

**Who is Jesus and What is a Disciple?
Part 6: People of the Re-Formation
Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
Reformation Sunday
25 October 2009**

Today is Reformation Sunday. Although it's not celebrated nearly as much as it once was, this last Sunday in October has traditionally marked the start of the Protestant Reformation nearly 500 years ago. It was on Sunday, October 31, 1517 that an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed a revolutionary document to the town bulletin board in Wittenberg, Germany. That document challenged some of the beliefs and practices of the Church. Now that bulletin board also happened to be the front door of the local church. So Brother Luther's concerns got noticed that Sunday!

What followed was 150 years of turmoil. It shook the foundations of the Church and indeed the foundations of European society. But not only there. In the following centuries, missionaries who were inspired by the Word and empowered by the Spirit took this historical and ecclesiastical earthquake to every continent; to the ends of the earth. It's called the Protestant Reformation: "Protestant" because it began as an act of *protest*; "Reformation" because it *re-formed* the Church. The monolithic structure of the Church, headquartered in Rome, became a multi-faceted operation with many centres of power and influence and many different ways of believing and acting. In time, many of these new expressions of Church became known as *Protestant* churches. And on their good days they've been clear about the fact that there's always room for *protest* in the life of the Church; that the Church is always being *re-formed*.

Luther's act of protest wasn't some impulsive outburst. He'd thought long and hard about his disagreement with the policies and practices and theology of the Church. And his 95 challenges were *deeply grounded* in the Bible; *deeply grounded* in the God of whom the Bible speaks: a God of grace and forgiveness; a God who, yes, demands much of us but also reassures us that God's love for us – God's acceptance of us – is not based on anything that we can do. God offers us love and forgiveness as a *gift*. We are embraced by God not as a reward for something good that we've done but simply because God loves us so. In other words, we are saved by grace alone. And in that love – in that grace – we are made new.

Two key themes of the Protestant Reformation: we are saved by grace, and God's grace makes us and all things new. Again, this is *deeply grounded* in the Bible. Paul puts it this way: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! *All* this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:17-18a).

Everything has become new: not just in Paul's first century or in Luther's 16th century, but also today and tomorrow. The love of God, revealed in Christ Jesus, transforms us and makes us new. We are constantly being re-formed.

This is true on a molecular and cellular level. Your body is not the same body that you had a few years ago; let alone a few decades ago. Your cells are constantly dividing and dying; new cells are being created even as we speak to replace the old. Everything has become new.

This is true of society. The changes brought about by new technology are mind-boggling. Even a techno-dinosaur like me carries a cell phone now; and mine is quite primitive compared to the high-tech gizmos that my colleagues have. Everything has become new.

This is true of the church. We're painfully aware that the church of today is not the church of our youth. But we need to remember that the church of our youth was not the church of 50 or 100 or 500 years before that. I mean, if you really want me to give you that old time religion, be prepared for a 2 or 3 hour service, of which at least 1 hour would be preaching – at *least* 1 hour – and I'm not even talking about the *other* 2 or 3 hour services at *various* points during the week. Those early Protestant preachers took their sermons *very* seriously.

The point is that, individually and collectively, we are *constantly* being re-formed. *Everything* has become new.

So if you want to live your life in Christ – which is to say, if you want to follow Jesus – you can't expect things to remain the same. God keeps making things new.

Yet we *do* expect things to remain the same. The Church especially has this notion that *nothing* should change. I mean, that's why the Pope kicked Martin Luther out of the Church: Luther wanted to change some things and the Pope wasn't interested. Think of the hymns that we sing which suggest that the Church is solid – like a rock – and it can't be moved or changed.

“On Christ the solid rock I stand,
all other ground is sinking sand...”

“Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone.”

“A mighty fortress is our God,
a bulwark never failing.”

And it's not just the *old* hymns. What's the one that we sing fairly frequently with the children?

“Like a rock, like a rock,
God is under our feet...”

