

“*SEMPER REFORMANDA*”

**a sermon on Jeremiah 50:4-7, 1 Timothy 1:1-7, Luke 19:1-10
October 30, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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This is Reformation Sunday – in commemoration of Martin Luther’s act of nailing his famous “95 theses for debate” to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Let me give you a minute to reflect on that date. October 31, 1517. That means that *next* year, we will be celebrating exactly five hundred years of what most consider the “official” beginning date of the Reformation. And plans are already underway for that celebration all over the world.

You will find, as time goes on, that I talk *a lot* about the Reformation. For one thing, it was just an exceedingly important era in European history. It was roughly the era in which Columbus set sail for India (in 1492), and found the Americas. It was the time when a man named Copernicus, developed an entirely new “world-view” challenging the centuries-old assumption that the sun revolved around the earth, and changing forever the way humanity views what one philosopher has called “the fabric of the heavens.” It was the time in which Europe’s feudal system – by which most of the people were governed – gave way to the great national monarchies.

And then of course, the Reformation was the time when the protestant churches were born, and the great Reformers lived - people like, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, John Knox, and one of my personal favorites – for a variety of reasons, including that it’s just fun to say his name – Johannes Oecolampadius. He was church leader in Basil, where my family’s ancestors lived. That’s the second reason. And the third is that, as in my family, he changed his original German/Swiss name, which was Heussgen, into its “equivalent” in another language. Oecolampadius, in Greek, and Heussgen in German, both mean (in English), “house lamp.”

It was a time of incredible advancements in all fields of learning, when the “classics” were being rediscovered and appreciated – hence Oecolampadius’ decision to change his name to its Greek version. All of the Reformers were avid readers of – and experts in – the works of the great ancient Greek philosophers, and in the classical Hebrew, Greek, and Latin languages.

And then, it was a time of great “technological advancement” and change – perhaps rivaled only by our *own* time. And the Reformation was *directly* the result

of one of those advancements – the invention of the printing press around the year 1450 in Guttenberg, Germany.

All of a sudden books, and pamphlets, and news announcements could be *published*, and “mass produced, and made available to *everyone*, not just an “elite.”

I could go on and on about the various Reformers, and their particular contributions. But instead, I want to take a step back, and look at the bigger picture – by focusing on just a few significant *overall* contributions of the Reformers, and the movement they began – each of which, as I will point out, has both an “up side” and a “down side” – or at least, a *caution*. That was true of so much of the Reformation, regularly acknowledged by the Reformers themselves, like when Calvin critiqued the form of government he helped create and institute in the Reformed Church, writing that it had a “tendency” to result in “factionalism.” And we’ve been proving him right ever since!

The first Contribution has to do with “Freedom of Thought,” or “the life of the mind,” as our *Book of Order* calls it. The Reformation was fundamentally a battle over the right to have a personal set of beliefs about God, and a personal way to express those beliefs. The Reformers felt that theology was a *living* thing, a “system of belief,” that requires ongoing attention, that benefits from the accumulated wisdom of all who have gone before us, and that is “processed” by each of us – made our *own* – by our own prayerful consideration, in God’s grace. Theology, in other words, became *everyone’s* responsibility.

Now, it is true that the Reformers developed confessional statements – in part – to define what we call the “limits of orthodoxy” – but such statements are broad, and leave many details to the individual believer.

And even those of us who must make some profession of adherence to belief in “Reformed doctrine” in particular (that is, those of us who are ordained to office the church) are only asked to accept the “essential tenets of the Reformed Faith,” not to accept every word of all 900+ pages of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, and not even every single line of the Westminster Confession, just the overall “system” – the essentials. And in fact, to the contrary, one of the foundational statements of our denomination’s constitution says that so far as possible - without risking the peace or purity of the church - “freedom of conscience, with respect to the interpretation of scripture is to be maintained.” We owe that concept to the Reformers and the Reformation.

