

‘Reformation Challenges: Unity in Diversity’

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Part I: Foundations of Unity and Diversity in the Reformation

Introduction:

Lutherans have had a long tradition of having trouble with unity in the church. Every time we have a debate or disagreement in the church, one of our ‘default’ actions has been to split and start a new church. We come by it honestly, however. Nor was it something that the reformers of the 16th century were concerned about. After all, they were the ones responsible for, or at least considered as the leaders of the factions that led to the split in the Roman Catholic Church. So what right do we have to talk about unity as Lutherans? Weren’t we the initiators of division?

History tells us that one of the most common accusations hurled against these reformers, such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Johannes Oecolampadius, Jacob Sturm, Philipp Melancthon, Conrad Grebel, Georg Blaurock, Felix Mantz, Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Denck, William Farel, John Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, Thomas Muntzer, Matthew and Katharina Schütz Zell, and many, many others, was that they were willing to split the church for the sake of their own views about the Gospel, Scripture, Tradition and the understanding of the true church. Again and again, the Roman Catholics of their time pointedly accused them of thinking that they alone were right, while the whole church was wrong. The very thought that the whole church might be wrong went against all common sense.

It was no surprise, then, that the Roman Catholics put all the reformers in a common pot, labelling them all sectarians. Johannes Eck, for example, made no distinction between all the reformers in his 1530 work, ‘The 404 Articles.’¹ The 404 Articles were published just prior to the Diet, or Parliament of the Holy Roman Empire, which was meeting that year in Augsburg. Eck was upset that the Emperor was willing to give these ‘Protestants’ a platform for their ideas, rather than punishing them, as the parliament meeting in Worms had agreed upon in 1521, nine years earlier. In response to Emperor Charles V’s decision to give the Protestants another hearing, Eck lumped the Lutherans, Swiss, Anabaptists, and the ‘enthusiasts’ all together, suggesting that every last one of them taught the same heresies, or errors. Eck contended that these heresies would only divide the church. So he wanted to make clear that no compromises

¹ The 404 Articles can be found in Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 31-82.

should be made with these reformers. In his mind, one did not negotiate with heretics. If they didn't repent of their errors, you exterminated them.

As a result of these misguided reformers, so the argument goes, we are now saddled with over 33,000 distinctly different Christian denominations in the world today.² Of those 33,000 different denominations, 97% of them have their roots in the 16th Century Protestant tradition. Given that track record, it seems a bit absurd for us to be speaking of Christian unity.

We have paid the price for this in the broken witness we present to the world. We are a fractured people. Who would listen to us about unity? And when it comes to diversity, we can speak more clearly about divisiveness than we can about diversity. As soon as different opinions arise in our churches, we seem able to resolve it only by splitting into yet another faction, or, to put it another way, we go madly off in all directions. No, truth be known, we haven't embraced diversity too well.

Nevertheless, I do think that there are some very helpful principles about unity and diversity that are embedded in the teachings of the Lutheran reformation. We tend to forget that Luther and the reformers sought a unity, in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. In turn, the bases for their unity gave a great deal of room and freedom for a healthy dose of diversity. This unity in diversity, I would suggest, was based on three basic theological foundations: 1) a trust in God's unconditional grace, 2) a respect for the neighbour, and 3) flexibility in matters not of the essence of the Gospel. I would like to spend the next few minutes discussing these three principles.

1. Trust in God's Unconditional Grace

Lutherans are known for talking about grace. But I'm not always sure we really, wholeheartedly accept unconditional grace. It's just too messy, and too uncontrollable.

The trouble with unconditional grace is that we want it for ourselves, but we're not sure that others should get it as well. Some have called it the Pharisee syndrome – certain people deserve God's grace, of course, but others need to change their ways before God will welcome them unconditionally. With the Pharisee syndrome, the prayer that too often escapes our lips is, 'Lord, I thank you that I'm not like those underserving sinners over there.'

