

Title: The Roots of Reformation  
Text: I Thess. 2: 1 – 8  
Date: October 29, 2017

Always up for a challenge, my goal today is to somehow make a connection between this letter to the church at Thessalonica, my comments last week relating to mysticism and the power of the spirit, and finally relating this to Reformation Sunday. To be clear, historically I have not been a Reformation Sunday groupie, but since this year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Reformation, I thought something a little more than an honorable mention was in order. Let's see if I can pull this off.

Last week we highlighted how the **“message of the gospel came to [them] not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”** (I Thess. 1:5) So what were the roots of that?

I would like to suggest that it all started with Paul's conversion, but this was hardly succumbing to a reasoned debate. Most of us remember a Sunday school flannel graph of Saul getting knocked off his horse. But if we looked a little more carefully at the account recorded in Acts 9, it says nothing about a horse. Instead, it really sounds more like what we would describe as a powerful mystical experience. We read that **“suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him”** and he heard a voice. (Acts 9:3)

Now if this sounds a little airy-fairy to you, I have to warn you that I know the “safe word.” All I have to do is say “Marcus Borg,” and everyone will calm down. Borg says, **“Paul had what scholars would call a mystical experience – a powerful and dramatic experience of the sacred. Mystical experiences happen! They are not every day experiences, but more people have them than we might imagine. And once one takes seriously that dramatic experiences like this really happen, it seems clear that Paul had one of these.”** So I would contend that these early churches that Paul planted essentially had their roots in Paul's mystical experience.

Having said that, there is another sense in which reformations just seem to happen. I don't believe that Jesus intended to start a new religion. It just happened. I don't even believe that Paul intended to start a new religion. Borg would say about Paul: **“He would have thought of himself as a follower of Christ, as being one with Christ, but still he would have thought of himself as a Jew until his death. A Jew who was a follower of Jesus... but he did not think of himself as part of a new and different religion.”** [*The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*, by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan]

Likewise, there is a sense in which the Reformation took on a life of itself. Martin Luther did not intend to start Protestantism. He intended to reform Catholicism. Paul didn't intend to start Christianity. He intended to bring a broader and vibrant vision to Judaism.

In Luther's age, authority in the church had become hopelessly corrupted, epitomized by the sale of indulgences, and thoroughly compromised by avarice, greed, and muting any witness to the message and values of what we call the gospel. Luther's protest saved the church from itself. Luther did us a wonderful service by campaigning for a rediscovery of God's grace, and the direct access of the faithful to God's truth.

But as vitally important as Martin Luther's contributions were, he wasn't perfect. He missed the mark in some areas. Likewise, as vitally important as Paul's contributions were, he wasn't perfect. He missed the mark in some areas.

I have to imagine that you have heard this before, but I believe that a vital principal of our reformed tradition is *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda* - Latin for "The Church Reformed, Always Reforming." Allegedly derived from St. Augustine, the saying was popularized by Karl Barth. I believe this is vital for our reformed tradition in general, *and* I believe this is vital for Shepherdstown Presbyterian specifically. We cannot rest on the reformations of the past.

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson was general secretary of the Reformed Church in America for 17 years, and he has identified four areas where he believes the Reformation had unintended consequences that injured the church's life and witness, continuing to this day - areas where the church needs more reforming.

**First**, he believes the Reformation established the precedent that a group of believers, convinced of their understanding of God's revealed truth and its demands in specific circumstances, could break away from the larger church, and even denounce it as heretical, establishing their own separate church structure. This practice has become so commonplace, that we barely give it a second theological or biblical thought. Looking at world Christianity's landscape, the reality is that what we confess as "the one holy catholic and apostolic church" has, in fact, become endlessly divided into separate denominations.

He points out that there are an estimated 43,800 denominations in the world today, often living with sectarian distrust and judgment of one another. Heck, there is even distrust in our own Presbytery! This was an unintended legacy of the Reformation.

**Second**, I am delighted that he quotes Richard Rohr as saying, "**The Reformation focused on the individual, but missed the inner life.**" The individual's ability to know, think, and believe for him or herself - rather than having the terms of faith dictated and mediated through the authority of the church - became primary. *But* as the Reformation spread, especially into northern Europe and England, faith became all about creeds and confessions requiring the intellectual consent of the individual believer.

