

Reformation, Transformation and A Contemplative Way of Knowing

Matthew 11:25, Ephesians 2:8-9

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Then Jesus prayed, "Abba God, Creator of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever, you have revealed to those who are like children."

Matthew 11:25 Inclusive Bible

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9 NRSV

Today we are standing in two places at once, looking at two spiritual revolutions we could say. We are going to look back briefly about 500 to the Reformation and going to look at the present and future as we finish reflections on Richard Rohr's book published in 2019 *The Universal Christ*. I will do my best not to wobble or do the splits up here.

This month marks 505 years since Martin Luther sparked a spiritual revolution that we call the Reformation. It began on October 31, 1517, as he nailed 95 theses or complaints on a church door of the Cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. (Looking out at the doors to our church, our Facilities Committee would request that you not use nails, or masking tape, when attaching any of your 95 complaints to the newly painted patio doors or lovely new sanctuary doors!)

Actually, Luther didn't use nails either. He presented his 95 theses to the church officials in Wittenberg, intending to start a conversation and academic debate, not intending to found a new religious movement.

The church remembers that day as the day the Protestant Reformation begins. I have a Catholic friend who refers to it as the "Protestant Revolt." Maybe it is wrong to remember this day in worship because we shouldn't celebrate schism in the church. And it is true that this day marks the day we separated from the Roman Catholic Church. It has taken 500 years to be able to call each other brother and sister in Christ again. There is more work to do. We pray to be reconcilers and not dividers.

There were three mottos that marked the Reformation: "soli scriptura," by scripture alone; "soli gratia," by grace alone, and "soli fide," by faith alone. These can offer some help on how the Christian church might need to be reformed in our own day.

As we navigate who we are being called to be today and how to be open to Richard Rohr's invitation to see Christ through a new lense, we can pause. Almost 500 years after Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and the other Reformers, we have to remember what it was

like to speak a truth about the Gospel that was inconvenient, unpopular, and enough to get them kicked out of the church.

In the beginning, there was only one church. The western church had its headquarters in Rome, and it was the only show in town, at least in Europe.

The kings and queens gave their solemn allegiance to the pope, who ruled over all Christendom, quite literally the dominion of Christ. The church was the center of all commerce. It was the glue of civilized society. It held the keys to the kingdom of God, and determined who would go to heaven and who would burn eternally. So it was always important to be on the good side of the church.

In one of his sermons on the Reformation, my friend Rev. Bill Carter reminds us - The church's power was absolute. Its authority was unquestioned. If anybody misbehaved, they were punished publicly while the church approved. If anybody doubted the faith, they were reprimanded and threatened with fire. If a public tragedy occurred, it was widely believed to be God's punishment for the sins of the people. And the only way out was to do what the church told you to do, and to believe what the church told you to believe. (1)

There was no freedom to think for yourself. The church told you what to think. It shaped your entire life. There was no freedom to do as you wished. Life was difficult, and there weren't a lot of options on how to spend your time. It's nearly impossible for us to imagine what life was like for the 16th century Europeans.

And then the Reformation happened.

Intellectually, people were starting to think. Some of their thoughts were new. It would be another 150 or 200 years before the Europeans began to imagine how life might be constructed if the church wasn't calling all the shots. There was a rebirth of imagination, literature, music, and the arts.

Economically, the times were changing. The old medieval system of a Lord in his castle and the servants in the fields was breaking down. People were finding opportunities to work in the cities. As they lived closer together, there was more conversation, less isolation. People started to question the autocratic rulers.

What else was happening?

Gutenberg invents movable type, allowing material to be printed at a pace that changes the way information is distributed in the world. Michelangelo creates David. DaVinci is inventing all sorts of things, and has painted the Mona Lisa.

So why did the Reformation happen then and not in 1200? or 1700? Edwin Friedman, in his book, *A Failure of Nerve* suggests that all of those things took place when they did because of Columbus. Before Columbus, all explorers headed East to reach the East. Which makes some sense, but it meant traveling all the way around Africa. So Columbus convinced some investment bankers & monarchs in Spain, that if he headed West, he would reach the East. (2)

To do this, he needed to believe that the Earth was round. Many people believed that already. But not everyone, and not everyone agreed with the size of the planet.

