

The Reforming Christian
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Reformation Sunday

Psalm 119:137-144

“My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words.”

Sometimes we're right, and we know it. We are steadfast, we are sure, and we are stubborn. We see the world in a certain way, the right way, and our minds will not be changed. Facts and details are just objects of propaganda, tools for persuading someone a certain way, but not the truth. We maintain our ways, we stick to our guns, we hold our ground when we are “right.” Do you know someone who is like this? Are you like this? Our culture is ripe with examples of people who feel they are right about their view of life, and cannot be convinced otherwise. From Mel Gibson's character in *Conspiracy Theory*, who believed that everything was part of a government plot to get him to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, who believed that he was indeed a knight errant we have a number of examples. Neither could be convinced that they were seeing things through a flawed lens. Have you ever read *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach? In this story, the majority of the seagulls are convinced that their whole purpose in life is to eat. When Jonathan wants to show the seagulls the joy of flying, they turn their backs on him, because in their minds, they are right and nothing is going to change their ways. You can hear this certainty in the words of the Psalmist read for today. “My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words.” In the Hebrew, the word “zeal” connotes jealousy and anger which the Psalmist was feeling because others were not seeing things his way.

This stubborn certainty is seen in churches as well as individuals. Within many churches one can find the conviction that they are right in the way they worship, in the way they fellowship, in the way they understand their relationship with Christ, and no one else is going to tell them differently. This was the stance of the Catholic church 487 years ago when Martin Luther suggested that things may have gone astray. The Catholic Church was sure and right in the practices of indulgences and understanding of grace among other things, and no monk from Germany was going to tell it otherwise.

We all have been right one time or another.

But there are times when we are wrong. We would rather not face the truth at those times. We would rather not admit that we are wrong. We would like to be like Mr. Smith in Washington, sticking to the truth of his character, and to the truth of American ideals knowing that we will be vindicated in the end. Maybe if we stick to our own beliefs, we too will be vindicated in the end, even if it seems that the rest of the world is against us. After all it is scary to think that we may be wrong. Our foundations are shaking, our security falls, and unknowing creeps in. In that classic book, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* thought that the seagull lifestyle might be wrong, and because of his questions about the seagull life, he was cast out by his flock, denied by his family and forced to live out his life (his first life anyway) in isolation. It would be easier to be wrong, and to live in the bliss of ignorance, than to point out the problems in a life uncertain. What if Luther did not say anything about the practices of the church? Well, someone else probably would have stepped up, but Luther would have suffered. He was struggling to understand how to accept the grace of Christ, and could not bring himself spirituality and

emotionally to the teaching of the Catholic Church. He was going mad, and knew that things were not right. Things needed to change. This is a dangerous and difficult place to be. It is that moment right before you change, when you realize that not all is right with the world, that something is rotten in Denmark. You might not be able to put your finger on it, but you know that something just is not right. You work hard, put in long days, and then come home late, just in time to put the kids in bed before you doze off on the couch and that is your quality family time. Something is not right with this picture. You give yourself things to do, you are constantly moving from one thing to the next, you are busy and have little time to spend with anyone and feel so lonely. Something is not right with this picture. You go to church each week, praise God, commit yourself to Christ, and then go back to your life without thinking about or mentioning Christ throughout the week, and wondering why your life still feels empty. Something is not right with this picture. The church is well organized, has many pre-planned meetings, discusses business, has a lot of programs, but the people never take care about each other – only focusing on the tasks, not the community. Something is not right with this picture. The Psalmist sees the picture, and cries to the people and to God, turn back to God, change your ways, and realize that you are not living according to the instructions of our Lord.

Now you are at that point just before change, when you realize that things are not as they should be.

It is time for a change. It is time to shake things up. It is time to re-evaluate your life, your patterns, yourself. After all, “ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,” cried the proponents of the reformation. The church should change, it should reform and should always be reforming because we are never fully the church we are called to be. Whenever things become status quo, whenever things become routine, whenever things become comfortable and complacent then it is time again for the church to reform. And if the church should be constantly changing, should we as well? Maybe we are wrong from time to time. Maybe the way we are living is not the best. Maybe we could do better as Christians if we try something different. Sometimes we are wrong in our choices and we need to change.

But it is scary to admit that we need change, and it is scary to go through with the change. What if we go too far? What if we make a wrong choice? What if we are denying our true sense of who we are? Maybe you have seen this happen. Someone gets a good idea, runs with it, but then things get out of hand. This is something we see often with churches. After the first round of fights between Luther and the Catholics, and the split was over and done, the reformers wanted to keep going with their changes and things got a little out of hand. For example, the feeling that symbols were part of the Catholic church which many of the reformers had just rejected, so they purged the churches of all images, icons, saints, relics, and anything ornamental. Great works of art, beautiful statues were all ruined. The reformers were trying for the greatest level of change that could happen. Seeing that things had gone too far, Luther tried to make a point by conducting one service without any candles, or any other source of light. Get rid of everything – Luther seemed to be suggesting. Yet the next time they met, Luther put so many candles around the church that the light was, “brighter than the sun.” Some of the reformers understood the extremes that Luther was illustrating. You can go too far with change. You can go so far as to deny your own past, your heritage, your identity. You can go so far as to isolate yourself from others because of the extreme. This is the danger of

change, because once the ball is rolling, it is hard to stop it. Many church fights emerge out of one group wanting to change more than another group. Hence the Reformation. Hence the multitude of Baptist groups.

