

Presbyterians

Reformed *being*

REFLECTIONS ON
WHAT THE CHURCH
NEEDS TODAY

WEST.
PRESS
2006-18

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A Resource for Regathering God's People

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One of the most pressing challenges facing congregations is to create congregations that are genuinely inclusive.

A trend is challenging our capacity to be communities of faith that are welcoming and responsive to people from different circumstances and persuasions. People seem to be segregating into churches based on ideological inclinations. People seem to be looking for congregations that offer a homogeneity of belief and practice.

For years some church growth advocates have proclaimed the value of congregations being clear and direct about what they believe and of striving for consistency and uniformity of belief. This has often been interpreted as affirming homogeneity of belief and practice. In an article in the *Washington Post* Henry Brinton observed that people of like minds seemed to be gathering together in congregations. He wrote that in recent years his church, which had been a community of faith with diverse views, had "lost members left and right to more specialized, politically focused churches and communities."¹

Even words like "inclusive" or "hospitable" have acquired divisive connotations. After my first year in seminary, I went to Seminole, Oklahoma, to work for what was then called the Board of National Missions. I was working on a Native American parish where most of the members were Choctaw or Seminole. There were two Choctaw chapels and one Seminole church. When I asked why the structure where the Seminoles gathered was called a church while the Choctaws gathered in chapels, no one seemed to know. The best guess was that the Seminoles had a building made of bricks and the Choctaws went to worship in two wood frame buildings.

I would visit these chapels and that church on Sunday afternoons and evenings. Every Sunday morning, however, I led worship in the Cheyarha Presbyterian Church of Seminole. There were usually between eight and twelve people present. There were Caucasians and Native Americans. They

called themselves “inclusive.” It was the first time I had heard that term associated with the church. “Inclusive” simply meant including and not rejecting people who are different. The few people who gathered in that congregation were proud of their inclusive spirit.

Such a spirit is being challenged these days.

Reformed Theology as a Resource in a Time of Controversy

For the leaders of congregations, there is a resource for shaping and renewing their vision of the church. It is close at hand, yet commonly ignored. It is what is usually called our Reformed tradition or Reformed theology.

My awareness of this tradition was shaped as I grew up in Presbyterian congregations, but it was certainly given more direction when I was in seminary. However, it was not until the recent debates and struggles in our denomination over the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian people that my appreciation for this tradition acquired a fresh and more urgent quality.

In the crisis that developed after the *Book of Order* (G-6.106b) was amended for the purpose of prohibiting ordained service by openly gay and lesbian Presbyterians as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons, a number of people responded by trying to draw together people who had different views. Jack Haberer, another contributor to this volume, and I organized several such groups. We were admittedly looking for some common ground. We were hoping people who disagreed about the ordination of active gay and lesbian people could at the very least listen to each other and learn from each other about their different points of view.

We discovered early on that people were holding highly simplistic and self-justifying stereotypes of the people who disagreed with them. Our conversations did not change many views, but they did dispel some of those stereotypes.

Seeking Common Ground

One of our groups met more than any other. It was a group of pastors called together by Jack and myself and hosted by the Theology and Worship Office of the Congregational Ministries Division. Staff director Joe Small and staff member Sheldon Sorge led our worship and our discussions. We met five times.

In our fourth meeting, we reached a moment that I still remember vividly, even though it is now several years ago. Our conversation had moved into the areas of Christology, the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ, and ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. This was a movement other people had been making as well. The initial discussions about biblical authority had

led naturally into these related areas about our theology of Christ and his authority and our theology of the church and its authority.

We reached a point in that discussion where we were wondering out loud to each other whether or not we had different Christologies and different ecclesiologies. We wondered with each other whether or not the disagreement about ordaining active gay and lesbian people was a symptom of something more than simply disagreements about biblical interpretation and authority. Was it possible that disagreement was a result of more basic disagreements about the person of Christ and the nature of the church?

For a moment, a clear but chilling moment, it appeared we might have reached an insoluble impasse. I remember in that moment a sense of sadness. By this time we had discussed these matters intensely on several occasions. We had developed some bonds and ties to each other. We disagreed, clearly in some cases, but we did not view each other as enemies. Yet here was, it seemed, an unbridgeable impasse. This is, of course, what many people across the church believe today. They believe we have reached such an impasse.

