

The Sermon preached by The Most Revd Dr. Scott McLaughlin for Reformation Sunday, 2003

Today we commemorate the Reformers. We celebrate “Reformation Sunday. While we consider ourselves as Catholics, and see the excesses of Protestantism, true “Reformation” has more to do with us and with the Church, than just the Protestant Reformation. “Reformation” is not just history: it is living theology, as we shall see.

The first step to understanding the true meaning of Reformation is to understand the meaning of the word itself. Literally, to reform something is “to form it again”, that is, to return something to its original form: to cut off all of the accretions and accumulations and return something to its first, pristine form.

This is exactly the inner meaning of the English Reformation in history. The Church of England (from which we share a common history) wasn’t started by King Henry VIII; it wasn’t originally formed to provide an excuse for the King’s divorce of Catherine of Aragon. The Reformation in England was a returning of the Catholic Church in England to the original form of the Faith, as it was received from the Hands of Our Lord and His Apostles.

On our website, we quote Anglican Bishop John Jewel, who in 1562 wrote the following: “We have returned to the Apostles and old Catholic fathers. We have planted no new religion, but only have preserved the old that was undoubtedly founded and used by the Apostles of Christ and other holy Fathers of the Primitive Church....”

During the War Between the States, the Episcopal Church split into northern and southern jurisdictions. The Southern Bishops issued a new prayer book, and debated the name of their new Church. One of the names given serious consideration was “The Reformed Catholic Church of the Confederate States.” We are indeed Reformed Catholics, having returned—as much as we are able—to the original form of the Catholic Faith, without Roman additions or Protestant subtractions.

But, when it comes to reformation, we find that it is a reoccurring action in the history of God’s people. On the back of our bulletins: Jeremiah 6:16 “Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.” In other words, return to the original form of the Faith!

Not a Reformer from the 1500’s, not a New Testament saint, but an Old Testament prophet! So, this thing called “Reformation” is important. We must know what it is, how it happens, and what are its proper results.

First, Reformation is the continuous action of the Holy Spirit in leading the people of God back to their source of life and salvation.

We find reformation from the first pages of the bible to the latest headlines in the newspapers. Moses continually taught the people not to forget the Commandments of God: to remain in the original form of the faith. A few of the kings of Judah, as we read this morning, took the lead in reforming the people of God. The prophets, from Samuel and Elijah to Malichi and the John the

Baptist, all were reformers, calling the people back to the original form. Jesus, as we saw from the gospel reading, was a reformer: using a whipcord to make his point!

Reformation continues through the Church's history:

Hippolytus' writings on the liturgy, called the Apostolic Tradition, are the source from which we can know of the Church's practices in the 3rd century. The Apostolic Tradition was written, Hippolytus tells us, because the younger generations were leaving the original forms.

St. Anthony left the cosmopolitan world of the 4th century to become a hermit, largely to preserve the original spirituality of Christianity.

St. Benedict's monastic Rule was a reform movement, as was that of St. Francis. When St. Francis heard Jesus speaking to him in the crumbled chapel at Assisi, "Francis, rebuild my church." He could as easily have said, "Francis, reform my church."

But finally the reform needed by God's people broke the organic communion of the church worldwide. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg, October 31, 1517, he began a movement so large that the very word "Reformation" is associated almost exclusively with him.

But real reform doesn't stop with Luther: the English leaders were real reformers, restoring the original Catholic faith. They were not revolutionaries (as some were and who are incorrectly associated with the reformation). They did not seek to impose their own, new ideas.

But by the late 1700's, the Church in England had once again lost its first love and was in need of reformation. The Holy Spirit moved again to reform the Church in the Oxford Movement, which has so dramatically shaped our expression of Anglicanism.

Reform continues today: our very existence is a challenge for the entire church to repent and return to the Orthodox Faith.

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This applies to the entire Church as well to individual parishes. It applies to families as well to individuals.

We are in need of Reformation! There are many ways to tell if we are in need of Reform.

A person is baptized, confirmed, or the things of God take more importance in life. The Spirit begins to move and reform the individual to what God originally intended for us.... But then "life" happens....

"Well, I know I vowed to follow your commandments....but what I really meant was that I'd do my best....

“Well, I know I vowed to do my best....but what I really meant was that I’d try....”

