



<sup>14</sup>For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. <sup>15</sup>And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

<sup>16</sup>So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

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## *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*

Sermon Delivered January 22, 2017

The love of Christ compels or impels us? In light of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 95 Theses which this ecumenical service commemorates, I decided to consult the Luther Bibel, 1545 edition, on the meaning of “compel” or “impel,”: “Denn die Liebe Christi dringt in uns also.” I wondered whether “dringt”—to penetrate or permeate—is an older form of “drängt”—to urge or press. I also wonder if it is the case that We love Christ **OR** Christ loves us; we are therefore compelled.

How do we answer such questions? Context, yes, but context can be complex. Tonight, I will broadly outline three contexts in the hope of offering meaningful reflection on our text: First, Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth provides context. Second, the fact this year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary the 95 Theses provides context. Third, is the Zeitgeist of our present culture.

Paul writes to the church at Corinth which is a church in conflict. “I hear from Chloe’s people,” he writes, “there are quarrels among you,” The Corinthians suffered under consequences of destructive behavior, wrongheaded, sinful beliefs, and abuses. Paul’s Corinthian letters bear witness to a process of correction, restoration of faithful practice, and chiefly to reconciliation which our text for tonight highlights.

A half millennia ago, conflict fractured the church. Attempts to tell the story of what happened and why have been offered ever since. Late in the “Enlightenment,” in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dominant narratives of the Reformation emerged from the lecture halls and studies at the University of Berlin. G.W.F. Hegel established the contours of a particularly influential account. In 1839, Leopold von Ranke published *German History in the Age of Reformation*. Where Hegel asserted his account to be true as a philosophy of history, Ranke avowed his narrative to be objective truth grounded in archival sources culled as incontrovertible historical evidence.<sup>1</sup>

The Reformation emerged from the Enlightenment as the revolutionary moment when light dawned to displace the darkness of the Middle Ages. Martin Luther was projected as the hero of a revolutionary religious movement that swept Europe, or should have,<sup>2</sup> which began with nailing the 95 Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Hegel argued, and Ranke agreed, “The Reformation began as a result of the **total** corruption of the Catholic Church.”<sup>3</sup>

As you may imagine, not everyone agreed that Martin Luther was a hero to be celebrated. Friedrich Engels, for example, offered an account of the Reformation as the inverse of Hegel’s dialectic.<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther was portrayed not as the hero of the Reformation, but the antihero; a lackey of bourgeois German princes used for the purpose of quashing the 1525 Peasants Revolt which Engels and Karl Marx believed was the progenitor of what one day would necessarily and inevitably become the Communist Revolution as the teleological triumph of human nature.

As you may imagine, not everyone agreed with either Marxist<sup>5</sup> or Rankean accounts of the Reformation. Interest in the Reformation continued unabated since the Enlightenment, often offered, not by historians, but as competing confessional accounts written by theologians.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-1980s a new thesis emerged that eventually dispatched the Rankean narrative and swept Luther to the margins of the European age of reformations.<sup>7</sup> The unanticipated consequence articulated by renown German historian Heinz Schilling who declared, “We have lost the Reformation, ground up between the ‘intensified formation’ of the late Middle Ages on the one hand and the actual post-Reformation process of formation on the other.”<sup>8</sup>

Today, historians now recognize that the world changed, not with the mythological blow of a hammer delivered by a former Augustinian monk, but through complex global processes unleashed when all of the worlds shorelines were connected in the fifteenth century putting all peoples of the world in sustained cultural contact for the first since the origin of humanity.<sup>9</sup>

At the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the world was becoming increasingly complex, and thus demanded of Europeans a reassessment of their place in the world, and God's relationship to the created order. The amorphous religious movements and molten theological ideas that erupted in the early sixteenth century and continued after Luther's death eventually coalesced into the culture of confessional Europe and stand as evidence of that reassessment.

The 95 Theses were an invitation to conversation over doctrinal reform; a difficult, clamorous, conversation, sure, but a conversation nevertheless. The unintentional fragmentation that followed, I believe, should not be celebrated, but understood in new ways from a new perspective so that we may learn from the past. I have come to believe that the Reformation occurred, not as a result of the total corruption of the church, but as a result of the globalization of Europe which accelerated in the early sixteenth century. Notwithstanding the absurdity of Hegel's claim regarding the corruption of the Catholic Church, a global perspective sure seems a more fruitful premise for conversation.

We have briefly considered the general biblical context of this reflection and examined the context offered by the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 95 Theses as a subtext for this event. We now turn, briefly, to the Zeitgeist of our present-day culture and society.

On Friday, the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, delivered an inauguration speech. On Saturday, women by the hundreds of thousands assembled to protest what the events of the previous day meant, or could mean, for the country. At that event, country singer and actor, Ashley Judd recited a poem entitled, "I am a Nasty Woman." How many people listened to the words of *both* President Trump *and* Ashley Judd? How many rational conversations have taken place among those who heard either speech very differently? I offer these speeches, without commentary, as symbols of how divided and polarized we are as a culture and as a nation.

In America, the Constitution guarantees us, not merely the freedom to worship where we choose, but explicit protection under the law to exercise our religion freely. When we exercise our religious freedom in the world as citizens we do not suspend who we are as Christians. Joining the political fray, however, can be a precarious proposition. We are tempted to engage political fights on the world's terms. If we do not remain vigilant and constantly engaged in self-examination, prayer, and reflection we might just find ourselves making raw political arguments adorned in religious language; attempting to wield worldly power by raising our voices with no interest in listening or holding out the remote possibility that the other side has something worthwhile to say.

