

“Christ’s Church: Where the Dust Never Settles”

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10-29-17 Reformation Sunday (500th Anniversary)

Based upon Matt. 13:51-52; Acts 13:44-52

Today is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation which birthed the Church we know and love. As we saw in the little movie clip which was our introit, in 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther posted on the door of his church in Wittenberg, a list of theological assertions and ecclesiastical complaints known as “*The 95 Theses*.” When he did this, he was not trying to start a new church or a revolution, so much as to fix in the existing Church the doctrines and practices which he believed were contrary to the will of God. But in the same way now that all kinds of things can happen if a person’s comments are taken and shared with millions on Twitter or Facebook, Luther’s life and the nature of the Church changed because the new technology of his time, the printing press, enabled his concerns to be shared all over Germany. This transformed his personal musings into fuel for an unstoppable movement. Christianity has not been the same ever since.

Given the import of Luther’s work in Germany, and the parallel reformation work of our denomination’s founding fathers, John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, and later John Knox, in Scotland, I originally thought that I might lead us in recognizing the 500th anniversary today by preaching excerpts from these great Reformers’ sermons. But I did not have to read through too many of them looking for excerpts before I realized my idea wasn’t going to work. Although Luther’s hymns and many of the prayers and liturgy written by the reformers have stood the test of time, the rhetorical style and the theology of that time was so different from our own that the sermons seemed more dated than inspiring. Back then the Reformers wrote a lot of very long, heavily abstract, philosophical sermons attacking the Roman Catholic Church, and telling all people that they were going to go to hell if they didn’t shape up. That kind of preaching is not my style, nor does it reflect the gospel of love and inclusivity which defines our denomination today.

But as I thought about how far we have come in our understandings of human nature, the Church, the world, and God in Christ, I realized that it is really kind of perfect that the great Reformers’ words seem dated because the Presbyterian motto which the Reformation they started inspired, is “Reformed and ever reforming according to the Word of God and the Work of the Spirit.” In other words, our understandings about God, ourselves, and the universe are supposed to be ever-evolving because change and the Gospel go hand in hand. We don’t believe in the infallibility of the Church or its leaders, and although God’s word is still alive in Scripture thousands of years later thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit, we don’t believe in the immutability of our understanding of that word either. So it would be a cause of concern not celebration, I think, if we could dust off Luther and Calvin’s 500-year-old words and still preach them without qualification or clarification as God’s word to us today.

Although they were both men of strong egos as well as faith, I think that even Luther and Calvin would agree because both of them believed that the Christian life is a life of continuous conversion in response to God’s word and work. The very first of Luther’s *95 Theses* affirmed just this. It says: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life

of believers to be one of repentance.”¹ His second thesis then went on to affirm that “repentance” cannot be understood simply as confession in Church. In the Bible, the Greek word we translate as repentance is “*metanoia*,” which literally means changing direction. Theologically speaking therefore, repentance or conversion (the two words are synonyms) is a lifelong process of trying to turn ever more in the direction of God, and away from the way of the world. You can’t do this just once or even twice. In order to do this, Calvin argued, you must be willing again and again to lay aside the old and put on the new.²

This has always been hard for people of faith to do, as we see in today’s lesson from *Acts*. When Paul and Barnabas showed up in Antioch and starting preaching the good news that Yahweh, the God of the Jews, also loved the Gentiles, and had come in Christ to save both Jews and Gentiles, the Gentiles were thrilled to hear this news and ready and eager to follow Christ. But some of the Jews in that area were so jealous of Paul’s crowds, and threatened by his teaching that they did everything they could to sabotage his ministry. First they turned the devout women in the synagogue against him. (Incidentally, this raises all kinds of intriguing questions about how women were viewed in the synagogue at that time, and who had the real power in the faith community.) Then they turned the male leaders in the city against him, encouraging them to persecute Paul and Barnabas for their message. The threatened Jews stirred up all kinds of turmoil and conflict. But in the end, they did not hurt either apostle, or succeed in stopping their evangelism. Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet as Jesus had taught his disciples to do years before, (see Luke 9:5), and kept moving forward with the Gentile followers of Christ at their side.