Luther recognized this problem in terms of what he called 'works righteousness.' Deep down, people want grace to be distributed to those who deserve it and who work hard for it. We want grace to be 'fair.' But it was precisely because people want grace just for those who deserve it that Luther had a problem with many of the monastic movements in his day and age. Many people had entered the monastery – perhaps himself included – with the idea that as a monk, and because they could devote their lives to good, religious works or efforts – they would be more holy and more deserving than the common folk. They would be first in line when the gates to heaven were to be opened. They felt that the very idea of a person being saved simply because of God's grace was just too much to accept. Surely, one had to do something – or at least believe the right things, in the right way. I mean, if grace were unconditional, then anyone could be saved, whether they deserved it or not! And think of what that would do to the neighbourhood! Think of what that would do to our understanding of the church!

² Data extracted from: David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: a Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Even buying an indulgence, a ‘get out of purgatory free’ card, was preferable to unconditional grace. At least with buying an indulgence, a person could point to what they had done to deserve their ‘get out of purgatory free’ card. Further, the very fact that one was going to purgatory meant that God had already blessed you with grace and given you salvation. All that was left was to ‘work off’ the residue of your sins – something you could control. But to leave these matters only in God’s hands? Well, that was really just too much to accept.

We often forget that the Roman church in the time of the reformation didn’t mind grace at all – as long as the right people could distribute it, and as long as only the right people could get access to it. And they were quite happy to be in charge of distributing grace, within their carefully defined limits. What really bothered the Roman church at the time of the reformation was not that Luther taught about God’s grace, but that he dared to suggest that grace was unconditional, and not under the control of the church authorities.

Yet Luther insisted on the centrality of unconditional grace. In his *Schmalkald Articles* – a document that is one of the confessional documents of the Lutheran church, even today – Luther states, right up front, that God grants grace to people, based not on what people do in order to deserve it, but solely on what God, in Christ, has done on the cross for people. The theological term for this unconditional grace is ‘justification by grace through faith.’ This grace, insists Luther, is given to people as a free gift – totally underserved, because God has chosen to do so in order to change the world around.

After declaring that unconditional grace was the ‘chief and first article,’ Luther goes on to evaluate all other ‘religious actions’ based on this grace. To be honest, he comes down hard on all the ways the church had turned grace into something conditional – whether it be on how correctly the priest offered up Christ to God in the mass, to how a person could show off their piety by taking part in pilgrimages to visit relics, or even by buying indulgences. All these things, said Luther, were against the first and chief article of unconditional grace, contrary to scripture, unnecessary and even useless. They didn’t make a person more worthy or deserving, but were often actually obstacles, to God’s unconditional grace.

How do we distinguish unconditional grace from a subtle version of grace with conditions attached, however? One of the simplest ways of discovering whether grace is conditional or unconditional is whether it proclaims a freedom for new opportunities for experiencing life in its fullness, or whether it puts certain restrictions or conditions around who is eligible to experience life. Does it open up the possibilities of life in relationship with God and with the neighbour, or does it put up fences to control life? Unconditional grace breathes life into people and opens up previously unheard of possibilities for people. Conditional grace, however, puts limits on grace, including using even religious actions or standards of piety and morality to determine who should get grace. This kind of conditional grace is actually not even grace at all. It is a legalism, based on expectations.

Many Christians, even today, still have a big problem with unconditional grace – simply because we can’t control it, and it is not based on all of the standards or expectations we have set for others. In the back of our minds, unconditional grace should be deserved. What do I mean by that? Let me give some examples.

We are always glad to welcome people of other faiths –and people of no faith! – into our communities – as long as they don’t change our way of life or seem to impose their faith or lifestyles upon us. Or, we can be gracious to our indigenous neighbours – as long as our way of

life is not threatened, and they don't want to move into our neighbourhoods or take over our businesses or reclaim the land that settlers had homesteaded many generations ago. Or we gladly welcome refugees who have fled from the horrors of their home countries – as long as they are not terrorists. Many would also insist that we should graciously welcome refugees, as long as they are Christian. We are often willing to offer grace to others, as long as we can control the parameters of that grace. And that's the problem.

God's grace, however, is unconditional. As soon as it is controlled by anything or anyone, it is no longer grace. It becomes an expectation. It becomes something to control. It involves requirements and conditions attached to it. Unconditional grace, on the other hand, makes room for diversity in our lives and in our world. It opens us outward to the world, rather than closing us in on ourselves. In that sense, the opposite of unconditional grace is not conditional grace, but sin. As Luther himself defined it, sin is being curved inward upon ourselves³ and our self-controlled communities, whether they be defined by ethnic, class, or religious criteria. Sin seeks to shut out diversity, because diversity, like grace, cannot be controlled.

