or the sovereignty of God—are far less significant than the biblical themes of poverty and healing, the living reality of the Holy Spirit, and Christ's call to the Great Commission.

Calling attention to this broader perspective does not mean we should ignore the long series of events next year commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. "Right remembering" is a central theme of the biblical narrative—an expression of the good news of the gospel.

But if the Reformation is to be relevant to the global Christian church, it may call for greater attention to those 16th-century groups that have traditionally been relegated to margins of the story: the dissenters, radicals, spiritualists and heretics. Like the Radical Reformation dissenters, AIC groups often emerge as lay-initiated movements of self-proclaimed pastors and prophets who challenge traditional sources of ecclesial authority, ignore political boundaries and threaten the social status quo. Like the spiritualists of the 16th century, Pentecostal-Charismatics tend to emphasize the central role of the Holy Spirit, frequently expressed in ways that defy systematization. The growing edges of the global church today, like their Radical Reformation counterparts, have a tendency to fragmentation and division. At times, they practice a biblical hermeneutic open to apocalyptic themes, attuned to the realities of the poor, the young, the disenfranchised and women. And for many, persecution is a likely, even inevitable, consequence of their faith.

The Protestant Reformation has bequeathed many gifts to the global Christian church—it should not, and will not, be forgotten in the history of the church. But as the service in Lund reminds us, commemorations are also opportunities to reflect on basic assumptions. The emergence of global Christianity is not just an interesting development somewhere on the periphery. It represents a profound transformation of the Christian faith that calls for a fundamental reorientation of our understanding of church history, including the traditional narrative of the Protestant Reformation. TM

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