I love the image Luke paints of Paul and Barnabas shaking the dust of the conflict off their feet and then moving on un-phased at the end. It makes me think of how fights in cartoons are often illustrated with a big cloud of dust with arms and legs occasionally visible. **[Slide shown.]** Paul’s opponents expected that when the dust settled, they would walk away the victors and Paul and his ministry would be left crushed. Paul’s antagonists pulled out all the stops, enlisting all the big wigs in their community to make him look bad. But when the dust settled, Paul and Barnabas and the gospel won, not the detractors. The apostles picked themselves up, shook off the dust of resistance that lingered on their boots, and moved on.

As far as I know the two expressions, “when the dust settles” and “kicking the dust of your shoes” have no common origin. The first is a metaphor about the chaos stirred up by times of transition and conflict; the second is a Jewish expression about rejecting everything that has to do with Gentiles, which Jesus “reformed” to be about rejecting those who resist the Gospel. Yet in the Church, the reality is that these expressions overlap in an interesting way. If we are called to be reformed and ever reforming according to the word of God and the work of the Spirit, then that means that the Church should be a place where the dust never settles, both because we are always in transition, *and* because transition inevitably requires us to shake the dust of resistance to newness off as God calls for as we strive to follow Christ in changing times.

¹ See Martin Luther’s 95 Theses at <http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>.

² Calvin: *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 3, v., John T. McNeill Ed., (Philadelphia, Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 597.

If you look at the story of Jesus and the early Church, it has always been a story of dust being stirred up or shaken off, not settling. For example, according to the *Gospel of John*, one of the first things that Jesus did in his ministry was to march into the Temple and dump over the tables of the money changers there (John 2:13-22). In *Matthew*, Jesus is forever saying, “You have heard it said.... but I say to you,” as he reinterprets the Law. (See e.g. Matt. 5:21). He also creates all kinds of dust-ball conflicts as he hangs out with outcasts, heals unclean people, and questions the establishment’s understanding of faithfulness. Jesus was a reformer from the very beginning of his life, and remained one throughout his ministry.

After Jesus ascended, Paul then became the reformer, expanding the reach of the gospel to the Gentiles. Then after Paul, the authors of the gospels became the reformers, packaging and repackaging Jesus’ teachings and story to make the good news relevant to the contexts of their audiences. And so on and so on. Luther, Calvin, Knox, and others both stirred up the dust and shook it off during the Reformation, and it still hasn’t settled since Presbyterianism crossed the ocean from Scotland. Study our denomination’s history, and you will discover that we have moved from dust ball to dust ball as people of faith have felt called by the Spirit to introduce changes. Many of the conflicts were literally named new versus old: the New Light versus Old Light controversy, the New School versus Old School. I used to think that all the conflict was a sign of dysfunction in our denomination. But now I see it as a sign of the opposite. The Gospel is alive, and the Spirit is ever at work leading us into newness. So far we have been led into critical new understandings about slavery, biblical interpretation, women’s roles in the Church, and God’s love of GLBTQ people. Without a doubt we will be led into other new understandings in the future.

In fact, the Spirit may be leading us into those new understandings right now. Christian scholars and church leaders across denominations have all been recognizing in the past decade, but especially in the past few years, we have been entering in a time of massive reformation in the Church. Pastor/author Brian McLaren describes this time as a time of great spiritual migration, people leaving the old way of doing church in search of a new way.³ The old way of doing church isn’t working anymore for a lot of people, and the problem is not simply a cosmetic one that can be easily cured by changing the style of music we use in worship, the architecture of the buildings where we meet, or the dress code. The problem is not even about who can serve anymore, at least not in progressive circles. What’s at stake in this reformation is what it means to be Christian, and what the purpose of the Church is supposed to be. The terms “Christian” and “Church” have come to mean so many different things that they are increasingly confusing or meaningless to the rest of the world. We need to decide whether the gospel of Christ is about love or hate, about going to church or being church. Is it about beliefs and doctrines, or teaching and sharing love?