Then someone pointed out that we had a resource that we all shared which might provide a foundation for continuing conversation instead of abiding division. It was our common theological heritage and tradition. It was Reformed theology. We began to realize that we were not on our own in trying to work through our Christologies or our ecclesiologies. We did not have to start from scratch. Better still, we did not have to keep going back to the now somewhat drained well of our partisan theologies. We did not have to go back to good "conservative" or "evangelical" theology. We did not have to go back to good "liberal" or "progressive" theology. We had a common heritage. We had a common resource that we had not been using very well.

"The Bear"

In William Faulkner's story "The Bear," a boy named Ike McCaslin sets out in some woods to see a bear. The bear is real but has acquired a whole mythology. It is huge. It is powerful. It has rarely been seen. The men who go hunting in those woods every year want to find this bear and get it.

As Ike enters the woods on the day he is setting out to see the bear, he begins to realize how he is impeding his own search. One by one he gives up some items he has carried with him into the woods. He puts down his gun. Then he sets aside his watch. Finally, he puts down his compass. When he has divested himself symbolically of a means of protection—his gun; his watch, a means of telling time; and his compass, a means to orienting himself—he is ready. Shortly after putting those items aside, he sees the bear.

In our conversations, we went through a similar divestiture. We had to give up our stereotypes of each other. We had to listen to each other, to respond to each other, and to develop a respectful posture toward each other. We also had to put aside our desire to win the argument. We had to reaffirm our desire to work through our conversations as brothers and sisters in Christ, not as adversaries who one way or another were going to win the church for his or her side and, by implication, to drive out the others. Finally, we had to put aside our partisan theologies. We had to get over trying to be true evangelicals or true liberals. It is sad but true that at times we all get caught up in trying to be more liberal than Christian or more evangelical than Christian.

I think that is what happened when we finally reached that point in our discussion when we wondered if we had different and irreconcilable differences in our Christologies and in our ecclesiologies.

Then, figuratively speaking, we saw the bear. We saw Reformed theology. We did not see it whole. We did not in any sense immediately comprehend all of its scope and depth. Nor did we have a shared sense of what was distinctive about it. We simply realized we had a common heritage. We had a shared fund of theology.

What has intrigued me ever since is that when the subject of Reformed theology comes up or is raised, people are somewhat puzzled or unsure of just what it is. While it is true, as several people have pointed out, that it is not some clearly defined set of doctrines, it is also true that it has characteristic beliefs and practices which when taken together make it unique.

Rogers: Ten Beliefs

Theologian Jack Rogers has written on the ten characteristic beliefs of Reformed theology listed in chapter 2 of the *Book of Order*.² There are two beliefs we share with all Christians: the mystery of the Trinity and the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ (G-2.0300).

There are two beliefs that were formative during the Protestant Reformation: justification by grace alone, and Scripture as the final authority for salvation and the life of faith.

Then there are six beliefs that form a distinctive profile of Reformed faith: the sovereignty of God, God's election of people for salvation and service, the covenant life of the church, the faithful stewardship of God's creation, the sinfulness of human nature and our tendency to idolatry, and the call to seek justice and to live in obedience to the word of God.

Certainly our denomination has struggled over what have been called "essential tenets." One of our ordination vows asks, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the con-

fessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"³

There are the so-called Five Points of Calvinism that emerged from the Reformed Synod of Dort (1618–19): total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.⁴ In 1910 the General Assembly of the then-Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. identified five essential tenets: the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, Christ's bodily resurrection, and his miracles.⁵

Such listings of essential tenets have always triggered sharp debates focusing upon the danger of subscriptionism, the tendency in the church to ignore the ambiguity and mystery of all theological efforts and to use such listings to drive people out of the fellowship of the church.

Yet for all the dangers of subscriptionism, it is nevertheless helpful to have some clarity about beliefs that are part of our history and heritage. We should be able safely to refer to characteristic beliefs.