“Well, I know I vowed to try to follow your commandments....but what I really think is that I’m OK...the problem is with the church! Who ever heard of praying everyday, reading the scriptures everyday, attending church every week. Who ever heard of that?”

“No, Lord, I can just as good a Christian here alone in bed on Sunday morning than those folks at Christ Church....”

Do you see yourself here? Sliding down the spiritual scale?

Reformation is the continuous action of the Holy Spirit in leading the people of God back to their source of life and salvation. Use today to nail the faults of your soul on the door of your heart. God promises to hear you, if you will take a step to individual Reformation.

Now, we know what reformation is. How does it happen?

Reformation is a top-down activity: it requires courageous leadership. You can search the pages of scripture and history, and you’ll never find the people asking God, “Please be more strict”! “Please make us go through the pain of Reformation!” “Be tougher on us!”

Reform happens when the leaders—of the nation, of the church, of the family—resolve through the power of God, to bring about reform. Look at Hezekiah (vs. 3) in the first month of the first year of his reign, he began the reformation of Judah.

Hezekiah: don’t know who influenced him, perhaps his grandfather (also a godly king) He approached the clergy first: reformation in the church begins here and proceeds outward. Likewise our individual reformation begins with an interior cataloging of our relationship with God and our spiritual state, and the power of the Holy Spirit reforming us proceeds to work on the inside, leading us to reform of exterior behavior, the “amendment of life.”

Hezekiah was a reformer. Yes, and the same can be said of King Henry VIII, although a vain and violent man: through him the Lord worked His will. If we are concerned about the future of our nation, we must understand that our duty is to elect Christians to public office: Christians who are not ashamed of their faith once elected. Our nation is marching toward an official godlessness that will eventually cause the hand of God to move against the nation. We are in need of national reform.

Paul is an example of leadership in the church: he, too was a reformer: warning the Christians in Galatia not to fall into the lies of Jewish preachers, to hold on to the traditions he had taught them. This, as we have seen, is also the role taken by our own reformers, Archbishop Cranmer, the author and editor of much of the Prayer Book, Bishops Latimer and Ridley, who, like Cranmer, were burned at the stake for their Faith. These men and countless others are needed by the church in every age.

Reformation is a top-down activity: it requires courageous leadership. That includes leadership of the family. And there are many families in need of reformation in our land, even in the church. If you are the head of a family, do not shirk your responsibilities. If you have, make confession that you have abdicated that which God has given you: leadership in his Kingdom. Resolve by the power of the Holy Spirit to feed your soul with the scriptures, study to make yourself the true leader and head of your family, and begin taking the lead.

Everyone of us is a leader, somewhere: in the home, at work, in the church, in our nation. We can return to the original intent God has for us and our society only to the extent that we are will to speak up, work, lead, and yes, die, if necessary, for our convictions.

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What are the results of reformation?

The oft-quoted passage from 2 Chronicles 7 tells the story: “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

He will heal us as individuals when we return to him. He will heal our dysfunctional families when we turn to him. He will deal with error in the church when we seek the Old Paths. He will save our nation from the consequences of our own folly.

But mostly, reformation brings clarity. It brings the questions of life to a simple, clarified truth. Jesus said the purpose of the temple was that it was to be a house of prayer. Clarity. Truth.

What is the purpose of our life? What is the purpose of your life?

When we go through reformation, when we confess our sins and return to our first love: the original form of our Faith, when we do this we are clear about the most important questions of life

The scriptures tell us that the purpose of human life: the purpose of our life, is to glorify God. Reformation brings us back to that purpose.

Is what I am doing now glorifying to God?

Is this TV show I'm watch bringing glory to God?

Is this use of my time glorifying to God?

Is the education my children are receiving glorifying to God?

Truth. Clarity. Simplicity. Bringing glory to God. The fruit of reformation.

Reformation is the continuous action of the Holy Spirit in leading the people of God back to their source of life and salvation. Reformation is a top-down activity: it requires courageous leadership. And its result is clarity of purpose and amendment of life.

This is Reformation Sunday. But today we celebrate more than history, more than martyrs. We celebrate the Lord's leading of his people to His original form, His original intent for us. Let us not let today pass without heart-to-heart talk with Him, that we might be reformed, renewed, and blessed. Amen.