

Reformed and Always Reforming?

Reformation Sunday

Isaiah 43:18-21 Romans 3:19-24; 5:1-2
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda! This rallying cry for Presbyterians is a motto of who we are and who we intend to be. This Latin phrase is commonly translated as "The church Reformed, and always reforming." Or better, "**The church Reformed, and always being reformed.**" But what did these words actually mean back during the Protestant Reformation nearly 500 years ago in Western Europe? What do these words actually mean today? These are some of the questions before us each year on the last Sunday in October, known as **Reformation Sunday** on the liturgical church calendar.

Presbyterian theologian, Anna Case-Winters, in a very helpful article in the *Presbyterians Today* magazine back in May 2004, warns, "Our Reformed motto, rightly understood, challenges both the conservative and the liberal impulses that characterize our diverse church today. It does not bless either preservation for preservation's sake, or change for change's sake."

She's right, for **both sides of the theological spectrum have used this phrase to justify their own perspectives.** I have an excellent example. A few years ago, I attended a noon meeting that included most all of the Presbyterian pastors in the central region of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. To be perfectly honest, I don't even recall exactly what issue we were talking about at the time when one pastor, speaking from a decidedly conservative perspective, made the comment that we need to hold tight to tradition and the heritage of our Reformed faith. Without pause, I immediately responded with something like, "What century do you proposed we go back to, in fact what decade? Because our understanding of any number of issues, like the ordination of women, has changed drastically from the past, even among conservatives."

That challenge was met by silence and a hushed room. So we moved on. Sometimes prophetic words don't come out all that pastorally. It did highlight, however, that living by the phrase "Reformed, and always being reformed," can be used by everyone to promote their own agenda.

Conservatives, you see, tend to focus on the 'reformed' part of that motto, as in sticking to John Calvin's theological understanding of the 16th century and the doctrines found in our historic church confessions. Progressives, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the 'always being reformed' part of that motto, as in needing to constantly examine and update past understandings, when necessary. They seek to incorporate the latest in scientific developments and biblical scholarship. So yes, both sides can be guilty of spiritual arrogance in that their position, their perspective, is right.

Perhaps it's wise, then, to go back and take a look at what "Reformed, and always being reforming," meant in its original context. Case-Winters explains:

In the 16th-century context the impulse it reflected was neither liberal nor conservative, but radical, in the sense of returning to the "root." The Reformers believed the church had become corrupt, so change was needed. But it was a change in the interest of preservation and restoration of more authentic faith and life...

The cultural assumption of the Reformers' day was that what is older is better. This is strange to our contemporary ears. We do not share this assumption; if anything, we applaud the new and "innovative."

But one of the serious charges church authorities hurled at the Reformers was that they were "innovating." John Calvin responded to this and other charges in his treatise "The Necessity of Reforming the Church." As he put it, "We are accused of rash and impious innovation for having ventured to propose any change at all [in] the former state of the Church." He then goes on to counter that they were not "innovating," but restoring the church to its true nature, purified from the "innovations" that riddled the church through centuries of inattention to Scripture and theological laxity.

Their approach was more like going back to the very beginning, to the original purposes and activities of the church. Many who call for a new reformation in our day and time are calling for the same. She continues:

The appeal was to a more ancient source, Scripture—"sola scriptura" (Scripture alone) [another major rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation.] According to church historian David Steinmetz, by submitting themselves to Scripture, the churches of the Reformation movement were purging themselves of these unwanted "innovations" and returning to a more ancient and therefore purer form of church life.

What the motto does *not* mean

1. Newer is always better.

Using the motto to back up any and all "innovations" would be a misuse of the original intent.

In many places where the slogan appears, the phrase is completed with a clarifying addition so that it reads: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi dei*, which translates, "reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God." **Reform, where it is advocated, must find its grounding in Scripture.**

Some conservatives claim that progressives want to ignore that part. But nothing could be further from the truth. For example, in the current debate *supporting* marriage

equality, we progressives use the testimony of scripture as a whole, not ignoring or contradicting scripture. But that's another much more detailed sermon.

2. The church can reform itself.

Another potential misuse of the phrase is lodged in a common mistranslation as "reformed and always reforming." This can mislead us to believe that the church is the agent of its own reformation. **God is the agent of reformation.** The church is rather the object of God's reforming work.

That is why I love Isaiah 43:19, where it states that the Lord says, "I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" And Theologian Harold Nebelsick put it well: "We are the recipients of the activity of the Holy Spirit which reforms the church in accordance with the Word of God."

Why the church needs reforming

1. Because of who we are (sinners) □

Part of our openness to being reformed comes out of a conviction about who we are. Reformed folk have been particularly aware of human fallibility and sinfulness.

Even our best endeavors and highest aspirations are prone to sin and error...

We acknowledge that the church even at its best is a frail and fallible human institution. We know that we "hold these treasures in earthen vessels." Edward Dowey, another church historian, has written that reform is the institutional counterpart of repentance. Recognizing how far short we fall from God's intentions, we continually submit all doctrines and structures to be reformed according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

2. Because of who God is (a living God)

Openness to being reformed comes not only because of who we are but because of who God is. The God "whom alone we worship and serve" (Brief Statement of Faith) is a living God. God is not bound, either to our tradition or to our particular contemporary context. God's revelation is always a gift, never a given.

As Dowey rightly observed, "Reform has a backward and a forward reference. It leads not only back to the Bible but also forward under the Word." *The Presbyterian Confession of 1967* underscores this teaching: "As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is

confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture."

The backward and forward reference of reform invites us on the one hand to attend respectfully to the wisdom and Scriptural interpretations of those who have gone before us with humility. On the other hand, it pushes us to do more than simply reiterate [dare I say, regurgitate] what fathers and mothers in the faith have said. Rather, we must do in our day what they did in theirs, worship and serve the living God.

That's why I have declared on occasions that we need to be very careful when it comes to the Bible. For some, it seems that it is the Bible itself that they worship, rather than the living God to which it points. So, the church, because of who God is, a living God, remains open to always being reformed.

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. This motto calls us to something more radical than we have imagined. It challenges both liberal and conservative impulses and the habits and agendas we have lately fallen into. It brings a prophetic critique to our cultural accommodation—either to the past or to the present—and calls us to communal and institutional repentance. It invites us, as people who worship and serve a living God, to be open to being "re-formed" according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

This perspective, therefore, keeps us from making tradition infallible, or from starting from scratch with each new generation, or from caving into culture.

Now, I can tell by looking at your faces that this may not have been the most interesting of topics. But it is one which we need to be reminded of from time to time as faithful Presbyterians.

Amen.

Resource:

Anna Case-Winters, *What do Presbyterians believe about "Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda?"*, May 2004 issue of *Presbyterians Today*.