

Clark's Corner
Reformation Day
November 1, 2009

Each year at the end of October and the beginning of November, we celebrate Reformation Day. This is a time to remember the beginnings of the Presbyterian Church in the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 1500s. Jack Rogers, a former professor at Fuller Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary, used to describe the different approaches in the Reformation this way:

He described Martin Luther's approach to the Reformation like a person who wants to clean out their dresser drawer. They open the drawer and remove only those things that do not belong. They remove a few items, but most things stay in the drawer. He described John Calvin's approach to the Reformation like a person who cleans out their dresser drawer, as well. But this person pulls the drawer all the way out, turns it upside down, and dumps everything out on the bed. They put the empty drawer back in the dresser and then only put those items back in that should have been there in the first place. Thus, the Calvinist approach to the Reformation made a lot more changes to the church than the Lutheran approach. It continued fewer elements from the Catholic Church than the Lutherans did. But, they continued to carry forward the essentials of the faith.

This is our legacy. This is our history. This is part of our DNA as Presbyterians. We are people who are not afraid to make major changes if and when they are called for. This is reflected in our constitution. G-2.0200 says that "The church affirms 'Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,' that is, 'The church reformed, always reforming,' according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. G-3.0400 says that "The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ." G-9.0402a and c says that "Mission determines the form of structure and administration. All structures should enable the church to give effective witness to the Lordship of Christ in the contemporary world...All structures shall be open to the possibility of change and new forms of ecumenical cooperation."

In our constitution, the word "shall" means must. It is a requirement. It is mandatory. This means that all of our structures must be open to the possibility of change. These ideas are part of our foundational documents. They are part of our heritage. But, in some places, they are no longer part of our present culture. In some congregations and governing bodies, we have forgotten our historical legacy that we are not only open to change, but leaders of change. We do not believe in change for change's sake. We believe in following the Savior into whatever changes He wants us to make. We are willing to change our styles of worship and structures of governance if it will help us move back into our neighborhoods. "That's the way we've always done it before" never appears in our constitution. The God of the Bible is the God Who keeps surprising us,

calling people into leadership we would not imagine, and calling us to go into places of ministry that we would not anticipate.

So, as we reflect once again on Reformation Day and the roots of our wing of the faith, let's remember that our historical legacy is that we are not afraid of change. We were birthed out of change to the Catholic church. We believe in carrying forward the best of our past into our present and our future. We learned how to adapt the forms and methods of the faith from a European culture to an east coast colonial culture, to a westward moving frontier culture, to a modern culture, and to a suburban culture. With all of this experience, we can learn once again what changes Christ is leading us into, as we adapt our ministries to a culture that is becoming more secular, more urban, more multi-cultural, and more pluralistic. We are reminded that the command mentioned most often in the Bible is "Do not fear". So, as we follow the Spirit into the future, we do so with a confident faith in God, and the strength of our brothers and sisters in Christ around us, as we become more and more of a learning community together.

So everybody grab a hold of your dresser drawer, pull it out, turn it upside down, and let's go.

Clark Cowden