Word & World
Volume 37, Number 4
Fall 2017

The Next 500 Years—The Church Unleashed by the Spirit

CHERYL M. PETERSON

The Reformation movement sparked by Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses 500 years ago was about unleashing the gospel for the sake of God's people. Luther believed that the gospel needed to be freed from its captivity to hierarchical ecclesial structures and an enmeshed relationship between church and the secular authorities. The church had turned the gospel into a new law, afflicting the consciences of those who believed they needed to do more for God to love them. The Word of God ceased to be a comfort and a source of life for many people, who were trying to merit grace through human traditions instituted by the church. Luther preached and wrote against church leaders for being more interested in money and power than preaching the comforting good news of the gospel. The gospel needed to be unleashed from this "Babylonian captivity," as Luther himself put it.

As heirs to this tradition, and living in a country where all citizens constitutionally are guaranteed freedom of religion, Lutherans and other Christians are free to preach the gospel of justification by grace through faith. It is no longer captive to a church hierarchy or to state interests; the faithful are free to preach the gospel without fear that soldiers will come and remove pastors from pulpits, as

Many Christians in the mainstream of Christianity (Protestant and Roman Catholics alike) have been wary of too much of an influence of the Holy Spirit in their theology. But historically the leading of the Holy Spirit has been the catalyst of reform and renewal in Christianity, and embracing the Spirit's guidance is key to the future of the church.

happened in the Reformation. The message that is preached from these pulpits is still welcomed today, by consciences afflicted by the law. Although we live in a very different context than Luther, and people no longer buy plenary indulgences, undertake pilgrimages to Rome, worry about missing high holy days in church, etc., there are still many people who do believe that good works are required to ensure God's grace and love. Various forms of the prosperity gospel promise abundant blessings in return for believers' faithfulness, especially through financial offerings.

It is not hard to find people inside and outside of the church whose consciences are burdened by such human traditions, and who feel unworthy of God's love. Every year in my classroom, I meet a few new students who tell me that it was through the Lutheran church that they discovered the unconditional grace of God, and freedom from law's captivity. Recently, I came across these words in an online article on social justice: "When I was a Christian, all I could think about was being good, showing goodness, and proving to my parents and my spiritual leaders that I was on the right path to God. All the while, I believed I would never be good enough, so I had to strain for the rest of my life towards an impossible destination of perfection."[1] The Reformation gospel continues to be a powerful antidote to a world that judges people on what they contribute, how successful, how perfect they are.

The gospel itself may no longer be in captivity the same way it was in Luther's day, but an argument can be made that the churches are. While churches in the US enjoy freedom from state interference in this post-Christendom context, as Douglas John Hall and others point out, most are not free from the vestiges of a cultural Christendom and patterns of behavior that made sense when the church was at the center of society. The churches are captive to the fear for their own survival, and to ecclesial patterns that worked under cultural Christendom.

Lutherans, like most of the other "mainline" (or to use the preferable term today, "ecumenical") Protestant churches in the US, have been experiencing a steady decline in worship attendance and church membership since the middle of the twentieth century. To take one example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is twenty-five percent smaller than when it formed in 1988. Many have turned to evangelism or outreach programs, especially versions of what has come to be called "attractional evangelism," not in order to continue the Reformation, but simply to keep the doors open. Congregation leaders try to better market what they have to offer—be it a music program, vibrant worship, dynamic children's programs—or they try to figure out what programs might bring people into our churches. Church consultant Reggie McNeal has referred to this strategy as "if you build it, they will come."

There are at least two problems with attractional evangelism. First, by focusing on what it takes to attract people to the church, it is easy to make the congrega-

[1]Francis Lee, "Excommunicate me from the Church of Social Justice, "*Autostraddle*, July 13, 2017. https://www.autostraddle.com/kin-aesthetics-excommunicate-me-from-the-church-of-social-justice-386640/ (accessed on September 10, 2017).

tion as the thing being evangelized, rather than the good news itself. For many ecumenical Christians, it may be easier or more comfortable to talk about your church than about Jesus. A commonly repeated statistic in Lutheran circles goes like this: "How often does an average Lutheran invite someone to church?" (Answer: once every twenty-three years, to which everyone laughs nervously). In these same circles, I've never heard someone ask this question: "How often does an average Lutheran (or fill in the blank) tell someone about *Jesus*?" It is true that knowing Jesus also means knowing his body, the church, and the church is the assembly in which we gather to hear about the good news of Jesus. However, when the main focus is on getting people to join the church, and not sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, the church can easily turn into a social club, a voluntary association, an organization that people choose to join, or not. Evangelism then becomes little more than how we market the church, so that others will join us in our ministry.

