

REFORMATION - THE GIFT OF A NEW NORMAL



If we've heard one thing in the last two years, we've heard it a thousand times: **"We are living in the new normal."** The pandemic has made us consider our world in a whole new way. We are told to prepare for the future with the threat - this is YOUR new normal. The new normal for many now includes wearing a mask in public and indoors; social distancing rather than gathering together in groups; working from home rather than in a cubical; distance and hybrid learning rather than in person; inequality, injustice and mental health issues magnified. We now know that with every protest there will be a counter protest - pro-life vs. pro-choice; vaccinate vs. freedom to choose; mask vs. no mask in school. Government is totally partisan and polarized

with the conservative right on one side and the liberal left on the other - and never will the two meet or agree on anything. Is that really our new normal heading into the future?

This weekend, we are celebrating the gift of a new normal in our Christian lives. The Reformation is not just a memorial of a date 504 years ago when Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the Castle Church doors (October 31, 1517). Rather it is the gift of freedom that results from the proclamation of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone as revealed in Scripture alone. The new normal for the child of God and believer in Jesus is standing fearlessly and victoriously on the Gospel of Jesus and the forgiveness of sin won through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But to stand definitely on this truth in our sinful world means to stand with a bull's eye target right between the eyes. Who wants that, right? **YOU DO!** **Read this article** which will encourage you to say along with Luther: "Here I stand! I cannot do otherwise! God help me. Amen."

The Reformation truth is what equips and empowers us to take a stand today.

I've heard it said that a good person will never again run for political office because they couldn't survive the scrutiny they would face from the public, the media and all the pundits. If that's true, it's a real shame. But maybe this tragic situation in our lives today is one of the reasons we as Christians find it so difficult **to take a stand** on the saving truth of the Gospel. That stand will lead to persecution. Jesus said, *"And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved... So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before My Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 10:22, 32-33). The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,*

while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Timothy 3:12-13). Paul also wrote to the church at Corinth, “For the Word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). The truth of God is our new normal as children of God and heirs of salvation. This truth is what is re-shaping and molding our lives as we live in the world around us.

With such a life-altering truth in our hands, hearts and mouths (from dead in sin to alive in Christ, from sinner to saint, from enemy of Christ to friend/brother of Christ), why is it so difficult to proclaim? Is it simply that we don't want to be offensive to a world that is perishing? Jeff MacArthur rightly says, “Satan continues his efforts to make sin less offensive, heaven less appealing, hell less horrific and the Gospel less urgent.” Tullian Tchividjian says, “The Gospel is good news to those who know they don't measure up. It's offensive to those who think they do.”

As Christians who are graciously living in the new normal of freedom, we also understand that the Gospel works real change in our lives - now and for eternity. And the world around us rejects such change. We've all been privy to this in the past two years when changes have been plentiful. Do you remember this Peanuts cartoon: "Next year I'm going to be a changed person!" Charlie Brown tells Lucy. "That's a laugh, Charlie Brown!" she says. "I mean it!" he replies. "I'm going to be strong and firm!" "Forget it," she says as she walks off. "You'll always be wishy-washy!" "Why can't I change just a little bit?" Charlie Brown responds to Lucy and the world: "I'll be wishy one day," he shouts, "and washy the next!" We must confess, that some days we resemble Charlie Brown's proclamation.

Martin Luther took a stand for the truth. And so should we!

Five hundred and four years ago, on October 31, 1517 – the “Eve of all Hallows” or “Halloween,” the eve of All Saints' Day – Martin Luther, a thirty-four-year-old Augustinian friar, preacher, university lecturer, and professor of Old Testament, took an eight-minute walk from his monastery home on one end of the little town of Wittenberg to the Castle Church on the other end of town, and there he posted his protestation against indulgences. He had absolutely no inkling of the firestorm he would start, nor that within weeks he would become the most famous person in the Western world. And he certainly had no inkling that the storm would still be raging over five hundred years later.

