

Synod 2025 Bible Study
Rooted and Re-forming – Romans: Grounds for reform and ways to do it
Pastor Udo Lütge; 13/09/2025

Sed omnia ad optimum verte...

Any idea what that means? And if you do know what it means, do you also know where those words come from?

But now for something completely different...

I want us to do a little exercise. This will take a bit of time, but I want you to close your eyes for a moment and keep them closed until the exercise is finished. Let's use our imaginations a little as we go on a journey in our minds, a journey to both a time and a place far from here. You'll soon see where – and when – you are. So close your eyes...

You're walking down a narrow street. You are on your way to the house-church over at Priscilla and Aquila's home – you got the message that they are going to be reading out a letter from Paul today. Poverty had driven all of you to cheaper quarters. But you don't see the flimsy buildings. You are deep in thought. You've just walked through the market place, and the soldiers that you saw there brought back some bad memories. You remember a time, not so long ago, when your community was disrupted by soldiers like that. The emperor had ordered a whole lot of people from your little group to be expelled from Rome. Priscilla and Aquila themselves were forced to leave the city. They settled in Corinth – that was where they met Paul for the first time. They moved with him to Ephesus and later returned to Rome. You didn't go. You stayed in Rome. You remember trying to convince the authorities that what they were doing really wasn't necessary – you weren't a threat to the empire. But they wouldn't listen. You remember the changes that brought about. Your little group of believers split from the synagogue. They didn't want anything to do with the trouble-makers that believed in this Jesus. Still the number of believers grew. At first you were really happy about that, but then you started sensing changes. There were some real tensions flaring up between the different people in your group, people with different views and ideas, Jews and Gentiles, people from different social levels and economic backgrounds. There were suddenly people who were just not prepared to follow the old customs anymore. The laws of your people and your God meant very little to the Gentiles in your fellowship. And there were still others among the Jews who were just too conservative. Your thoughts are interrupted as you finally stand before the door of Priscilla and Aquila's house. You walk in. It looks like everybody is there already. This hasn't happened in a while – everybody together. There in one corner is Rufus, the man who refuses to have his son circumcised. And there, not surprisingly on the opposite side of the room, is Herodion, the one who will not even visit his Greek brothers and sisters because they associate themselves with things that he insists are impure. The tension in the room could be felt. How did it come to this? Then you hear the voice of Priscilla: Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle...to all who are in Rome, beloved of God...

OK, you can open your eyes now.

If you have your Bibles here, or use Bibles on cell phones, please turn to Paul's letter to the Romans. I will refer you to certain passages during this Bible Study and I encourage you to also turn to verses that are important to you in this letter when you hold group discussions or reflect on things that are being said.

The journey you've just gone on, gives you some idea of what life looked like for the early Church in Rome. They faced disruption from outside because the Roman establishment viewed them with, what can probably mildly be called scepticism. And they faced disruption from within. They were only

somewhere around 100 people, maybe a bit less – and maybe that’s why, because they were such a small group, the tensions between them were magnified. People in this small group expressed their faith differently, they lived their lives differently, they just saw things differently. And that threatened to tear them apart. In fact, many scholars conclude that it did, and that the Church in Rome split very early, maybe even before Paul wrote his letter to them.

Right, I’m going to ask you to have a first group discussion now. I’d like to ask the group reporters to take notes throughout the group discussions this morning and to hand or send them in to Liselotte at the end of this session – I’m going to draw all the input together in a report that can be shared with you all. I’m also going to ask Church Council, of which I am a part, to look at and reflect on it. In the next year we want to review our Church’s purpose statement and I think your thoughts today can make a contribution to that. So...for the first group discussion, I want you to take 10 minutes to discuss what similarities you see between the context you’ve just heard and thought about in the early Church in Rome and ours and to share with each other where you think there is or where you have experienced anything similar...in the Christian Church, in our church, in your congregation. On your marks, get set, go...

Group Discussion 1 (10 minutes)

A word of warning...we do have to be careful of simply translating from the context of the Bible one to one to our own when the two contexts are so far removed from each other in time and space, in culture and language, and more. So, for example, very often the same word did not mean exactly the same thing 2000 years ago as it did 500 years ago as it does now. That’s why it is so important to weigh thoughts and words so carefully and to take care and be precise with theology – which, after all, literally means our logos about theos, our thoughts and words, our reasoning about God.