The second problem with attractional evangelism is that it no longer reflects our contemporary context. For generations, Lutheran immigrants arrived on these shores, looking for a church to join. They had children who grew up and, even if they stopped attending church for a time, would often look for a church to join once they had their own children. The motto of the great eighteenth-century German missionary to the American colonies, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, famously was: "The church must be planted." Muhlenberg described his first day on the job like this: "Had myself transported to a city in a boat, looked for German people, and found several who said that they had no lack of physical nourishment but that they were gravely in need of spiritual nourishment, namely the Word of God and the holy sacraments in their language."[2] That was his mission strategy, because likely any Germans he found in Pennsylvania would be Lutheran immigrants, hungry for the gospel, and desirous of having a congregation to attend so they could be nourished with the Word and Sacraments. People were looking for congregations to build and to join.

This was not only the experience of Lutherans. Most of the European immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were Christians. For generations, Americans lived in a context in which Christianity was the majority religion and the identity, place, and influence of the historic mainline churches were supported by a society which was "Christian" in rhetoric if not always in numbers. It was presumed that one would at least join a church, even if one did not attend worship very often or become active in its ministries.

Theologian Douglas John Hall says that, since the 1960s, ecumenical Protestant churches find themselves being "dis-established" from this position and losing a clearly defined role and sense of identity in the larger social fabric. While this shift to a post-Christendom context in North America has been discussed by scholars like Hall, it has been my experience that most congregations are in denial

[2]Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, eds., *The Notebook of a Colonial Clergyman* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 1.

that things are different. Many of us are still, as Hall says, "Dreaming Christendom dreams."[3] Too many ecumenical Protestants are still captive to wanting things to be the way they "used to be." Muhlenberg's strategy for mission worked in his day, but it will not work in ours. There are not boatloads of ready-made Christians out there, just waiting for someone to "plant" a church so that they can worship with the Word and Sacraments. Today's context is very different. People do not wake up on Sunday morning wondering which church to join. In fact, they are probably not thinking about the church at all. The irony is that while many in the church still operate with a "voluntary association" model of church, very few people outside of the church are looking to join anything.

Many of us are still, as Hall says, "Dreaming Christendom dreams." Too many ecumenical Protestants are still captive to wanting things to be the way they "used to be."

It is important to point out, however, that "post-Christendom" does not mean "post-belief." Many polls show that Americans believe in God as strongly as they ever did. Unlike in much of Europe, America is not seeing an increase in secularism. Belief in God or the transcendent remains widespread, with one study reporting that nearly nine out of ten Americans believe in God.[4] But increasingly, these believers do not anchor their belief in any particular religious tradition. The fastest growing religious affiliation today in the US—especially among those thirty years old and younger—are the "Nones," those who profess no religious affiliation. Of the Nones, more than fifty percent believe in some kind of deity or higher power, with thirty-five percent claiming uncertainty about this belief.[5]

Many of them would identify with the label "spiritual, but not religious." Yet, the majority of these seek spirituality outside of the church, because, as Reggie McNeal argues, most churches are more secular than the culture that surrounds them. In fact, McNeal charges that for the most part, traditional Protestant church culture—with its emphasis on membership over discipleship—is not "spiritual enough" to help people with the questions they are asking about life and God. He writes, "The problem is that when people come to church, expecting to find God, they often encounter a religious club holding a meeting where God is conspicuously absent."[6] Diana Butler Bass says her research shows that one of the biggest reasons that people choose not to belong is because when they have bothered to

[3]Douglas John Hall, "Metamorphosis: From Christendom to Diaspora," in *Confident Witness-Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America,* ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 72.

[4]"U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious, Modest Drop in Overall Rates of Belief and Practice, but Religiously Affiliated Americans Are as Observant as Before," *Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life,* November 3, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/ (accessed September 10, 2017).

[5]"2014 Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life*, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god/ (accessed September 10, 2017).

