

## Talks by Professor Timothy Wengert in Singapore Reformation 500 Years Commemoration Event

Professor Timothy J. Wengert is emeritus Ministerium of Pennsylvania Professor of Reformation History at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. He is also a representative for the ELCA on the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches. As he was on a teaching tour in East Asia, he was invited by Bishop Terry Kee to Singapore to share his insights on the Reformation to LCS pastors and lay people.

On 6th November 2017, he shared with our pastors on the work and contribution of Philip Melancthon to the Reformation at Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer. On 7th November, he shared with our lay people on the relevance of the 95 Theses for today.

A reflection on Professor Wengert's talk on Philip Melancthon by Rev Soh Guan Kheng:

An enlightening talk on an engaging person who was almost as important to the Reformation as Luther was. With tremendous insight and knowledge, Dr Wengert, a leading international scholar on Melancthon, blessed us with an excellent exploration into the person of Melancthon and his impact on the Reformation.

Philip Melancthon was small of stature, about 5 feet tall, but a giant of a theologian whom Luther, and the reformation needed. Melancthon's intellectual prowess was amazing. He began learning Greek at age 11 and he became professor of Greek in Wittenburg University at age 21!

He was the principal author the Augsburg Confession and its Apology which have shaped and guided Lutheran theology ever since. Erasmus has called him "more Lutheran than Luther." While Erasmus may not have meant that as a compliment, it does speak of the influence that Luther had on Melancthon, and in turn, how much Luther trusted Melancthon as a defender of the faith that he believed, taught and confessed.

A particularly striking and valuable insight for me was Dr Wengert's focus on Article XX of the Augsburg Confession, "Concerning Faith and Good Works." Through this article he helped me gain two new perspectives.

First, how the Augsburg Confession should be read. We have perhaps become accustomed to reading the Augsburg Confession as a doctrinal statement. While it is certainly a clear and organized explanation of the

doctrine of the Lutheran Church, it is something more than a theological document. It should also be read as a "people caught in the act of confessing their faith under threat of their lives."

Article XX begins with the words "Our people are falsely accused of prohibiting good works." This introductory line differs in tone from the otherwise irenic, non-confrontational tone of the Augsburg Confession as a whole. Here the confessors sound irate and embattled, criticizing their opponents of teaching "childish, unnecessary works - such as rosaries, the cult of the saints...brotherhoods, and the like" instead of faith in Christ.

Melancthon and the confessors were indeed giving their confession under pressure of the Emperor and the church who were capable of condemning them outright. It was no secret that they favoured Johann Eck's 404 Articles, presented shortly before the Augsburg Confession, which branded Luther as a dangerous heretic and an enemy of the church.

Realizing the dangerous and dramatic circumstances surrounding the confessors, my appreciation of the Confession itself has deepened, as I am reminded that our Lutheran confessions are convictions for which people have given their lives to defend. All of us who are Lutherans should all the more learn what our confessions say, for they have stood the test of time and the threats to the very lives of those who have courageously confessed these truths.

Second, that at the heart of the reformation was not just doctrine, but preaching. Article XX says (*italics mine*): "for the most part childish, unnecessary works - such as rosaries, then cult of saints, joining religious orders, pilgrimages, appointed fasts, holy days, brotherhoods, and the like - were emphasized in all sermons....at present the teaching concerning faith, which is the principal part of the Christian life, has not been emphasized for such a long time...but only a doctrine of works was preached everywhere." (AC, Art. XX, para. 3-4, 8)

By writing the article in this way Melancthon shows us that while the doctrine of justification by faith is the central doctrine of the reformation, it is the application of this doctrine through preaching that is at the heart of what the reformation was all about. In other words: what on earth have the pastors been preaching to the people? If we continue to preach these works, then we are leading the people to spiritual death!

Admittedly, I have had a tendency to think of the reformation as a very cerebral movement. But the reformation was, in fact, an intensely pastoral movement, deeply concerned with what the church was teaching and preaching. The church had become a preacher of good



works, indulgences and relics, and the very salvation of the people was at stake. The reformers sought to move the preaching of the church back to proclaiming Christ on the cross, justifying all of sinful humanity before God, and bringing the faith and comfort that only the gospel can produce. And they did this even at the risk of their lives.

What do we as Lutherans preach? While we may not be in danger of preaching indulgences, we are in danger of preaching good works and inadvertently teaching people to trust in them. Do we preach the commandments without the creed? Or do we show people their sin that they may be driven to the Savior who alone delivers the forgiveness of sins and eternal life? In our quest to preach "practical" and "relevant" sermons, because that is what our parishioners want, we are often tempted to preach the law without the gospel. But our confessions tell us to preach so that our people may have faith and receive the comfort of Christ, for in the eyes of God, nothing is more practical and relevant than that.

I am deeply grateful for the time and opportunity to listen to Dr Wengert, and for the insights gained into the life and work of Philip Melancthon, a layman whom God used mightily to further the cause of the gospel through the reformation.