Having made that vital point, though, I do also want to say clearly that God’s Word wants to say things to us directly and it is foundational truth. And that truth is accessible to everyone, learned or not, university educated or family educated or not educated at all. I have a little practice that I put into practice every now and again in Bible Studies. I will read a Bible text carefully and slowly to the group and then ask them to respond, to share their thoughts, to reflect on and talk about what impacts them in the text. And I will just facilitate that without sharing my own thoughts. At the end of the Bible Study we all sit there amazed at how much was discovered in the text, without a theologian being all clever or getting in the way. You see, as the letter to the Hebrews tells us, God’s Word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It works actively all on its own, even without our comments on it. In the Bible Study group, once we have done that, we will then talk about how we need theologians and how good it is that we have them, how good it is that there are people who are trained and who learn and study and work with the Bible, even professionally, while at the same time recognising that each and every person can read the Bible and what God says about His Word in the book of Isaiah will remain true: it does not return to Him empty but does what he sends it for. I know that was bit of an aside, but I do think it is important to say.

Now, let’s go back to the letter to the Romans. You’ve heard a bit about the context and have reflected on it. Next, let’s have a look at how Paul, the Apostle who did not found this particular congregation in Rome as he did most of the others that he wrote letters to, responded to what he was hearing about them. How did Paul tackle what was going on? He confronted the Roman Christians with a foundational truth. In their conflict with each other, everyone was justifying themselves: I am better, I am right and you are not and so I reject you. To that...Paul takes out his shotgun and aims and fires (bah!) – turn to Romans 3:23...there, you will see his shotgun cartridge: for ALL have sinned and FALL SHORT of the glory of God. It is worth having a closer look at how Paul gets to that statement. The structure of the whole section is bracketed by a concept we Lutherans know well: justification. I suppose you could say

justification is the legal declaration of righteousness. And Paul tells his readers how that works. The brackets are in Romans 1:17 and Romans 3:24-27. These brackets speak of the Gospel, in which a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. That's Romans 1:17. This righteousness is freely given to us so that we are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus, something that is to be received by faith. That's Romans 3:24-27. Those are the brackets... and what wonderful brackets they are. What...well...good news! In the middle of those brackets is Paul's shotgun blast. All of you who justify yourselves, as if by your own righteousness you merit anything before God...I have news for you. And then in a section about a chapter long he blasts the Gentiles. Then, just as the Jews are starting to get smug, like our friend Herodion in the one corner, Paul turns to them and blasts them for about another chapter long. And finally the conclusion: **no one is righteous, not even one; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...**

Hi. My name is Udo, and I am a sinner. All that is true of me. My friends, all that is also true of you. The recognition of that is the beginning of a careful and wise weighing of our thoughts and words. We are, not one of us, without sin, without error, without imperfection and we are not justified in justifying ourselves, especially not at the expense of others as we so often do it, we are not justified in coming with our stones that we want to throw at the "other" sinners. When, a moment ago, you were discussing similarities in our time to the early Roman Church, were you tempted to begin with "the others," the ones who are the problem? That is how it so often is with us, among us. It is like that for me. Is that not part of our sin?

This is reason number 1, why reform is necessary. In fact, what is necessary is daily re-pentance...that is, re-turn to God, re-orientation, re-focus, re-newal, re-form. To do all that we should take the time to heed Paul's shotgun blast, we should take the time to confess. And then re-pent. How did Luther so famously say it? *Durch tägliche Reue und Buße* – daily contrition and repentance. All that, every day. So let's take the time for that. Each one of us in silence right now. Look in the mirror. That is famously one of the roles that the Law plays. Look in the mirror of "Love God with all you heart, mind, strength, soul." Look in the mirror of "love your neighbour as you love yourself." Let's take a bit of time to do that. IN fact, take one minute. That's something I do every morning and every evening. I started that a while ago when we did a re-entry programme with the scholars in Hermannsburg after the first Covid lockdown. And it's something I often do with the little children at our school...and with youth on camps...and often enough with adults too. Take a minute. Pick any question or topic: how am I? What's going on? Let me look in the mirror. And then take a minute to do that. So do that now. Take a minute to look in the mirror of the great commandment. On your marks, get set, go.

Individual Reflection (1 minute)

A minute is not long. We all have time for it every day. But it is incredible what your brain can think through in a minute. If I asked you to think of your whole life up to this point, your brain could do it in a minute. So take at least one minute every day to think of the important questions in life...in your life.