[6]Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) 59.

visit a church, too often they do not find people "walking the walk," or showing how their faith makes a difference in the world. They are looking for real and authentic community, opportunities for service, and what they find instead when they visit a typical congregation is a social club concerned with its own survival.[7]

Many respond to such critiques by trying to figure out what will attract these "Nones" into our churches, which misses the point. If we only think of the church as another voluntary society we have chosen to join to have our needs met and the needs of others whom we are trying to get to join us, we may individually be getting something out of our worship and ministry programs. But the gospel will remain in a kind of captivity, not because of hierarchical structures like in Luther's day, but because of cultural forces and fears that keep us looking inward, and focusing on what we need to survive. Not only does the church need to be unleashed from its captivity to old models that no longer work in Christendom, it needs to be unleashed by the Holy Spirit for the mission of God to which it is called.

A church unleashed by the Holy Spirit may not sound very Lutheran. It is also true that a focus on the Holy Spirit has not been a hallmark of Lutheran (or Reformed) theology. However, the rise both of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity globally as well as those who self-identify as "spiritual but not religious" invites a fresh consideration of the work of the Holy Spirit today. Many would be surprised to read Luther scholar Heiko Oberman's assertion that one of the most important aspects of the Reformation was the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that medieval theology did not have a doctrine of the Holy Spirit; it did, but it was localized in the sacramental infusion of "created grace" and a hierarchical sacramental system. "The Reformation returned to an understanding of the Holy Spirit as *the dynamic presence of God in Jesus Christ.*"[8]

The Holy Spirit as "the dynamic presence of God" is more associated with Pentecostal spirituality today than Lutheran, and yet the language of Martin Luther in his catechism is instructive. As he writes, the Holy Spirit first leads persons into God's holy community, placing them in the church's lap, where the Spirit preaches to them and brings them to Christ. In turn, Christ then reveals to believers the heart of the Father. The Spirit is our point of personal contact with God; believers would not know Christ and his benefits, nor the heart of the Father, if the Holy Spirit did not first call us through the gospel.[9]

Through the gospel—the primary means of which are the proclaimed Word and Sacraments—the Holy Spirit works to forgive sins, that is, unleashing us from

[7]Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012) 20–26.

[8]Heiko A. Oberman, "Preaching and the Word in the Reformation," *Theology Today* 18/1 (1961) 21. Emphasis mine.

[9]See Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles Creed in the *Small Catechism* and *Large* [German] *Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 355–356, and 435–440. Hereafter, *BC*.

the penalty of sin, and also to renew and bring life, that is, unleashing us from all that gets in the way of our following Jesus. The renewal that the Holy Spirit unleashes in believers is not what justifies, but is a result of justification. It is the new birth that accompanies our justification, whereby we are given new "spiritual impulses" to love God and love the neighbor. The Holy Spirit is poured anew into our hearts as a result of our justification, in order to be regenerated, and made new.

This new birth is not only an individual experience through the personal gift of faith; it is also a communal one.

This new birth is not only an individual experience through the personal gift of faith; it is also a communal one. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther speaks of the "holy people" that is created by the new life given in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and how this "spiritual community" is transformed by the promise of the forgiveness of sins that becomes part of our life together, as "we forgive and bear with one another," as Luther writes.[10] The Spirit unleashes us in not only the gift of forgiveness, but "fruit" that grows in and among us as Christ's body, and by the gifts of the Spirit, that build up the body of Christ for ministry. The gospel is unleashed for the people of God by the Holy Spirit as we gather for worship, receiving forgiveness and renewal, and the same Spirit also unleashes us into the world, as the assembly is sent out of worship for God's mission in the world and empowered by that same Spirit to share's God's love and power wherever we go.

I suggest that Lutherans (and others) do well to reclaim Luther's insights on the work of the Holy Spirit in his catechisms as a resource for "continuing" the Reformation in making the gospel known to all people, specifically in moving from "attractional" forms of evangelism to more "incarnational" forms of evangelism. Unlike Muhlenberg, simply "building it" will not guarantee that people will come to church to hear the gospel. Designing programs and strategies to attract "seekers" to church is not the answer either, as already discussed, because it tends to make the "church" that which is being evangelized rather than the "gospel." What the church has to offer the world is the gospel of Jesus Christ, but in today's context, how we live as God's people is a more powerful witness (positively or negatively) than what we profess to believe. The best way to evangelize that good news in a post-Christendom context is allowing the Holy Spirit to incarnate the gospel's promises in our communal life together, and in lives that extend into the wider community.

This is what many "spiritual but not religious" people say they do not find when they visit traditional Christian congregations. In her work on "Luthercostals" (that is, Christians who merge Lutheran theology with Pentecostal spirituality and practices), Leila Ortiz names the lament that many Luthercostals have about the

[10]Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *BC*, 438.

lack of vitality, prayer, and spiritual community in Lutheran congregations.[11] What would it mean if more congregations were experienced by seekers as vibrant spiritual communities, and not simply "places" where individuals worshipped or attended "programs"?

