

# Celebrating a Thinking Faith

Psalm 139 & Romans 12:1-12

*30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/28<sup>th</sup> October 2007/Reformation Sunday*

Obscurantism. O-B-S-C-U-R-A-N-T-I-S-M. “Opposition to the spread of knowledge.” Obscurantism. I didn’t know the meaning of the word. I was in college, reading an essay by the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), in which he warns against the church’s predisposition toward obscurantism, when I came across this word from the Latin root meaning, “to make dark,” as in to obscure the light.<sup>1</sup> Obscurantism is a philosophy or attitude that resists or even opposes the spread of knowledge; this includes the discovery of new knowledge. It’s anti-intellectual. It’s thoroughly un-democratic in that it holds that knowledge should be contained by only a privileged few and preserved at all costs. It’s resistant to change, skeptical about intellectual inquiry, wants to preserve a particular notion of truth (even if it’s wrong). It prefers to remain in the dark.

Now there’s obscurantism in theological conservatism and in theological liberalism. Both sides are guilty of this. But Niebuhr’s essay led me to see long ago that the Christian has a commitment to knowledge, to the discovery of the truth, and to the exploration of the mind and the heart toward truth. We don’t accept truth just because someone told us it is true. The Christian doesn’t take things on “blind-faith.” A Christian questions and doubts *in order* to believe and affirm. Faith isn’t blind, just the opposite. With the eyes of faith we are able to see. Anselm (1033-1109) confessed almost one thousand years ago, "For I do not seek to understand that I may believe. I believe in order to understand. I believe in order to perceive. I believe in order to reorient my life." Belief can be rational and because we have been gifted with reason, it is incumbent upon us to *use* our minds to understand our faith. Living in darkness is not a Christian virtue. In fact, it’s dangerous living there. Preferring ignorance, choosing to remain in the dark when it comes to thinking through our faith is not the way for disciples who follow the one who *is* light (John 8:12). In his light, we see light (Psalm 36:9). Light gives way to light.

Putting all of this a different way, thought matters. Ideas matter. The ideas we hold (or that hold us) shape the way we move in the world. How we think about God informs the way we live our lives and share our gifts and serve the Lord and one another. Our thoughts matter. Getting our ideas right, getting our thoughts in order, leads to life. If our ideas and thoughts are wrong, then so are our lives. The mind matters – it matters passionately to God. It’s one of many God-given gifts entrusted to our care, making us stewards of thought. Just as we love God through the use of our gifts, we can love God with our minds, *through* our thoughts. It is a Christian vocation to live the life of the mind in service to God.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, Edited and Introduced by Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

If there was ever one who felt called to this, it was John Calvin (1509-1564). His was a thoughtful faith in which he brought all of his prodigious intellectual gifts to bear upon being a *biblical theologian* (that's what mattered most to him), interpreting scripture for the sake of the reform of the church (and he wasn't even ordained!). As a humanist scholar and son of the Renaissance, Calvin saw the mind as a gift from God. "With the light of reason as guide," he said, the mind can "distinguish what should be followed from what should be avoided."<sup>2</sup> The Reformed theological tradition that descends primarily from Calvin's Geneva and reaches down into these pews has always been about the reform of thought as informed by scripture and interpreted by the Holy Spirit. The great motto of the church says it well: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda. The church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God and the witness of the Spirit.*

The Reformed church was born with the hope of bringing the church out of the dark ages, of rejecting an obscurantism that eclipsed the meaning of the gospel. It was primarily an intellectual earthquake that continues to tremor through time. It was thought, ideas, concepts that turned the church and the world upside down. This same spirit is alive in the Reformed communion of which the Presbyterian Church (USA) is an integral member. There are more than 70 million Christians in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, dedicated to the ongoing reform of the church under the Spirit's direction. This is one of the gifts we offer the whole church. If the Reformed-Presbyterian Church dissolved away, the church of Jesus Christ would continue fine. Although there would be a loss, for we have something special to contribute. For us, the ongoing reform of the church takes place through *theological education*.

From the local church level to our ten Presbyterian seminaries, it's clear that thought matters. Presbyterians are extremely well-educated in all areas of knowledge, and we bring our respective fields into dialog with the Christian life. Presbyterians don't leave their brains in the narthex but bring them into the sanctuary of the Lord in order to worship "in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)." Presbyterians are readers. Books – in all genres – are very important to us. We are not afraid to think and to have our thinking challenged because this is one of the ways we love God. We value a learned ministry for both clergy and laity. Knowledge of the Bible and knowing how to interpret it are both critical for the reform of the church.

We need to celebrate this, take our light out from under the bushel. Several years ago I was elected by the General Assembly to serve on its Committee on Theological Education, the GA committee that has oversight of our seminaries, seeks to strengthen our denominational ties with our seminaries, and to support theological education as a crucial way to renew the church. All of our seminaries, plus seminaries associated with the PCUSA, send their presidents to the meetings. We met on the campus of Louisville Seminary just two weeks ago, and I have to say

---

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 1.15.8, cited in Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 29.

every time I come home from one of these meetings I thank God for the Presbyterian Church and for being Presbyterian. Our seminaries together are a priceless resource to the church of Jesus Christ, preparing clergy eager to serve the church in a new and challenging age. Here we see the Reform spirit at work. I could go on about the unique ways each seminary is seeking to be faithful in this age and doing amazing things. This is the life of the mind in service to God.