Unconditional grace also allows us to see each other as children of God. But the key to this unconditional grace is a trust in God – a trust that God is going to do what is best for all – and not just us, and that what God does, and wants to do, for all creation will also be the best thing for us. Diversity, through God's grace, takes courage. Lots of courage and lots of trust – trusting that God knows what is best for us and for our neighbour.

2. Respect for the Neighbour

Luther insisted that a person can only understand what it means to be fully human, with all its complexity and challenges, when one is grounded or rooted in the community. He believed that we are not so much *homo sapiens* – a knowing human being – as we are a *homo communitens* – a person in community – in community with God and in community with one another.

If you have ever played 'Monopoly,' you have encountered one of Martin Luther's great contributions to society. In this game, one of the sets of cards you can draw from is called 'Community Chest.' The Community Chest was the first real social assistance program for the community in Luther's time. How it worked was that people would pay their taxes by putting their payments into the chest. They would also pay any fines by putting money into the chest. Some would even donate to it freely. Then, once a month or so, the chief pastor in town and the town mayor, who both had a different key to the community chest, would open it and distribute the money to those in need, based on the information they had gathered from the community. As time passed, a second community chest was also set up, with the proceeds going to the schools and hospitals where the sick could be cared for.

Now, even a cursory reading of Luther's writings and sermons reveal how important the community was for him. For example, one of the crucial 'benefits,' of his insistence that a person is saved by God's unconditional grace alone is that it allowed him to emphasize how it sets a person free to care for the neighbour. Because God does what is necessary to create a relationship with us, all we can do, in response, is to care for our neighbour.

³ This idea is found in Luther's Commentary on Psalm 51:10, (151301515), as found in LW 10:241; WA 3:292.18. 1513-1515. He also uses the term in his 1515-1516 Romans Commentary (e.g. LW 25:245, 291; WA 56:258.10, 304.26), and in his 1525 treatise On the Bondage of the Will (LW 33:175-6; WA 18:709.14-15).

In the *Small Catechism*, in explaining the Ten Commandments, he spends the majority of time discussing, not what we shouldn't do ('Thou shalt not' ...), but instead goes on and on about how keeping the commandments is really about the unlimited possibilities for helping our neighbour be fully human. For example, Luther treats the fifth commandment this way:

You are not to kill.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.⁴

To keep this commandment, it wasn't enough to simply not kill someone, or even to not harm our neighbour in any way. To keep the commandment fully, a person is enjoined to help their neighbour with whatever they need. To do less, felt Luther, was to steal or take away the possibilities of life from them – or, to put it another way, to not help our neighbour when we could, is nothing less than killing their possibilities for life!

Think of the dynamic that this kind of thinking would introduce into a community – not only would we be aware of the needs of others, but others would be more aware of what we need in order for each of us to experience what it means to be fully human as well. But the catch is, the only way experience what it is like to be fully human for ourselves is to help our neighbours discover the same thing.

This is where diversity enters the picture. When you think about it, it is quite radical in its simplicity! To serve the neighbour in a way that is best for them introduces diversity in our relationships. Rather than focussing on what is important for me, we ask, what is important for our community. Sometimes, the answers may surprise us!

But is this 'catering' to our neighbour really practical? That's the really important question in our pragmatic world. But think about it. Every business today would fail if they were designed to help or benefit only the person running the business. A business only survives if it provides benefits to others.

At the same time, Luther was all too aware that sin is always present, both in individuals and in a community. It kept Luther from being a 'pie-in-the-sky' idealist. Thus, his basic definition of sin, as I've already mentioned, was 'being curved in on ourselves' – or, as we might say it today, 'thinking it's all about me.' When we focus on ourselves, in other words, to the detriment of the community, then we sin. Luther describes it by using the example of a miser:

The miser is of no use either to himself or to other people. No one can share his pleasure, because he does not live with anyone else and keeps his property all to himself; indeed, in having it he does not have it. Someone whose style of life is not so solitary, on the other hand, has certain definite advantages. Being himself of benefit to others, he also receives benefits from others.' As I have said, this community serves to preserve and to increase goods.⁵

The same is the case when a particular community, or even congregation, focusses inward, upon itself. When that happens, we get a good look at sin. The opposite of sin is being turned outward to others – both as individuals and as a community. It opens us up to being aware of others, of

⁴ Small Catechism, Ten Commandments, 9-10.

