

“Article of Faith: Reform”
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Romans 3: 21 – 31

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Reform. Today’s article of faith. To reform. A word that takes us Presbyterians back to the days of the Protestant reformation, which was inspired, in part, by our reading from Romans for today that emphasizes being justified by faith.... Reform, also a word that has face value meaning. “Improve, better, make better, ameliorate, refine.” And the first entry in the dictionary under reform? Change.

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?

Ten. One to change it and nine to say how much better the old light bulb was.

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?

We don’t know, we’re waiting for the committee to meet and vote on whether or not we should change it.

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?

Change? Change? My grandmother donated that light bulb.

These jokes are funny (or were funny the first time you heard them) because here in the institutional church, most of us have a love-hate relationship with change.

Change. Reform.

We love change when it is something we want. When I moved to New York City to attend seminary, it was the most terrifying thing I had ever done. But I threw myself into it headfirst, because I knew it was exactly where I was supposed to be.

We don't love change when it is not something we want. A big screen in this sanctuary projecting a pastor who is a hologram.... a ball bouncing on the words of the hymns? That's Change that I suspect would not be well received.

Some changes we embrace, others we reject.

What change is happening in your life that is bringing you great joy and anticipation?

What change is happening that is bringing discomfort or anxiety?

We can take comfort in knowing that we are not alone in this love-hate relationship. It's been going on for thousands of years.

As soon as Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery from Egypt, what did they want? They wanted to go back, back to the world that they knew. Even if it was horrible, on some level they wanted to choose the certain misery over the uncertain change.

In the gospels, fear of change was the tool used to keep people away from Jesus. It's one of the reasons they were always testing Jesus about his knowledge of scripture and the law. If Jesus tripped up, it would show people that Jesus represented something they didn't want-change in how they lived their lives.

It was the same story even after Jesus' resurrection. In the early church, people were still using change against Jesus. Even as things were changing, people who were afraid of that change discouraged potential believers by telling them "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us (Acts 6:14)."

Some changes we like, others we don't. But change is a part of life, is it not? This is not new. It certainly pre-dates light bulbs.

Change is inevitable. Change can even be good. But is reform, change, and article of faith? In one of thinking, it isn't. Because change, reform, can't ever be the point. We don't ever want to change for the sake of changing.

But, in another way of thinking, it's exactly central to what we believe. Because we cannot be people of faith without embracing change. Change, reform, is inevitably and unapologetically what happens when we pray. When we study. When we worship. When we believe.

When we believe in the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ. When we believe in the Word that is still active and present in the world today, then our lives do change—inevitably, unavoidably and thankfully.

But, once again, if we go back to the Bible, and to Jesus, we see it wasn't change for change's sake, it was a very particular change.

Jesus didn't want people to give up their beliefs and embrace new ones, he wanted to give people back the things they already had but had neglected or forgotten. Give them back faith in a concrete and lived way. Jesus wanted to take away going-through-the-motions-of-faith and the following-the-rules, and give them forgiveness and hope and accountability and possibility, the things that were already there.

The same is true of the Protestant Reformation, from which we get our Presbyterian motto "Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. Once reformed, always reforming."

The Protestant Reformation wasn't a blind change, it was a change of return, of restoration.

Anna Case-Winters, professor at McCormick Theological Seminary, explains it this way¹:

Our Reformed motto, rightly understood, challenges both the conservative and the liberal impulses that characterize our diverse church today. It does not bless either preservation for preservation's sake or change for change's sake.

In the 16th-century context the impulse it reflected was neither liberal nor conservative, but radical, in the sense of returning to the "root." The Reformers believed the church had become corrupt, so change was needed. But it was a change in the interest of preservation and restoration of more authentic faith and life—a church reformed and always to be reformed according to the Word of God

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. This motto calls us to something more radical than we have imagined. It challenges both liberal and conservative impulses and the habits and agendas we have lately fallen into. It brings a prophetic critique to our cultural accommodation—either to the past or to the present—and calls us to communal and institutional repentance. It invites us, as people who worship and serve a living God, to be open to being "re-formed" according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

In the life of faith, change is not about the new, it is always about going back. Back into the Word, the living Word, and out into the world. It is radical, rooted in the example of Christ, the example of the early church we find in scripture, a church, a people, that lived in a very new way— together, holding all things in common. Sharing, praying, hoping, caring.

