

“Reformed ... and Reforming?”

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22; Luke 18:9-14

This week, as many celebrate Halloween, some Christians will remember another holiday—one that marks the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther challenged the Roman Catholic Church’s theology of salvation and sacraments, thus initiating the religious movement that became known as *Protestantism*. On the Sunday before October 31, Lutherans (and Presbyterians and Congregationalists—and others) recall these events in worship.

Although the United States was a solid majority *Protestant* nation for most of its history, *Protestantism* has fallen on hard times of late. The once commanding 2/3 Protestant majority has slipped to a bare 40% of the population, with many who are part of Protestant churches *unsure* of the meaning of the word, the *origin* of their traditions, or the *basic* insights of Protestant theology. Many people *eschew* the term itself, favoring more *generic* religious language to describe their faith, wondering if a 500-year old argument about Catholic theology and the Bible has anything to do with today’s world.

It strikes me as *interesting* that those who followed the teaching of the new reform movement did not come to be known as “*Reformists*,” rather the moniker that stuck was “*Protestant*.” Luther and his associates were *protesters* rather than *reformers*—they stood up against the religious conventions of the day, arguing on behalf of those suffering under *religious, social, and economic oppression*. These *religious protesters* accused the church of their day of being *too rich, too political, in thrall to kings and princes, having sold its soul to the powerful*. The original Protestants *preached, taught, and argued for freedom—spiritual, economic, and political*—and for God’s *justice* to be embodied in the *church* and the *world*.

(Perhaps) it is time to put the protest back in Protestantism!

You see, the heart of Protestantism is the *courage* to challenge *injustice* and to give *voice* to those who have *no voice*. Protestantism opened *access* for *all people* to experience God’s *grace* and God’s *bounty*, not only spiritually but actually. The early Protestants believed that they were *not only* creating a *new church*, but they were creating a *new world*, one that would *resemble* more fully God’s desire for humanity. The original Protestant impulse was to *resist* powers of worldly

dominion and domination in favor of the *power of God's spirit* to transform human hearts and society. Protestants were not content with the *status quo*. They felt a deep discomfort *within*. They knew things were not right. And they set out to *change* the world.

In the United States, *Protestantism* has often been *torn* between the impulse to *protest* (the abolition movement, women's rights movements, the Civil Rights movement) and the *complacency of content* by virtue of being the majority religion. After all, if you are the largest religious group in society—if you shape the culture—*what do you protest? Yourself?* Protestant success in the United States has always been a bit *at odds* with the primary impulse of the faith to *resist* convention in favor of *challenging injustice*.

Now, however, as part of a *religious plurality* and no longer *the majority faith*, we Protestants can *rediscover* the *courageous part* of our identity too long hidden under a veneer of cultural success.¹

For example, we can rediscover (perhaps for the first time) the *Gospels* as *protest or movement history*.

You see, on page after page (as in today's Gospel reading!) , Jesus and his disciples practiced *movement dynamics* in Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. Jesus seized the *opportunity* for change created by unrest in Galilee, by tensions between Pharisees and Sadducees, by divisions between Zealots and Herodians, by the injustices of the Roman occupation, and by corruption among the religious elite.

He *framed his message* through a *powerful central image* (Kingdom of God), a *unique art form* (parables), and through *powerful slogans* ("Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand," Render unto Caesar ..., " "Love your enemies," "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me," for example).

He developed a *protest and messaging strategy* that included *public teach-ins* (the Sermon on the Mount), *demonstrations* (healings exorcisms, feeding of the five thousand), *guerilla theater* (his triumphal entry into Jerusalem), and advanced action-reflection *leadership training* (deployments and retreats with disciples).

¹ Diana Butler Bass, "Putting the Protest Back in Protestant," Patheos, October 28, 2011

His *mobilizing structures* included the *three, the twelve, the seventy*, and special *two-by-two* initiatives. In addition, he *taught* his disciples to *build allies* among “*people of peace*,” and to be willing to let people *walk away* if they were not ready for the demands of movement involvement. He developed *rituals* of *initiation* (Baptism) and *renewal* (Eucharist), calling people to initial commitment and strengthening them for the long haul.

His *movement culture* was unique and distinctive, characterized by *feasts, parties, joyful processions, and outdoor festivals* at which usually *stigmatized and outcast* people were warmly welcomed. He gave *women* an unprecedented level of responsibility in his movement, and among his *inner circle* he included people of *diverse gifts and temperament*, from a *poet* like John to an *activist* like Simon the Zealot to a *steady pillar* like Peter (at his best).