On the down side, though, stand warnings like Paul’s words to Timothy about what was going on in the early church, about people being overly occupied “with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the

divine training that is known by faith.” A religious system in which one can simply believe *anything*, becomes *no* religious system. And I think that is an important word to the Church today. Jesus proclaimed that the Spirit would “lead us into all truth.” We need to “claim” that promise and believe it – while at the same time *maintaining* standards, and upholding the church’s historic doctrine and teachings.

A second contribution of the Reformers is that – especially when we view the Reformation in conjunction with other events of the time in Europe – they are a clear evidence of God’s *continuing* presence and activity in the Church, and in human society – and the Reformers were particularly attendant to that. They truly believed that God cares equally about *everyone*. And the *result* of that period of history was that European societies were no longer composed of only an “upper class” elite, and a lower class of servants and slaves.

A significant amount of the credit for that goes directly to John Calvin – who among other things, created in Geneva the world’s first public education system (because he believed that *everyone* needed to learn to read the Scriptures for themselves), a social welfare system of sorts, and something else that we don’t often think of – a *banking* system, that allowed the common people to begin to accumulate some wealth. Calvin took a lot of *heat* for that one – given the Scriptural prohibition against charging interest. But Calvin was successful in convincing his colleagues that the *Old Covenant’s* prohibition didn’t necessarily still stand in the new era, and that God was essentially “doing a new thing,” now, that could help *all* of God’s children live better lives.

The “caution” I would add to that one is the tendency of some in our tradition to have what I would call a predisposition to be *against* those we label “the wealthy elite.” The lectionary Gospel text for today is the story of Zacchaeus. There’s an interesting little debate – that’s been around for a long, long time – about verse eight, where Zacchaeus announces, as the New Revised Standard Version has it, “half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

The *problem* is, in the Greek text, those verbs – to give, and to pay back – are in the *present* tense, not the *future* tense. In Calvin’s commentary on the story, he simply assumes that since Luke tells us Jesus was in the habit of meeting with tax collectors, and apparently even knew Zacchaeus’ *name* when he first saw him that day, that they had probably already met at some point, and so Zacchaeus had already given away half his possessions, and begun to make specific restitution to those he had defrauded. But as we learn at the beginning of the story, he was a *chief* tax collector, in Jericho, no less, one of the *wealthiest* cities in the region.

And so he would *still* have been a rich man. And Jesus was apparently *ok* with that, as long as he had repented for his *illegal* gains, and made restitution.

But the translators of *modern* English Bibles, by and large, just can't seem to conceive of that reality, and so they put it in future tense – presumably with the assumption that *when* he does those things, he will cease *being* a tax collector, and do something less lucrative – and tempting – for a living, rather than *continue* in his work, but being fair and just to all concerned.

Finally, a contribution of the Reformers is that they re-emphasized the importance of individual faith. Paul's words in Romans were exceedingly important for Martin Luther, where he said, "For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'"

The Reformers proclaimed that we all have a personal responsibility to attend to our faith in God, and our relationship to Christ, because "he who through faith is righteous shall live" – not, he who is righteous through good works, or through the effectual prayers and proclamations of a holy man, or through the proper receipt of blessings and sacraments, or in any other way. God calls us to faith, and we respond. And the "system of belief" we Presbyterians affirm, as we discussed last week, is the process of first recognizing our individual need of God's mercy, then accepting God's forgiveness and welcome into the household of faith, and then increasing in the knowledge of Christ, and the practice of a Christian life. But the starting point, again, is the recognition that we are not perfect or worthy, that there is a power higher than ourselves, to which we owe our very existence, and in whom (alone) we must trust for our well-being, and our ultimate salvation.

Only (and here is the caution), we must remember that our "individual faith" leads us *into the Christian community* – the *covenant* community, that "new covenant" that Jeremiah talked about, so that my faith isn't just "about me," it is about the Christian community of which I am humbly and gratefully a part – and my *role* in that community.

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum dei. That is our "Presbyterian motto," if you will. It is translated, "The Church Reformed, always being Reformed, according to the Word of God." It means, as long as the world exists, God is still *at work* in it – still reconciling it to Himself, restoring and making things right – through the Church. And the Church is never *done* Reforming. There is always more work to do, more progress to make. *Semper reformanda.* Always being Reformed.

To God be the glory. Amen.