

Reformation Sunday, St. Stephen's, October 27, 2002

It is a privilege to share on Reformation Sunday about church, creed, and canon, as these understandings impact upon our Christian lives today.

One of the famous slogans of the Reformation was: *ecclesia semper reformanda* – the church is always reforming itself.

The word “training” in French is *formation*. “Retraining”, *réformation*, is something we all go through many times in our lives, until, in the end (excuse the pun) we again wear diapers, and we're beyond continence. Reformation Sunday in the church is memorializing the massive sixteenth-century “retraining” of the church in Western Europe. And, to continue with the scatological allusion: there was a lot of crap to get rid of! When it comes to the church, there always is.

The broad strokes of the Reformation, for the sake of a quick historical overview are the following:

- On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk living in Wittenberg, Germany, presented ninety-five theses to his superiors in challenge of Roman Catholic beliefs and practices then current. The sale of indulgences, whereby one could assure the soul's safe journey to heaven (for a price!) was the precipitating event.
- Though it had not been Luther's intention, papal inability to comprehend Luther's intense challenges, together with the temper of the times socially and politically, led eventually to a breach with the German priest. Four years after the initial publication of the Theses, at the 1521 Diet of Worms (a formal meeting before the Holy Roman emperor and church authorities), Luther finally declared: “I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.” The Diet went on to declare him and his followers “outlaws”, marking a permanent break with Rome.
- By the mid-sixteenth century, the Lutheran Church had taken form, and most of Germany and Scandanavia had embraced Lutheranism.
- The Reformation spread westward, and under John Calvin of Geneva, eventually became dominated by “Calvinism” outside Germany and Scandanavia, excepting England. There a “middle way” ultimately was found in Anglicanism which became the official religion of England to this day, headed by the monarch.
- The Radical Reformers began in Geneva. They eventually became known as “Anabaptists” (Re-baptizers), precursors of Mennonites, because they insisted upon rebaptism of adherents as adult believers. Often known as the Reformation's left wing, they called for “restitution”, not mere “reformation” of the church. They wished to recapitulate or restore the pristine purity of the New Testament Church. (One may wonder which New Testament they were reading, to have ever imagined the New Testament church “pure”!) For their perceived extremism, they were hounded out of most jurisdictions in Europe. The mainstream “Protestants”, as the Reformers became known, obligingly “re-baptized” them: thousands were bound hand and foot, and drowned in local lakes and rivers. The Roman Catholics burned thousands more at the stake. Their main

legacy was the first call in Western culture for full religious freedom, and the insistence on separation of church and state. They also became known as the oldest “peace church” Christian tradition.

- There was as well a “Catholic Reformation” that sought to renew the church from within. The brilliant Christian humanist Erasmus in many ways represented this spirit of reform, without breaking allegiance to Rome, but the Reformation and its reaction, the Counter-Reformation, eventually passed him by.

The Reformation in Western Europe was so monumental, it obviously cannot adequately be sketched in such few words. One historian sums up the impact thus: “Unlike the Renaissance, the Reformation directly affected nearly every European and forced almost everyone to make a choice between the old and the new. As it did, the Reformation movement profoundly changed the course of Western civilization and touched every facet of human existence. The modern pluralistic, culturally fragmented Western World, for better or for worse, is largely the child of this tumultuous and significant movement (Robert D. Linder, “The Reformation”, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, pp. 830 And 831.)

I want to discuss the Reformation under five themes: *Freedom; Schism; Anti-creation; Non-violence; and “Putting on/clothing oneself with Jesus Christ”*.

Freedom

One of the great Reformation themes was *freedom*. Freedom from the obligation to work for one’s salvation; freedom from a religious system that did not work for the masses; freedom from Satan’s wiles.

One of the passages read on Reformation Sunday in the Lutheran Church is John 8:31-36. Verses 31, 32, and 36 read:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Billy Graham wrote *Peace With God* to highlight for him the essence of Christianity. In it, the “freedom” of Christianity is presented more in terms of *right belief* than of *right action*. This is a mainstream Reformation legacy.

Graham never has written what is the urgent simultaneous sequel (if there can be such a thing): *Peace With Man*. Though there is no world religion with a greater emphasis upon the non-negotiable call to love neighbour and enemy as the *only* litmus test of claimed love of God. What in fact is the “truth to set us free” if not the dynamic, live-out-in-action demonstrated love of neighbour and enemy?

The great preacher represents the dominant spirit of Protestantism: an overemphasis upon *doctrinal* reform and belief, an underemphasis upon *political/social* transformation and action.

Schism

A major legacy of the Reformation is schism.

Schism is the utter inversion of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17(15 – 23):
My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The only strategy endorsed by Jesus in the Gospel texts whereby the world may know that Jesus has come is *unity in the church!* That the Reformation is a massive contradiction to the unity of the church is profound understatement. That Protestantism continues to uphold the magisterial Reformers, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, in irreproachable esteem when they authored such a monumental inversion of Jesus' call to unity. is no small wonder.