His movement culture also emphasized the value of *contemplative solitude* and *withdrawal* to nourish the *inner life* and sustain the *struggle* over the long haul.²

So, how can we apply these *protest or movement principles* to our world today?

First, we need to be honest about where we are: Most of our 21st century *denominational differences* represent *territorial and theological feuds* now three or four hundred years old. *Relics* of these feuds have been preserved in our *organizational structures* the way an *insect* may be preserved in a *bead of amber!*

For instance, in the life of the Catholic Church of his time, Martin Luther saw some practices and beliefs that caused him to start a revolution that resulted in the formation of the Lutheran churches. But to tell the truth, one would be hard put to find a region of the Catholic Church today (certainly not in the United States) where Catholic practice and belief is what it was when Luther took offense (they had a Reformation, too, called the *Counter-Reformation*).

I have not heard of the sale of a single *indulgence* in the past several hundred years! Luther’s hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, is also commonplace in Catholic worship services around the world.

² Brian D. McLaren, “*The Great Spiritual Migration*,” Convergent, New York, 2016, pp. 141, 142

I do not mean to *trivialize* the genuine differences that remain, however, the *differences* are much less central to faith communities than they were in the past. In fact, the ordinary church member (likely) finds the rationale for those differences increasingly *trivial*.

The result is that (as researchers are telling us) *fewer and fewer* members of our denominations are content to be *dyed -in-the -wool* members of their own denomination, come what may. There is a fairly *constant flow* of *ordinary members* from one denomination to another. And *younger Americans* seem to have more *ecclesiastical wanderlust* than their elders.³

Second, almost all of the Pastors and Denominational leaders I meet recognize (that in the 21st century) the *forward-leaning* spiritual movement we need must *transcend* denominational silos, working both *within* and *across* denominations. They know that Episcopalians alone can't solve Episcopal problems; Methodists alone can't solve Methodist problems, and so on. That's because the problems we need to solve are *bigger* than Lutheranism, Orthodoxy, Presbyterianism, or Catholicism. We have *Christian problems*, (which at root are *human problems*) and so our future must be more *connected* and *collaborative* than our past.

For example, since Christianity is a *global* and *diverse* religion with *no single institutional center* from which innovation can be disseminated, the spiritual movement we need must be *global* and *multi-cultural* as well as *trans-denominational*. It must involve *partnership* between global north and global south, between rich and poor, and across racial divides.

It must bring the *descendants* of the colonizers and enslavers together with the *descendants* of the colonized and enslaved. It must forge an unprecedented partnership between *clergy and laity*. It must *empower* people everywhere to *self-organize* around *shared movement* opportunity, message, strategy, structure, culture, and personal experience.

And then the global spiritual movement we need must *help* those local self-organizing movements to *link up* and *synergize*.

³ Loren B. Mead, *"Five Challenges for the Once and Future Church,"* The Alban Institute, 1996, pp. 26, 27

For instance, there is a grassroots movement of young Christians in East Africa (Burundi) that is emerging who aren't satisfied simply to show up in their (mostly Pentecostal) churches week after week, singing and dancing and listening to sermons about how God can solve their problems and help them prosper. That was good, but they felt the Spirit calling them to go further.

You see, they were coming to care for the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts. They realized that the Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses social, political, and economic issues of the day, and so must they—including issues of tribalism, systemic economic injustice, religious pluralism, ethical business, equality for women, mental illness, health care, education, climate change, and environmental stewardship.⁴

Friends, the Right Reverend Mark Dyer, an Anglican bishop known for his wit as well as his wisdom, famously observes from time to time that the only way to understand what is currently happening to us as twenty-first century Christians in North America is first to understand that *about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale*. And he goes on to say, *we are living in and through one of those five-hundred-year sales*.

That is, as Bishop Dyer observes, about every five hundred years the *empowered structures* of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an *intolerable shell* that must be *shattered* in order that renewal and new growth may occur.

And when that upheaval happens, history shows us, there are always a few consistent results or events:

- A new, more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge.
- The organized expression of Christianity (which up until then had been the dominant one) is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self.
- Every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity have been broken open, the faith has spread—and been spread—dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Convergent, New York, 2016, pp. 144, 145, 146

range and depth of Christianity's reach as a result of its time of unease and distress.

Thus, the birth of *Protestantism* not only established a *new, powerful* way of being Christian, but it also *forced* Roman Catholicism to make changes to its own structures and praxis. As a result of both those changes, Christianity was *spread* over far more of the earth's territories than had ever been true in the past.⁵

And the same thing is happening again ... in our time ... *That* is both our *challenge* and *opportunity*.

⁵ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008 & 2012, pp. 16, 17