

**“Reformed and Reforming”**

**Romans 16.1–16**

**The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 28 October 2007**

I'd like to start this morning by asking you all a couple of questions. By a show of hands, how many of you were raised in a Lutheran church of some type? And how many in a Roman Catholic parish? How many have a Presbyterian background? How many of us grew up in either Methodist or Episcopal churches? Who are the former Baptists – Southern, American, National, or other? And finally, how many of us grew up in the United Church or one of its predecessor denominations: Congregational/Christian churches or the Evangelical & Reformed Church? And I've missed some...LDS, Greek Orthodox, UU, Unity, evangelical and nondenominational, non-Christian faith traditions, or no faith tradition?

The community you grew up in likely informs the way you think about Reformation Sunday. For some Lutherans, it was a chance to belt out “A Mighty Fortress” with Teutonic gusto; for some Protestants, it was a chance to bash our Catholic brothers and sisters; and for non-Christians, they probably didn't even know Reformation Sunday existed.

Now, you might assume that the Reformation happened all at once and only in Germany when Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, an Augustinian, nailed his 95 theses (addressing his opposition to some points of Roman Catholic orthodoxy and practice) to the door of the church in Wittenberg. Not so.

How about all you former Episcopalians...when did your Reformation happen? Remember Henry VIII? And how long did it take our Congregationalist forbears to have our Reformation *from* the Episcopalians in the Church of England? And what about you former Methodists...when did you have your Reformation *from* the Anglican Church?

And how about you who grew up in Reformed Churches? Dutch Reformed, German Reformed, Swiss Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, or E&R...when did your Reformation happen? (When we say “Reformed,” we mean those whose Reformations drew upon the thinking of the French theologian Jean Cauvin, or John Calvin, as we like to call him.)

The Reformation was not – is not – monolithic.

John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrims, had a new idea about what constituted a church community. It wasn't a hierarchy in Rome. Nor was it a national church like the one Henry VIII started. It wasn't even a grouping of churches run by elders (the Greek word is *presbiter*) – what Robinson's neighbors to the north in Scotland called a presbytery. This new conception of community tried to get back to the primitive church's idea of *ekklesia* – the gathered church. When he said that the *true church* was a gathering of people in one place at one time, he birthed a new concept: Congregationalism.

Congregationalism is the idea that the church isn't a hierarchy or an institution, *per se*. Rather, it is people. It is Phoebe and Prisca and Aquila and Epaenetus and Andronicus and Junia and Olympas and Nereus. When Paul talks about “all the churches of the Gentiles,” rather than “*the* church” and when he addresses “the church in their house,” he is talking about a theology of the church that would have appealed deeply to John Robinson. There were no bishops in Paul's time.

Our Congregational forbears knew that in order for the church to be the church, it needed to be *the movement*, rather than *the establishment*. That's one little part of *our* Reformation.

And what happens when one church disagrees with another church? Then...*they disagree!* One of the elements of genius in the Congregational tradition is that the enforcement of orthodoxy among different churches is less important than covenant... because if we operate under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we'll be on the right course.

Though there are some serious problems with Congregational polity, it does avoid having a pope like Benedict saying that all other Christians are “defective” because they don’t agree with him. (And while our church sign this week reads “Good theology and good coffee,” that’s a general statement, not a rigid orthodoxy.)

When John Robinson said, “There is more light yet to break forth from God’s holy word of truth, the was warning the Plymouth Pilgrims against orthodoxy of either the Calvinist or the Lutheran stripe. And the idea that “there is more light” really plays into our current UCC idea that God is still speaking. . .that we continue the reformation.

Jesus calls us to unity, and there can be diversity within our unity. If you read my response to Pope Benedict in the *Coloradoan*’s article about the issue, I maintained that the church universal has unity. . .it’s just that some of us don’t know it yet!



One of the great ideas from the UCC’s Evangelical and Reformed tradition (and I’m sorry Phil Hoefer isn’t here to hear this today. . .he’s up at the Men’s Retreat) is that we are not only Reformed, but reforming. At least that’s how we are when we’re at our best.

Dr. Song Choan-Seng, professor of theology at the Pacific School of Religion, one of our UCC seminaries where our own Jon Dodson is a first-year divinity student, writes, “In our overconfidence as Christians, we have, to our great loss, failed to see how God’s Spirit has been working in the lives of men and women outside the church. We have confused God’s redeeming love with our zeal to convert the world to Christianity. We have awakened to realize that the very foundations of our understanding of the Bible and theology have been shaken to their roots.

