

## Reformation Sunday October 30, 2011

About 2000 years ago a Jewish peasant's short life was spent wandering a small area of his homeland confronting people who need what we would call counseling. His activity seem to have threatened the Romans and the established Jewish leaders

Jesus lived in a turbulent time for the Roman Empire This was particularly true in Palestine where restive “terrorists”--as we would call them today-- were a real problem for the Empire.

The Romans attempted to stamp out the trouble by, among other things, crucifying some 200 such terrorists—including Jesus.

The Jewish establishment consisted primarily of priests who cooperated with and were used by the Romans to help put down the terrorists. This is reflected in the documents which came to be known as 'gospels'.

Some important considerations:

What is often forgotten in our time is that the word 'history' has two meanings: (1) What actually happened and (2) What historians think happened. Note that the first cannot be experienced and, therefore, cannot be subjected to scientific investigation. The second amounts to being intellectual autobiographies of historians. Even artifacts uncovered by archeology have to be interpreted and, therefore, are to be classified under the heading: “what historians think happened”.

I remember once our family all gathered in Southern California for a celebration of my mother's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. One day during the week-long visit, Jane's and my older daughter, Ginny, and I visited the matriarch's condominium. I was in the kitchen and could see the two ladies and hear their conversation and, believe it or not, kept my mouth shut.

Ginny plied her grandmother with questions about her life experiences and wrote the answers down on the note pad she had in her lap. Some of the stories were about events I had experienced too. It was shocking to me that Mom and I remembered the events quite differently; but over-hearing my mother's account taught me a lesson about 'history' and, indeed, any kind of 'eyewitness' testimony.

Another consideration:

Sociology and anthropology are valuable tools in the investigation of humans and their social behavior. And one the results of the study of that behavior, is that--again subject to the care we must take with 'history'--that the most important yearning of humans is for security.

The most common tool for attaining that security is the absolute assurance provided by so-called revealed religion (that is the word of God). For the ignorant and oppressed, religion is the only way out of their problems. Remember: “Go Down Jordan”, “Beulah Land”, “Gather by the River”, Fly Away” and many more celebrations of 'salvation'. Salvation from what? From death? From hellfire and damnation? In the case of slaves, of course, from slavery. Maybe not now but surely in the afterlife

Watch televangelists who assure us that they know how to ensure 'salvation'. All programs seem to emphasize, “Believe/Have faith” in Jesus and you will be saved.

And most of the 'televangelists' preach with a Bible in hand. Moses had his staff; televangelists have their Bible—and “Bible” usually means a limp-leather, pebble-grained, “King James” 'Holy Bible” with gold or red tinted page edges and back strip and, at least, one ribbon to be used as a page marker. It doesn't matter that televangelists of this sort can't read the Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic texts or that there are numerous mistranslations in the “Saint James”, as I've heard it called. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century English of this 'authorized version' has become a hiero-glyph ( a “sacred-writing”). Somehow prayer seems more reverent when it uses “Thee, thou, thy”.

About 500 years ago, a German monk (a Roman Catholic but not a priest) was very concerned about the Roman church's claim to authority. He was very scholarly as is evidenced by the fact that he made a fine German translation of the earliest of the manuscripts of the Bible available to him.

He was bothered by the fact that the church founded in Rome claimed absolute authority. It's sources of authority were: first of all, Jesus's words as quoted in the Bible, “You are Peter (Petros) and on this Rock (Petra) I will build my church”. So Peter became the first pope [eel pah- and then, secondly: tradition.

Specific traditions develop over time, of course, and even though their origins are often obscured by the mists of time, they become important for one reason or another—usually because of their usefulness or the security they provide (“Mom, why do I have to ...” , “Because nice folks do it”, “I say so”, “Someday you'll understand”, or if all replies fail: “Ask your father”)

Those who were ordained by the church had authority by the “laying on of hands” from someone who already had that authority. The theory was that Pope Peter laid his hand on his successor and this hand become the conduit of the Holy Spirit into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pope. Even Presbyterian churches (part of the product of the “reformation” usually referred to as the “Reform church”) use the rite of 'laying on of hands' to create “elders” (the Greek word for this is, “presbuteroi”) and clergy. So this act creates that is--'ordains'-- its leaders (both clergy and members of the session).

