

The Next Reformation

Matthew 21:42-46

This coming Tuesday will mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. This may be news to those who assume October 31 is merely a time to revel in ghosts and goblins and parcel out treats. Unless you are a closeted Lutheran, it's unlikely you've been anticipating this milestone with anything more than a passing nod, even though in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral on All Hallows Eve, it sparked a religious firestorm which scorched the landscape of Europe and forever changed the course of Western civilization. To this day, the entire phenomenon is characterized by the name ascribed by its earliest advocates, i.e., *Protestanism*, an inspired, rebellious movement led by righteous reformers defying the tyrannical authority of the Roman Church. Or so it seemed anyway to Luther and his friends.

At the time, it's doubtful anyone could have foreseen how tacking a laundry list of ecclesiastical complaints would result in such a cataclysmic schism in Christendom, given that Luther was mainly focused on the corrupt and greedy practice of selling indulgences—a lucrative papal program where “divine forgiveness” and other “Purgatorial mercies” were offered for purchase—a seemingly clever fundraiser packaged with an

appealing *quid pro quo*—all to cover the cost of opulent improvements at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, which provided Pope Leo X his own indulgences. In all fairness, Luther was only intending to reform the practices of the Church, not break it apart.

However, Luther’s defiance unleashed a torrent of papal condemnation, which was then met with scholastic and popular outrage throughout Europe, with other Reformers (e.g., John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, in particular) resisting the authority of the Holy See—each with their own theological angle and prophetic critique, essentially calling for vast reformation in the Church. That reform would be for Christians to return to the biblical roots of faith by accessing the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, not through the Church of Rome. It turned out to be a watershed moment. The popular mantras of the Protestants were, *Sola Christus, Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide*—Christ alone, Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone—the cornerstones of the Reformation. With the assistance of Gutenberg’s press and their own translations, Luther and other Reformers successfully brought the Word of God out of the pulpits and into the hands of the laity for them to read the Scriptures and work out their own salvation before God. Before long, the Western world was peppered with nouveau Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Methodists,

Congregationalists, Anabaptists, and eventually a host of other denominations and sects collectively representing Protestantism as we know it today. That's the Reformation in a nutshell.

In looking across our religious landscape, however, it would be hard to imagine Protestants as rebellious, unless you were inclined toward fiery Fundamentalists. Most Protestants today represent the religious establishment—both mainline and Evangelical—and both are in steady decline, at least in this country. In the U.S., the level of fervency and interest in organized religion, by historic standards, is itself at an all-time low, and the Christian witness is barely making an impact on younger generations. Protestantism is in a weakened state.

Perhaps for this reason, the theological battles that spawned religious wars and pitted clerics against clerics and monarchs against monarchs are now largely ignored, with few exceptions.¹ Instead of theological and denominational battles, the divisions today are between the cultural Left and Right, with Protestants and Catholics on both sides. Matters that once were life-and-death conflicts are now more like coffee-hour discussion topics. Protestants and Catholics no longer despise each other as they once did; they intermarry, they work ecumenically side-by-side, they often share

¹ "After 500 Years, Reformation-Era Divisions Have Lost Much of Their Potency," www.pewforum.org, August 31, 2017.

communion. Protestants interpret Scripture through their traditions or tribal biases, much like Catholics; Catholics don't fear church authority or follow its teachings, much like Protestants. According to surveys, Christians of all persuasions have even abandoned the idea that personal faith alone is sufficient for salvation (given all the hucksters and hypocrisy in the Church); across the board, people believe good works lend more credibility and integrity to faith than "sound" doctrine. So five centuries later, the Reformation has, in many ways, come full circle.

Christianity has evolved in one other significant way since the 16th and 17th centuries, i.e., it is now barely evident at all in Europe and increasingly less influential in North America. This is a major demographic shift and most likely indicates the next reformation (or *re-formation*) of the worldwide church, evidenced by the fact that in the last decade or so, the southern hemisphere has become the center of global Christianity.² A sign of this monumental sea-change occurred just a few months ago, when the Lutheran World Federation (the global body of Lutherans) held its 500th anniversary celebration of the Reformation, not in Europe or America, but

² App. 850 million Christians in the Global North and 1.3 billion Christians in the Global South. "Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," www.pewforum.org, December 19, 2011.

in Namibia, where nearly half the entire population is Lutheran!³ Go figure.

This demographic shift to the Global South has occurred ever so rapidly, even within our lifetimes. At the 400th anniversary of the Reformation in 1917, the Christian world still appeared quite European. However, at the time, the homelands of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli were also in the throes of World War I and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, while the Ottoman Empire was dissolving in the Middle East. Furthermore, rationalism, scientific advancement, and secularization were eroding the traditional religious worldviews in Europe and North America, impacting mainline Protestant Christians, who on average were “educated, American, British or German, middle class, and white.”⁴ These cultural trends begun a century ago have continued into the present to where fewer and fewer people of European descent embrace the traditional Christian faith as a worldview or framework for their lives.