But note that these hymns don't say that the *Church* is like a rock. They say that *God* is like a rock; *Christ* is our sure foundation. You know, a highway has a firm foundation. They've been digging up and re-building I-69 across Michigan all summer and fall; I've been watching it with each trip to Chicago. That highway has a *firm* foundation. But the *purpose* of that foundation – the purpose of a highway – is that things can *move* on it. God is like a highway in

the wilderness over which the Church can move and change and boldly go and explore new territory (see Isaiah 40:3; 43:19).

So the first thing that I want you to remember this morning is that *God* is the solid rock; *Christ* is the sure foundation. The Church can be re-formed – the Church can travel to new places – because it has a sure foundation over which it can move swiftly into the wilderness.

It's not the Church which is a solid rock; *God* is the solid rock. But, secondly, remember this: even rock isn't as solid as we think it is. During Vacation Bible Camp this past summer, when Ross was teaching the song *Like a Rock* to the kids, he asked them, "What do you think of when you think of a rock." This one kid said, "Magma!" Now magma is liquid rock. Magma is what you find if you go far enough down into the seemingly solid rock of the earth. In fact, the continents *drift* on magma; they kind of *float* on liquid rock. The earth is made up of tectonic plates that drift on something like conveyer belts of magma. I mean, what's more solid than the ground under our feet, right? Well, not exactly. Even that ground is floating; even that ground is drifting an inch or so to the west every year. And maybe the folks on the west coast don't think of the ground as being quite as solid as we do, because that's where the North American plate collides with the Pacific plate. And where continents collide, the earth quakes; the ground moves; and, as Elvis might put it, people kind of get "all shook up."

God is the solid rock. But rock isn't as solid as we think it is. So what does it mean to say that God is like a rock? Well, maybe it means that God is kind of like magma. Even God flows, something like a stream. Even God is on the move. And there comes a time when the Church has to go with the flow. There are times when the Church is set adrift, and like a continent it collides with other realities. But that's not necessarily a bad thing because you know what happens when continents collide? Yes, you get earthquakes and that's painful and messy; *but*, you also get *mountains*. The messiness of continental drift creates the majesty of mountains. When the Indian plate drifted north and crashed into the Asian plate, it created the Himilayas. When the North American plate was drifting eastward it collided with the African plate and it created the Appalachians. God is like a rock, yes; but that rock creates movement and collision and out of that collision comes the uplifting of the earth.

When I gaze upon the mountains of this earth, my spirit is lifted up. But I have to travel in order to have that uplifting experience. If I want to marvel at the White Mountains of New Hampshire, I have to drive to New England. If I want to see the majestic Rocky Mountains of Alberta, I have to travel west. If I want to lift up my eyes to the heights of the Himalayas, I have to soar over the ocean and float on the wind.

It gets pretty messy when the earth moves. But without that messiness there would be no mountains. It gets pretty painful when the earthquakes of change shatter our own lives. But without those painful times when God breaks us and remakes us, our spirits would not be lifted up and we would not become the magnificent people whom God intends us to be. Like continents floating on

liquid rock, we have to be folded over on ourselves and re-formed in the image of God. That's true of individuals and it's true of the Church. No one enjoys the pain of being re-formed. But when I look back over the painful periods of my life during the past 30 years, I have to be grateful that God loves me enough to sometimes be hard on me; because in many ways I'm not the person that I was back then, when I was arrogant on the surface but scared to death at my core.

As God cares for individuals, so God cares for the Church. God was kind of rough on the Church during the Reformation of the 16th century, and there are times when God is rough on the Church today. But things aren't as rough if you're flexible; things aren't as rough if you're able to move. The buildings that survive earthquakes aren't those that are rock solid; no, the buildings that survive earthquakes are those that are designed to be flexible.

God is like a rock. And sometimes that rock provides a firm foundation over which the Church can move. But when even the Rock starts to move, the church must be flexible in order to survive, and thrive, and be re-formed. Amen.