Furthermore, 'once ordained always ordained. When an ordained person commits, for examples, adultery, murder, stealing etc. he or she is still ordained. This means that

morality is not the basis of ordination. It simply means that 'laying on of hands puts the ordained person in a chain of command which was initiated by Jesus when he said, "and on this rock I will build my church."

Never mind that scholars of all denominations, suspect that the originating statement, supposedly by Jesus', designated not Peter (Petros) but Peter's answer to Jesus's question "And who do you say I am?" "You are Jesus son of God". That answer by Peter was the rock (petra) upon which Jesus' church was to be built. This makes more sense to scholars in general. The same scholars have their suspicion that Jesus had no interest in organizing a religion. At this point, it might be well to remember that Jesus was thrown out of his home 'church' (synagogue) for heresy. His only further adult relationship to his home synagogue was some hell-raising at the Temple-- so far as the Biblical record is concerned.

Martin Luther was aware that the authority of Church tradition derived from the Bible. So, in effect, he reasoned, apparently: why pay serious attention to the tradition? Why not take a shortcut directly to the Bible?

And that, plus some important political situations, created serious discord in the Roman church and to the protests (a word most of us have heard recently) which led to the 'protestant' movements.

Martin Luther wasn't interested in forming a new church. He wanted the church to reform itself. But he lost that game and his followers down through history have founded, reformed, and altered church organizations.

Even the Presbyterians split in two over the War-Between the States (otherwise known as the Civil War, or Northern Aggression against the South). And in Tulsa, our denomination recently lost one of its largest congregations over the acceptance of homosexuals into the denomination. Fortunately, the denomination had title to that particular real estate and the buildings on it.

This latter is a good example of how tradition digs in against changes and misuses its authority (in this case, the Bible) to justify a position. Often when it loses the Bibles, it goes to "let conscience be your guide".

Unfortunately, the 'conscience' is often, in reality, only gastritis induced by fear.

Part of the problem is letting a fear drive a person. A distinction needs to be made between a feeling and a moral judgment. It's a pretty good idea to let your head rather than your stomach be your guide, I guess.

After all, the marriage of ignorance and fear produces 'fundamentalism'.

How about that word, "Reformation"? Should "Change" be substituted for it? Change is more accurate for describing what has and does happen.

And it divides people into those who dislike change and those who accept it. Of course that won't happen; tradition rules when the problem is not great. We slip in terms like “social evolutionists”, “progressives”, liberals”, “conservatives”, and “traditionalists”.

The word, 'progressive' suggests 'regressive' and 'retrogressive' (is there a word, 'congressive'?)

I think we should be more careful in using the words 'liberal' and 'conservative'.

'Liberal' suggests to me, someone who doesn't claim to know the answers and 'conservative' someone who does. The first is the question mark person and the second the exclamation point person.

Now this brings up what is to me a very important matter:

Is there a way for the liberal and the conservative to get along in the church without blowing it up?

I think so—with reservations. I think that the answer lies in the use of law.

Most of our denominations have constitutions which can only be changed by an orderly process prescribed by those constitutions. The process contains a mandate which describes who or what is permitted to change the constitution and to review actions resulting from application of the laws it contains.

In religious organizations, the authority may lie in a book, a person, a theology, a tradition. In not-religious (secular) organizations, it lies in the process.

Our founders, having grown up in Europe as children of the Enlightenment, knew how religious organizations could rule all of society with an iron hand. The founders struggled over this matter and had to amend the Constitution (the 'Bill of Rights') to get the job done in such a way as to avoid the tyranny of a state over its citizens, and the tyranny of organized religion over its citizens. Thank God!? No. Thank democracy!