⁵ 'Commentary on the Song of Solomon' LW 15:68-9.

seeing how we can help others experience life. We know this by our own experience. When everyone is only concerned about themselves, we experience the breakdown of community. But if we are ‘open to others’ who are different from us, and if we recognize the importance and gift that diversity brings, we experience life in community at its best.

Experiencing the benefits of diversity in the community requires a lot of work, however. Community, at its best, does not happen when we run away from problems in a community, or force everyone to do things in exactly the same way, but when we stay and work for its renewal, in all its diversity.⁶ Thus, Luther concluded:

If you want to live in a community, you must share the community’s burdens, dangers, and injuries, even though not you, but your neighbor has caused them. You must do this in the same way that you enjoy the peace, profit, protection, wealth, freedom [from this same community].⁷

Life in community is not always easy. Diversity in a community is not always easy to deal with. It’s often complicated, difficult, and messy. But it is in this community that we discover what it means to be fully human. We discover our full humanity when we are ‘turned outward,’ to our neighbor, to our community, to the world, and to God. There, we discover that life is only as rich and diverse as what we invest in the community, as we are helped by others, in all their diversity, to discover how we, together, can be most fully human and alive, and as we teach each other. It opens us to life.

3. Diversity in Matters not of the Essence of the Gospel

Luther was not at all flexible when it came to proclaiming the Gospel – the Good news of God’s unconditional grace. This was a non-negotiable. But everything else in life, as we have discovered, should have room for flexibility or diversity – so that God’s grace is not impeded. For this reason, Luther proposed that the church needs to approach issues in society by determining whether they are a) of the essence of the Gospel; b) they are for the well-being of the church and society; or c) they are adiaphora.

First, there are certain things that are essential to faith and salvation. In this category are all the things God does for us, in Christ. Since life and salvation are totally dependent on God, they belong in this category. These things are of the essence – or, in Latin, *esse* – of the church and of our life of faith.

Second, and on the other side of the spectrum, are those things that are adiaphora. These things can be done in a multitude of ways. Carpets in the church can be blue, red, or yellow without affecting our salvation. You can have the hymn of the day before the sermon, or after the sermon – when you sing the hymn is not essential to our salvation – unless we have made our salvation dependent on something, or rather, someone other than Christ.

A third category, which fits in the middle, is those things that affect the well-being - which in Latin is the *bene esse* - of the church. Things in this category are not essential for us to do or believe in order to be saved (the first category), nor are they simply neutral, as are adiaphora. These things affect only our human relationships – the ways we find most helpful in

⁶ ‘Lectures on Galatians,’ LW 27:392.

⁷ ‘An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants,’ LW 46:78–79.

relating to each other and to our world. For example, actions such as transferring membership out of – or into- the ELCIC, or our understanding of who can preside at the Lord’s Table are neither adiaphora nor essential for our salvation. But they can matter a great deal to people. Moreover, when congregations divide over an issue, it is no longer adiaphora.

One of the major struggles in our church, however, is that what some people consider adiaphora, of no real consequence to our Christian faith, is considered essential to the faith by others. For example, the countless debates that we have had in our church, over same sex issues, is a case in point. We cannot say that a person’s sexual orientation will determine that person’s salvation, for that would mean that our orientation, rather than God’s unconditional grace alone, is determinative of our salvation. Instead, this debate had to be about how it fits into the well-being of the church. But our tendency in those debates was to label the issue as either ‘adiaphora’ or ‘essential’ – and that did not serve us well.

It is helpful, then, to deal with our God-created diversity, whether it be in terms of race, ethnicity, social status, or countless other ‘categorizations’ within humanity, by talking about then in terms of what is best for the well-being of the church. How do these ‘diversities’ give life and texture and richness to our communities of faith and our global communities? By exploring life from the perspective of the well-being of the community, we can spend our energies within the church, and in ecumenical, interfaith and secular conversations, by celebrating the ways diversity contributes to society, rather than how it threatens our own status at the expense of others.