The Reformation brought about many things of which we Lutherans can be very proud: universal education; education of young women; real care for the needy; huge advances in university education, art, music, astronomy, and medicine. But most importantly, Martin Luther took a stand for the Word of God that proclaims in Romans 3: *“We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28).* This is the freedom of the Gospel. Salvation is 100% gift. It's our new normal as Christians. This Gospel means confessing we are all sinners (Romans 3:23). It also means confessing that we are powerless to save ourselves

(Ephesians 2:8-9). The Gospel is the Good News that we have a Savior from sin, death, the grave and the power of the devil (Romans 8:3).

To confess our sin, our inability to save ourselves and our need for a Savior was actually the first of Luther's 95 theses. Our entire life should be one of repentance (returning to the Lord). That's what Martin Luther discovered when he realized the truth of the saving Gospel. Once he understood that the righteousness of God was not a standard being held up that he had to achieve in order to gain salvation and be pleasing to God, but was rather a gift from God, achieved not by Luther, or any other person for that matter, but solely by Christ for him and the entire world – that truth changed everything! Martin Luther took a stand purely on the Word of God, the Words of Jesus, *"If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free"* (John 8:31-32).

This freeing truth meant there was a new normal for us - that we are no longer under the burden of the Law, having to fulfill all the commandments and rules and statutes of God if there was to be any hope for mankind. But in Christ, we have been set free from all that, and our enduring hope is not in us but in Christ alone. The new normal is not fear but joy, not condemnation but forgiveness, not the burden of the Law but the freedom of the Gospel. In Christ, things are different. In Christ, we have been made new creations and so there is a new normal for Christians, which is truly a whole new way of life and of looking at life.

This new normal will change your life – forever.

At the time that Da Vinci painted the fresco, "The Last Supper" in a church in Milan, he had an enemy who was a fellow painter. Leonardo had a bitter argument with this man and despised him. When Da Vinci painted the face of Judas Iscariot at the table with Jesus, he used the face of his enemy so that it would be present for ages as the man who betrayed Jesus. He took delight while painting this picture in knowing others would actually notice the face of his rival on the body of Judas. As he worked on the faces of the other disciples, he often tried to paint the face of Jesus, but he couldn't make any progress. Da Vinci felt frustrated and confused. After four years of frustration, he finally realized what was wrong. His hatred for the other painter was holding him back from finishing the face of Jesus. Only after making peace with his fellow painter and repainting the face of Judas was he able to paint the face of Jesus and complete his masterpiece. The forgiveness won for us by Jesus frees us to live differently than the world.

Luther understood just how much his life was changed by the Gospel when he made his now famous confession before Emperor Charles V at the imperial hearing in Worms, Germany. Luther was asked if he would repudiate his writings and the truth that he found only in the Gospel. He turned to the Lord in prayer asking for the ability to speak the truth, and with the truth of the new normal to stand firmly upon, he appeared on April 18, 1521, and said these words:

“Since your most serene majesty and your lordships require of me a simple, clear and direct answer, I will give one, and it is this: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason (for I do not trust in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

When the Word of God is proclaimed to the world (and to you personally), and you realize that all those accounts in the Bible aren't just about others but they're about YOU – God's love story – that you have been rescued, that you have been forgiven and freed, that you have been healed, that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon you, there is a new normal for you. Christ took a stand for YOU to give you this new normal, and as those who have received this gift, we are called and empowered to share this truth with the world. The new normal simply leads us to take a stand for the world. An anonymous quote says, “What makes the Gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out, but who it lets in.” Thanks be to God – we are counted in that number. And thanks be to God for the opportunity to take a stand by sharing this offensive Gospel where we live.

For some, this weekend is only about Halloween.