So...we are the Synod and we are sinners. We are, all of us, *simul iustus et peccator*. We are these mixed beings of sin and righteousness. That is the foundational reason why we are in need of *semper reformanda*, always re-forming. And because we are all individually mixed, the Church is mixed...because we are the Church! Luther said of the Church that it is the *ecclesia permixta*, the mixed Church: in it you find sinner and saint, right and wrong, good and evil, belief and unbelief, just as you find all of that in each one of us. Because of that, my favourite quote of Luther is true of us and of the Church: we are not godly or holy but in the of becoming godly or holy, not healthy but getting well, not being but becoming...we are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. On that way as Church we must be always reforming.

I want to ask you to take 15 minutes to discuss in your groups: where does the Church, where does our Church, where does your congregation require re-forming? And just a reminder to the reporters: please take down written notes of all the points that are raised so that you can hand or send them in at the end of the session.

Group discussion 2 (15 minutes)

What is the measure against which we measure our need for re-forming?

I want to do something a bit unique now, a speed round. In your groups, take just 90 seconds to popcorn share words or phrases that answer that question: What is the measure against which we measure our need for re-forming? Everyone in the group is only allowed to say one word or one phrase and nobody comments on the words and phrases that are shared. You have 90 seconds for that. Then take 30 seconds to decide in your group which measure you want to share with all of us. And then the reporters come up to the mics and share the one word or phrase that your group chose. I will police this popcorn round. The question is up on the screen: What is the measure against which we measure our need for re-forming? On your marks, get set go.

Popcorn Round (2 minutes)

Can I ask the reporters to all come to the microphones now and to share the word or phrase that your group wants to share, just the word, just the phrase, no commentary...

Report back

(Feedback – God’s Word and core truths we distil from God’s Word: at the top of the list is Jesus Christ, God’s living Word in whom we most clearly see who God is and what he does and what he wants)
When we filled in our roots and fruits and leaves for Synod, we did it on a Sunday when we had three Services – we do that once a month, we celebrate all three forms of Services that we have in our congregation: German, English Contemporary and English Traditional. We also sent out a Google form for more detailed feedback. So we got about 300 responses for each category. By far the most roots said “God and God’s Word.” That is the measure. Holy Scripture is the measure. Sola Scriptura. It is the sole guide, the Richtschnur, the measure of faith, doctrine and life. Our confessional writings say that, our NELCSA constitution says that. We all agree on that.

But...we have a dilemma. The dilemma is this: we mixed human beings are all different, all with different views, perspectives, knowledge and more. And there is the very real potential...no...there is the very real reality that we all view this differently, even Holy Scripture, even God’s Word and what it says and what it asks of us. And so we have different views of what needs re-forming. In our congregation we filled in two types of leaves – dark green ones on which people wrote what is and should be growing in our congregation, what is going well and what they appreciate...and pale ones on which people wrote what is not growing, not going well, what we should stop doing. Do you know how many topics there were where several people wrote: this thing is wonderful, and we should keep doing and promoting it...and others said that exact same thing was a problem, and we should not be doing it. Reality. Reality not just between different churches, but within one church, within one congregation, within one family. So the question becomes: how do we deal with that? Please discuss that in your groups for a few minutes. On your marks, get set, go...

Group Discussion 2 (10 minutes)

Throughout his letter to the Romans, Paul addresses that. He addresses that because this is not just a reality amongst us, it was a reality in the early Church in Rome. It is a reality amongst any group of human beings. How does he address it? In chapter 12, a chapter in which Paul talks about the many members of the one body being different, he gives some thoughts on this.

- First of all few things to keep in mind...
 - Romans 12:1 – do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Perhaps you could even say something that is important in all of this – when you are debating things you do not see eye to eye with others about, be open to allowing your mind to be transformed.
 - Romans 12:3 – do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.
- Then a few things to do...
 - Romans 12:9 – amongst you love must be sincere...and cling to what is good, keep what is good (something we'll hear more about in the bishop's sermon tomorrow).
 - Romans 12:14 – Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.
- All things we should hear.