At the same time in the turbulent 16th century, practices focused on reviving and deepening one's inner spiritual journey were *growing* in the Catholic Church, particularly seen in Spanish mystics such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatian spirituality in particular - with its practices of retreat, spiritual direction, detachment, "examen" of consciousness, finding God in all things, and union with Jesus - became a framework for deepening *interior* spirituality. But as this movement, and the emerging Jesuit order, became part of the *Counter*-Reformation, it all was rejected by the Protestant Reformers. Protestants got stuck in their heads with rational articulations of right doctrine.

It really wasn't until much more recently with the crossover success of Catholic writers such as Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen that the Protestant world started opening to rich spiritual practices that were long ignored. It's only in the last 30 years that contemplative prayer, spiritual direction, detachment, intentional retreat, and the examen have made their way into the vocabulary and experience of Protestants in general, and this church specifically.

**Third**, Granberg-Michaelson believes the Reformation bred a mistrust of aesthetics. One sees it most in architecture and worship style. Reformed church buildings shunned art, rejecting the “idolatry” they saw practiced in the unreformed church. As in this Shepherdstown meeting house, walls were blank. The focus was on the pulpit, to hear the sermon. The emphasis, here again, was on right articulation of doctrine. “Smells and bells” were dismissed.

In some ways, protecting the church from the influence of art and aesthetics derived from a strong division between the spiritual and the material worlds. So there was a reactionary move in Protestant thinking to keep matter and spirit detached from one another.

Somewhat more recently, as I have observed in this church, there has been something of a liturgical renewal. Some churches have gone much further in terms of introducing sensory-saturated worship, as well as the recovery of liturgical arts and dance within the church. All this can be seen as outgrowing the Reformation’s war on aesthetics.

**Fourth**, he believes the Reformation poisoned how we understand religious leadership, believing that no sole individual should be trusted with religious authority. For most branches of the Reformation, this created forms of polity and governance that placed authority in councils, Sessions, synods, or other groups. At their core, these methods of governing the church are based on the mistrust of any leadership vested in a person.

The wisdom of this is clearly obvious, *but* he believes this also has its deficiencies. Sociological wisdom shows that any group has some persons who function in a leadership capacity. When such leadership is not identified, this can lead to covert attempts to exercise influence and authority, resulting in dysfunction and chaos.

So the Reformation implanted a distrust of any personalized leadership within historic Protestantism. So the challenge is how to affirm the gift of leadership, but also hold it firmly accountable.

Aside from these four areas identified by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, there is no question that we could add to this list areas in which the church needs to be “always reforming.”

- We’ve reformed in terms of ordaining women, but we need to continue to reform as long as women are objectified, and paid on a different scale – and we need to continue to reform in affirming the humanity and full inclusion of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.
- We’ve reformed in terms of abolishing slavery, but we need to continue reforming as long as we are complicit in institutional racism.
- We’ve reformed in terms of inviting global partners to the table, but we need to continue to reform as long as they have no voice, and we expect their deference.
- We’ve reformed in terms of talking to Catholics, but we need to continue to reform in terms of robust interfaith dialogue.
- We have reformed in terms of providing shelter for the poor, but we need to continue to reform in light of extreme income disparity.
- We believe love is a good thing, but we need to continue to reform as long as we cannot address political differences without our blood pressure going haywire. We could go on.

Before closing, perhaps we should reference Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians one more time. In between his mind-blowing mystical experience of his past, and the theologically dense discourse in his future, lies this letter – perhaps one of his more pastoral letters. We are reminded of his willingness to suffer persecution for the sake of what he believes (I Thess. 2:2), and we are reminded of the deep, deep affection he had for these people. (I Thess. 2:8)

So as we have lofty aspirations for future reformations, perhaps we would be well-served simply by remembering both Paul's willingness to care ever so deeply for others, *and* his willingness to suffer for what he believes. *Semper Reformanda!*

Amen.

I Thess. 2: 1 – 8 (NRSV)

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, <sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; <sup>5</sup>nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.