

On October 29, 2017, we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation with the following “reader's theatre” performance during worship. The script, while not original, was adapted and updated for our use.

Our cast consisted of:

Narrator: Sandy Stenquist

Martin Luther: George Langbehn

John Calvin: Kathy Totten

Pope Paul III: Berenice Knight

(Thanks to Chip & Laurie Simpson for help with costumes,
and thanks to Sharon Bond for playing along!)

Reader's Theatre: So Close to God; So Far from Each Other

Taken from “Luther, Calvin, and the Pope Meet: A Reformation Day service with reader's theater” by James C. Dekker (*reprinted from Reformed Worship #57, Sept. 2000, adapted and updated for use at Phippsburg Congregational Church in October, 2017 by Holly S. Morrison*)

Narrator stands at lectern; Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Pope Paul III stand together at microphone.

Narrator: [Reads Romans 3:19-24]

Around the year 1540 there were three great Christian leaders, each guided by a powerful vision of what the church should—and could--be: Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Pope Paul III. On earth they never met. In fact, the Lutherans, Calvinists, and Roman Catholics they represent often struggled violently against each other.

But God reaches out to us from eternity. God longs to make all things new and help us gain perspective on who we are as God's children. In that light, we are to confess our sins to God and to each other and to forgive each other.

Imagine the place where God is all in all. The time, eternity. Here Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Pope Paul III can worship God together—and speak to each other with grace.

Martin Luther: Friends, if we were still living on earth, do you know what day it would be?

John Calvin: Brother Martin, you still commit the sin of pride. I know you're thinking it's what some call Reformation Day, and you think you invented it, 500 years ago.

ML: Well, after the year 1517 that was a day to remember, Monsieur Calvin, if I must say so myself. It wasn't the easiest thing in the world to write ninety-five points about the Christian faith and open up such a public debate.

Pope Paul III: Martin, Martin—I'd still prefer to call you “Father Martin,” for you were a priest. But then I must remember that we did remove you from the church. I still regret it. Anyway, Martin, you certainly started a debate. Some have said you

divided the church and started wars among Christians. And while you'd like to call this "Reformation Day," many remember it as All Hallows' Eve—the day before All Saints' Day. Too bad that has become only a night for candy and skeletons.

But how could anyone from *our* time forget those ninety-five theses—bold, angry declarations—you nailed on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg? It was an act of prayer and passion, a detailed rant against the structures and practices of the Roman Catholic Church—which was the ONLY church that existed in the west, back then. In hindsight, I can appreciate why you did that. But at the time I was furious.

ML: Father Paul—no, Brother Paul, for we're equals now—there was so much for me and many others to be furious about. The Catholic Church was a corrupt mess. The practice of Christianity was a sick caricature of what Jesus' first followers practiced.

JC: Martin, right away, you get steamed up! I remember hearing a lot about your hot temper. That never really helped your cause, even though many of your ideas were sound. Still, you rediscovered what St. Augustine had taught, more than a thousand years before—"justification by faith."

ML: Thank you, Brother John. I'll try to watch myself. St. Augustine was not the first to teach "justification by faith," He merely taught what Saint Paul had written long before him. Justification—it's about how God saves people. The Scriptures told me that no one—not even Church authorities—can judge the worthiness of a human soul. Yet the Church was actually marketing its own "get out of hell free" cards, called "indulgences." That was the seed of what came to be called the Reformation.

Please, Brother Paul, I would think--by now--you'd admit: by the sixteenth century, the church had sunk to a low point. It had stolen salvation away from God and was trying to run God's show.

Paul: Martin, I agree with John Calvin. You still exaggerate and seem to try to inflame people for the sake of debate—even now in eternity, in God's gleaming presence.

We didn't claim that the Catholic Church saved people itself. We always said that God saves and forgives through Christ's death.

ML: I'm not exaggerating now, friends. You and the church always insisted that "no one could be saved outside the church." I'm just quoting one of your own church's documents. I tormented myself because of that teaching. And I wasn't alone in that pain. We were never sure that we were saved. We always felt that we had to prove ourselves good enough so the church would say we were forgiven.

JC: Martin, I remember hearing about your torment. When you were a monk, you whipped yourself...

ML:... until I bled. For years I did that, trying to convince myself of my salvation.

Paul: And you insisted that it was the church's fault.

ML: Because the church stood between God and people. You kept people captive to the church and made them wallow in guilt—so they never come to know God and God’s great salvation!

JC: Martin, careful! You’re boiling over again...

ML: Sorry; I’ll try harder. Anyway, I never realized that God’s sheer undeserved grace saved us—not until I studied the Bible. After I became a monk, I was given access to the monastery’s Bible and other religious books. Then I worked through Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians and saw a light I’d never seen before—because the church didn’t trust laypeople with the Bible. I vowed to share what I’d learned.

