

Reformed and Always Being Reformed: Our Presbyterian DNA

IV. *Being Reformed*

Exodus 24: 12-18 & Matthew 17: 1-9

Transfiguration of the Lord/ 6th February 2005/ Sacrament of Holy Communion

“Reformed and always being reformed.” This banner emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries during and after the Protestants Reformation, but it wasn’t the standard for all Protestants, such as Luther, but only for the heirs of John Calvin (1509-1564), Ulrich Zwingli (1504-1575), and John Knox (c.1514-1572). This morning we finish up this mini-series on what makes us ‘tick’ as Presbyterians. We started three weeks ago looking at the way Presbyterians interpret scripture, then we looked at the centrality of worship, followed by a consideration how we see ourselves relating to culture and society. Today we look at what it means to be reformed.

“Reformed and always being reformed,” was the rallying-cry for Reformed Christians, heirs of Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox. Today they are known as Presbyterians or Congregationalists or simply Reformed Christians.¹ The meaning of this statement is perhaps what makes us unique among all the Protestants; it forces us to stand out from Episcopalian or Methodists, for example.

I remember as a teenager, perhaps in confirmation class, first coming across this sentence. It was in Latin and part of the seal of the old northern Presbyterian Church. It was printed on the front cover of the *Book of Confessions* and today it is included in our *Book of Order: Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. It can be translated, “a church reformed and always reforming”; “a church reformed and always being reformed”; or “a church reformed and always to be reformed.” Only later as an adult and later still in seminary did I come to have a fuller appreciation of what is involved in being Reformed.

What struck me then and strikes me now even more is the *dynamism* built into this motto. The church is not static or staid. It is not simply a monument to the past or a museum of the past or a preservation society. Reformed Christians see the church to be on the move and always moving. Now, for those folks who have problems with change of any kind (which is probably most of us), this might appear a little unsettling. To which I respectfully say, “Sorry.” That might be the way or expectation of cultural Christianity, but we have to be intellectually honest and way that is not the way of Jesus Christ.

There is always *movement* involved in being a Christian. The early followers of Jesus were not known as Christians, but as people of The Way, followers of the one whom himself said, “I am the way. (John 14:6)” This implies a journey, traveling. The church of Jesus Christ is not supposed to stay in one place, because Jesus himself never stays in one place. The body of Christ follows after the steps of Jesus, not in the sense of simply doing or repeating what he did, but getting caught up, being in step with what Jesus is doing *now* and seeking to do with us and through us. Trying to answer the question, What Would

¹ For a comprehensive look at the state of the worldwide Reformed church see the website of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, of which the PC(USA) is a member: www.warc.ch.

Jesus Do? which we have no doubt seen on wristbands and t-shirts – WWJD – is a good thing. But perhaps a better question, and more theologically appropriate is, W-I-J-D? *What Is Jesus Doing?* You see, *Jesus might accept us as we are, but Jesus never leaves us there.*

The reformers of the sixteenth century believed the church had become corrupt, so change was needed, thorough-going change, change right down to the roots of the church and society. Change is involved. But this doesn't mean that the church simply celebrates and welcomes any innovation for the sake of innovation. There is change and movement here, but it is of special kind.

Anna Case-Winters, professor of theology at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, makes the important point that while this motto does not justify change for change sake, or any and all innovations, neither is it a call to simply hold on to the past and worship our tradition. The new is not better because it is new; neither is the old better, simply because it is old. In fact, she makes clear that “our Reformed motto, rightly understood, challenges both the conservative and the liberal impulses that characterize our diverse church family today. It does not bless either preservation for preservation's sake or change for change's sake. In the 16th century context,” she continues,” the impulse it reflected was neither liberal nor conservative, but *radical*, in the sense of returning to the ‘root.’”² The root of the word ‘radical’, *radix*, means ‘root.’

And what is that root that both radicalizes and makes irrelevant both liberal and conservative sensitivities? The Word of God – Jesus, himself – and the testimony of his Spirit. The church is always in need of reform, but the church cannot reform itself. This is because the church is made of people and people, as Presbyterians know, are “totally depraved.” *Not* totally depraved in that we are all worthless worms with no inherent value. What we mean by being totally depraved is that we're all messed up; every aspect of our lives is tinged by sin. Presbyterians believe that “even our best endeavors and highest aspirations are [still] prone to sin and error.”³ No action is free from sin. All of this is not to make us depressed. This is a liberating insight. It tells us we cannot rely on ourselves to save us. So we need a reformer. And the one who reforms us is none other than the Living God who speaks to us through God's Living Word, Jesus Christ. The motto, *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*,” actually continues “*secundum verbi dei*,” according to the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit. To borrow from the United Church of Christ (our Reformed cousins) in their recent publicity campaign, “*God is still speaking.*”⁴ Our own Confession of 1967 states, “As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.” Edward Dowey (1918-2003), the primary author of the Confession of 1967 (one of my professors at Princeton), notes that “Reform has a backward and a forward reference. It leads not only back to the Bible but also

² Anna Case-Winters, “What Presbyterians Believe: Our Misused Motto,” *Presbyterians Today* (May, 2004), found at <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/past/may04/reformed.htm>. A similar article is found on the WARC website.

³ Case-Winters' helpful definition.

⁴ See their advertisement campaign at www.ucc.org.

forward under the Word.”⁵ This requires a movement back to scripture and an attitude of openness to what the Spirit is saying to us, possibly in new ways so that we can be reformed and be reforming. Can you feel the dynamism here, the movement? This is why it is so *radical*, it cuts to the root, it undercuts liberal and conservative perspectives, and allows us to focus only on “Jesus himself alone (Matthew 17: 8)” – *only Jesus*.

That’s the focus of Matthew’s account of the transfiguration. Everything in the story leads to him. That’s what the disciples discovered who were with Jesus. They discovered that Jesus is always close, yet always beyond our grasp. Just when we think we have him figured out, just when we think we know who he is or who he isn’t, we find ourselves questioned to *our* roots. Jesus is neither liberal nor conservative, but radical. For Jesus will be not be co-opted by our limited views, our petty political agendas, or controlled by our fears. In his presence our figurations are questioned and shattered by the blinding light of his presence. Being Reformed means always going back to the source, to Jesus himself and then before him, we are to “listen to him (Matthew 17:5).” *Listen* to what he has to say. *Listen* for what he is saying to us and allow his words to form and reform us – even in unexpected ways. Just as the disciples were blinded by the truth of Jesus in his transfiguration, so we too need to be open to those moments when we encounter the Living Christ who continues to transfigure and transform our lives and the church and moves us forward. We move backward to the text and its witness and forward to the realization of God’s purposes in the world. And for this change to take place within us, we need those moments of encounter when we can *really* listen to him.

One of those places of encounter is in the intimacy of a meal,
at a table where we sit,
where he is known and we are known in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24: 35),
to sit at table with truth itself,
radical and gracious.

But who are we to sit at table?
Who are we to be the bearer such truth?
Who are we to be the hearers of such truth?⁶
Listen to him.
He will tell you.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

⁵ Cited by Case-Winters.

⁶ Cf. the quotation from the bulletin: “To sit at table with Him is more wonderful and terrible than a blinding light since it allows us no fictional existence in which to shroud ourselves, no place to hide from the relentlessly gracious claim that our very existence, fractured and fictionalized as it is, is of infinite worth, potentially a bearer of the very Truth which we fear could so easily crush us under the weight of its glory.” James E. Loder (1931-2001), *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).