The only strategy for proving to the world the authenticity of Jesus' Incarnation, according to the text in John chapter 17, is "complete unity" of the church. If this be true, and I defy anyone to discover in the Gospel texts any other "strategy for evangelism", for authenticating the Good News, than the unity of the church, the Reformation was a tragic breach of that Gospel call.

Anti-creation

Baldly put, by the standard of unity, the Reformation was a violent rejection of the heart of the Good News, the *Euangelion*, the Gospel. It was in turn a rejection, argue some, of the continuity of creation. The doctrine of creation includes an understanding of God's patient work in history to bring about no less the ultimate unity of the cosmos. And the church is centre-stage model of that creational intention. Listen to Ephesians:
In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. (Eph. 1:7 – 10)

To contend that *Jesus is the only way, and the church the only hope*, is not at its biblical best an exclusivistic means of alienating or trashing all other religions, beliefs and worldviews. Far from it! It is a description rather of what and how God intends for the entire cosmos one day. And the church is meant to be now, is the constant New Testament witness, what the whole cosmos is destined to become one day!

Therefore, to break with that continuity of creation, by dividing the church, is to work fundamentally at odds with the entire purpose of the creation in bringing about Kingdom Come, the unity of the whole of creation.

Such a grand socio-political unity was not the vision of the great Reformers. And peace and peacemaking were far from their hearts. One need just read the horrific writings of Luther about the Jews, or consider the actions Calvin endorsed in burning at the stake the heretic Servetus, or read Luther's chilling call, "Smite, slay, and stab!" to the German nobility to ruthlessly crush a Peasants' Revolt, and one shudders at these Reformers' views of the unity of the church, let alone of peacemaking in the creation.

Non-violence

The magisterial reformers, Luther and Calvin, were not much different from the Roman Catholic leaders of the day with regard to their attitudes toward violence. Luther's teachings had indirectly contributed to the Peasants' Revolt in Germany in the 1520's. Luther nonetheless called for suppression of the rebellious peasants in these chilling words: "Let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog (J.M. Porter, *Luther: Selected Political Writings*, p. 86)." In 1525, in one battle alone at Frankenhausen, about 50,000 peasants were slaughtered by the German princes, urged on by Luther. As many as 100,000 were brutally massacred.

Meanwhile, the Consistory in Calvin's Geneva burned at the stake the anti-Trinitarian heretic Michael Servetus in 1553. Calvin is reputed to have favoured beheading as a more humane form of execution in this case. Nevertheless, he approved of the Consistory's decision, and observed that Servetus "cried like a Spaniard" as he was being burned. (Calvin also oversaw beheadings, including for graffiti scribbled on his pulpit!)

As mentioned, the Catholics and the Protestants were united in their fear and loathing of the Anabaptists who had the audacity to proclaim that Christians should not be in the business of killing. For teaching this and other 'heresies', they were themselves killed by the thousands.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ

New Testament theologian Walter Wink writes: "I submit that the ultimate religious question today should no longer be the Reformation question, 'How can I find a gracious God?' but rather, 'How can we find God in our enemies?' What guilt was for Luther, the enemy has become for us: the goad that can drive us to God (*Engaging the Powers*, p. 263)."

One may put this central "counter-Reformation" question as stark proposition: *If one does not find God in the face of the enemy, one does not find God!*

There is consistent teaching by both New and Old Testament writers that all human

powers and principalities belong to Satan's realm and that Christians overcome the evil of such powers by doing good. It is God's will that by loving the enemy Christians overcome an oppressive state, an abusive parent, a misogynist male, an intolerant religionist, an overbearing master, etc. Jesus' teaching was love of one's enemies, even when they do us evil. This love was meant as both means and end.

The "overcome" list just given above is reprised, with variations, by the Apostle Paul in many of his writings. Martin Luther called these *Haustafeln*, rules of the house as it were, about power relationships in the early church. These arrangements referenced the citizen before the state, gender relationships, master-slave issues, interracial and interreligious matters, and parent-child dynamics. In the history of the Reformation, these texts were generally interpreted to mean endorsement of *status quo* power relationships. Slaves were merely to obey their Masters; women were to be under the control of men; citizens were to accept uncritically the injustices of the state; children were to obey unquestioningly their parents even when abused; etc.

There is a kind of code expression, calling for radical subversion of such power arrangements in ancient neareastern society, used by Paul on several occasions when dealing with the socially and politically entrenched evil structures of control. To accomplish the task of overcoming evil with good, Paul held that, through resurrection empowerment, it was possible to "love the enemy to death" – until in fact the death of the tyranny is realized!

Paul's code expression is for instance found in Romans 13:14: "*Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.*" It is possible, challenges Paul, to be so immersed in the words and ways of Jesus in his response to the enemy, that we will respond to all our enemies in similar fashion.

This same expression, in Greek, the word *enduo*, is variously translated "clothe yourselves with", or "put on". The "clothing" to be put on is either Jesus, or his characteristics, including light like armor; a new self like Jesus; love as supreme virtue; compassion; kindness; humility; gentleness; and patience. These all are found distributed in various New Testament texts.