Paul: Martin, I’ve got to hand it to you there. You were as good as your word. You translated the whole Bible into contemporary German. But without the help of early printers, the Bible could never have found its way into the hands of priests and scholars—and later into homes and the entire European society. Yes, when laypeople learned to read and had the Bible in their own hands, it was just what we feared: revolutionary. They began to challenge our power, and... everything. Peasants got the idea their souls and lives were as precious as ours. They demanded protection for their rights. Even women got the idea their voices and ideas should be heard! Our world was turned upside down!

JC: Women...! Well, Brother Paul, I agree with you: that part *is* terrifying, and I did my part to defend the church from that “monstrous regiment.” Terrifying! Yet Martin’s work also encouraged a revival in preaching. In our day, preaching had nearly disappeared from worship. Worship revolved around the standard words and rituals of the Mass. In the Mass the church focused on Jesus’ crucifixion. But his death was only part of his work of salvation. What about his life, his teaching, and the resurrection? If Jesus hadn’t offered himself up, there’d be no gift of forgiveness, of course. But no resurrection means no salvation, no new life—only the guilt that Martin described and suffered. It went against my own understanding of Scripture—it seemed to me that you symbolically killed Jesus again and again every time Mass was celebrated. I considered that blasphemous!

Paul: Brother John, you too have a way of overheating.

JC: You get the point. In fact, your whole church these days on earth is getting that point. Your present successor, Pope Francis, proclaims, “There is more that unites us than divides us.” I never guessed it would take 500 years.

One thing that unites us now—and I’m glad you’ve come to see it Martin’s way—is that preaching has strongly awakened in Catholic churches. What’s more, Bible study is growing in ways that you discouraged in your day. And, Brother Paul, your people participate and hear each other’s voices in worship—not just the voice of the priest!

Paul: Your challenges have caused pain, yes, and blessings. And Martin, one of your greatest gifts was your music! After all the holy wars and political disagreements, I

still treasure your gift of congregational hymn-singing. There is nothing like a shared hymn to give courage to the faithful in their struggles, and open our hearts to the unifying power of God's Spirit! *(to congregation)* Please, dear people of God, let us sing Martin's enduring hymn together: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

[Congregation sings "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" PH 363/NCH439]

JC: We keep learning. Priests are preaching from Scriptures that were not shared in churches for centuries. Many Catholics are studying the Bible as never before.

ML: But we are still not completely agreed about the central point of justification. Does God save us through the gracious gift of Jesus Christ? Or does God save us because somehow we draw ourselves closer to God? Your church is not clear on that, Brother Paul. You still emphasize doing good works to prove a person's worth. And you still claim that the church is the gateway to a saving relationship with God.

Paul: But you Calvinists and Lutherans have always made salvation too easy. You confess only to God—not to each other. No visible authority keeps you together. There is still one Roman Catholic Church. But there are more than 20,000 Protestant denominations, many of them independent, squabbling with each other. The Calvinist Reformed churches split so quickly and easily. Our witness is divided.

JC: Perhaps we have divided Christ because we haven't listened to God or to each other. We have been swayed by other considerations. We still need forgiveness for that. And many Protestant churches have done the hard work of reuniting—just look at the United Church of Christ!

ML: But what does unite us, really? Doesn't Christ's gift pour out for all of us? Don't we all believe that it is God who saves? God makes us right—we don't do that ourselves. We are utterly dependent on God.

Paul: Martin, you are still preaching that! You're worse than a dog with a fresh bone. But you're right. We disagree about the function of the church. We disagree about how God gives us salvation. Yet we have come to agree that it is God, and God alone, who gives it. Thank God for that!

JC: And we have come to that because we read the same Scriptures. We come to that agreement only when we trust in God's Spirit to guide our hearts, our reading, our study, our worship. Christians in the Pentecostal tradition may not see eye to eye with us Calvinists, but they have shown us how to trust God's Spirit—and they sure know how to praise and celebrate. We should do that more.

Narrator: And that is why we are here today. Diverse in our beliefs and united by God's grace, we share history and eternity. Here and now, we mourn our divisions, but also celebrate what unites us—whether we're Lutheran, Calvinist, Catholic, Baptist, Mennonite or Methodist, Quaker or Congregational. We are here because God calls us together, through Scripture and preaching, to hear God's Word. We are here to remember Christ's life, teaching, death and resurrection, and to explore

what it means to follow Jesus Christ now. Here's to 500 years of Reformation!

John, Paul, & Martin: And here's to 500 more! You Faithful People of Today, keep reforming--and renewing--Christ's church in the world!