Ultimately, our unity is found in Christ alone, for Christ alone can gather us together into the one body. But our diversity, our ways of being witnesses to that unity in multitudes of ways that speak to people in their own context, is about the well-being of the church. It matters in how we live together as the community – the community of the church, and in the global community.

Questions for discussion:

1. Think of a time when you have experienced unconditional grace. In what ways did it make you uncomfortable? In what ways did it open you up to new experiences and possibilities? In what ways is this unconditional grace life-giving to you and your community? In what ways does this unconditional grace give us our unity in Christ, and in what ways does it free us to be more open to diversity?
2. Think of a neighbour that is totally unlike you, who has helped you see yourself and your world in a new, and more helpful, way. What were your initial fears about this person who was ‘other’ than you? How did your neighbour help you expand your world and see it in a new and richer way?
3. One of our human tendencies is to categorize things as either ‘essential’ or ‘adiaphora.’ Why, do you think we want to categorize things in this way? How can a focus on working for the well-being of the community give us new possibilities for life in the community? In what ways does a focus on the well-being of the community make us, as a community, more receptive to unconditional grace in our lives? How does it make us more open to diversity?

Part 2: Unity in Diversity: Our Challenge Today

Introduction

It is easy for us as Lutherans to make Luther into a hero. In his own time, some people portrayed him as the ‘German Hercules,’ the slayer of all the evils of the world. But Luther doesn’t fit that mold. He was a justified sinner – and, in some areas of life, a deeply flawed sinner. We do well to remember that. For example, his perspective on the Jewish people of his time, or his fear for anarchy led him to say things that leave a bad taste in our mouth today. His ideas about religious pluralism are also not something we are proud about.

Luther lived in an age where religious diversity and pluralism was considered foolish. In his mind, and in the mind of most other people in western Europe, it was inconceivable that there be more than one religion, or even one denomination, in each town.⁸ So Luther and many others spoke out against such diversity. He was following a tradition, however, that had served the church well – when the early medieval missionaries had evangelised Europe, they would go into a village or town, and seek to convert the local leadership. If the local leader or ruler became Christian, the whole community would become Christian. The advantage of this approach, of course, was that it kept the ‘fabric of the community’ together. It didn’t divide families over religious lines, as individual conversions would have done. The community was in it together.

This is one of the reasons that the Roman Catholic church, and later the Protestant churches, fought so hard against the splitting of the church. In their mind, it would fracture the community and society. We have to remind ourselves that Luther did not want to start a new church. He simply wanted to reform it from within. He simply could not conceive of a church splintered into all kinds of denominations. That was contrary to his understanding of the Gospel. But the churches have split into countless pieces, much to the detriment of our witness in the world. Nor can we go back to those days. There are too many memories, too much history, and too much suspicion. So in dealing with religious diversity and pluralism, let me suggest that this is one place where it is better to follow Luther’s theology than it is to follow his practices. It will save us a lot of heartache and problems.

Luther never ceased to remind his congregations that our unity is found in Christ. St. Paul defined justification as being ‘in Christ.’⁹ One of the gifts of the Sacrament of the Altar, also known as the Lord’s Supper, was that a person and a community are brought into the ‘body of Christ’ which is the church. But our unity is also at the heart of what Luther called the Gospel. Luther defined the Gospel in a few simple words –the forgiveness of sins. In this forgiveness, a person is made ‘one with Christ’ – and one with the community. Without the Gospel, without God’s unconditional grace, we have no unity. In fact, without the Gospel, apart from the forgiveness of sins, we can only reject the unity that God wants to create in us and in all creation.

At the same time, however, one discovers that within this unity in Christ one finds an incredible amount of diversity. Some years ago, for example, there was a suggestion that ‘true’ or ‘real’ Christians would have all the gifts of the Spirit that were listed in Romans 12:6-8 and 1

⁸ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation: 1521-1532* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 338-39.