Two little neighbor girls about the same age, one Christian and one Jewish, were constant companions. After one Easter holiday, the grandfather of the Christian girl asked her what her friend had received for Easter. The girl looked at her grandfather in surprise, and said, "But Grandpa, you should know that Becky is Jewish and she wouldn't get anything for Easter." Then she went on to explain patiently, "You see, I'm Easter and she's Passover. I'm Christmas and she's Hanukkah." Then with a big smile, she added, "but I'm really glad that **both of us are Halloween.**"

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm all about the candy (especially Reese's – not sorry!). As a child, I grew up in an area with townhouses. Where we lived, there were 200 units. I could make the rounds in 30 minutes. I would then change into another costume, and head out again. In the three hours of Trick or Treating allowed, I would change costumes five times. I would bring in a huge haul of candy which also led to dentist visits.

In 2021, 65% of Americans plan take part in Halloween celebrations, up from 58% in 2020 and just short of 68% in 2019. U.S. consumers are projected to spend a record \$10.14 billion on Halloween, substantially more than the \$8.05 billion spent in 2020 and \$8.78 billion in 2019. The per-person amount spent on costumes, candy, decorations, and greeting cards is anticipated to average \$102.74, up from \$92.12 in 2020 and \$86.27 in 2019. Households with children will spend more than double the amount on Halloween items than households without children—an estimated \$149.69 versus \$73.57. Halloween is big business. Unfortunately,

more people have tales to tell about Halloween than their celebration of the new normal found only in the Gospel. This is tragic indeed. Reformation is a big deal for all Christians!

What will the new normal mean for you this year?

And so the new normal we have in Christ is something quite different than what the world means with that phrase. For that phrase is used negatively by the world – a change for the worse that you just have to get used to. But as children of God and believers in Jesus Christ, it's a change for the better that you get to rejoice in! And a joy to take out into the world, into every relationship, every place, to every person. We get to tell the whole world – beginning with those in our circle of influence – about the free gift of God's salvation. We are blessed to boldly proclaim to the world that in Christ alone there is hope for the hopeless, help for the helpless, love for the unloved, gracious care for those in any need, and life for the dying. As broken but redeemed people, we have the difference making truth in every and all circumstance for our broken world. Please join me in praying that the Gospel will boldly be proclaimed to the world. The celebration of the Reformation is a great opportunity to practice.

How often do you have people who sorely need the Gospel come knocking on your door? The children and parents watching from the sidewalk can hear you say, "Jesus loves you. God be with you." The children can show their parents the bag of candy they received with a loving note that God's truth is sweeter and lasts longer than the candy in the bag. Your door and porch can be decorated with a pumpkin with hearts for eyes, a cross for a nose and a fish for a mouth. The possibilities are endless to tell the world that there is a new normal and it begins and ends with Jesus Christ. What a precious opportunity God gives to us: to live in praise to Him for all that He, by His grace has done, is doing, and will continue to do for us. That's our new normal.

As those buried with Christ and raised with Him in our Baptism and through the daily reforming and shaping truth of the Holy Spirit working in our lives, our new normal includes speaking this truth. We have something to say in every encounter, every circumstance: the Truth. Our lives resonate with praise to God giving Him the glory for our lives, our salvation, our eternity. Our every word and deed point to the cross of Christ crucified, and God's love is poured out revealing His love for all people. Living in the cross, we begin to do that which we could not do before – the good works of the Law our Father would have us do. Because we are no longer under the Law, being crushed by it, but set free from it, to now live it. Our Savior, having fulfilled the Law in full so we might live the new normal, also empowers us to share His grace with others.

We are living in a changing world. There is a new normal. And that new normal gives us the opportunity and privilege to share WHO and WHAT makes up the new normal. Our new normal looks like pointing to Christ. Our new normal reveals that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone revealed in Scripture alone. The English District Evangelization

Team is praying that every member of every congregation will live out this new normal where God has placed you. YOU embody the new normal with every redeemed thought, word and deed. YOU are not only set free from sin, death and the power of the devil, but set free for living the new normal. Give us a shout out at the email evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org. Let us know if we are encouraging you or where you further need to be equipped. We stand ready to serve. And like Martin Luther confess, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." The celebration of the Reformation is truly the celebration of living the new normal in Christ – here in time and with Him for eternity. Have a joyous celebration!

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20