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A New Reformation: Evangelism as Life Together

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An Historical Perspective

On October 31, 1517 an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther ignited a movement in the Western church that would lead to the Protestant Reformation. It was a bold response that captured the people's yearning for comprehensive reform of a church that seemed to have lost its mooring. In modern times it has become apparent to more and more Christians that the church seems obsessed with its own institutional survival, like a dog chasing its own tail. What kind of reformation do we need today for the church to remember its identity and live into its true mission?

Many positive reforms were instituted in the church through the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, but it also caused the scandal of permanent schism. In 1999 representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church concluded two decades of dialogue by releasing a "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification." Not only did these two church bodies find common ground on a point of doctrine that the Lutheran Reformation considered "the first and chief article"; more significantly, the mutual condemnations pronounced by the Lutheran Confessions and the Council of Trent over this doctrine were lifted after more than 400 years.

According to the Second Vatican Council, Protestants are not part of the true church but are to be considered "separated brethren" – in other words, family, but homeless. Thankfully, most Catholics and Protestants today seem to agree that we are at least separated brethren, if not all "real" Christians. But this détente may be too little, too late. The logic of distrust, recrimination, schism and endless splintering seems to be part of the DNA of the institutional church, and this logic is passed on like an infection to the faithful of every ecclesiastical tribe. More and more people are giving up on the church altogether. Who needs one more place of isolation and fracturedness in their lives?

Every few months at Church of All Nations (CAN), we offer a class for visitors who want to become members of our congregation, and by extension, of the church catholic. In the class, we discuss discipleship, membership, and the theological concepts at the core of our community. But the majority of class time is devoted to a 2,000 year overview of the Christian story. Why do we spend so much time discussing history? We see no other way to know who we are as a church, and where we are going, apart from knowing how we got here.

It doesn't take long for our new member candidates to see that our congregation, though part of the mainline Presbyterian family, draws its inspiration from the radical reformers persecuted as "Anabaptists" by Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists. The Anabaptists' clear identification of church-state collusion as idolatry made them a threat to both the Catholic Church and the fledgling Protestant movement. At CAN, our commitment to costly discipleship doesn't come from Reformed catechisms and creeds, but from the way that the Confessing Church emerged to challenge Nazi rule in Germany, and the daring witness of Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer – their courage, "real world" theology, and pastoral insights.

Today, we see growing impatience with the institutional church's accommodation to temporal power. Younger generations, no longer willing to give the church the benefit of the doubt, are driving the mass exodus out of the Western church, which they see as a primary source of pain and abuse in the world. But

for those who have not given up on the church as a vessel of God's grace and transformation, the contours of a new reformation are beginning to surface.

Our congregation, for instance, is trying to root itself in the anti-imperial gospel community that Jesus inaugurated in Galilee. We hope to be heirs of an unbroken tradition of radical faithfulness to the God of Israel. Though the church has given in to the temptations of empire throughout her history, we are encouraged by the long and continuous witness of uncompromising faithfulness to Jesus as well.

The Early Church

What can we learn about reformation today from the early church? The gospel of Mark opens with John the Baptist proclaiming "repentance and the forgiveness of sins." John was consciously hearkening back to the traditions of Moses and Elijah, legendary leaders of Israel who practiced the dual roles of prophet and pastor. They boldly entered the courts of Pharaoh and King Ahab and demanded justice. They re-taught the people how to live as family, how to practice hospitality, and how to rely on God for their daily bread. John the Baptist had a simple message: The kingdom of God is just around the corner, so you better get your act together. At the core of his teaching was an ancient Biblical ethic of mutual aid and restorative justice: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do the same."

Jesus opted to be baptized into the radical wilderness movement that John had faithfully stewarded for years. The gospels give us a portrait of a scandalously loving and spirit-filled messiah who healed those plagued with evil spirits. He dared feed the hungry whose common lands had been gobbled up by massive estates. He taught the Galileans how to live with one another like Moses had originally taught them. God's law was to love one's neighbors as family, to not scheme about tomorrow, to not give in to the strife and petty jealousies that fracture communities and make them easy to divide and conquer.

When Jesus died, his followers experienced his presence among them. The brutal execution of their Lord could have ended the movement. Instead, they saw that Jesus refused to counter violence with violence. When the women reported an empty tomb, they took it as a sign of Christ's vindication. The story of the resurrection and ascension of the Lord to "the right hand of the Father" became a rallying cry for those who knew Jesus in his lifetime. Jesus had stayed faithful to the Father, the God of his ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, even on pain of death. Rome had done its worst, its most terroristic act, and Jesus turned the whole spectacle on its head with the words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." For the disciples, death had truly lost its sting.

Paul, the "strict constructionist" rabbi who sought to protect the integrity of Pharisaic Judaism by any means necessary, was also a privileged Roman citizen. He was interrupted on his way to Damascus by the stark presence of the resurrected messiah. Blinded by the Lord's presence, Paul went from chief enforcer of temple law to "least of the apostles." As an alternative to Caesar's patronage in the imperial *familia*, Paul could now offer a place in the loving family of God, the body of Christ.

The church has certainly been a force for good in countless ways, and it is right for Christians to celebrate that heritage. But an honest accounting also requires us to admit that for most of its history the institutional church has in alternating ways been both the master and servant of Western empires. Is there another way? Can modern disciples truly follow the Way of Jesus over the American Way?

