One time I had a conversation with a teenager who was going through the catechism classes with me, as he was about to receive his confirmation. The topic that week was “Why does your faith matter?” Initially I thought this topic would be a boring one for this young man, but it turned out it wasn’t. To my amazement, this young man was fascinated by the topic and was asking lots of thoughtful questions, not only about his own faith, but faith in general. As we explored the history of the Christian faith, he began to open up about his own personal spiritual struggles and challenges. One of the questions that this young man asked was, “*what does my faith have to do with what happened more than 500 years ago during the Protestant Reformation? I believe in God and Jesus and all, and that he died for our sins, isn’t that good enough? Why does the Reformation matter to me today?”*

Well, these were all valid questions and undoubtedly what crossed the mind of some of the Reformists as well as they fought so hard for and defended their faith? To answer this young man’s question…Yes, the Reformation does matter! And it has everything to do with our faith and our practice of faith today! From how we read and understand our Bible, how we sing and what we sing, how we pray and to whom we direct our prayers. The Reformation not only defined our doctrines but it shaped us into who we are called to be today!

On this last Sunday of October, many of the fellow Protestant churches commemorate the Protestant Reformation movement that occurred more than 500 years ago. When Martin Luther nailed the series of protest statements (famously known as *“The 95 Theses”*) on the door of the church in Wittenburg, Germany in 1517, he not only challenged the religious institution establishment but also its authority over its people. Luther became a “whistle-blower” of the many clerical abuses with the sales of indulgences. According to Luther, **one’s salvation cannot be attained or redeemed by human works or purchases, but in accordance to God’s grace through one’s faith and repentance of sins.**  It is God who initiates and governs this process of salvation, and never us.

The Reformation movement was NOT intended to cause a religious uprising, division, or a spin-off from the established institution, but instead it called for a renewed sense of personal spiritual reflection returning one’s faith **back to God**. **It was about setting our relationship and focus RIGHT with God, fixing our eyes on the Godly things above and not on the worldly things below.**

The Reformers pointed out that the church had missed its marks and had lost its missional focus by become corrupted for personal gains. **The church had become more concerned about the financial and materialistic “bottom-line”, rather than laying down the basis and the core foundation of our faith.** Changes were inevitable and indeed necessary. As one theologian put it, *it was a change in the interest of preservation and restoration of more authentic faith and life*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This “spiritual awakening” came at a period of divisions and dissention within the church when the corrupt practices of the church were under scrutiny and questioning while the church leadership and its authority were being challenged because of their malpractice. It sparked a revival in personal devotion of prayers, reading and interpretation of scripture, while cutting out the non-essential elements that often get in the way between **one’s faith and relationship with God**.

Instead of being told of WHAT they must believe in and HOW they ought to think, the people were invited to explore and to read God’s word themselves in the language that they could understand. The singing of congregational hymns revived their souls, as an expression of their faith. The role of leadership had also shifted from the esoteric council of clergymen to the “***priesthood of all believers***” where everyone participates and engages in some ways and various forms of ministry. These were monumental and revolutionary!

The Reformation movement offered the people a breath of spiritual fresh air and rekindled their long-lost and distorted faith and relationship with God. **This is why Reformation still matters...some 500 years later today!**

As I mentioned earlier, one of the greatest contributions of the Reformist was to bring to the relevancy of reading the Scripture, in the language which people understand. Back then, the scriptures were written in either ancient Hebrew, Greek or Latin. That means only those who were theologically trained or educated enough were able to read and understand the Holy texts. Common folks could only receive God’s word, as what were being told and interpreted by their priests.

Luther felt that this should NOT be the case and that the holy text should be accessible to EVERYONE, with the help of the Holy Spirit as the interpreter.

Luther then began to translate the Holy texts, not for his own sake but for his people. He published his 1st German translation of the New Testament in 1522 years and in 1534, he successfully completed the entire bible (both Old and New Testaments) including the Apocrypha. Along with the invention of the printing press, more people were now able to read and understand the Bible for the very first time. And how often we take these things for granted today, especially in places where we can practice our faith openly and freely without fears. This is why Reformation still matters today!

This week the church lost one of its contemporary spiritual pioneers, a modern day “Reformist” by his own rights. The Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson died at the age of 85. Peterson was an ordained Presbyterian minister devoting nearly 30 years in parish ministry as a church planter in a small town in Bel Air, Maryland back in the 60’s. Perhaps what Peterson would be most remembered for, was his publishing and academic teaching works that came later on in his career. His name became synonymous with “***The Message***” that he published in 2002, a modern-day translation of the bible that uses contemporary language and expressions that the common people actually understand and use every day, yet remained grounded and attributed to the ancient biblical texts that were written in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, or Latin. He spent nearly 20 years in putting together **“*The Message”***, which over 15 million copies have been sold worldwide.