⁹ This idea of justification being described as being ‘in Christ’ is emphasized repeatedly in E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

Corinthians 12:8-10. But as Paul makes clear throughout his letters, God deliberately does not give all the gifts of the spirit to one person – if a person had all the gifts, they wouldn't need anyone else in the community. Instead, we are all given different gifts – for the sake of the community. Of course, this also implies that our very diversity is given by God for the sake of all creation, and not to simply bolster our own personal piety.

Our ongoing reformation challenge for today, I would suggest, is to continue to be a reformation people in our world, by operating from the principles we previously looked at – God's unconditional grace, respect for the neighbour, and diversity in matters not essential to the essence of the Gospel.

How can we do that, however? Personally, I think the possibilities are unlimited. At the same time, though, I don't think that this path of unity in diversity is an easy road to travel. Despite the obstacles before us on this journey, the God of the Gospel challenges us to engage in being a Gospel people in our communities and in our world, filled, as it is, with an incredible amount of diversity.

Our cities and towns are no longer ethnic enclaves. We encounter, in our stores and places of business, First Nations peoples and peoples who have immigrated from around the world. We encounter people that come from diverse religious practices and people with no religious affiliations at all. We are no longer a monochromatic society – if we ever really were. So how can we be a people that are united in Christ while fostering a healthy, life-giving diversity? That is our challenge. I would like to suggest three things that may help us be reformers in our church and society. These three things are; 1) working for justice for our neighbours and all creation; 2) respecting, rather than simply tolerating, the other; and 3) practicing open transparency in our practices.

1. Justice for our Neighbours and all Creation

Luther's emphasis on respect for the neighbour led him to also insist that one cannot avoid working for justice for our neighbours. At the same time – and this might be shocking for us – Luther insisted that we were not to seek justice for ourselves, but only for our neighbours. Further, if we don't seek justice for our neighbour, we are robbing our neighbour of whatever our neighbour has a right to have or experience.¹⁰ Conversely, we are to trust our neighbours to work for justice for us when we are unjustly treated.¹¹ When we seek justice, in other words, we are to do so without benefitting ourselves. This is echoed again and again in Luther's *Small Catechism* – we are to help the neighbour simply for their sake.

This simple principle has a lot for us to think about. On the one hand, we don't want to have to rely on others for our justice. After all, we have been trained, and equipped, to get justice for ourselves, and to get the decision we want, by having the right lawyer and by making use of all the loopholes in the law that we can find. Who better, we say, than us, to get justice for

¹⁰ 'Treatise on Trade and Usury (1524),' LW 45:306. 'If you want to serve God your way, serve him without injuring your neighbor, and by keeping God's commandments. For he says in Isa. 61[:8]: 'I am a God who loves justice; I hate robbery for burnt offering.'" And the Wise Man says: "Give alms of that which is thine." But such overcharges are a theft from your neighbor, contrary to God's commandment.'

¹¹ 'Sermon, Epistle for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (1525),' LW 76:294-95. 'Here all rights among Christians are abolished. It is not permitted that anyone should demand his things back with justice; rather, he is to forgive and yield. This is promoted with the example of Christ, just as He has forgiven us.'

ourselves? After all, we are the most committed to it, and we are the ones that will benefit from it the most. On the other hand, Luther's words are a reminder that we are a community, and that part of our task as a responsible community is to work for others, so that they can experience justice rather than injustice. Another part of our task is to help our neighbour discover what it means to live with dignity rather than as second class citizens or even 'objects to be used.'

Thus, we are called to participate in reformation challenges today – to work to give a voice to those silenced in our midst. We aren't called to keep them silent while we speak for them – but we are called to contribute in ways that may give room for them to tell their story, and to work for justice for them, even if it may be at our own expense!

The Treaty 107 project, for example, to have the potential to model this kind of justice. This treaty land, not far from Saskatoon, was originally granted to the Young Chipewyan people, but was taken from them in 1897, without compensation, following the events at Batoche in 1885, and given to Lutheran and Mennonite settlers. Today, the Aboriginal, Lutheran and Mennonite groups are working together to bring justice for the indigenous population there, even if it may not benefit themselves. It is, however, an opportunity to be reforming agents in our society.

