



# A Reformation from Within

Luke 18: 9-14

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Thank goodness Catholic-Protestant relationships are not what they used to be. According to my Catholic parents-in-law, a lot has changed from when they were kids. By the time I married Michael, who grew up Catholic, he already had two Muslim brothers-in-law and one Jewish brother-in-law. So when a female Presbyterian pastor joined the family, it was no big deal. If I were to ask you to raise your hand if you yourself grew up Catholic, or have any family members who are Catholic, I think we would have a pretty good show of hands. Shall we do it? [Ask for a raise of hands.]

Given this reality, still I was surprised when, during the summer of 2013, an ecumenical council in Chicago invited me to take part in planning, four years in advance, commemorative events for this year's 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Even more surprising than the foresight someone had to give us such a long lead time was the fact that one of the primary initiators of this ecumenical effort was the Office of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. When, at the first brainstorming meeting, I raised the question, "Why would Roman Catholics want to celebrate and commemorate the Protestant Reformation?" the response I received pulled me out of a provincial mindset. Tom Baima, Vicar for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, responded. He spoke of how over the years the Roman Catholic Church has come to recognize the profound impact of the Protestant Reformation upon its own reforms. I sensed in his remarks a desire for the church everywhere to recognize that we are all in this together: what moves one part of the body of Christ impacts the whole body of Christ. While acknowledging that different denominations will have different reasons for commemorating the Protestant Reformation, the ecclesial representatives seemed to have left this meeting with one concern in common: a concern for Christian unity. The idea that seems to compel ecumenically-minded Christians is this: that if the commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation could somehow be an occasion for the whole body of Christ to redress the scandal of its ecclesial schisms, the church could more truthfully and effectively carry out its mission to feed those who hunger for the gospel.

Around the world, reconciliation seems to be the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary theme that the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations are keen to stress. Last year, leading up to this anniversary, Pope Francis and leaders of the Lutheran World Federation held a joint commemorative service. In his address, Pope Francis said: "We have the opportunity to mend a critical moment of our history by moving beyond controversies and disagreements that have often prevented us from understanding one another" (Billy Perrigo, *Time Magazine*, October 27, 2017).

Such a statement signifies that over time a change of heart has taken place. In his book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes, who served as minister of Harvard University's Memorial Church, remembers the self-righteousness that characterized Reformation Day observances not so long ago. It was not so long ago, he writes that Protestant churches celebrated Reformation Sundays "ostensibly to celebrate the nailing of Luther's theses to the church door, which in 1517 started the Reformation, but actually to celebrate the fact that we were not Catholics" (191). Then Gomes recites the stereotypes that Protestants had of Catholics: "Catholics, we all knew, did everything the pope and priests told them to do, didn't think for themselves, refrained from eating meat on Fridays, put ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday and generally voted Democratic. . . . The mere thought of a Roman Catholic president of the United States made many people very nervous" (191).

I remember a story that my mentor John Buchanan once told me. It is a story of his first serious conflict in ministry and it resulted in the loss of a family from a congregation that really couldn't afford to lose

anyone. While still a graduate student, he had only recently assumed responsibility for a small church. A member of his congregation asked to talk with him. It turned out that what he wanted was for John to say from the pulpit that it was wrong and sinful to vote for Senator John F. Kennedy, who was running for president, because he was a Catholic and could not be trusted to operate free from Vatican pressure. What he wanted was for John to be part of an organization of concerned Protestant ministers and lay leaders devoted to that same objective. John refused. The man became angry and quit the congregation.

Protestants have come a long way from such suspicion and hostility toward Catholics, but, as the statement made by Pope Francis indicates, we still have plenty of distance to go to be reconciled to one another.

The story in the New Testament lesson this morning is still imaginable, isn't it? Two men are praying in the temple: a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee who is respectable, devout, generous, looks over and seeing the other man, the tax collector, who is despised, a collaborator with Rome, a traitor, prays to God saying, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.' The tax collector wouldn't even look up. With his head hung low and beating his breast, he said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

This parable is Jesus' warning to us about being so certain of our rightness that you end up disparaging, even demonizing, another person. It is Jesus' warning about being so sure of our moral conclusions that we characterize the person who comes to other, different conclusions as sinful.