¹ <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/past/may04/reformed.htm>

In your own life, faithful change. Faithful reform isn't about turning into someone else, it is about living more fully into the person God created you to be.

Because we believe, we are called to embrace change. Wrestle with change. Discern with one another the meaning of scripture and voice of God.

Where is change faithful and when is it... just change?

Will we always get it right? No. Of course not. But part of answering the call to discipleship means being willing to take risks and having the humility to acknowledge wrong turns.

I have a friend who likes to collect photos of interesting road signs. A few years ago he posted one that is my all-time favorite. I wish I could buy copies and place one at the entrance to every church. His picture came from Scotland and exemplifies exactly what we are talking about here. Exactly what the life of faith means.



If you live in the UK, you might read this as a simple warning that the road layout has changed, but for me, it's the exact right thing for people of faith to know and embrace.

In the life of faith, there are changed priorities ahead.

When you know Jesus Christ as your redeemer, you have a new sense of gratitude and abundance.

When you know God as creator, you see the world through the eyes of a steward rather than a consumer.

When you know the Holy Spirit as sustainer, you view the community through the eyes of what is possible, through the eyes of God.

How far are we supposed to take this? All the way.

Living out this mission, this mission of discipleship, means taking risks. As it says in the Book of Order, part of the constitution of the church:

The church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ (G-3.0400).

When we do this, when we embrace the change that is brought by belief, when we take risks to live out that faith, we are living into the church God calls us to be. A church that doesn't get pulled behind, but leads the way in advocating for the poor, the forgotten, those whose voices are heard or ignored. A church that leads the way in the transformation of the world. Not because transformation is good, but because God is good, and God calls us to feed the hungry and care for the sick. Clothe the needy and visit the imprisoned. Welcome the outcast. To love. Neighbors. Enemies. Aliens. God. Ourselves.

To dream about what the church can be.

From the dream of Wesley Frensdorff, an Episcopal Bishop in Nevada in the 1970s and 1980s, a Bishop who was open to change. After he died in a plane wreck in 1985, they found in his writings a dream for the church of God. This is part of it²:

Let us dream of a church So salty and so yeasty that it really would be missed if no longer around; where there is wild sowing of seed, and much rejoicing when they take root, but little concern for success, comparative statistics, growth or even survival.

[Let us dream of] A church so evangelical that its worship, its quality of caring, its eagerness to reach out to those in need cannot be contained....

...each congregation is in mission and each Christian, gifted for ministry; a crew on a freighter, not passengers on a luxury liner. Peacemakers and healers abhorring violence in all forms...as concerned with societal healing as with individual healing; with justice as with freedom, prophetically confronting the root causes of social, political and economic ills.

A community: an open, caring, sharing household of faith where all find embrace, acceptance and affirmation. A community: under judgment, seeking to live with its own proclamation, therefore, truly loving what the Lord commands and desiring God's promise.

² *The Dream* by Wesley Frensdorff in *Reshaping Ministry: Essays in Memory of Wesley Frensdorff* Editors Josephine Borgeson and Lynne Wilson copyright © 1990 by Jethro Publications.

People of faith, we believe in God. We believe in the saving love of Jesus Christ. We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe that we are beloved children of God, and that God's story is still being written, here and now, with us. Because we believe all of these things, we believe that reform is an article of faith. Not as something to fight, but something to discern, for reform is one of the ways we welcome God, and by extension, the Kingdom of God. It is not the point, but it is the inevitable result of a growing faith.

Changed Priorities Ahead.

And while that may be risky and even a bit scary, it is also faithful and healthy.

Reform. And article of faith.

Amen.

Appendix 1 The Dream of Bishop Wesley Frensdorff³

Let us dream of a church

In which all members know surely and simply God's great love, and each is certain that in the divine heart we are all known by name.