What is fascinating is that all these *enduo* verses are in the vicinity of the *Haustafeln*, household rules, texts. In Galatians 3:26 - 29, Paul says, "*You are all sons [and daughters] of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were united with Christ in baptism have been clothed [enduo] with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus....*"

What astounding results from being clothed with Christ! All the old conventions, institutions, hatreds, and everything else belonging to the old *aeon* are done away! Paul may have limited his examples here in keeping with the classic contemporary rabbinical prayer he likely knew, which thanked God for not having been born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman! But the examples doubtless extend to all orders of creation and hierarchies caught up in radical sinfulness. Paul clearly will have none of them!

Religious intolerance, slavery, and patriarchy for Paul are all enemies of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All these are entrenchments of cultural, societal norms and mores that the New Testament writers set out vigorously to subvert and overcome. Over against all such social conventions, traditions, structures, institutions, norms, mores, etc., Paul's cry is, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery* (Gal. 5:1)."

In this understanding of radical reformation, all the old *status quo* ways of control and power are subverted by "putting on Jesus Christ"! It is not, therefore, that the church "reforms" first, in hope that Jesus, like a suit of clothes will "fit". Rather, Jesus, by example, inspiration, and transformational power through his Spirit, is that "suit of clothing" that we put on to undergo a powerful, even catastrophic, "reshaping" of our very selves.

Writers of New Testament scriptures taught the complete subversion of all hierarchy, chain of command, or brutal authority legitimized for instance by the church during medieval Christianity, or any other era. To Paul, Peter and Jesus, hierarchy was as surely *anathema* as judaistic legalism. There is only one legitimate *archy*, namely the Kingdom of Jesus, over against which all other *archies* or *hierarchies* are illegitimate pretenders. In Jesus' kingdom, the way of all relationships was exemplified when Jesus took on the servant role, and washed his disciples' feet.

"It is an irony of history", claims retired Syracuse University Religious Studies professor James Williams, "that the very source that first disclosed the viewpoint and plight of the victim is pilloried in the name of various forms of [biblical] criticism... However, it is in the Western world that the affirmation of 'otherness,' especially as known through the victim, has emerged. And its roots sink deeply into the Bible as transmitted in the Jewish and Christian traditions... the standpoint of the victim is [the West's] unique and chief biblical inheritance. It can be appropriated creatively and ethically only if the *inner dynamic* of the biblical texts and traditions is understood and appreciated. The Bible is the first and main source for women's rights, racial justice, and any kind of moral transformation. The Bible is also the only creative basis for interrogating the tradition and the biblical texts ("King as Servant, Sacrifice as Service: Gospel Transformations", in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, pp. 195 & 196)."

In response to the Judeo-Christian sacred texts, two broad approaches have been taken: rejecting the texts wholesale in a bid to find a higher humanism; or reinterpreting them in the process of "appropriating their inner dynamic". The former is culturally akin to cutting off the nose to spite the face. The latter is arguably, in the words of René Girard, the most revolutionary way humanity may proceed: "In the Hebrew Bible", Girard writes, "there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut-and-dried thing. Rather, it is a process under way, a text in travail; it is not a chronologically progressive process, but a struggle that advances and

retreats. I see the Gospels as the climactic achievement of that trend, and therefore as *the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world* (Robert Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins*, p. 141, italics added.)”

Conclusion

The church, like individual believers, is ever in the business of reforming itself. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, indeed. I believe that one may make a sustainable case, in studying two thousand years of church history, that, in light of church performance, on balance, it would have been better for humanity had Jesus Christ never been born! I think I at least could have a vigorous argument about that!

There is an African saying that goes: “The church is hopeless; the church is the only hope.”

Simone Weil wrote: “The church is that great totalitarian beast with an irreducible kernel of truth.”

Gil Bailie writes: “The church, like Peter, is both a stumbling block and a cornerstone. It is the latter only when it is consciously contrite for being, and having been, the former (*Violence Unveiled*, p. 275).”

Bruce Cockburn often says: “I’m a Christian, but I’m not one of *those*.” My twenty-three year-old son has decided he is *not* a Christian, rather a “follower of Jesus”. On his e-mail signature, he has this quote: “Christianity is not, first and foremost a religion; rather a relational way of repeatedly discovering and learning to hold trust in a very living and active God.” He has at this point consciously distanced himself from two thousand years of church history, by refusing to take on the name “Christian”.

John Howard Yoder, a noted Mennonite peace theologian, wrote: “The church is called to be now what the world one day is to become.”

That is the challenge of Reformation Sunday: to so live life as Christians, as Christ’s church (against which, says Jesus, the gates of hell will not prevail), to so live life on *eschatological edge* as theologian Timothy Johnson puts it, to counter all vestiges of violent *apocalyptic* living with a wildly *eschatological imagination* that eschews, in theologian James Allison’s words “any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger or exclusion (*Raising Abel*, p. 48).” – and thereby calls us to such a gloriously liberated life as well.

If we choose to attempt to live such lives, we will discover the freedom, the unity, the affirmation of a wholistic creation, the peacemaking way of the cross, and the compelling clothing of ourselves with Jesus Christ that the Reformation in part is about. We will choose *ever-reformation*, until one day, beyond all hope and wild-eyed imaginings, “*They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea* (Isaiah 11:9).” Amen.