



Einreise Verbot!—Hier Stehe Ich

Two stories with a Reformation theme: First story: “Einreise verbot!” (Entry forbidden!) That was the “thesis” nailed on the church door in Wittenberg by caricatured communist East German leader Walter Ulbricht (in monk’s garb) in a 1967 editorial cartoon in Munich’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The East German government sought to torpedo the observance of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Wittenberg by arbitrarily denying entry visas to many of the expected participants from Western countries, often at the last minute. I received one of those last-minute telegrams—and it did indeed contain those very words: “Einreise verbot.” As a graduate student in Heidelberg, I had been chosen (one among many) to represent the then American Lutheran Church at this celebration. All the plans were in place, my train and lodging reservations made and confirmed, but it was not to happen. The East German government did not know me personally; I was simply a pawn in a plot by an oppressive and atheistic regime to oppose all things Christian and to disrupt, as much as possible, that very dangerous, even subversive, notion of the Reformation: “A Christian is the perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none.”¹ That notion, of course, is dangerous to all regimes, those of both church and state, which is why the cry “Reformation Now” is needed at all times and in all places, and why it became the theme of this issue of *Word & World*.

Eventually, as we know, “reformation” did come to East Germany when the people had finally had enough and joined in the “Peaceful Revolution” that ended with the downfall of the oppressive regime—a revolution that, fittingly enough, found sanctuary and meeting places in churches, including Kreuzkirche (Lutheran Church of the Cross) in Leipzig.²

Second story: “Hier stehe ich!” (Here I stand!) About the same year that I was denied entry to East Germany, I was asked by the Lutheran chaplain at Patrick Henry Village, the housing area for many of the American troops and their families in the Heidelberg area, to teach a confirmation class for the teenage children of Lutherans residing there. The kids thought it was cool to have a University of Heidelberg graduate student teaching their class, and I enjoyed the experience as a respite from the sometimes difficult lectures at the university. Come time for confirmation, my class and other Lutheran confirmation classes in that part of Western Ger-

¹Martin Luther, *On Christian Freedom* (1520).

²See Martin Henker, “Days of October: The Role of the Church in East Germany’s ‘Peaceful Revolution,’” *Word & World* 33/3 (2013) 237–247.

many traveled to Worms for the actual Rite of Confirmation. There we were, at the very site of the Diet of Worms (hear the giggles of the confirmation students), where Martin Luther made his famous declaration: “Here I stand!”—though whether he spoke those actual words is disputed. As we look back to 1517, we think about Reformation Then—an event in the past— but in Luther’s time and for my students at Worms, it was Reformation Now, Reformation come alive. More than most, perhaps, those students will remember their confirmation because of where it occurred, in the shadow of the imposing, larger-than-life statue of Luther with the words “Hier stehe ich” on the pedestal.

Remembering confirmation or reformation is one thing, of course; living them is another. Try a little introspection. What in you, in our churches, in our country is in need of reformation? For me, let me count the ways, but now in this time of election campaigns, all too many politicians will tell us that the only reform needed is by their opponents. For themselves, no reformation needed, we’re just fine, even exceptional! All our problems, after all, are “their” fault—whether “they” are the naive liberals or the fear-mongering conservatives, or maybe the refugees, the illegals, the Muslims, or the Mexicans.

Reformation is dangerous to all of this, calling all self-satisfied smugness into question. Reformation that matters, of course, must begin at home. “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matt 7:3). So, our first task is to look within ourselves, within our own church, within our own nation to see what needs reform and to work toward it with all our reason and all our strength. Do other people, other religions, other countries need reform? Of course. More than us and our own institutions and organizations? Maybe, maybe not. But to start with others is to get reformation wrong, to get ourselves wrong, to get Christian faith wrong. Reformation is not about “them”; it’s about us, about me.

Not long ago, I heard someone complaining about our starting worship with a liturgy of Confession and Forgiveness. Such a downer! Forget the everlasting introspection and get on with life! But, of course, the purpose of confession and forgiveness is precisely to get on with life—but now with a new and right spirit (Ps 51:10). It’s about reformation. And we can start now. No need to wait until 2017.

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