



LIVING GOD  
RENEW AND  
TRANSFORM US

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Called to communion, committed to justice

Najla Kassab

*Here I stand, a Middle Eastern woman in the pulpit of Luther; if just Luther imagined that, this could have been his 96th question to the church—not why there is a woman in this pulpit, but why did it take this long?*

A person visited a construction site and asked the workers **what are you doing?** One worker told him I am building a wall, the other told him I am building a room and the third told him I am building a new house. It makes a great difference while we are building where is our imagination focused at: a wall, a room or a house. Our attitude of our minds and heart makes all the difference.

Paul challenges the Church in Corinth using a metaphor “You are God’s building.” After Paul has spent 18 months in Corinth he came back to find out that the community of faith was distracted from the original foundation and teaching that Paul lay. The community was overwhelmed with divisions and wrong practices. He stresses the need to check on the way that others would continue in building on the foundation Jesus Christ, from laying the foundation, through the actual construction, to the final inspection and each one has to be careful how to build on it. They are a community of believers but a distracted one. This is why he gives them instructions on how they are to build.

If we were to understand the image that Paul is conveying here, we have to think of how houses were built in the old way. In old times building required great time and energy and a great number of people. Usually a mine was established close to the construction site. The stones were carried through a chain of people from the mine to the building site. The stones would be passed from one person to another till it reaches the construction site. If anyone in the people-chain dropped the stone or failed to do his or her part, the building task will be affected.

The image of passing the stones teaches us that to be God’s building and builders is to learn to build in full partnership with the community of faith. To build God’s church, each one is asked to take part in building and sharing his stone so that the building is completed and looks beautiful. And that is what the Communion is all about; it is us coming together focusing our eyes and imagination on becoming the building of God. In this image we have to note two things:

**Our stones do not necessary look alike**, but rather with our diversity we come together to present in humbleness our stones believing that the outcome of our work will be beautiful. We have a collection of diverse rocks.

If anything valuable that the Reformation did teach us is the value and beauty of diversity; how we learn to respect each other, even when we do not think exactly the same. Our diversity is the beauty of the Reformed identity, although many churches claim that our diversity confuses them.

Another aspect that we need to learn from the process of building, is that **the final plan for the building is in the hands of God**. No one church has the final plan. No one person has the final plan whether Paul or Apollo or you or me. This is why we build in faith. We build confessing that we know little, but our God does unfold to us graciously what will the final image of the church look like. This teaches us humbleness and patience. This is why we strive to keep reforming till we day after day get closer to the image God that God wants us to be.

It is worth noting that Paul urges us to be **careful how we build** on the foundation. He emphasizes the method or manner of building more than what is done. There is no success in building Christ’s church away from feeling of the need of each other to build right. This is what brings us together today in a very symbolic place where Luther was trying to build the church on the right foundation. Luther challenged the distraction then in the life of the church, and his intention was to make sure that the practice of the church does not deviate from the right foundation.



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Today we stand together from different parts of the world and different cultures and backgrounds, to commit ourselves to be coworkers in building the church of Christ, and no success in building the one church of Christ away from joining hands and efforts from all, so we can build in the right way. Today we commit ourselves to build the church and build it together, to scrutinize the way we build together. It is not what we are building but rather how we are building. If we were to be God's church today only when we work together in Christian way, it is then that we discover that we are building on the right foundation. **Paul's challenge is to use the right way of building.**

Another challenge that Paul presents is **whether we are using the right values**. Paul challenges us that we will be held accountable for whether our work will stand in the fire or not. To translate what Paul means here does not necessarily talk about the final judgment, but rather we will be held accountable today. One of the most striking statements that I learned during the celebration of the 500 years for Reformation is that the Reformation taught us accountability and no matter where we are in the church we are accountable, and we are called for continual accountability and reformation.

One of the stories that struck me lately in the news is about a 14-year-old child, a Syrian refugee Aboud Kaplo, who was forced out of his home in Aleppo, Syria. Filmmaker Susie Attwood met Aboud and his family at a Syriac Orthodox monastery, where she knew Aboud had a great interest in music and was trying to teach himself using YouTube videos. The filmmaker got interested in his talent and contacted Oxford University, which decided to lend the teenager the restored 19th century violin that was taken out of a collection of historic instruments held by Oxford University and sent to a young Syrian musician living as a refugee. They decided to put the historic violin in the hands of a suffering and struggling refugee.

Dear friends, this year we celebrate the wealth of our 500 years of Reformed heritage, that is precious to all of us, but unless we put it in the hands of the suffering around the world, we will not make a difference. Unless we put our precious violin in the hands of those who suffer injustice, we miss the meaning of real celebration. Unless we put our precious heritage of Luther words "Here I stand" and speak against all that dehumanizes people and leave them poor, with no homes and dignity, we miss the celebration.

Today we stand in front of our God to be accountable. We are called to use our imagination to make a difference in the world for a better world where justice, peace and reconciliation will prevail. We are called to lift up all the wonderful heritage to say "our heritage is for the people and for all the people." To stand up and claim the importance of looking at the inner human being and say you are valuable in the eyes of God no matter what your color or gender or race or passport. And you have the right not only to eat and live, but even to play a new tune for the world. To believe that the future is as valuable as the past and together we will live in the present and made a difference. We stand in front of our reformed teaching to answer what impact we have on the world today. We will be tested with justice with the shalom of the people. We will be tested if we really look like our Jesus.

At our graduation at Princeton, Fred Craddock, the well-known preacher surprised us in his sermon, "The last temptation of the church," saying that the church will die. We were surprised with such a message, as we are just heading to start our ministry in the church. What a discouraging message. Then he says if the church is to be in the steps of her master she has to die with him in order to resurrect with him.

We are called to die with our Lord, to empty ourselves so that we may be filled again with the power of resurrection. To pay a price even if that meant to give your valuable and precious violin.

Today we are reminded of Luther's words from his pulpit:

**A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.**



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This act of coming together as churches and signing the Wittenberg witness is a commitment to lend our violins and to join hands in building together. If we were asked what we are doing, we are not merely signing a statement, we are building together God's building.

Today we shout together **Living God, renew and transform us.** Come, Holy Spirit, renew our imagination.

To God all glory,  
Amen.