“Given all this, can the Christian church remain in the race? Should it remain in the race? With its glory faded, does it still have the desire and incentive to compete in the race without yielding its traditional power and authority?

“I believe we must stay in the race. Not only that: we must catch up. This is our mandate. To leave the race - to abandon the good news of Jesus - is to leave the world behind, to leave Jesus behind, to leave the God of Jesus behind. How can we excuse ourselves from sharing the gospel of life - from sharing a God who created life and the abundance of it?

“Let us look to our Buddhist brothers and sisters who are experiencing a religious reformation in Asia. We know what our own Christian Reformation means - *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (church reformed and always reforming). We are a reformed church all right, reformed in the past tense. But are we a church constantly reforming itself, reforming in the present tense, in the progressive sense? In all likelihood we are not. This is precisely our problem.”<sup>1</sup> While I think Dr. Song is right, I don’t think he’s never been to Plymouth!



Reformed and reforming. You do know what that implies, don’t you? It’s the C-word. . .*change!* That’s a word you’ve heard a lot around Plymouth this last decade.

And I want to stop for a moment and acknowledge that change – even changes for the best – are difficult. Let’s face it, change stinks. It rocks our assumptions. It disturbs our equilibrium. It challenges our sense of what is “normal.” It’s incredibly inconvenient. It’s a pain in the neck. Nobody really likes change, especially when they perceive that everything is okay.

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<sup>1</sup> Song Choan-Seng, “The Tortoise and the Hare: Creating a Reforming Church for a Global World” <http://www.psr.edu/page.cfm?l=62&id=80>

I just want to acknowledge that change is incredibly difficult, especially when everything in your life seems to be changing and it can be embittering when the one thing you think is really stable – your church – starts to change.

Fred Edmonds left Plymouth eight years ago, after 20-some years as senior minister. *That's a change.* Under Rick Riddoch's leadership, we voted to become Open and Affirming. *That's a change.* You all were crazy enough to call me as senior minister in 2002. *That's a change.* In the past five years, one-third of our members have joined Plymouth. *That's a change.* Sharon was called as our associate minister. *That's a change.* We voted to become a Peace with Justice Church. *That's a change.* Julie was hired as our Christian Education director. *That's a change.* Two long-time program staff member resigned. *That's a change.* We had our first capital campaign in a generation. *That's a change.* We've shifted the way we think about stewardship of our buildings, opening them to the school district, the DA's office, and Congregation Har Shalom. *That's a change.* We have been building new spaces for our programs. *That's a change.* And we've shifted around the service times as an experiment to meet the needs not only of those folks who are here, but for those who will come and wish to worship with us. *That's a change.*

It is no wonder some of our members are weary. (It's no wonder our staff are weary, too!) And sometimes, I'll bet you wonder if we bit off more than we can chew. Yes, we're Reformed, *and we are so damned reforming, it isn't even funny.* And this continuing reformation is not only what keeps us vital as a church, but it is living into the future to which God calls us.

And I'll bet if you think for a moment, you'll find that there are times of radical change and stress in your own life when that kind of growth and transformation occur. They aren't always easy times, as I will attest. But, they are times when we push ourselves out of the chrysalis into the light of a new day and into a new beginning.

So, how do you find a port in the storm during change? Look to your left...now look to your right...now look in front of you, and look behind you. These are the people who are the church...*your* church. And look within your own soul. Look down deep...see where God has touched you...see the glory that God has created within you. That's part of your church, too.

And there is another foundation that isn't about to be rocked by a few (okay, a LOT of) changes around here. We call the foundation by different names. God, Christ, Spirit. We even call the foundation "a mighty fortress." That's part of our church, too.

Change stinks. But sometimes it's a necessary part of who God and Christ and the Spirit are calling us to be. And it takes courage to change. Perhaps not as much courage as the Reformers of the 16th century, but courage nonetheless. Nobody is going to burn you at the stake here at Plymouth for your theology (thanks be to God) and nobody is going to insist that you move to a different country because of the way you think and worship (thanks be to God). But we will walk together as a congregation through the torrents of change.

It will take courage, wisdom, perseverance, strength, and deep faith if we are to face the future with open arms...if we are to be not just Reformed, but reforming.

I close today with these words that have been spoken by Congregationalists for nearly 400 years. May they – and the people around you and the Christ within you – give you strength to carry on. These words form the Salem Church Covenant: "We covenant with the Lord and one with an other and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his blessed word of truth." May it be so. Amen.