

# The Stewardship of Story: Reformation 500

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October 29, 2017  
Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Across the country and around the world today, churches are marking a significant moment...Ohio State's epic comeback victory last night over Penn State. Just kidding!

500 years ago this coming Tuesday, a rural German priest named Martin Luther produced 95 theses, or disputes, against the church, and legend has it that he nailed them to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. Tough there had been rumblings, 500 years ago, what we call the Protestant Reformation was born, a half of a millennium that has seen an enormous amount of grace and growth, and turbulence and controversy, both in the many cultures in which the movement has unfolded, and in the church itself.

We are in a Year of Stewardship, and we are also in a year when we mark 190 years of Third Church history. If the Protestant movement has encompassed about 25% of Christian history, what's interesting to note is that Third Church's history has encompassed about 40% of Protestantism's history. That feels like a gift and legacy worth stewarding.

You all know that I am a geek on all this. Yet I thought it best not to do too much history, but rather to touch on some themes and to pose the important questions of how and why the Reformation mattered, matters and will matter, with as much a focus on the future as anything.

We have heard the story from the book of Deuteronomy of the death of Moses, the one to whom God spoke from a burning bush. The movement did not start with Moses, and it continued, obviously, after his death. Judaism is a living tradition, as is Christianity, as is the Protestant and Reformed movement within Christianity.

We lift up names today like Martin Luther, like John Calvin. They were catalysts of course, but they weren't the only leaders and they are not the only names to remember now. In fact, a key contribution of Luther's remains something called "the priesthood of all believers," which insists that no one is more special, more sacred or holy, than any other.

We Presbyterians took Luther several steps further by insisting through our understanding of baptism that all are called to serve and all are called to lead, that the church is in the best hands when it is in the most hands. If you were watching Jeopardy this week, you noticed that not only was Protestantism a category, but Presbyterianism was an answer, the question being about elders and church government. Sadly, none of the contestants got the question right, but you can be sure my neighbors on Highland Avenue know the answer!

I am grateful to be a part of the Protestant Reformation movement. I believe that we have made important contributions to theology, to our understanding of church, to changing the world for the better. But given our name – Protestant and Reformed – we would be less than honest to say that those contributions have always been perfect or complete, that our beliefs and actions have also caused brokenness and grief within the body of Christ and have contributed negatively to cultural life.

This faith of ours has led to wonderful things, important accomplishments. It has also contributed to racism, sexism, xenophobia and religious intolerance. In fact, it's only been since Vatican II when Reformation Sunday, this Sunday closest to All Saints day when we remember Luther's original effort, has moved more positively away from a "how great is it that we are not Roman Catholic" sentiment into something more affirming.

So perhaps we linger for a few moments on each component of that name – Protestant Reformation – to see where it remains both helpful and problematic, before we set our sights on the next 500 years.

What, exactly, was Luther and so many others protesting? All of this, as I have said, can seem so anti-Catholic, until we realize that many of the things Luther was concerned about can now easily be experienced within Protestantism. Stale or misguided theology. Power in the hands of a few.

The immediate issue was indulgences, the selling of religious items to make money for the church and to assure Christians of their salvation. A theological issue – eternal life – sold like a cheap item on a late-night infomercial. (Someone joked that we should have sold indulgences at Meals with a Meaning last Saturday!)

Luther and others, including John Calvin a generation later and so, so many other women and men, well-known and otherwise, were protesting the unfaithful marriage of power and money and bad theology. The solution was to call power out, and to put faith more clearly in the hands of the people, aided by the printing press so that regular old people like you and me could get the Bible in their hands and read it for themselves.

What they discovered, and what we continue to discover, is grace, that salvation cannot be earned, or bought, but is a gift freely given by a loving and gracious God. No indulgence needed. No priestly intermediary. Just faith. So while the Protestant reformers did just that, protested, what they really did was advance a positive understanding of who God was, what faith is and who we are because of it.

From Luther and Germany, the Protestant movement spread in many directions. Our stripe, called Presbyterianism because of the way we govern ourselves but also called Reformed or Calvinist because of our theological leanings, was one such direction. Calvin in Geneva and others took church reformation in new directions. That makes sense given Calvin's legal training and the urban settings in which he served and taught. The role of the Bible, the role of ethics,

our understanding of God and humanity, all reflect a Reformed shading within the broader Protestant and Christian palette.

Calvin took Luther's affirmation of grace and drilled down, insisting even more fully on an understanding of the sovereignty of God that meant blurred lines and permeable walls between church and state, between faith and public life. God was the God of the whole world and not just the church-y part of it.

That gave things like the American revolution and the industrial revolution Presbyterian flavoring. It also gave things like apartheid and slavery Presbyterian flavoring. We need to be wide-eyed about both, the positive and negative contributions we have made to church history and to world history. We have led much change in church and culture, but some of the change we've led has addressed problems we created.

Hence our name, and our ongoing invitation – Protestant and Reformed. What needs protesting and what needs reforming?

Jill Duffield writes in the *Presbyterian Outlook*: "Reformation Sunday, at its theological best, ought to chasten our pride and heighten our self-examination as we go about being Christ's disciples in the 21st century. Reformation Sunday calls us to remember that God is always doing a new thing, but we do not always perceive it. God's salvation story is just that: God's. Our time is merely a chapter in a narrative we did not conceive nor create. Our limited vision calls us to humility and prayer as we seek to discern: What is essential and what is adiaphora (non-essential)? What must change and what must remain if we are to be faithful? If indeed reformation never ends, what must die for God's resurrection power to reign?"

What needs protesting and what needs reforming? We start by looking in the mirror and move outward. How do we understand that grace claims us, and not our credentials, nor our financial worth, nor status of any kind? When church or culture defines your worth, protest that. When stale or misguided theology leads you to self-understanding that doesn't make sense, or teaches you that God is other than loving and just and compassionate, protest that. When the church behaves in ways that exclude, or rationalize, or tamp down, protest that. And when the culture continues to discriminate based on gender or race or who you love or what you believe, by all means protest that, and insist that the church lead that protest. When we've been complicit, we must confess and repent, so that we can move to reforming.

That is to say, all of this must be rooted in our tradition – that's why we mark anniversaries like this. But we can't be hamstrung by tradition. Remember this: "ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda." The church reformed and always to be reformed. We are the subjects of reform. And if no reform, then no abolition, no women's ordination, no marriage equality.

God is not done with us yet, any of us or all of us, which is really the heart of this anniversary we mark. God is not done with us yet, as we are called to continue to reform imperfect people and imperfect institutions so we can reform a broken and fearful world.

Joan Acocella writes that (“Martin Luther’s) goal was not to usher in modernity, but simply to make religion religious again.” (*New Yorker*, October 30, 2017, page 73) That seems like a vision we all can embrace, to make religion religious, to claim the best of our behaviors and beliefs and to leave behind what needs discarding. To stand on the shoulders of giants and to realize at the same time that we are all given the gifts and callings of protesters and reformers. To craft our own list and nail it to whatever door that needs our attention. To live into the radical promises of God’s sovereignty and grace, and by so doing to transform the church and to change the world. To see God’s face and to look, as Moses did, into the promised land, and to be blessed. Amen.