Luther's vision of the church as a "spiritual community" in his catechisms is not a holier-than-thou group of individuals. It is a "holy little flock" because the Holy Spirit is present among it, gathering it into one faith, mind, and understanding, under the headship of Christ. This spiritual community, he writes, "possesses a variety of gifts, and yet is united in love without sect or schism."[12] Without sect or schism, and yet eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the day, as Martin Luther King Jr. used to say. What binds members of the body of Christ together is the Holy Spirit, and not an ethnic or racial heritage, a particular history and/or geography, certain families, a certain liturgical style, or anything else.

It is unclear what Luther means here by the "gifts" that the spiritual community possesses, whether he means the spiritual benefits all Christians receive in the sacraments—that is, life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins—or the kinds of spiritual gifts Paul discusses in 1 Cor 12 and Rom 12. The latter are not unknown to Luther, however; in a sermon on 1 Cor 12, Luther refers to the diversities of gifts that emanate from the Spirit as "the expression of [God's] power."[13] In a sermon on 1 Pet 4:7–11, he writes that "Christians know they are under obligation to serve God with their gifts; and God is served when they employ them for the advantage and service of the people—reforming them, bringing them to a knowledge of God, and thus building up, strengthening and perpetuating the Church."[14]

Holiness for Luther is a result of the forgiveness of sins; indeed, holiness is dependent on the daily experience of the forgiveness of sins—and not moral perfection. As he states, "All who would seek to merit holiness through their works rather than the gospel and the forgiveness of sins" separate themselves from the holy community. He goes on to to speak of the "full forgiveness of sins, both in that God forgives us *and that we forgive, bear with, and aid one another.*"[15] In other words, the "holy little flock" is a community in which the "full forgiveness of sins" is experienced and lived out communally, in how Christians "forgive, bear with, and aid one another." This is part of the incarnational witness enabled by the Holy Spirit." People "outside of the four walls" are seeking what the church purports to have—authentic relationships, healing, and reconciliation—but too often, when they walk into a typical Protestant congregation, they find instead a social club where members are bickering about unimportant things, people who not only re-

[11]See, for example, Leila Ortiz, "A Latina Luthercostal Invitation into an Ecclesial Estuary," *Dialog* 55/4 (Dec 2016) 308–315.

[12]Ibid., 438.

[13]Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. VIII,* ed. and trans. John Nicolas Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988) 211.

[14]Ibid., 278.

[15]Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *BC,* 438. Italics mine.

fuse to live by forgiveness, but who instead hold grudges and judge others. While it should come as no surprise that Christians are sinful human beings like everyone else, it is also true that they have received the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation as members of Christ's body, but too often, they do not practice and live into those gifts.

Although Luther's "mission field" was limited to Christendom, he nonetheless speaks of the mission of the church in the *Large Catechism*: "The Holy Spirit continues his work without ceasing until the last day, and *for this purpose [the Spirit] has appointed a community on earth, through which [the Spirit] speaks and does all of [the Spirit's] work.*"[16] An incarnational model of evangelism will not only embody the new life experienced in the gospel within the four walls of the church, but outside of them as well. In a post-Christendom context, we need to reclaim the idea of the parish as the neighborhood and not simply the congregation. Christians are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the love of God in a broken world. This is another aspect of the necessary shift away from an attractional understanding of evangelism, which focuses on getting new members to join our congregations. A more incarnational model will focus on how congregations dwell with their neighbors and accompany them in their struggles, joys, and challenges (as the Holy Spirit/Paraklete accompanies us), working toward the common good with our neighbors as we share the hope that is within us. In order to share the gospel with those who claim to be "spiritual but not religious," who seek spiritual depth, meaning, and who want to make a difference, it seems that the first step is to go where they are, start listening to them, and show them that that we care about them and the wider community. Reggie McNeal points out that if people do not believe you really care about them and their welfare, they will not care to hear about the God you believe in.

As the churches continue to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, a renewed focus on the Holy Spirit will enable the church to be both evangelical and evangelistic in the next 500 years, because it is the Spirit who will empower the church in our evangelistic outreach to those who seek to know and experience God, including and especially those who identify as "spiritual but not religious." ⊕

CHERYL PETERSON is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio. She is the author of Who is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century *(Fortress Press, 2013).*

[16]Ibid., 439.