In the depths of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln addressed this problem in his second inaugural address, "Both [Christians] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes God's aid against the other..."<sup>10</sup> The ability to use the Bible as a cudgel does not necessarily make us right no matter how loud we can scream or earthly power we can wield even if we dress political arguments up in religious language.

Whether you cheered for Donald Trump on Friday, or for Ashley Judd on Saturday, Christians are not required to sit politely on the sidelines and stay out of politics, and may not agree. There are issues that demand our involvement. The question is *how* we engage the world and each other.

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Paul moved the Corinthians toward reconciliation through what surely appeared to be intractable conflict. For many years, Lutherans and Catholics have engaged in conversation working through a conflict that erupted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that divided the church.<sup>11</sup> What have we learned?

Paul reminds us what is possible when we regard no one from a worldly point of view and how doing so is even possible. The love of Christ to which Paul refers is ***both*** our love for Christ, and his love for us. The word “compel” or “impel” suggests a very rich and heavily nuanced meaning.

Our love for Christ and Christ’s love for us forces us together, constrains us, penetrates, permeates us, and constantly propels us forward toward reconciliation. The hope of reconciliation always remains possible because God reconciled us to himself in Christ. Whether in the relatively short period that follows a church conflict or a protracted process of reconciliation that takes 500 years, God remains at work through the power of the resurrection as a power to tear down the walls that divide us. This power, is a power made perfect in the weakness of the Cross; a power far more potent than worldly political power. We are ambassadors of that power. The power to reconcile; a power that unites us and compels us in our love for Christ and the love of Christ for us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> And thus I proceeded boldly to the completion of this work; persuaded that when an inquirer has made researches of some extent in authentic records, with an earnest spirit and a genuine ardor for truth, though later discoveries may throw clearer and more certain light on details, they can only strengthen his fundamental conceptions of the subject: for the truth can be but one. Leopold von Ranke

<sup>2</sup> Ranke was dumbfounded by the success of the Catholic Reformation. Nevertheless, Ranke prognosticated that history would eventually; if not soon, right what went wrong with the Reformation. The failure of the Reformation to succeed, according to Ranke, did not diminish the heroic effort of Luther. Ranke laments, "Before any sort of a new constitution in a Protestant sense could even be imagined we see emerging an oppositional organization in favor of the Catholic principal, which has had the most momentous significance for the fate of our country." Ranke, *German History in the Age of Reformation*, Vol. 1, p. 292-3

<sup>3</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 412

<sup>4</sup> In this way the dialectic of ideas itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical movement of the real world and thus Hegel's dialectic was put on its head, or rather, from its head, on which it was standing, it was put on its feet. And this materialist dialectic, which for years has been our best working instrument and our sharpest weapon, was remarkably enough discovered not only by us but also, independently of us and even of Hegel, by a German worker [Feuerbach]. Engels, *Feuerbach and the Essence of Christianity*, p. 41

<sup>5</sup> The elevation of Luther into the socialist pantheon is indeed remarkable. Nevertheless, Luther is but one example of the comprehensive new socialist understanding of German heritage advanced by the SED. Goethe underwent his facelift in 1982, Schiller in 1984. In 1985, stories around composers Bach and Handel were revised by GDR historians. In summary, the entire span of German history was revised to create a new national history designed to strengthen the foundations of SED rule. The new national history advanced by the GDR now included familiar German faces in a revised, Marxist persona.

Pick, O. (1985). "Eastern Europe: A Divergence of Conflicting Interests." *The World Today* 41(8/9): 33

<sup>6</sup> The reference here is to the three short, but profoundly influential essays by German historian Bernd Moeller; the most significant for purposes of this message being, *The Problem of Reformation Research*

<sup>7</sup> The thesis referred to here is the Confessionalization Thesis.

<sup>8</sup> The full statement appears in *Die Reformation - ein revolutionärer Umbruch oder Hauptetappe eines langfristigen reformierenden Wandels? Konflikt und Reform : Festschrift für Helmut Berding* "Uns ist die Reformation abhanden gekommen, zerrieben zwischen vorreformatorischer 'gestalteter Verdichtung' des späten Mittelalters einerseits und nachreformatorischem 'eigentlichen' Formierungs- und Modernisierungsschub im konfessionellen Zeitalter andererseits"

<sup>9</sup> In 1994, editors of *The Handbook of European History*, Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy, avowed that old concepts of "the Renaissance" and "the Reformation" were "framed on a base that was socially too narrow and geographically too small" to bear the weight of sudden, revolutionary, epochal change. *Handbook*, p. xx. Jerry Bentley describes globalization of Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century according to the following summary of three primary global processes and seven spinoffs: Three primary global processes include: 1. Creation of global networks of sea lanes 2. Global biological exchange 3. Forging of an early capitalist economy Bentley identifies at least seven large-scale developments that follow from the three primary global processes: a. Demographic fluctuations b. Large-scale migrations c. Intensified exploitation of natural environments d. Technical diffusions e. Consolidation of centralized states f. Imperial expansion g. Global cultural exchanges

<sup>10</sup> The full quote of Lincoln reads, Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh."

<sup>11</sup> The reference here is intended specifically to [Declaration on the Way](#).