And then Romans 14-15, the culmination of Paul's thoughts on this. This chapter makes very clear how tense things can get between people who view important matters so differently. The Jews and the Gentiles are arguing about what the holy day is, Saturday (the Sabbath) or Sunday (the first day of the week on which Christ was resurrected). And they are arguing about what you are allowed to eat – pork or not. Paul talks about both of those in Romans 14. On the one topic he says there is no right answer – you can do what you want...it doesn't matter which day you view as holy or special...as long as you do it to the Lord. On the other topic, he says there is a right answer: you can eat any food you want to. He calls the ones who recognise that "strong in faith" and the ones who don't "weak in faith." Then you would think that he would say to those who are strong in faith: sort out the ones who are weak in faith. But **he does not** do that! No, instead Paul ends with what is almost always his main point – unity "in Christ" – Paul, by the way, uses the phrase "in Christ" more than 160 times in his letters. Clearly the thought of "in Christ" – and the unity that is based on being "in Christ" – was important to him. He says to those who are strong in faith: do not be a stumbling block to your brothers or sisters who are weak in faith. And the he says...and listen carefully to this...let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification, let us do what builds up. Even if you **are** right, do that. All that is wrapped up in Romans 15 – Paul writes there: everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. And finally, he quotes several Old Testament verses that show that both Jews and Gentiles belong. Those Jews and those Gentiles, of whom we hear in chapters 1 to 3 that they are all sinners, those very same Jews and Gentiles belong. What an important message.

Let's learn from all this. Let's keep that in mind and have the same attitude of mind, this attitude of mind, towards each other. Let's speak to each other, openly and honestly, being willing to point out what we view as wrong, being willing to speak truth, but also not being stumbling blocks to each other, even if we should be right...and the fact that we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God means that we won't always be right...not by a long shot.

Let's...

...oh yes...do you remember my opening Latin phrase?

Sed omnia ad optimum verte...

Do you know what it means? I know at least two people here who do. Has anyone else googled it yet? It is a small sentence in Luther's Small catechism, but it is a very important thought. I had to learn these

words off by heart as a young boy...and I really have carried them with me since...I submit to you that they should be at the front of our minds when we apply these minds to the question of our roots and our reforming. They are the words from Luther's explanation of the 8th commandment: *sondern alles zum Besten kehren*. To turn everything toward good, in fact, towards the best. This we should certainly do.

I see I have a couple of minutes left and I want to share one closing thought. Someone in our group in yesterday's group discussion asked: who does the pruning? What a good question! And my closing thought has something to say to it.

What we have been focussing on – in just about every discussion, every input from speakers, every reflection...what we almost always focus on, is the **active part** of all this...the righteousness that **we** live out, the reforming that **we** do. But we should not lose sight of the **passive** righteousness that our confessional writings speak about...the passive righteousness that is absolutely necessary because of the foundational truth that we have looked at today. I remind you of this slide: no one is righteous; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...that is foundationally true, it is true for you, for all of us...and we can do **nothing** about it. We can't pull ourselves together enough to "laß das" to leave that, to leave sin. And we can do nothing to save ourselves from the results of that. As Luther penned in his famous hymn: *mit unserer Macht ist nichts getan!* Nothing can be done by our might, our effort, our merit in this. Nothing. We are completely reliant on the next verses: and all are justified freely by his GRACE through the redemption that came by CHRIST JESUS...to be received by FAITH!

Our confessional writings speak very clearly of this. We often term what it talks about as active and passive righteousness. In our confessional writings, in the Apologia, the apology of the Augsburg confession, Philip Melancton articulated **passive righteousness** as the **heart of the gospel** – we are justified alone by faith, alone through Christ. We not only don't have to do anything to merit it, we **cannot** do anything to merit it. It is completely the work of the Triune God. God does want our active righteousness in response to this gift, but he does not want or need our active righteousness to give us this gift, He just gives it. We are holy and blameless in his sight when he looks at us through the eyes of the cross (Ephesians 1:4f). Because of that, because we can begin to apprehend his mercy by faith, we can begin to love God. The Apologia says it just like that. The passive righteousness that God gives us a free gift begins to produce fear of God and love of God in us. It also says that the working of the Holy Spirit is key in this...listen to Melancton's words: the affectations of the heart towards God, which God commands from us, cannot be rendered without the Holy Spirit. I'm trying to get you to understand that it is not all about you. Yes, the Apologia also says that, to a certain extent we can begin to produce active righteousness – the righteousness we are all reminding each other in these days that we should produce...but only in part... and still not perfectly. We will still fall short of the glory of God. And the righteousness that we do produce cannot then be something that merits the gift of passive righteousness that God gives. God gives it freely. In the end, we can only trust that this is so. We can only trust God.

Fancy words expressing fancy thoughts...but important...and it means that the *semper reformanda* we keep talking about is not just "always reforming" – as if we are the only ones doing the reforming...but also always "being reformed," reminding us that God is the first and the last to be active and is active everywhere in between. How did Paul put it in Philippians 1:6? I am confident of this: that the one who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. We can trust that. So let us trust Him as we walk into the future, rooted and always reforming and being reformed.