



A Legacy of Faithful Dissent

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This year we celebrate the 500th year of the Reformation. Another way of looking at this long and illustrious history is to say that for Presbyterians, the practice of our faith has always been rooted in a 500-year-old tradition of faithful dissent. Ours is a legacy of witness, of pursuing justice, and doing so from the wellspring of our Christian faith.

Dissent is a form of critique. Gayatri Spivak, professor at Columbia University in New York City, described the acts of critique and dissent as the task of insiders, saying, “It’s not just destruction. It’s also construction. . . . you actually speak from inside . . . ‘you can only deconstruct what you love’ . . . turning it around.”¹

The model of dissent I offer you is out of our love for the church universal and for the people of God. All of us are called to practice courageous, faithful dissent as members of the Christian tradition through communal reflection, self-reflection, confession, and collective efforts against the injustices that many in our community face today. The challenge for people of privilege in the PC(USA), particularly those who have white privilege, is to make sure they are doing their share of the labor towards justice, engaging in crucial conversations with those that disagree, taking risks, and participating in the work of dismantling their own privilege, which is ultimately engaging deeply in the work of deconstructing white supremacy.

A Brief Definition and Description of Faithful Dissent Today

Presbyterians may be surprised to know that the usage and etymology of the word “dissent” developed in Scotland. Indeed, “dissent” is a key element of Presbyterian theology and polity. Originally, the term referred not simply to what was disagreed with, but also what was denied. In other words, “dissent” is “refusing to give assent.” For example, the Theological Declaration of Barmen is a document of dissent—a belief is denied and then a committed belief is asserted.

The Reformed legacy of faithful dissent has been most recently expressed in the Confession of Belhar. Dissent is expressed first in what is believed, based on scripture, and then which doctrines are rejected. For example:

We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

- that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;

1. “Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” by Steve Paulson, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 26, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/critical-intimacy-interview-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak/>.

- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another’s burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;
- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;
- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

Here we have church-wide theological language for faithful dissent regarding issues of *minoritization*, a word we use for the experience of marginalizing groups of people, including people of color, people with disabilities, and people in the LGBTQIA community.² As stated above, we confess, “Therefore, we reject any doctrine . . . which denies that a refusal earnestly to

2. Minoritization is a way to describe the experiences of people and groups who have often fallen under the demographic term “minority.” The term minority is no longer one of numerical significance, but of implied social and cultural marginalization by the dominant culture.

pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin.” The visible unity described is not the unity of conformity, but of many differences and particularities held together as one people in Christ.

Many people, especially minoritized voices from within our denomination, are calling for Presbyterians together to make this unity defined in the Confession of Belhar a reality “so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted; that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another.”

This bending of the arc of history and justice most notably occurs due to the frontline labor of faithful Christian dissenters belonging to minoritized communities and identities such as women, people of color, LGBTQIA folk, people with disabilities, and all the intersections in between. Minoritized people have successfully fought for reform, change, and liberation, not by separating ourselves out from those who are unwilling to reform, but in conversation with them, often at great risk and peril to our very lives.

As a painful example in our nation today, it is perilous to drive while black, walk while black, and breathe while black, and yet black activists continue to lead movements for civil rights and equity for all, putting their bodies and voices on the line daily in the hopes that they will be heard this time. People whose lives are directly affected by injustices are often the ones who are guiding and leading the work of justice in our nation today. What if people of privilege—white folk—were to step into the fray in more meaningful and risky ways? How would the PC(USA) reform? How would the world change?

Faithful dissent as a denominational body today requires cultivating and embracing necessary change, not through coercion of people with significant differences, but in conversation with those in our body that may not agree with us. To be clear, faithful dissent is not a call for people of color or queer people to be in conversation with those who are actively oppressing them. This is me saying, “I see the labor you have done and are still doing. Labor that is done through tears, despair, and fury.”

This is also me telling my white Presbyterian siblings—those that are not yet fully in the struggle—that I see them too, and this is me asking, “Do you also see me?” If you do, if you see us, you will also see the work of Christian solidarity that lies before you: hard work with folks that look like you and that share the same privileges as you, but who may choose not to hear me because of what I look like. Many have deep biases against people in my community. Despite all this, at the end of the day, I will still do that work, but it would be nice to have you there too.

Change emerges from the crucible of tension, when the work of justice is shared, and when all are engaged. Our 500-year-old history of reforming is full of periods of deep tension. We as a denomination have been wrong before, and we have wronged one another. Reformation has so often been the work not of speeding towards reconciliation, but of first righting those wrongs, of together creating alternative ways forward toward liberating lives for all. Therefore, our reformation work is never complete this side of the kingdom. We have fought and are still fighting against theological and cultural justifications of racism which include, but are not limited to, antiblack,

anti-Asian, anti-immigrant, and now anti-Muslim sentiment.³ In more contemporary reformations, we have begun recognizing and honoring the call of women and LGBTQIA folks into ordained ministry and are pursuing a spirit of loving neighborliness, living side by side with people of many and no religions.