But with all this seismic change in the bedrock of Protestantism, it is hardly the demise of Christianity, which continues to be the largest of all the world religions in its various branches (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Coptic, Mormon). In the 21st century, the “average

³ Bruce Gordon, “From Wittenberg to Global Church: The Reformation Belongs to the World,” *Reflections*, Yale Divinity School, Fall 2017, pg. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Protestant is more likely to be Ugandan, Chinese, or Brazilian, and possibly quite poor,” according to Yale Professor, Bruce Gordon. Quoting Kenneth Woodward of *Newsweek*:

In fact, much of what Western missionaries once opposed as tribal witchcraft and idol worship, more tolerant churchmen now regard as the spadework of the Holy Spirit—a tilling of the soil for the planting of an authentically African church. The idea isn't new. Some early fathers of the Western church saw “pagan” Greek philosophy as divine preparation for the truths of Christian revelation. In the same way, many African theologians insist that the old tribal religions are more Christian because they are less skeptical of the supernatural than the post-Enlightenment Christianity of the modern West. “Africans are much closer to the world of Jesus,” than are Western Christians, argues Protestant theologian Kwame Bediako of Ghana. What is really happening in Africa today, he believes, is “the renewal of a non-Western religion.”⁵

Indeed, the Christianity of the Global South embodies the next reformation—mostly Protestant in Africa, while mainly Catholic in South America and southeast Asia. This reformation will only appear similar to Western Christianity in certain aspects, while being quite innovative and different in others; yet, it will advance the Christian faith into the coming centuries and generations. Instead of institutional corruption (as was the cause behind the Protestant Reformation), this time it comes about from colonial and missional expanse and religious decline in Europe and North America. What the next 500 years will bring is unknown to us, of course; one thing is certain: ongoing reform will be necessary so that the global Church continues to return to the roots of faith in Jesus.

⁵ Ibid. Quoting from Kenneth L. Woodward, “The Changing Face of the Church,” *Newsweek*, April 14, 2001.

This morning's text fits into this sense of ongoing reform. As a rule, it is viewed as the early church's verbal response, offered through a saying of Jesus, to being rejected as a true messianic movement by the Judean religious mainstream in the initial decades following Jesus' life and ministry. Under the leadership and influence of Jesus' brother, James, the Jerusalem church was accepted as a sect within the broader Judean religious milieu. But over time a strain in relations developed, leading eventually to the martyrdom of James in 62 CE orchestrated by Jerusalem's High Priest. With the Jewish rebellion against Rome four years later and the resulting destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the separation of the early Christian communities from Judaism became permanent. Coupled with the growth of the apostolic mission to the Gentile world, Christianity soon was viewed as a separate offshoot of Judaism by some and as an entirely different religion by most (not unlike what happened with the Great Schism in 1054 between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, as well as in the Reformation 500 years later, or again what's occurring today 500 years later).

It's in this context that Jesus' words ring with meaning as a prophetic declaration, by quoting Psalm 118, in reference to himself and to the apostolic mission:

“The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; it was God’s doing, and we find it marvelous to behold”...Therefore I tell you, the realm of God will be taken from you and given to those who will bear its fruit.

It was a pronouncement of defiance, against those who failed to represent the will and the ways of God, regardless of their religious heritage or standing or authority. Their religious affiliation, status, or reputation didn’t matter if they failed to live up to the ethical and moral standards of God’s realm. Faithfulness was principally *ethical*, not relational or doctrinal. If their sense of what was sacred was tied more to preserving the tradition, or propping up the institution, or privately abusing their positions of power to gain personal wealth, material possessions, or dominance and control over others—all of this would collapse—the center would not hold. By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written twenty or so years after James, Peter, and Paul were martyred, it didn’t take much imagination to grasp the meaning once Jerusalem fell and the great temple’s cornerstones were destroyed.

In many ways, Jesus’ words were echoed in Martin Luther’s defiance and in the spirit of every other reformer down through the ages.

Reformation is about recognizing what is wrong with organized religion and returning to the roots of our faith to get it right. We are in the midst of such a reformation—a very interesting transformation—as the Protestant heritage in the Global North is waning and new expressions of Christianity

are arising in areas where Europeans and Americans have historically colonized and whose cornerstones of humanity and equal worth have been sadly rejected! Reformation is a reaction to a breakdown in ethical integrity and moral justice, not a lack of good doctrine, effective organization, or material resources. The rise of the next reformation is an indictment upon our cultural inheritance of slavery, bigotry, economic exploitation, and racism that still haunts us to this day.

The Western Church (Catholic and Protestant) has been complicit with this for far, far too long. We are in the midst of our “wake up” moment; we still have a ways to go until Christians in this country realize that on so many fronts, we’ve gotten it wrong. Christianity in the places that gave birth to the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago is what now needs to be re-formed!

Part of our collective salvation, I believe, is in rediscovering God’s presence in the world, often in the places and populations we haven’t noticed or cared about and among those we have rejected or treated in inhumane ways. The great Christian leaders of tomorrow will be those who will help redeem us from all that we in the Western Church have done wrong, most notably our racism and callous exploitation. Reformation is

about recognizing what is wrong with organized religion and returning to the roots of our faith to get it right.

I am one who is looking for that future. I don't fear the decline of so many churches, because I recognize we have relied on our institutional presence for far too long. I don't worry about the end of White Christian America as many do, because I know that the One who blesses us with Christ's amazing grace and Spirit brought forth a human creation that is largely non-white, non-Caucasian—a human family that is colorful, diverse, multi-cultural, and incredibly valuable, gifted, spirited, and beautiful. I want to be a part of that rainbow world—the garden of delight—the earthly paradise we yearn for. I sense it when I gather with those who are on fire for God in places of great hardship and poverty. They experience the riches of God's Spirit in their lives and they claim the pastoral and prophetic mantle for the next re-formation of the worldwide church of Christ.

It's already been envisioned thousands of years ago, when John's Revelation of Jesus Christ was conceived. His vision of God's realm was described in this manner:

...I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice saying, "Salvation belongs to our God..." (Rev. 7:9, 10a)

the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, James, John, Peter, Paul, and all the saints and reformers who have lived their lives with integrity and grace to provide the world evidence that God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven—the yet-to-be-fully-realized realm of God that we constantly reform ourselves to be. For that is the enduring hope, truth, and promise of the Gospel.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
29 October 2017