And he needed to sail South of the Equator, which, at the time, was presumed to be a place with no land mass and from where nobody had ever returned. And here's a map from the era showing how much high quality GPS he had to plan his route.

So Columbus "discovers" the Caribbean, thinking he found Asia, which you can interpret how you will. But the important thing, according to Friedman, is that Columbus made it back to Europe and broke through a barrier that had held Europeans in sway for generations—namely the idea that you couldn't cross the Equator without falling off the planet. They had not passed this way before. And yet they made it.

Once the impossible becomes possible, then you start to wonder what else that was previously impossible might be in reach. And there are times when we need to bring that sense of adventure, that willingness to take risks back into our lives as we consider the changes that the future will bring. And an openness in our theology. "You have not passed this way before," God reminds us. But when God is with us, the impossible becomes possible. With a spirit of humility, we can discover deeper truths when we see a broader reality.

I think that is what Jesus was saying in our passage from Matthew. Let us be open and humble instead of arrogant or fearful. Some truths about life and death and the Holy take time to discover. I think that is what Paul was saying in his letter to the followers of Jesus in the early church about grace. And I think that is what Rohr is saying in his book and his last chapters.

Now we are invited to see in a more holistic way how our mind and heart together experience God's love and grace in this reality of the Universal, Cosmic Christ. It is not individualistic.

Rohr writes – *Martin Luther's important "justification by faith" sent us on a 500 year battle for the private soul of the individual, thus leaving us with almost no care for the earth, society, the outsider, or the full Body of Christ. This is surely one reason why Christianity found itself incapable of critiquing social calamities like Nazism, slavery, and Western consumerism. For five hundred years, Christian teachers defined and redefined salvation almost entirely in individualistic terms, while well-disguised social evils — greed, pride, ambition, deceit, gluttony — moved to the highest levels of power and influence, even in our churches.*

Christianity of the Reformation offered many blessings and new ways of knowing the Bible and experiencing worship. And yet we can also say it jumped the tracks. It set us on a very limited “rational” way of knowing that just didn’t provide a wide enough lens to process those scriptures or ancient contemplative teachings. It was like trying to see the universe with a too - small a telescope. We kept ourselves so busy trying to process the idea of Jesus as the personal incarnation of God , and a God that an empire (East or West!) could make use of.

So now Rohr and others are saying that a contemplative way of knowing must come to the rescue and allow us to comprehend a cosmic notion of Christ and a nontribal notion of Jesus.

The contemplative mind sees things in their wholeness. The rational, binary mind, either/or is so good at rational thinking, but cannot deal with things like love, death, suffering, infinity, sexuality, God or mystery in general. This new time of reformation is growing. For that, we can thank a combination of insights from psychology, therapy, spiritual direction, history, and Eastern religions, along with the rediscovery of the Western and Christian contemplative tradition, starting with Thomas Merton in the 1960s.

Now this new contemplative spirituality is growing all over the world, and in most denominations. Rohr says there is a new humility is emerging in Christianity as we begin to recognize our many major mistakes in the past, especially our tragic treatment of indigenous people in almost all the nations, and reality of systemic racism. A contemplative or nondual mind rejects denial and teaches you integration, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

There is that human tendency to safety, to the familiar, an aversion to change. Christopher Columbus and the other explorers could have gone for safety instead of adventure, but their explorations brought new vistas and a bigger view of the world.

Martin Luther and the Reformers could have stayed safely within the structures of the medieval church, but the voice of God was too strong to be ignored. The Reformation is not just a history lesson. As inheritors of the teachings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and others—we are people who believe God is always re-forming us and reforming the church.

God will not be confined to our buildings or stick to our script. As we remember the willingness of the Reformers to listen to God’s voice, as we listen for God’s voice speaking today, we are not alone. We are beloved. We are the living Body of Christ. God is here, preparing our paths, and guiding our steps. Amen.

Primary source

Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (Convergent: 2019), pp. 203-229

- 1) Rev. William Carter, “By Scripture Alone,” <https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2017/10/>
- 2) Rev. Marci Glass, “Uncharted Waters,” <https://marciglass.com/2011/10/30/uncharted-waters/>