We don't know what will happen, how things will end up. So it is indeed dangerous to change, to reform. So perhaps we should maintain the status quo in our lives. At least now we know where we are, where we stand with our lives. Because the less change, the less stress, the less conflict, and the safer we will be.

Is that what you really want?

What if there is a way to maintain some certainty in all of the changes we endure. What if there was a way to keep ourselves in check, a boundary, or a fixed pole that we would continue to circle around, looking for the right spot, or the right orbit. Like the fixed point a swimmer puts in his or her eyes on when swimming laps, like the focal point in orienteering to keep one walking in a straight direction. Something to insure that we do not go too far one way or the other. Would not something like that have helped the reformers when they were bitten by the bug for change? Would not something like that have helped many churches when the desire, or the need for change emerges.

Well, look at the scripture again. What is a common theme that we find in this scripture? Righteousness. Psalm 119 itself is a long, long, long psalm with concepts like righteousness, law, and instruction recurring. In this passage we predominately encounter the idea of righteousness. In the Hebrew world, the word "righteous" is not just a guideline of character, or moral standing. It has a relational aspect. It is suggesting the type of relationship that God has with us. God, in all of God's actions, will be righteous when dealing with the children of Israel. God has entered into a covenant, a special relationship with Israel, and all of God's actions will be righteous in light of that relationship. God's judgments, God's decrees, God's commandments are good and righteous. Words like steadfast love, kindness, mercy, justice, and faithfulness are found in this idea of righteousness. This means that God will not leave us, God will not ask of us undue burdens, God will not slander, use our name in vain, rebuke, mislead, lie, cheat, ignore, or forget us. Think about how we are in a relationship with God, is it righteous? How many times have we put God aside for something else – be it a game, a desire, a denial? How many times have I neglected to pray to God, to strengthen my relationship with God because of laziness? Where is the righteousness in my actions? Where is the righteousness in the actions of the church when we become preoccupied with power, ascetics, pleasing others within the church, and striving for allusions of self-importance?

Think about your relationships with others. This is a focus that we as Christians can use: are we maintaining our own righteousness in our relationship with God. Are we loving and forgiving others as God calls us to forgive. Are we inviting others into the church and helping them enter into a relationship with Christ? Are we working to maintain the righteousness of the world that God calls for – doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God? Are we trying to live with Christ before us, beside us, within us, and around us? For if we aren't then we need to change.

So the question we need to ask ourselves is if we are being true to our relationship with God, and if we are being true to our relationships with others. Are we loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, and essence, and are we loving our neighbor as ourselves? If not then we need to change.

We can go too far, we can become legalistic in our moral pursuit for

righteousness – rebuking all who have sinned in the least bit. We can deny access of any who have sinned in the least to this church, so that we can safely say that this is a church of righteous people in the eyes of the Lord. But if you do that, then I will be on the other side of those doors looking in, because like all of you, I am a sinner, and rest on the grace of God for forgiveness. Such a stance would deny our relationship with others. The righteous church welcomes sinners, loves sinners, and helps them change for the better.

We can go too far, we can become so relaxed that we allow any and every interpretation of the Gospel within the church. We can be so welcoming that we do not ask for any level of commitment to Christ and to the church. We can accept each and every theological doctrine, moral and precept, implying that what one believes is not important to this group. Then this will be no different than a social club, and we would not be a people righteous in the eyes of God.

Do you see how change gets tricky? Even with something to center us to focus us, it is hard to hit the mark, to get it just right. There is a *Simpson's* episode when Sideshow Bob (the bad guy) was taking Bart as hostage, and escaping with a Wright Flyer (for those of you not from Dayton, Ohio, this is one of the first airplanes). The air force responded by sending out two F-15s after the Wright Flyer. They got closer, closer, and in seconds, whizzed past their target – they were going too fast and needed to change. So they got out and walked. They missed the mark the first time, and had to change and slow down in order to get closer. This is what happens. We try and either go too far, or we don't go far enough. But we have to keep trying, we have to keep reforming, changing, and growing. This is growing in the faith. The psychologist, and theologian James Fowler discusses this growth and reform in his work, *Stages of Faith*. From one stage to the next, the believer develops, matures, and grows his or her understanding of God and self, and is getting closer and closer to the relationship that God calls us to be a part of. And like a pendulum swinging back and forth, we try and try to be the Christians that we are called to be. In the Psalm we are given the idea of righteous relationship, in our larger story we are given the cross as the mark which we are to try to hit. There will be times when we are close, but there will be times when our lives are far from the life Christ calls us to live. So with our eyes on the cross, we will need to change, to reform, and to try to be better.

Let us look to maintaining our righteousness with God, as we change and reform ourselves, and then let us look to maintaining our righteousness with others as we look to change and reform ourselves again. Let us calibrate, and recalibrate, and reform, and refine, until we are true to the righteous relationship which God calls us to be a part of. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, semper refermata ad verbum Dei* The church reformed and reforming, according to the Word of God.

AMEN