The apostle Paul would approve. But in order for the mind to really serve God something has to happen first. As Paul and Calvin and all of us know, our thinking has its limits; the mind is not always strong, and sometimes rationality seems to abandon us altogether. The mind, reason, too, is fallen and is in as much need of redemption as the rest of us. We can't reason our way out of the human predicament, in fact relying upon human reason alone has gotten us into a lot of trouble. And we can't *think* our way to God, at least not without God's help. The mind, for all its glory and wonder, is limited and like all aspects of the creation, it, too, needs to be reformed, or to use Paul's term, "renewed." That's why Paul cautioned us, "Do not be conformed to this world"; by this he means the prevailing worldview formed by *human* ideas, concepts and thoughts, "but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rm 12: 2)." It's not that reason has been completely wiped out of the human mind; it is "partly weakened," Calvin wrote, "and partly corrupted, so that its misshapen ruins appear."<sup>3</sup> Some "sparks" still gleam, and those sparks are renewed, reformed, transformed by the Holy Spirit working within us, "searching and testing our thoughts" as we read in Psalm 139, in order to teach us,

leading us into all truth,  
opening up for us the meaning of scripture,  
pointing the way to God's will for our lives,  
breaking us out of our darkness and ignorance,  
exposing and judging lies,  
shattering illusions,  
revealing more and more of the light of the gospel  
so that in its light we may see more and more light.

We're talking about thoughts reformed for the *sake* of the kingdom, in order to *advance* the kingdom. Left to our own thoughts as they are, we're all in trouble.

In a world where fundamentalisms of all kinds are calcifying belief – some of these fundamentalisms are actually armed and dangerous, violent and angry – where dangerous dogmatisms are the rise, where illusion and ignorance are masquerading as truth and wisdom our work as Reformed Christians becomes all the more important. Critical thinking is required. But also *humility of thought*, having the grace to confess that we might be wrong on some things – not everything, but on some things – and that we have more to learn, that we don't have it all figured out. It's having the humility to confess that our minds and the church need renewal;

---

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.12, cited in Tamburello, 32.

they need transformation by God's Spirit. It's having the courage of conviction to say we don't know, but we're on the road toward greater light, led by the Spirit, *together*. This is why everyone is needed for the journey, from every perspective.

In Louisville two weeks ago I had several occasions to talk with Iain Torrance, the president of Princeton Seminary. Last June, Princeton hosted a major gathering of scholars and representatives from every major Reformed educational institution in the world focusing upon the nature of Reformed identity and purpose. It was a unique event. As former moderator of the Church of Scotland, Iain has his pulse on the Reformed tradition throughout the world. I asked, from his perspective, what would be the one or two gifts the Reformed tradition has to offer the church and world today, what unique contribution do we have to make at this time? He said the centrality of *biblical theology* and the importance of inclusion, "the Reformed don't exclude," he said. [exception] I was struck by that. We make bridges. We led the way in the ecumenical movement, developing Reformed-Orthodox dialogues that have been going on for decades. But there's something about our approach to the world that is comfortable with the pursuit of knowledge in all disciplines, every human perspective is needed because it could deepen our understanding of God's Word and world and the movement of God's Spirit. That's biblical theology.

All of this might sound too cerebral, which has been a critique of Presbyterians. Some say we think too much. There are Christians who don't think enough! We do tend to overanalyze things – sometimes to death, the paralysis of analysis. Even Calvin has been accused by his detractors as being cold, rigid, logical, dogmatic, distant, impersonal, whose constant stomach problems, perhaps irritable bowel syndrome, produced an irritable theology and for an irritable people.<sup>4</sup> To actually read Calvin, you'll discover a different person there. Intellectual that he was, Calvin didn't worship reason and his thought wasn't a celebration of logic. Neither am I trying to celebrate Calvin. He was simply a man who believed firmly in the renewal of the mind for the sake of the church, of yielding to the Spirit of Christ to reform all that is in need of reforming within us in order that our lives might more fully glorify God.

There's a well-known saying that goes, "As a man thinketh, so he is." I did a Google search on this proverb and found one site that said it was coined by Buddha! It's actually from Proverbs and could also be translated, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so he is (Proverbs 23:7, KJV). That's what Calvin was most concerned about, it's what shaped the Reformed tradition, and, I believe it's what's needed today: *thinking with the heart*. Thought is not an end in itself. The purpose of all knowledge is to deepen the knowledge of ourselves and to deepen our knowledge of God, to deepen our experience of God, to lead us to the mystery of God. As Calvin wrote so beautifully, words that every Presbyterian, I think, should have memorized, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consist of two parts:

---

<sup>4</sup> See the helpful study by William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God, and without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.”<sup>5</sup> The place where all forms of human knowledge finds limits is before the mystery of God. We could also say before the mystery of God, that’s where all true knowledge really begins. Before the mystery of God, that’s where all renewal and reform begin. Before the mystery of God.<sup>6</sup>

*Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs*

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church  
Catonsville, Maryland*

---

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1; 1.1.1 & 2.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the quotation in the worship bulletin: “The single most important contribution of the Reformed tradition to the twenty-first century could be that it dares to celebrate a thoughtful faith, to combine mystery and rationality in a way that causes the worshiper to think about what faith means in the complex world of life and work. In the midst of so much activity that has cheapened worship – causing it to become little more than ‘feel-good religion’ – surely an important place exists for this tradition.” Howard L. Rice & James C. Huffstutler, *Reformed Worship* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 5-6.