A New Generation

The church continues only as the next generation accepts the call to be Christ's body, and his hands and feet to the world. As a pastor in a mainline church for twenty-five years, I have noted the dwindling numbers of young people in the local church. The children of Boomers see the church today as complicit in, and co-opted by, the ways of the world. They have little interest in perpetuating the Constantinian arrangement in which churches produce loyal foot soldiers for the *empire du jour*.

The Protestant Reformation and the Radical Reformation were supposed to inaugurate a new era of integrity and faithfulness for the church. But today we see that whether a congregation is Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Quaker, Mennonite, or Presbyterian (like ours), that they are overwhelmingly white, old, and declining. Such is the fruit of the Reformation after 500 years.

The church I currently serve was founded in 2004 with a demographic of mostly Korean American immigrants raised in this country, roughly 25-35 years old. In recent years CAN has become a slightly majority-white church, although our members still hail from more than 25 nations and cultures. The one thing that hasn't changed is that two-thirds of our congregation is made up of twenty to forty year-olds. Ministering to a mostly millennial congregation has given us some insights along the way about the future of the church in a post-modern context.

Our goal is to be guided by the Holy Scriptures to interpret the times we live in and participate in the wild and unpredictable movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. At this point, we could not do conventional ministry even if we wanted, because the younger generation will no longer be duped by church business as usual.

What is it that our young people don't buy anymore?

1. Uncritical patriotism and American exceptionalism (my country, right or wrong).
2. Unexamined white supremacy, both the nativism of the Right and the paternalism toward people of color by the Left.
3. Unfettered consumerism at the expense of global fairness and environmental sustainability, and endless consumption as a personal coping mechanism.
4. Rugged individualism and the subtext of the American Dream – the accumulation of enough skills and wealth so as to be completely independent of community.
5. Christian denominational sectarianism, parochialism and triumphalism in the face of religious pluralism.

Young people today are wondering if the local church can respond evangelically to their needs:

1. Our young people are searching for their **vocation**. Many are educated enough for a job or career in the present order, but are desperately searching for a calling.
2. Our young people hunger for **healthy relationships**, to meaningfully and deeply relate to another human being (half grew up in divorced or single-parent homes, and others in dysfunctional households).
3. Our young people are seeking enduring **Christian community** that functions like a diverse yet intimate family, as they are plagued with loneliness, isolation and alienation.
4. Our young people are looking for **stability** in a highly mobile world, **and concreteness** in an increasingly virtual and socially networked existence.
5. Our young people desire **authentic faith**. They are prone to agnosticism or even raw atheism as they see little evidence of a God that makes a difference in the religious institutions of the day, namely the local church.

A New Reformation

Many professional religious leaders are working tirelessly for the church's "renewal," hoping that a new reformation might save the institutional church from demise. But people today are not interested in institutional score keeping like membership, attendance, budgets, and square feet. If the only motivation for reformation is preserving a middle-class lifestyle for the clergy and preventing the sanctuary from turning into a condo, then people are saying, Let the temple be torn down, for Jesus can raise it up in three days. Amen, so be it.

We firmly believe that, after 500 years, the Protestant Reformation is giving way to another tectonic shift in what it means to be church. A new reformation is coming indeed.

One element of that reformation will be learning to live together in intentional Christian community. Our congregation has been forming households of unrelated people almost from our beginning, and now we have multiple community houses that are structured, ordered, and thriving. We were making steady progress, or so we thought, until we began to learn about the Bruderhof way.

We were blown away by this community founded by Eberhard Arnold in Germany that goes back almost a hundred years – the lifelong commitment to the community, the common purse, working for businesses that are owned and operated by the overall community, the care of its members from cradle to grave (if they choose to stay). CAN is in the Minnesota twin cities of Minneapolis and St Paul, a highly urbanized area, and cannot as yet match these characteristics. But we have been inspired by an actual community that has done it, is living out the Acts 2 way of being church, of sharing all things in common in an age of individualism, greed, loneliness and despair.

For us, a radical reformation in our time demands that the church live into its vocation as *ecclesia*, meaning, the “called-out ones.” Christians are to be called out of a sick society built on the evils of racism, sexism, militarism, exploitation, ecocide and destructive competition. We are to create a new community of love. This does not mean withdrawal from society or indulging sectarian impulses. Church of All Nations is in the middle of an urban and suburban landscape, and hopes to witness to God’s love for the world, right here where we are.

Rather, we seek to pool our people’s resources, talents, ideas, and labor for the common good. We want our members to feel that their work is rewarding, that the fruit of their labor is being shared justly, that they work together, live together, play together, and pray together because it is very good and pleasant when kindred live together in unity. We will have to participate in the broader economic system, but we will not allow capitalist dogma to influence our internal economics. We will draw people from our immediate context of great brokenness, but our mission will include the casting out of imperial demons and the healing of bodies and souls so that we can relate rightly to our God, our neighbors (human and non-human), and God’s good green earth. We aspire to create an urban village founded on the love and teachings of Jesus Christ our Lord, to live life together, and to share God’s abundance with an impoverished world.

Is this part of the next Reformation, or just a pipe dream? We’re not sure, but we pray that Christians can live together in harmony as a counter witness to a world falling apart.

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