The Reformed tradition, whose slogan is "reformed and always reforming," means that only God is God. We are not. We are human. Everything human is limited by our humanness. Everything human is open to critique and reformation, particularly when it comes to religion, with its tendency toward certainty and arrogance. It is a precious Protestant tradition to subject our best institutions - our government, our churches - to question and criticism, because we know that they are not perfect. The church is open to question. This is what Paul Tillich called the Protestant Principle, but Protestants cannot claim it as their own. It is a principle that was lifted up in the Reformation, but frankly, it is at work whenever the hard work of reconciliation takes place. Whenever there is reconciliation, there has to be self-reflection, self-criticism. There has to be willingness to reform oneself, one's own community and tradition.

Christians call this confession, repentance. What we have learned from the Reformation that began in 1517, when a German monk in Wittenburg, Germany nailed to the church door 95 complaints against the church, is that confession and repentance lose all their reforming power as soon as they become transactional.

Remember, the 95 theses were critiques specifically about the church's approach to personal penance. On that All Saints' Day 500 years ago, Martin Luther critiqued the church's selling of papal indulgences that promised buyers time off Purgatory. Christians, he argued, could not earn their way out of Purgatory through good works, viewing relics, or acquiring indulgences, because repentance, by its very nature, is not a transaction.

By attacking these practices of penance, Luther was threatening the whole financial and social edifice supporting this transactional system of penance, which allowed people to pray and pay for others and so reduce their time in Purgatory. Let me give you an idea of how elaborate the system was: The income earned from the sale of indulgences financed a whole class of clerical priests paid to recite anniversary Masses for the souls of the deceased. It paid too for laywomen whose job it was to say prayers for the souls of the dead in order to ease their path through Purgatory. It paid also for brotherhoods who prayed for their members, said Masses, and financed special altars. At the tip top of this edifice was the Pope. Any attack on the practice of indulgences would be an attack on the Pope's authority as the steward of a treasury of merits.

Listen to this description of the market when indulgence sellers arrived to a town:

The papal bull would be carried about on a satin or golden cloth, and all the priests, monks, town council, schoolmaster, schoolboys, men, women, maidens and children all met it singing in procession with flags and candles. All the bells were rung, all the organs were played

. . . [the indulgence-seller] was led into the churches and a red cross was erected in the middle of the church where the papal banner would be hung (Myconius, *Geschichte*, 15, cited by Lyndal Roper in *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, xx-xxi).

Historian Lyndal Roper writes that the market for indulgences was so efficiently organized that “the indulgences were even printed on parchment that could be filled in with the name of the person on whose behalf they were purchased” (xxi). Indulgences were advertised by jingles like this: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs” (xxi).

What we learned from the historical Reformation that began 500 years ago is that the deep and abiding reformation that salvation requires cannot be transactional. Confession and repentance cannot be transactional.

If the church has any hope of continuing the cultural revolution that began in the Reformation, one by which the true nature of confession was reclaimed, we have to make time and space for our own and one another’s interior work of confession. The interior work of confession can’t be forced or imposed. It doesn’t happen when a person feels cornered or exposed. It cannot be transacted for something in return. Rather, the work of confession and repentance is interior work that no one else can force you to do or do for you. Collectively, however, we can foster a culture by which people are more likely to engage in the interior work of self-reflection, self-critique, confession, and repentance.

What would such a culture look and feel like? Surely, it would be nothing like the toxic environment we see and feel all around us today.

I recently read a transcript of a presentation given by Chris Satullo, a professor in the School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Chris was speaking to a Jewish congregation in Germantown about a project on civil dialogue that he and his colleague Harris Sokoloff have developed. The point of the project is for the participants, through experiential learning, to engage in civil dialogue with people with whom they disagree, who think, believe, vote, or choose to act differently from them. Chris and Harris teach techniques that can be put to use any time at home, at work, or in the community where difference of opinion exists - all the places where the church can foster a culture in which the interior work of self-reflection needs to happen.

I can imagine us participating in such a project, perhaps with others in our surrounding community. I can imagine the deep difference such efforts could make in our relationships with friends, family members, and fellow citizens. I can even almost imagine the difference civil dialogue could make in the world. Surely, there are many ways by which we could foster a culture conducive to the interior work of self-reflection, confession, and repentance. At the heart of any continuing reformation is this interior work. That, my friends, is good news, because it means that at any time actual reformation can begin anew and continue within each one of us.