“***The Message***” was Peterson’s masterpiece and ultimate gift to the church, although he did not want to receive any credit for it, as his work, because as he said, it was NOT his work, it was God’s work and God’s gift for God’s people. He happened to be called upon to do this “translation” work. It was Peterson’s hope that ***“The Message”***would offer a whole new perspective of how we may reclaim our relationship with scripture and with our God. Peterson’s lifelong motto was ***“I will complete what I promised God I would do, and I will do it together with his people.”***This is another reason WHY the Reformation still matters today!!!

In the same way more than 500 years ago, Martin Luther was also inspired and motivated through his careful reading and studying of ancient biblical texts, including Apostle Paul’s writings, as we read earlier in *Romans*. As a young monk, Luther wrestled with many conflicting ideals and finally drawn upon the conclusion that as sinful **as we human may be, we have been justified by God’s grace as a gift through the redemption that is already made through Jesus**.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other word, **what Christ did for humanity is already good enough for our own salvation.** This may sound trivial to some but yet profound….and remain a mystery to others.

Likewise the Apostle Paul summed up the core of our Christian faith in two simple verses, when he wrote to the early church in Ephesus. Paul wrote, ***“for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*** **It’s all about God and NEVER about us.**

As Presbyterian, we take great pride of being ***“a church that is reformed and always reforming”***. This not only serves as a reminder but a challenge for us all today. It is a **reminder** that we are who we are as a byproduct of the past effort and progress that has been made over the years…for better AND for worse. We need to not only acknowledge but embrace that! We may not reverse the course of history but we can only go forward, and learn not to repeat the same mistakes for our future.

***“Being reformed and always reforming”*** also serves as a **challenge** that we are to keep our eyes, our ears, and our hearts opened for **God’s next steps for us, in this season of renewal and hope.**

However, we must never forget that there is a second part to that motto, ***“according to the Word of God and the calling (or the leading) of the Holy Spirit”.*** To me, this latter part is more critical than the first. It clarified both the direction (as well as the Director!) of the church's ongoing reform. The direction of reform shall be **“according to the Word of God**” and the director of such reform shall be the **Holy Spirit and not us**.

In her article entitled ***“What do Presbyterians believe about “a church reformed and always being reforming”,*** Dr. Anna Case-Winters of *McCormick Theological Seminary* wrote, *“the backward and forward reference of reform invites us on the one hand to attend respectfully to the wisdom and Scriptural interpretations of those who have gone before us with humility. On the other hand, it pushes us to do more than simply reiterate what [our] fathers and mothers in the faith have said.*

*Rather, we must do in our day what they did in theirs,* ***worship and serve the living God****. Therefore, while we honor the forms of faith and life that have been bequeathed to us, we honor them best in a spirit of openness to the Word and the Spirit that formed and continue to re-form the church. The church, because of who God is, as a living God, remains open to always being reformed.* [[4]](#footnote-4)

This week the church also celebrates “All Saints Day”. Each of us have been called into faith to be “saints” of this world. Saints not because we are “special” or more “righteous” or “holier” than others, but as ones who are **set apart** and **dedicated** to participate and to engage in God’s ministry here on earth.

As we heard last week from our PC(USA)’ mission co-worker Jonathan Seitz, we are called to be God’s missionary wherever we are. Our mission is defined by where our heart is. We don’t necessarily need to travel far away to some remote parts of the world in order to be God’s missionary, to serve God, and to bear witness to what Christ has done in our lives. We can do that in our own backyards. We don’t need an abundance of resources in order to serve God’s people either. **God only wants the best of what we have to offer!** And as we mentioned last week, mission is more about our overall **attitude** and **proper perspective** of how we see ourselves, **in light of God’s presence and calling amongst us**. This is why Reformation still matters today!

Reformation is still happening in 2018, more than 500 years since it began. You and I are called to be a part of this on-going “Reformation” as we live out our calling of what it means to be ***“reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”***

**THIS** is the kind of faith that would bear much fruits for God’s kingdom. **THIS** is the kind of faith that we, as “saints” of God must seek in gratitude and in hope. Thanks be to God. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Case-Winters Anna May 2004 *Presbyterians Today* http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/reformed/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Romans 3:24* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ephesians 2:8-9* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Case-Winters, Anna, *What do Presbyterians believe about ‘Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda? May, 2004 Presbyterian Today,* *http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/reformed/*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)