



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)

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“The Evangelical Reformation and the Middle East: A Way Forward” Conference

Sermon by Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

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“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”
~ 1 Thessalonians 1:2-7

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

We have met in this church to celebrate 500 years of Reformation as one Christian Evangelical family, and we are meeting as one Christian family to thank the Lord that the Holy Spirit has led Reformation 500 years and in the presence of our Catholic sisters and brothers. This is the same Holy Spirit that also has led us to sign the historical reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics last year. It is the same spirit that leads us today despite our small numbers and the various problems we are facing either externally or internally.

The Holy Spirit has reinvigorated the freshness of the Gospel of Christ. He continues to reinvigorate the same spirit to refresh the Gospel in the Middle East and in different languages, and in all of our churches.

For this reason, I have taken the theme from 1 Thessalonians which was the first Epistle that Paul wrote in the New Testament.

Paul wants to encourage the congregation of Thessalonica to continue in their Evangelical vitality in spite of the difficult situation they face. For that church was an integral part of the One Apostolic, Universal, and Holy Church.

Paul wants to connect all the churches that he has established in order that they may be one strong church witnessing to the Gospel of Christ. For no church being small or big can witness alone without the other churches.

For this reason, our common witness is the power of the influence of the Gospel in the church. Saint Paul thanks the Lord for the faith of the Thessalonians, as today I thank God for the witness of each of your churches that is present. I thank God that your churches, despite all of what you have faced in the last year, will remain steadfast in witnessing to the gospel of love in the Middle East without any kind of fear.

For this reason, our Evangelical family in the Middle East today is similar to the church of Thessalonica. It has three main elements:

Work of faith. St. Paul writes “because our message of the Gospel came to you not in word only but also in power and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.” (v.5)

He also writes in Romans 10:17 “so faith comes by what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

So when the people of Thessalonica heard the power of the Word of God, faith sprang up in their hearts as also the theme of faith was centered in the Reformation movement. What is known about the reformer Martin Luther is that when he was a monk he preformed all traditions and practices that were asked by the church but he never found peace in his heart. Until he found Habakkuk 2:4 “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.” And in Romans 3:22 “ the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Then he initiated Reformation by the power of the faith of Christ that freely justifies us by his precious blood on the cross. This faith in Christ Jesus is enough for our salvation and the salvation our souls. The work of faith that the Thessalonians had gave them the strength to believe. For this reason, Saint John writes in 1John 5:4 “for whatever is born of God conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” We have preached this faith in our Lutheran-Anglican Reformed churches since the Reformation entered the Middle East and today we have to stand for a moment of truth within ourselves and our churches asking, does the fervor of our Evangelical faith continue in our churches? Are we like Martha, we care for everything but the need is for One? For fervor through faith? For this reason, Jesus asked in Luke 18:8, “ when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” I dare to ask you if Jesus came today to our Christian churches including the Evangelical family, will he find this fervor of faith in it? For this reason, as we celebrate Reformation let us evaluate our faith with a rule of faith as a standard.

The labor of love. The Thessalonians lived the love of Christ. They lived through tribulations and difficulties but they never succumb to despair and hatred, but they always wore the love of Christ. For they believed what St. John said, 1 John 3:1 “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and this is what we are.” The genuine faith is the true faith that extracts its power from the love of Christ to us and to the whole humanity. For there are no limits to love that keeps the bond of the church of Thessalonica. With each other they labored in love toward each other so that their love would continue to be genuine without interest, truthfully. As Saint John says “god is love” and he also says in 1 John 3:18, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Isn’t love today a challenge to the Church in and through and outside the Church? Do we labor in love toward each other in a genuine love? Have we become professionals in talking about love but we are far from it? The Evangelical Reformation reminds us there is no growth in faith without genuine fresh love. Not the love that is built on interests but the love that is sacrificial like that of the Gospel, a love that is not afraid of its position or appearance, but a love that sacrifices itself, accepts the other and extracts its power from the love of Christ as the Thessalonians have done.

The Romans used to say of the Christians in the 1st century, “Look how much they love each other.” The challenge to our church today - the Christian churches, including our Evangelical churches - is can others say look how much they love each other?

Steadfastness of hope. The church of Thessalonica was suffering from persecution and tribulation because of their faith. But the Thessalonians didn’t loose, for a moment, its hope that the Christ who was risen from the dead would come back from heaven. They lived with this faith knowing that some of them expected his return quicker than their expectations.

Today many of our churches are living in times of tribulation and persecution in the last years. Our churches in Syria and Iraq have experienced the bitterness of persecution that obliged many to escape their villages, towns and countries where they had lived for centuries. Our people in Palestine are suffering from occupation and many were obliged to emigrate from it. Many Christians in Egypt suffered a few months ago from the suicide attacks against them and their churches. Others in neighboring countries are experiencing today what we have experienced in the Middle East, but what comforts us is the steadfastness of Christians that remain on their land in the Middle East, who never lost hope in Jesus Christ. The steadfastness of hope is the one that called them to steadfastness. I remember what I have seen on television of the people of Nineveh, who on Easter returned to their town and held a worship service on the rubble of the church! For this reason, we as Evangelical Christians of the Middle East we will continue to implant hope despite the density of darkness we experience. But we also trust in the words of Jesus when he says to every believer in Luke 12: 32 “do not be afraid. Little flock for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Dear sisters and brothers, we have met in this church that is celebrating 30 years since its construction. We have met in this church to promise to stand and be together.

We have come to encourage each other to pray together and to thank the Lord and put aside any kind of conflict, disagreement, and forget what is behind and look forward. We have met to ask ourselves in the spirit of repentance, "did we remain steadfast in the work of faith and in the labor of love and of hope." Yes! Our churches are in need, more today than ever to be built on the rock of Jesus Christ. Do not boast of what we have done in the past or what we have achieved, but stand together as one Evangelical family asking the Holy Spirit to blow in our churches, in our congregations and to burn away our transgressions and to guide us in our work, and to only look to the chief of our faith and its fulfillment, Jesus Christ.

Today as we concelebrate Holy Communion we come to the table of the Lord, with three things: thanksgiving, repentance, and commitment.

To thank the Lord for where he has brought us today,

To repent for what we have done or have failed yet to do,

To commitment in order that the Holy Spirit will lead us in the power of the Gospel.

As we today receive the true body and blood of Jesus Christ, he sends us together with the power of the Holy Spirit to be living witnesses together to be witnesses of faith, witnesses of love, witnesses of hope and only in such a way that Reformation will continue in our churches. This is the reason that today is a time for renewal in us. Love, faith, and hope and the greatest among them is love.

*May the peace of the Lord, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.***