

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Reforming/Protesting"
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Reformation Sunday

We have seen continuing protest movements on the news lately. These appear to be based on the global economic crisis, the non-responsiveness of some in the business community, such as the big banks and large manufacturers, and the alienation of the individual's seeming powerlessness over things like being able to own a house in the US, or paying taxes in some European countries. Calls for serious change are mixed with those who appear to be "professional" protesters who seem to jump from one cause to another. It's not up to me to either affirm or deny what protesters are doing these days.

It is up to me to explain something of what happens in a protest movement that began long ago. Individuals can campaign hard for change. Martin Luther (1483-1546) did so in the early 1500s as a priest who wanted to see the Roman Catholic Church change in significant ways. He wanted to make sure people understood they could not buy salvation, or a relationship with God through good works. Rather, he proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the true treasure of the church, which is accepted only by faith, neither by money nor by works. This was #62 of his famous 90 theses, nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Church on October 31, 1517, almost 500 years ago. In Latin, the rallying cry was "sola fide," or salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. That's what makes you a part of the church more than your offerings, your time, your influence, your power. Trusting Jesus, that is all. Then once you know you have a relationship with Christ, then the good works and offerings, your time, your influence and your power can all be used for God's purposes and kingdom. But Luther felt these things were misunderstood badly in his day.

And no wonder, because the Scriptures were not in the common languages of German, French and English but only in Latin. This was on purpose because it was widely held in the church that only the church leader, the priest, could properly interpret Scripture. So only a few had Bibles, remembering as well that Johann Gutenberg's (1398?-1468) printing press was just emerging in this era, largely to increase the availability of the Bible. So at the same time that the movement for salvation by faith alone was heating up, so was the call for the availability of the Bible for the average

person in the common language. Also, we need to remember that it was only in the mid-twentieth century that the Roman Church chose to move away from the Latin worship service or mass, to the common languages.

So the protest movement, the movement for reforms came sporadically and from many different countries, not just Germany and Luther. Zwingli in Switzerland, Calvin from France and later Switzerland, Knox in Scotland all began to take up the cause for faith alone, Scripture alone and then grace alone, *sola gratia*, which emphasizes that God is doing the saving, not us. Finally the *sola Christus*, Christ alone is the head of the Church, and the author of salvation. The reason we talk so much about Jesus, is that he is the way to God. Much was getting in the way of this most basic fact. This can happen today too. We can think that it is all about other things here in terms of church membership, but this is the centre, the bullseye: trusting what Jesus has done for us in his cross and resurrection.

Many of those individuals who wished some reform in the church had never imagined hundreds and even thousands of denominations of Christianity. All they were doing was trying to be faithful to God and to the Scriptures. Thus it always happens that individuals make up movements, that become codified in some way, and then become organizations, with Luther and the Lutheran churches, with Calvin and the Reformed/Presbyterian churches, with John Wycliffe and the Lollards and others built on Henry VIII's personal protest against Rome and also imported some Lutheran and Calvinist ideas, thus commencing the Anglican church.

All of this may be something of what Jesus was teaching in the Gospel today in Matthew 23, that there is a kind of protest and rebellion that can work in God's favour. I often warn you about rebellion against God and take time in our confessing our sins of rebellion against God's ways in our Sunday morning prayers. But Jesus also warns us to be careful of what we are taught, including what I am teaching you today. Each one of us is meant to weigh what we hear by God's word and God's standard. Jesus clearly puts in question, not the office of the scribes or Pharisees, because he agrees that they seek to perpetuate what Moses was doing among the people. However, Jesus pointed out that their leaders were not practicing what they preached and furthermore, were tying heavy burdens on the people without helping them lift the burdens. They were more interested in looking good than being or doing good. Making a priority of looking good on the outside can kill your spiritual life, if you do not recognize your broken inside and need for

God. So if I or any other church leader becomes only more interested in titles and honour rather than doing good and serving you and the church, than you need to challenge that.

Leaders and teachers must be held accountable for their lives and what they say. James say they will be held accountable by God. But you need to hold us accountable too, and whoever is elected as new elders here. The leaders need to hold the followers accountable and vice versa. All this still recognizes that the main relationship is with God as father, with Jesus as doctor or teacher, and don't forget that in your other relationships. We can deify others in our lives, putting others beyond accountability, but only to our detriment.

Now this does not mean we simply can remove ourselves from "followership" in the midst of imperfect leadership. It does mean that God has set up leaders for our good. We need to be in good relationship with our church leaders and our civic leaders, as best we can. This means cultivating better communication and helping each other. Because what the Church is doing is so much more than the one person or few persons standing at the front of the church Sunday by Sunday.

The Reformation reminds us that we are all priests. The priesthood of all believers means we all have a ministry. We all are accountable to God for how we live out our faith. This is not a day to Catholic bash. This is a day to remember how far we have come in relating to our brothers and sisters in Christ, including our Roman Catholic friends. There are over 50 churches in St. John's. We have a long way to go toward ministering together in the one Body of Christ. As we do, we cannot lose our distinctives and history. We must continue to reform and to protest that which is not in line with God's will. As we do, we must ask each other what this looks like today, in a country and culture which is increasingly non-Christian and even anti-Christian at times.

Individuals looking for reforms and changes, when supported, become movements. Movements as they continue on in time become organizations, or in the church, denominations. The protests that started at least 500 years ago continue. All human experience tends to solidify or codify what were just some attempts at change. Thus even the non-denominational and new movements go through this as well. The Vineyard, for example, is one such movement in N. America. With its founder John Wimber passed away, and

its redefining of what congregations are within its purview, kicking a few out, it has become a denomination. Even individual congregations which do not affiliate with denominations or affiliations still are a part of the body of Christ, if they share the essentials of the faith with us. So we must continue to discern what God is doing in our city and in our lives.

As we do discern God's desires, we will be blessed and build up what God wants us here and in us. As you take some of your children around the community tomorrow, remember this as an opportunity to meet and care for neighbors. As always, I urge you to not celebrate evil, but use every opportunity as an occasion for sharing our faith and what is most important to us in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.