To be a neighbour also means taking turns so that all can tell their stories. We are called to hear the voices calling for justice for missing indigenous women; for refugees, for migrant workers. It means listening to voices that our society so often drowns out. Their voices need to be heard, so that everyone together can discover how best to 'do justice, love kindness, and walk kindly with our God' (Micah 6:8).

We are also called to fight for justice for creation – a gift given by God for all living creatures as well as for creation's own health and wellbeing. How do we speak words of justice for the land, the air and the animals, God's good creation, especially when creation does not have a voice at the boardroom tables or legislative assemblies where decisions are made? Are we willing to fight for justice for our groaning earth as much as we fight for justice for ourselves and for the downtrodden and forgotten in our society, especially if it will cost us something in the process?

2. Acceptance, Respect, and Belonging, rather than simply Toleration

One of the delightful experiences we had while attending grad school in Toronto was to have our young children attend a downtown school where the students came from 65 different countries around the world. Our two boys were the only blue-eyed, blonde children in their classes. We were always amazed when they would come home each day, and rattle off the names of their classmates – names that we couldn't even pronounce when we saw them written down. But it was a wonderful learning experience for us, and one of the things we learned in the process was the distinction between 'tolerance,' on the one hand, and 'acceptance' and 'respect,' on the other. These were their best friends – they belonged together because they respected each other.

Toleration, in a nutshell, is often defined today as 'putting up with.' We tolerate the occasional noisy parties in our neighbourhood. We tolerate the quirks of our family members. We put up with many things, simply because it's not worth the effort to change them. I don't think it is a noble thing, then, for Canada to be considered a country where we 'tolerate'

diversity. If you ask me, it's a pretty low standard, and it requires very little work. It also allows us to maintain unhelpful stereotypes that allow the easy labelling of people. Further, the principle of toleration works for us – as long as there are no conflicts that arise. And when our toleration is threatened, we simply build bigger walls so that we can keep our distance. We can tolerate others without having to change our opinions and views about ourselves and our world.

Acceptance, respect, and belonging, however, are a different matter. Acceptance – at the level of belonging¹² – begins with showing respect for others. And this kind of respect demands high standards from us – challenging us to recognize the best of others, to recognize their humanity and to actually engage with others in ways that help us to actually understand and accept them in the same way that we would want to be accepted. It's not simply a matter of tolerating them. To respect ourselves and others is also to engage each other in dialogue about our diversity, to ask tough questions and be asked tough questions for the sake of better understanding the other, and to seek to be accountable to others and to ourselves, rather than trying to destroy, demean, or dismiss them because their differences threaten us. Acceptance, respect and belonging involves looking the other person in the eye and seeing in them God's creation, a neighbour that God created for me and the community of which we are a part, a community where all belong together. We are also called to look at ourselves in the mirror with a critical eye, perhaps even from the viewpoint of the other, and seeing if our words and actions are consistent with what it means to be a child of God living in God's world. This kind of respect takes a lot of work for people to feel that they belong.

I think that it is a big step for us as a church, to go from tolerating others to respectfully accepting others as God's people and seeing ourselves as all belonging to the same family. It's a step we must take, however. Here, I think that working with refugee families, and hearing their stories can help everyone see how we belong to each other. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission can also be a helpful guide for us, since it is based on respecting and belonging to each other rather than simply tolerating each other. This commission challenges us, and gives us concrete examples of how to show respect to others in the midst of our diversity. What does it reveal about ourselves? In what ways have we been robbing ourselves of the richness of diversity by operating on stereotypes, rather than learning from others about the possibilities before us, as walls are broken down and we see our neighbours as our neighbours – to whom we belong, rather than shadows in the background of our agendas to get on with life?

3. Open Transparency

Countless studies in the last 20-30 years have revealed that we live in a society that is sceptical, even distrusting of institutions and people in authority – including the church. Of course, countless scandals in politics, big businesses, the church and even voluntary organizations has not helped foster trust. One of the reasons for Donald Trump's election win was that he successfully portrayed Hillary Clinton as the 'establishment' – someone that couldn't be trusted, while he portrayed himself as the 'outsider.'