In which Jesus is very Word, our window into the Father's heart; the sign of God's hope and design for all humankind.

In which the Spirit is not a party symbol, but wind and fire in everyone; gracing the church with a kaleidoscope of gifts and constant renewal for all.

A church in which

worship is lively and fun as well as reverent and holy; and we might be moved to dance and laugh; to be solemn, cry or beat the breast.

People know how to pray and enjoy it -- frequently and regularly, privately and corporately, in silence and in word and song.

The Eucharist is the center of life and Servanthood the center of mission: the servant Lord truly known in the breaking of the bread.

With service flowing from worship, and everyone understanding why worship is called a service.

Let us dream of a church

In which the sacraments, free from captivity by a professional elite, are available in every congregation regardless of size, culture, location or budget.

In which every congregation is free to call forth from its midst priests and deacons, sure in the knowledge that training and support services are available to back them up.

In which the Word is sacrament too, as dynamically present as bread and wine; members, not dependent on professionals, know what's what and who's who in the Bible, and all sheep share in the shepherding.

In which discipline is a means, not to self-justification, but to discipleship, and law is known to be a good servant but a very poor master.

A church

Affirming life over death as much as life after death, unafraid of change, able to recognize God's hand in the revolutions, affirming the beauty of diversity, abhorring the imprisonment of uniformity, as concerned about love in all relationships as it is about chastity, and affirming the personal in all expressions of sexuality; denying the separation between secular and sacred, world and church, since it is the world Christ came to and died for.

A church

³ *The Dream* by Wesley Frensdorff in *Reshaping Ministry: Essays in Memory of Wesley Frensdorff* Editors Josephine Borgeson and Lynne Wilson copyright © 1990 by Jethro Publications

without the answers, but asking the right questions; holding law and grace, freedom and authority, faith and works together in tension, by the Holy Spirit, pointing to the glorious mystery who is God. So deeply rooted in gospel and tradition that, like a living tree, it can swing in the wind and continually surprise us with new blossoms.

Let us dream of a church

With a radically renewed concept and practice of ministry and a primitive understanding of the ordained offices. Where there is no clerical status and no classes of Christians, but all together know themselves to be part of the laos-- the holy people of God. A ministering community rather than a community gathered around a minister.

Where ordained people, professional or not, employed or not, are present for the sake of ordering and signing the church's life and mission, not as signs of authority or dependency, nor of spiritual or intellectual superiority, but with Pauline patterns of "ministry supporting church" instead of the common pattern of "church supporting ministry."

Where bishops are signs and animators of the church's unity, catholicity and apostolic mission, priests are signs and animators of her eucharistic life and the sacramental presence of her Great High Priest, and deacons are signs and animators -- living reminders -- of the church's servanthood as the body of Christ who came as, and is, the servant slave of all Gods beloved children.

Let us dream of a church

So salty and so yeasty that it really would be missed if no longer around; where there is wild sowing of seed, and much rejoicing when they take root, but little concern for success, comparative statistics, growth or even survival.

A church so evangelical that its worship, its quality of caring, its eagerness to reach out to those in need cannot be contained. A church in which every congregation is in a process of becoming free -- autonomous -- self-reliant -- interdependent, none has special status: the distinction between parish and mission gone.

But each congregation is in mission and each Christian, gifted for ministry; a crew on a freighter, not passengers on a luxury liner. Peacemakers and healers abhorring violence in all forms (maybe even football), as concerned with societal healing as with individual healing; with justice as with freedom, prophetically confronting the root causes of social, political and economic ills.

A community: an open, caring, sharing household of faith where all find embrace, acceptance and affirmation. A community: under judgment, seeking to live with its own proclamation, therefore, truly loving what the Lord commands and desiring God's promise.

And finally, let us dream of a people

called to recognize all the absurdities in ourselves and in one another, including the absurdity that is LOVE, serious about the call and the mission but not, very much, about ourselves, who, in the company of our Clown Redeemer can dance and sing and laugh and cry in worship, in ministry and even in conflict.

