

Why bother with Reformation? John 8:31-36

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [October 20, 1999](#) issue

There was a time when Reformation Sunday provided the occasion for Protestants to get together and say bad things about Catholics. Reformation services were conclaves of smug pronouncements. We had the truth and they did not. They felt the same way about us.

When my mother was married in 1944, her best friend watched from the doorway of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in St. Louis. A Roman Catholic, she would not participate in the wedding service. Accepting the invitation to be maid of honor was out of the question. Her priest forbade her.

Lutherans returned the favor. I grew up thinking a certain inedible part of the chicken's anatomy was called the pope's nose. The plate of fried chicken was passed around the table. From among the thighs, drumsticks and breast pieces, my Uncle John speared the back and waved it in my direction. Pointing to the fatty protrusion that stuck out from one end, he asked, "Do you want the pope's nose? "

When our son was born, my mother came back to St. Louis to visit. I took her to the old Roman Catholic Cathedral on the Mississippi River levee, where we attended a Roman Catholic-Lutheran worship service commemorating the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Roman Catholic and Lutheran bishops and clergy led the service. We sang "A Mighty Fortress." My mother was dazed. "Those are Lutheran pastors up there," she said more than once, seeking my confirmation.

We have come a long way in a single generation. It used to be that the main reason we did not do some things was because the Roman Catholics did. Then, sometime after Vatican II, it was as if we (Lutherans at least) stood outside the opened windows of Roman churches, caught whatever they threw out, and carried it home with us. A visitor in the parish I served in Virginia said our service was like the way it used to be in their Roman Catholic church, minus the Latin.

We have come even further since then. On this Reformation Day, Sunday October 31, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican will sign a statement lifting the mutual condemnations of the 16th century. Better than that, the document will include a joint statement on the doctrine of justification.

Since we have come so far, why bother at all with Reformation? Is it not just an anachronism? The fact is, many are not bothering. It is hard to get any kind of crowd out for a special Reformation service.

In addition to indifference, there is ignorance. When an increasing number of people in the pew on any given Sunday don't know much about Jesus, why insert talk about Martin Luther? If they don't know biblical history, why confuse things further with church history?

Maybe the indifference and ignorance are related. Have both come about because the old tribalism has waned? Or do indifference and ignorance about things biblical and churchly arise when everything is true and nothing is? The relativization of truth may have contributed to the waning of our old tribalism. This arguably good development can give us scant comfort, however. New and ever smaller enclaves of people are walling themselves off from one another. The road signs by which we might have navigated the distance from one group to another don't mean anything in particular in the cultural landscape we now traverse.

"What is true for me may not be your truth," is as close to an axiom one is likely to get today. And in matters religious, "We are all working to get to the same place. All religions lead to the same god, just by different paths. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." Such a creed leads us to put faith in faith and makes faith a solipsistic exercise. Such a creed robs us of a language with which to engage one another.

I'm not yearning for the bad old days of ill will among denominations. I do yearn for passion and fervency and devotion to a truth larger than myself.

Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Jesus thinks there is some objective thing that is the truth. He is it. Telling this truth is why we should bother with Reformation. The Reformation principle is that the church is always being reformed. We are always in the process of being formed by the Holy Spirit around Jesus Christ.

A premise of scripture is that we are not free and sovereign. We are servants of one lord or the other. We are by nature sin's servants. Now another Lord has asserted dominion in our lives.

We are formed to Christ at baptism. We taste an appetizer from the heavenly banquet when we come to the Lord's Supper table. We abide in him, according to the language of John's Gospel.

When the bride and groom exchange rings, they say, "With all that I am and all that I have I honor you in the name of God." The old language was, "I plight thee my troth and with all my worldly goods I do thee endow." Everything that the bride has and is now belongs to the groom and vice versa.

Apply this to our relationship with Christ and we see how we are set free. Our smugness, resentment, fear, anger, lack of confidence in God's call and whatever else chains us—we give all that to Christ our bridegroom. He can have them and experience them. From him we claim his confidence, his love for others, his gentleness, his forgiveness and whatever other at tributes we need for the day at hand. That's a message for Reformation Sunday and every other day.