Open transparency is needed if we want or expect to work with others for justice, peace, integrity of creation and respect for each other. God's unconditional grace opens us outward. As

¹² One of the lessons we can learn in North America is that 'belonging' is an acceptance at a much deeper level even than acceptance. To belong is to no longer 'look in from the outside' – which can still happen with only an acceptance of the other. A high level of respect for each other is present in 'belonging' relationships.

a people of God, and as a church, we have been given this unconditional grace in the ‘light of the day,’ and it is not to be ‘hidden under a bushel.’

One of the challenges of open transparency, however, is that we will be scrutinized. Sceptics will examine us to see if we ‘practice what we preach.’ We will be scrutinized, to see if our unity in the gospel actually makes us open to, and welcoming of, diversity – whether we are actually open to seeking the best for our neighbour, or just tolerating them. And this challenge is daunting. Yet in the midst of this challenge, we are called to be transparent.

In the *Evangelical Declaration*, a statement adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in 1997, the ELCIC made a commitment to open transparency. It is still a commitment for us to take seriously. Here’s what we agreed to:

We commit ourselves as church to *communicate clearly* with one another and with society. We commit ourselves to openness and trust. We will listen to the voices of our church and society, and respond to their needs.

This is a daunting challenge. Our society has become secretive, partially, no doubt, because if we make our goals and aims public, we can be held accountable to them. But Jesus did his ministry in public – everyone was able to evaluate his actions based on his words. He was involved in a public ministry, just as the church today is called to be involved in a public ministry of proclaiming the Gospel through public means – word and sacrament.

The very nature of the Gospel is open. It is not something to be controlled – in fact; it cannot be controlled – at least by us, or by the church. To be the church, then, is to be agents, or proclaimers, of this Gospel, this unconditional grace that transforms lives and the world, rather than to be controllers of the Gospel. To be the church, then, we cannot be anything but open and transparent. The Gospel itself is open and transparent. It speaks good news by challenging that which seeks to take life from people and from creation and it gives life to people and creates new creations in this world, for all to see. As Gospel people, we should have nothing to hide.

Conclusion

It was not Martin Luther that coined the phrase, *semper reformanda*, ‘the church always reforming.’ It was actually first used by the Huguenots, or Protestants, in Roman Catholic-dominated France 100 years after the German Reformation. But as we come up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation initiated by Martin Luther, this phrase is quite appropriate. We cannot, as a church, rest on our laurels and smugly point back to what ‘we’ did half a millennium ago. Instead, we are called to be a church always reforming.

Today, in Saskatchewan, and in Canada, we are challenged with how we relate to the indigenous peoples, to the increasing numbers of refugees and immigrants, to the countless families living near or below the poverty line, and threats to our environment. It may seem like our world is spinning out of control, and that we are helpless, as a tiny little church and as individuals, to do anything about it.

But our reformation heritage reminds us that we are also called to be reforming agents in our communities today, and that there are some foundations we have been given to equip us to handle whatever comes our way. Rooted in the gospel of God’s unconditional forgiveness and

grace, we are called to care for our neighbour, and to work for the well-being of the church and of society, allowing for the diversity of gifts, traditions, and perspectives that people bring.

From these foundations, we can indeed follow in this rich reforming tradition by working for justice for all people and all creation, by respecting, and not just tolerating, people in our communities, and by being an open book to all. When we live in this way, people will be able to read the Gospel in each of us and in our churches, and thus see this unconditional grace that not only reforms our world, but transforms it, for the Glory of God.

Questions for discussion

1. Think of a time when you experienced or observed an injustice being done. In what ways would it have been helpful to have your neighbours working for justice on your behalf? In what ways would it be uncomfortable? What would be the source of that discomfort? How can the Gospel speak a word of comfort to us and to our neighbours in such situations?
2. We often pride ourselves in Canada in being tolerant. However, how can being tolerant mask a deeper problem? Think of a situation where a person or group was shown toleration, but not respect. What could have been done to foster respect for the other in that situation? How can God's grace be experienced by us and by our neighbours in such a situation? What, if anything, would be 'non-negotiable' in such a situation? Where would there be flexibility?
3. Open transparency can be scary – both for those trying to be this way, and for those encountering it in others. Why is this? In what ways is an open transparency a reflection of God's calling for us, and of God's unconditional grace given for the well-being of all?