



Reformed and Always Reforming

Rev. Mark A. Medina

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Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda

The English translation and most succinct wording for this phrase is “A church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God.” This phrase gives meaning to who we are as Presbyterian Christians and as a Reformed body.

This year Presbyterians celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s 95 theses. The theses, which criticized the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church officials, are considered the opening salvo in the Protestant Reformation—a movement that emphasized individual relationships with God and salvation through faith alone. These theses were nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, the eve of All Saint’s Day.

Far too many people just use the phrase “The church reformed and always reformed.” It seems simple to say but it carries a more defining meaning. The original phrase is “The church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God.” There is more depth to what the church reforming can do when the word of God leads the way.

Dr. Anna Case-Winters wrote an article in the *Presbyterian Today* magazine (*May 2004*) on this guiding phrase. She writes “Even to this day; these ancient words are a rallying call for Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians. It is a motto that reminds us who we are and who we intend to be.”

Friends, we live in our own little world where we struggle with remaining in the old ways of living as opposed to changing to new ways. Some would say it is better to stick to the way it was and not change, while others say it is more advantageous to move ahead with innovation and change.

Dr. Case-Winters “points out and challenges both the conservative and liberal impulses that characterize our diverse church today. ‘It does not,’ she writes, ‘bless either preservation for preservation’s sake or change for change’s sake. Instead, ‘It was a change in the interest of preservation and restoration of a more authentic faith and life – a church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God.’ The word of God.”

There was an historic Presbyterian Church back in the Kansas City area that had a fire in the sanctuary. When it came time to repair and restore the

sanctuary, a major conflict occurred over the red carpeting. As my pastor friend described “It was all out war between the old guard who wanted the same carpet with the same weave and same color. The new folks of 20 years wanted a different color and a better weave to take the wear over time. So there I was, stuck in the middle of this battle and I was getting bloodied and chewed up no matter what.”

I heard later that she left that position a beaten woman and severely mentally scared over the carpet war. Her parting words were, “It’s too bad we couldn’t come together to truly be the church of Jesus Christ over faith issues rather than a carpet, a red carpet. There is new meaning to the great ends of the church where it more about keeping the status quo by not changing a thing.” I did learn later that the church divided and half the congregation went on to thriving congregations. And those that wanted the red carpet the same red carpet the same way remained.

The prophet Jeremiah passed on the message about what the Lord was calling the people to become. Yes, they were to build on the faith foundations of the past and to become a renewed people to move into the future. The Lord said **“The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,”...**

A new covenant is what the Lord will make with the people. The Lord is renewing the covenant in a new way so life and faith can move to a better place.

This new covenant is one where the Lord will **“...put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord.** The people will have faith that is more active, visibly alive and authentic in every way possible. All this will be possible because the Lord graciously said **“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”** Building on the past gives hope and possibilities for the future. A new covenant; a new relationship.

The gospel of John testifies to being alive and free to all the possibilities that Jesus offers you and me. This renewal of one’s mind in a new way sets a person free from what holds you and me back from an authentic faith. We have to live our faith. Jesus said to the believing Jews, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** Like the people of old, we too can be renewed in a free mind, body and spirit in Christ Jesus. He is the one who sets us free to enjoy God forever.

What is the chief end of man? To love God and to love God forever.

My dear sisters and brothers, we are set free from what shackles our minds, hearts and actions when the Lord truly moves through us. Not only knowing him but actually living out what Jesus is asking us to do in life. Traditions are there to build on and to see new possibilities. Yes, even to let God work anew through us. Every day! Every day is a new day; a new opportunity to share our faith, to live our faith, and to act out our faith in this world.

I'd like to tell a story about my daughters. If they were here they would be blushing and asking me not to use them as illustrations.

When my daughters were little girls, I had them help me make Spanish Christmas cookies. I would pull out the old tattered 3x5 card that had the recipe that had been handed down to me. We gathered all the ingredients and pulled stools up to the counter so they could be part of a continuing tradition. After all the ingredients were mixed, we put the cookies in the oven and waited with anticipation to be done. It was the longest 10 minutes.

The big smiles, as the smell of cookies filled the house, anxious looks as the cookies cooled and glasses of milk were poured.

Those days and images are now a fond memory in my life. Both Ruthann and Rachel are grown women and married. Several years ago, I made laminated cards with the Christmas cookie recipe on one side. And on the other side I wrote this message: **Ruthann and Rachel, this is another gift to you from your Dad as you begin traditions of your own. Enjoy and keep the Medina tradition going. 12/18/2012.** Another tradition passed on.

Since they are both into organic farming and cooking, Ruthann made some cookies using organic ingredients and you know they just didn't taste the same. She was trying something new and keeping up the tradition. She was doing this to help her and to help her family.

Friends, let's keep the traditions of faith moving forward so that you can experience the freedom of Christ moving in our lives. There are all kinds of possibilities for our faith and life. Remember, God is the God of the past, the God of the present and the God of tomorrow. God is calling us into that future. Yes, we are building on the past, we're living through today. But you know God is going to be there through it all because he is there. God is our destination. God is our life.

Please join me in the closing prayer that you will find on the front of the bulletin. Let us pray together- "We rejoice in the goodness of God, renounce the works of darkness, and dedicate ourselves to holy living. As covenant partners, called to faithful obedience, and set free for joyful praise, we offer our hearts and lives to do God's work in his world. Amen."

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Scriptural support:

Jeremiah 31:31:34

³⁴ "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they

will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

John 8:31-36

³⁶ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “**If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.** ³² **Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**” ³³ They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” ³⁴ Jesus replied, “**Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.** ³⁵ **Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.** ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.