



## The Continuing Reformation

After 500 years, has the Protestant Reformation finally run out of gas? This argument could be (and has been) made by some theologians and church leaders who no longer see the point of the Reformation. Some of them feel that, after all, the Reformation was only the product of a particular time and place, perhaps necessary because of the intransigence of the Papal authorities, but something that time and events have rendered moot. Suggesting that this alleged obsolescence has been overcome by the modern ecumenical movement, they claim this has erased the need for the sixteenth-century divisions. Others, especially those intoxicated with all things modern (or post-, or post-post modern) suggest that human society has evolved (progressed?) in so many ways after 500 years that the doleful and morbid piety of half a millennium back can simply no longer resonate with *homo modernus*. In the age of internet and cell phones, the best the Reformation can seem is quaint.

There are many other variations on this theme, all of them suggesting (one way or the other) that the Protestant Reformation is a spent force. The rationale behind these ways of thinking suggest two elements: first, that the Reformation was a contingent event, tied to a time and place that are no longer applicable, and second, in a progressive mode, that both the church and human beings have moved beyond (and improved on) their situation of 500 years ago. Simply put, the argument goes: we are now beyond such things, and they no longer matter to us.

The hubris embedded in such arguments is staggering to behold. The modern belief in the invincibility of our age and our understanding has led us, paradoxically, to a situation where we now have the technology to act on our homicidal urges on a massive, planetary scale. Yet beneath it all we are the same scared, selfish child-humans that we have always been, bravely whistling in the dark as if this will chase away the monsters under our beds. “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” In very crucial, human ways, we have not (and cannot) progress an inch; only the scale of both our fears and our goodness is magnified by the powers of modernity (something that, if we think of it, should frighten us to death).

Here Martin Luther stands as a prophet-theologian for the ages, as he demonstrates the nature of the human condition, before God and by itself, as an irresolvable dialectic of contradictions. Channeling Paul and Augustine, Luther clearly and forcefully expresses all the struggles of the human being, with the Old and New Adam/Eve locked in a deadly struggle with each other inside each person.

Luther masterfully unlocks all our human foibles, including our tendency to create personal and institutional idols and worship them, our stubborn disobedience of the loving God, and our desperate attempts at self-justification. As he understands all this, his words ring true, “We are all beggars.” Because he dared point all this out (to speak the truth to power), the idolatrous forces of his day sought to crush him and his preaching of the gospel.

Luther stood for the proclamation of the gospel, the freeing Word that destroys our feeble human attempts at idolatry and self-justification, and graciously offers us justification with our Creator, free and apart from our struggles and pretensions. Though we are not worthy, in any way, this proclamation of justification declares us forgiven and cleansed, freed from the internal and external demons that torment us. This justification, then, is the lens through which we now see all the world, including our churches; it is the principle on which everything stands and falls.

Luther is known for many things; many good, some not so good. But if he had only proclaimed this one point, it would have been much more than enough. This gospel, on which he staked his entire life, is a timeless proclamation of faith in the living God. This is a proclamation for the ages; after 500 years its power still desperately needs to be heard.

—M.G.

#### SYLVIA RUUD RETIRES

After 148 issues and 7 special supplements, covering 37 years, Sylvia Ruud has decided to retire from her duties at *Word & World*. From the very beginnings of this journal, she has served as office manager, copy editor, and production manager of this publication, and has done so with the utmost of skill and dedication. It is an understatement to say that she has been the heart and soul of this journal for its entire existence, and without her efforts the journal could hardly exist. Sylvia was famous for assisting (and when needs be, gently correcting) a series of faculty editors, including myself, and we are profoundly grateful to her for her partnership with us. With the retirement of editor Fred Gaiser last year, Sylvia was kind enough to continue her duties through this next year, allowing us a much-needed period of transition. Because of her wisdom and experience, it goes without saying that she cannot be replaced, only that we will attempt to continue producing this journal to the high standards she has established for the journal. On behalf of the staff of *Word & World*, and of the entire Luther Seminary faculty and community, we lift many grateful thanks and profound appreciations to her—thank you, Sylvia!