Gerrish: Five Habits of the Reformed Tradition

Theologian Brian Gerrish has moved in another direction. He has identified what he refers to as habits of the Reformed tradition. One habit is deference to the past and the theological work and developments of the past. A second habit is a willingness to engage in critical reflection, even of what has been inherited from the past. A third habit is openness "to wisdom and insight wherever they can be found, not simply among fellow Presbyterians." A fourth habit is an emphasis on practicality: truth should lead to goodness, to good and practical actions. The fifth and last habit is being evangelical, in the sense of putting the gospel in the center of all reflection and action.⁶

Another aspect of our Reformed tradition is expressed in a variety of sources, including the Act of Toleration of 1729 and the Auburn Declaration of 1923. The Reformed tradition honors beliefs as already mentioned, but it also honors forbearance and tolerance in the interpretation of these beliefs. Our Reformed tradition does not homogenize theology or theological discussion. Rather, it has a remarkable capacity to hold different points of view together.

To point toward characteristic beliefs or characteristic habits does not exhaust the depth or breath of the Reformed tradition. But Rogers and Gerrish have given us points of entry into our tradition. They have provided intriguing subjects of conversation about a tradition that is larger than our more partisan theologies and far broader than our simplistic views of various camps.

Strengths of the Reformed Tradition

In a time of so many polarizing tendencies in our society and in our church, it should be very helpful to church leaders to renew their knowledge of and participation in our Reformed tradition. Exploring it will lead to several encouraging discoveries.

The Reformed tradition is quite literally larger and broader than so many of the points of view that get expressed in session meetings or gatherings of presbyteries, synods, or the General Assembly.

The Reformed tradition is ours. It is not something we have to beg, borrow, or steal from any other Christian group.

The Reformed tradition does not flatten or compress theological discussion or complexity, but has a capacity to permit such complexity without discarding basic beliefs and convictions.

Theologian Letty Russell has suggested that in our communities of faith we need to move toward a spirit of "hospitality and diversity."⁷

This is an alternative to the efforts at working toward unity and diversity. Hospitality places a different emphasis on the effort, a more inclusive emphasis. It also avoids the dangers of confusing unity with uniformity.

In our congregations and other gatherings of people of faith, we cannot simply resist but constructively challenge the polarizing and segregating tendencies that are so much at work among us. We can do so by drawing into our discussions about faith and life the deep and broad resources of our Reformed tradition.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the polarizing tendencies you see in your own congregation?
What are the causes you see at work?
2. Break up into small groups, and have each group answer the following questions and then compare group responses:
What are the beliefs that are most important to us?
What are the beliefs that are most needed in our church at this time?
What are the habits we need to practice?

The Church Is Corrigible

Jerry Andrews

*T*he church is corrigible. Thanks be to God. I say so because the vocabulary item which is its more frequently used opposite seems always to be accompanied by disappointment, as in:

“Jerry, you are incorrigible” —Mom;

“Jerry, you are incorrigible” —Homeroom teachers grades 1–8;

“Jerry, you are incorrigible” —Wife.

The corrigibility of the church is to be greeted not with disappointment—the church *must* be corrected—but with glad anticipation—the church *can* be corrected. Corrigibility is a good thing, a virtue even, a necessary virtue.

Think of your own childhood and the efforts of your parents to correct your behaviors and attitudes, to shape your character, to amend your ways, to form the habits of goodness, to reform the ill-formed habits, and generally to transform the self. Our corrigibility was the reciprocal necessary virtue to their efforts.

The church, like each of us, was not birthed in perfection or cradled without fault. She does not live without spot or mature without wrinkle. She is imperfect. Yet her purpose is to be perfect, perfectly conformed to the image of Christ. No lesser teleology is at work. The church is to grow up in all things to the full stature of Christ. So says the apostle. Our maturing is nothing less than becoming like Christ. This is the intent and effect of God’s work in us. The church did not begin in perfection, prizing most her unchanging ways; rather, the church is being conformed toward that perfection. Thus she is to prize her corrigibility.

The church is corrigible. Thanks be to God.

This is not to say that the church is an unformed mass still awaiting its first formations. The church is the beloved of God and has never been abandoned. She has always been under the tutelage of God and has experienced God’s