Did the Bill of Rights work completely? No

Our coinage and currency show religious—indeed Christian—icons, mottoes and symbols. Churches and clergy are given tax advantages [which by the way get in the way of honest discussion of political issues from the pulpit] the historical nonsense about ours being founded as a Christian nation persists. We've got a little problem with the national anthem as well: it celebrates war; if we substitute “God bless America” we've still got a problem; how about “May our faithfulness to democracy always prevail” [a bit lengthy, I realize] or “America the Beautiful” without the religious/theological verse. The Vatican is recognized by our Government as a state and as a member of the U.N.; every politician finds he/her must end a public speech with “God bless America!” Sessions of Congress are opened by a

preacher borrowed to bless the legislative body. And it is well to remember that the opening of Supreme Court sessions are opened with “God bless this honorable Court.”

So, friends, about an annual celebration, of Change? A little scary, but, it seems to me be a good idea. And would that mean not including what we owe to the German Monk, the Reformation and the recognition of the sociological facts of societal life? Of course it wouldn't.

And, by the way, how about keeping in mind that the inevitable hymn of services on Reformation Sunday identifies the Pope, as our “mortal enemy”, even as I would claim the Roman Church today is in its antiabortion stance. Overpopulation will destroy the planet yet! I am very happy that there are so many “cafeteria Catholics”. They use contraceptives

Can we change that? I fervently hope so for the sake of my great granddaughters and their generation.

How about the juggernaut of science? It slowly rolls on crushing everything in its way.

Science never claims that he has the truth. Rather, it confines itself to the study of observable (by eye, ear, etc.) phenomena and includes procedures which make sure of the accuracy of its observations. Laboratories are places where such testing goes on. Its study is to determine facts; not truth.

Truth is the province of philosophy (theology included) and is based on assumptions which are not testable. It uses logic to develop the usefulness of its assumptions.

Not that science tries to avoid logic in its attempts to uncover facts. That is what a theory is: a logical proposition based on facts.

“Intelligent design” is the resurrection of an ancient classical theory. Science does not say no to it as a theory any more than it says unreservedly that evolution is 'true'. But it does say that facts are on the side of evolutionary theory. Modern scientists overwhelmingly prefer evolution. Of course there are scientists who are not philosophical and claim emphatically that evolution is true.

The Bible is steadily losing its authority. We must abandon it as other than magnificent literature but not require it to be seen as authoritative. Perhaps this is the basic change which will keep the church from becoming a dodo.

I find it interesting that every sacred-writing (the Torah, the New Testament, and the Qur'an are good examples) begins to go out of date as a useful tool when it is declared “infallible” and somewhat less authoritative commentary on it takes its place. The Torah has its Gemara and Mishnah (built on the Gemara) to form the Talmud which is then used to keep the Torah up to date.

The “NEW Testament” updates the holy OLD testament

Muhammad apparently—since he considered the Bible a holy book—saw the revelations to him, the Qur'an, as up to date additions to the Jewish and Christian revelations. By the way, Jesus was to him the greatest of the prophets before Muhammad and an absolute Qur'an has its authoritative interpreters; he apparently considered the Qur'an a kind of “New New Testament”.

Other changes which I do not have time to cover will include, I suspect:

1. the disappearance of a theistic god (a god made in human image) and theological ideas such as the Trinity)
2. recognition that ethics and morality are always changing: relativism will replace absolutism.
3. a move away from prayer that asks for the violation of natural law.

The alternative to these changes: the disappearance of organized religion.

This, of course, won't happen in the lifetime of even the youngest of our church-family's precious children.

In the meantime, religious organizations survive as valuable servants to the spiritual, social, medical and educational needs of our society.

*~Rev. Harold Hill*

<Bill's coda (adapted from materials found at pcusa.org)>

Church reform is ongoing, as it should be in a denomination that claims to be reformed and always being reformed. Today should be an opportunity to look back to the changes in the 16th century, but also reflect on the changes required today...and tomorrow. So we must ask ourselves: How are we as Presbyterians...how are we as members of the church at 7th and Columbia, College Hill, and how are we as individuals being changed and reformed? What is God doing now to change us into more faithful Christians for today and tomorrow?