

# *The Reformation Today*

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Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

It's that time of year, when the leaves change color and throughout the Stockade neighborhood where Lynn and I dwell, all thoughts turn to the ghosts of yesteryear. Small children, youths, and adults looking like larger versions of small children show up with faces daubed white and strange ballerina dresses. It has started already. In our neighborhood we don't wait for Halloween. The evening tours through the neighborhood led by figures in 19<sup>th</sup> century hats process solemnly past our house. One group even *stopped* there last Friday, an unusual event. Maybe someone told them about the old Dutchman who makes his presence felt occasionally in the front bedroom of number 29. Or maybe there is some more specific and ghastly tale I do not know.

It's that time in this *century* when the ghosts gather from an earlier time, just a century and a half before the Europeans and a handful of Africans showed up in my neighborhood. In Europe, in Germany, in 1517, a young Roman Catholic monk and professor of theology published ninety-five theses, ideas challenging the practice of selling indulgences—offering free passes out of purgatory, to go straight to heaven, for a price-- and challenging some of the underlying theology. From that event five hundred years ago, the churches traditionally mark the beginning of the protestant reformation. Here in New York state, emissaries from the Reformed (including the United Church of Christ) and Lutheran traditions have been sending tours and individuals and official emissaries to celebrate the event.

The ghosts of that reformation era are our ghosts in this church, for we claim more than one of the sides of Christianity that called itself reformed or evangelical, Baptist or Congregational. The traditions that lie behind this church's beginnings got hatched largely by dissidents in England and the Netherlands, about 400 years ago. Thomas Helwys, speaking for the dozen Baptists who had come back from Amsterdam to England to confront the king, sent the king of England a copy of his little book, the *Mistery of Iniquity*, a book with a polite note on the inside reminding King James I he had no control over the souls of his subjects, only their bodies. Here's the note on the flyleaf that he wrote--

*Hear O King and despise not the counsel of your poor, and let their complaints come before you. The King is a mortal man, and not God, therefore hath no power over immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances over them, and to set spiritual lords over them. If the King have authority to make Spiritual Lords and laws, then he is an immortal God and not mortal man. O king, be not seduced by deceivers to sin so against God whom you should obey, nor against your poor subjects who should and will obey you in all things with body life and goods, or let their lives be taken from the earth. God save the King.*

I can imagine the King of England wondering "Who is this little man?" Thomas Helwys died in prison a few short years thereafter. The women and men in his movement all but

disappeared. But others picked up the flag of their convictions and ideas. If time permitted I would go into the extraordinary witness of Anne Hutchinson a colonist who was exiled from Boston Massachusetts for HER opposition to the spiritual lords in that place.

For all that happened 500 years ago, 400 years ago, 300 years ago, we may well wonder—despite all the festivities-- how much difference did the European reformation make outside of western Europe? Not long ago I heard the Rev. Alan Boesak, Black South African church leader, make the point that for the people on the receiving end of Europe's colonizing, the state of Europe's religious wars made little difference. Whether they were Catholic or Protestant, the Europeans came sure that God was on their side and that they had a right to take what they pleased and call it their own. The guns may have been held by Catholics or Protestants, Baptists or Anglicans. They were guns nonetheless, held by ruthless invaders.

Of course, Alan Boesak is a Reformed minister who used his Reformed theology to help end apartheid. Through the efforts of both Boesak and others, the Reformed Churches worldwide declared the theology used to justify it was a heresy. So, we are left with contradictions and troubling questions and a little bit of hope that somehow courage and love will prevail over arrogance and proud theology...

For you and me personally the dogmatic disputes of half a thousand years ago are not the most important thing about what happened during Europe's Reformation. The finer points of church doctrine are not as important as a huge shift, a new trajectory that was begun, 500 years ago and counting. That shift is away from thinking of faith as a set of beliefs that are fixed and orthodox and cannot be challenged. That shift is toward thinking of Christian faith as something that is always changing and growing, shifting ground, if you will. That shift is away from thinking of the Church as an institution to be controlled by Men. And it is a shift back toward recognizing that we are the body of Christ, a fallible group of women and men, children and youth together, who must listen to each other, search the Word, seek divine guidance, and listen for the echoes of God's voice.

Martin Luther, an important figure in that movement, became part of the problem, when he got power, calling for the extermination of both Baptists and Jews. John Calvin's ideas were subverted to support the idea of places like Massachusetts Bay—and Albany—as Cities on a Hill, authorized to slay dissidents, and to exterminate the local people who were there long before the newcomers arrived.

But what we claim as a Reformation principle is that every time the movement of love and justice that comes from God alone gets taken over by a new set of overlords, every time that it sells out to some King or gets wedded to the prevailing world order, we end up having to take a stand, speak the truth, run the race, trust in faith to bring us through.

Mr. Luther had ninety-five theses that fine day we call Halloween. I have but five humbler claims, this 28<sup>th</sup> day of October 2017.

We continue to claim:

- (1) the insistence that faith is a matter of grace, and of free choice, not something that can be compelled by ecclesiastics or the state.
- (2) that faith must continue to examine its own heart, and be open to growing and changing, with humility and a radical insistence on the truth.

We also claim:

- (3) that the reformation of the churches is not a single event 500 years ago, but an ongoing process of discovery, struggle and growth in spirit.
- (4) that reformation is personal, not just institutional—it is the continuous process of changing, growing hearts and minds being drawn closer to God, closer to real love of our neighbors. It is a personal pilgrimage that lasts a lifetime.

To sum it up, (5) the reformation today is not about proclaiming the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith and not by works, nor any other single teaching. It starts with a query, not a proposition: as a follower of Jesus, where do I stand and how am I growing? NOT what are the articles of my faith and how can I be certain? As gathered communities of faith, where does God call us to give witness and to serve our neighbors, where does the Spirit say resist, and where does Christ invite us to go, together?

The passage we read this morning from scripture today is quite likely the oldest written text in the New Testament—Paul writing just 20 or 30 years after Christ’s life, and at least a decade before the first Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, was written. It speaks to the essence of our Reformation spirit—a spirit as alive in the liberation movements of Catholics in Latin America as it has been among protestant preachers willing to go to prison to oppose Jim Crow in this country or the efforts of ordinary people of all stripes today to speak to the rights of the downtrodden all over the world.

*2 You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. 3 For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. 5 As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; 6 nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7 though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. 8 So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. [NRSV]*

May this be our calling, may this be our sacred charge, as individuals and as a congregation, now and in the days to come.

to care, o King, and dispise not  
counsell of the poore, and let their  
complaints come before thee.

The King is a mortall man, not God  
therefore hath no power over immortal  
soules of his subjects, to make lawes &  
ordinances for them, and to set spirituall  
Lords over them.

If the King have authority to make  
spirituall Lords & lawes, then he is  
an immortal God, and not a mortall  
man.

O King, be not seduced by deceivers  
to sinne against God whom thou  
oughtest to obey, nor against thy  
poore subjects who ought and will  
obey thee in all things with body  
life and goods, or else let their lives  
be taken from the earth.

God Save y King



Spittleried  
nare London.

Tho. Helwys.