Explaining his own reformation of the Hebrew Scriptures for the purpose of affirming the truth of the Gospel, Matthew said that a scribe of the Kingdom of Heaven must bring out of his treasure what is new and what is old. That’s good advice, except that in these times of conversion and reformation, we don’t all agree on what is treasure. One person’s old Rembrandt is another person’s black velvet, paint-by-number Elvis not worth keeping. One person’s new insight is

³ See McLaren, Brian D., *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian* (New York: Convergent, 2016).

another person's heresy. If the Spirit would just send out a memo to all people who call themselves Christian of whatever stripe telling us all what to keep and what to toss, it would be easier to move forward in faith. God doesn't work that way, however, so we must continuously live in an acute state of discernment instead. We also must increase our tolerance of unsettled dust.

But as we move forward, there are at least two things we can keep in mind that can make the reformation process more tolerable for those of us who do not like change. First, although reformations always bring changes, in McLaren's words, "the spiritual conversion we need won't change the true essence, heart, or treasure of Christian faith. It will still be rooted deeply in Jesus and his good news. It will still draw sustenance, as Jesus did, from the Bible... It will still be informed by the Christian tradition... [and] still engage in the core spiritual practices that have sustained Christians for centuries."⁴ Therefore we do not have to fear. All of this old treasure isn't going anywhere because it is God's treasure not just ours. So even though the form that Christianity takes in the future may change significantly, we will not lose the good stuff.

The second thing to realize is that if we cling to the old stuff too fiercely out of a desire to preserve and glorify what we love, we will end up doing just the opposite. It's not a dust story but many years ago, newspaper columnist Jim Bishop told a memorable story about a little boy named Dennis and his pet turtle Oscar.⁵ Dennis loved his little brown turtle more than anything in the world. He had saved all his money so he could get a special bowl for him. He ran home after school each day to feed him and visit with him. But one day when he came home, to his horror, he discovered Oscar floating on his back in the bowl. Dennis had seen enough fish come and go that he immediately recognized what had happened and started sobbing. Despite all his mother's attempts to comfort him, Dennis was inconsolable. So that night, his father said to him, "You can cry as long as you like but it won't bring Oscar back. So what we should ask ourselves is how we can honor Oscar. Perhaps we should organize a funeral for him." Dennis stopped crying and looked at his father. "We could bury your pet in my silver cigarette case. And you know the big stone in the back? We could get a stone cutter chisel Oscar's name on it." The little boy wrung his hands with gratitude. "Just think," the father said, "centuries from now, whenever someone passes this way, they will see the name Oscar on the rock and know that a little boy had the greatest love for his turtle." Dennis was now standing up tall, his eyes twinkling with pride. Then as his gaze shifted over to the bowl, Oscar flipped over and began to swim. Dennis stared at him for a long time, and then turned to his father and said, "Let's kill him."

Now I'm not trying to suggest that Christians today are intentionally trying to kill the Church. But I am saying that when our primary concern as Christians becomes about preserving the Church we know, then we are at risk of making church about memorializing our greatest loves, whether they are practices, doctrines, or buildings, instead of sharing God's greatest love in Christ. That not only misses the point of what the Church is called to be and do, it is also effectively taking a living thing and making it into a dead thing. Christ is alive and so is his church. We must not suggest otherwise to the world.

⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

⁵ This is an edited version of the story. The fuller story is available at *Jim Bishop*, MEANDERINGS BLOG, July 24, 2009, <https://nhmeanderings.wordpress.com/2009/07/24/jim-bishop/>

It is challenging to live and serve in a community where the dust never settles. Sometimes it is hard to see where you are going. Sometimes the conflicts and questions that inevitably crop up now and then can make us uncomfortable. Sometimes having to let go of things we love can make us weep. But when we learn how to treasure old and new alike, we can make the kingdom of heaven visible to a world which desperately wants to know and needs to know now more than ever that God is not dead. The good news of the Gospel is that God is alive and that even now we are moving forward into God's future with hope. So let's shake off any dust of resistance that clings to our hearts, minds, or shoes, and keep on moving and discerning. There's a Reformation going on—thanks be to God!