So with this in mind, the spirit of the Reformation and any continual reformation we attempt together today is built on constructive critique, an internal and external pursuit of faithful dissent. In other words, faithful dissent is confession: we are honest about ourselves, welcoming God's critique, and we are honest about other systems in God's world, like the government, opening our hearts and minds to the prophetic critique of Jesus.

We continue living into our dissent by thoughtfully challenging new forms of inequities and oppressions that appear. It is with hope that we engage in the collaborative work of reformation and reconstruction of a refreshed Christian community that embraces the ways we think about difference without necessarily needing to reconcile these differences. Today, we can usher in God's justice and liberation by committing ourselves to creating justice and reform together. But this means that we also commit ourselves to push beyond simply observing difference to taking apart the ways privilege works through language and legislation to minoritize various groups of people.

Y'all Means All

When I first moved to Louisville, Kentucky, a bumper sticker on a car caught my eye. It said, "Y'all means All." Kwok Pui Lan, an Asian postcolonial feminist theologian and the 2011 president of the American Academy of Religion, said in her inaugural address entitled, "Empire and the Study of Religion," that we must never forget to bring the tribe along as we embrace change and as we work towards the common good.⁴

The bumper sticker and Kwok's statement echo each other. Reforms—especially social, cultural, and theological change—are not substantive unless the process and results include everyone: unless the tribe is brought along, unless all are welcome.

This means we have to get ready to engage the differences that secretly terrify us, even when it is far more appealing and comfortable to remain with like-minded folks fighting for the same things you care about in this world. Particularly for those in the church with white privilege, this means doing your part to engage fellow white Christians who are comfortable believing that assimilation into a dominant white culture is possible or the way it should be, rather than with mutual liberation and freedom for all people.⁵ This is hard work, but it is significant: engaging in the work that must be done to become the anti-racist and welcoming denomination we want to be.

3. Anti-Muslim sentiment or bigotry is now being analyzed and discussed as a racialized phenomenon and experience. This means that anyone who appears Muslim or fits a phenotype that is reminiscent of what someone would consider "Muslim" can be the victim of anti-Muslim sentiment. After 9/11, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslim-appearing people rose 1700% in 2001 per <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3154170.stm>. For instance, the first person murdered because of a racialized hate post after 9/11 was a Sikh-American named Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was targeted because of his turban (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Balbir_Singh_Sodhi).

4. Paraphrased from Kwok Pui Lan's presidential address at the 2011 AAR Annual Meeting on November 19, 2011, <https://www.aarweb.org/programs-services/a19-404-presidential-address-kwok-pui-lan>

5. Voters self-identifying as white evangelical Christians overwhelmingly voted for Donald Trump despite Trump's racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant rhetoric, and despite his noted history of sexual assault against women (see: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly-for-donald-trump/?utm>).

We all have communities to whom we are accountable and who are accountable to us. I am a Korean American woman who is a teaching elder. For me, faithful dissent means, among many other things, that I continue to fight hard for the acceptance of women's ordination and fair pay for women *within* the Korean American and Korean immigrant congregational contexts.

What might it mean for you? Common wisdom in community organizing is that those who disagree with the pursuits of justice and equity are still vital stakeholders. After all, we want to work together to shape real and lasting change. So we do what we can to partner with them and remain open to change that might be very slow, because it is necessary to bring the tribe along. For those with power and privilege, this understanding of community can be uncomfortable because it requires entering and staying in tough conversations with people we may not like. It means our work of reformation is not done, but it is also a reminder that faithful dissent is one form of loving action we pursue with and within the body.

Theological Dissent

We Presbyterians still cite the Reformation era as the turning point of our collective religious history. Faithfulness in that robust theological tradition means we must also wrap our faithful dissent with a robust theology. And in our Reformed, scripturally grounded theology, we are committed to liberation for all (as Christ liberates us), as well as precise about the whys and hows of the ways we engage injustice in our world. The spirit of reformation is a commitment to accountable community.

For example, Presbyterians have asked each other hard questions about financial stewardship for centuries, and have held one another accountable for tithing and giving. The same line of questioning that opens people up to deeper conversations and solutions about financial stewardship can also open up deeper conversations and solutions about the stewardship of justice. This is especially true in a community made up of many opinions and diverse ways of embodying spiritual and religious life.

But this communal strategy of reform does not turn people away if they do not agree with us. It does not attempt to coerce people or dominate them to force grudging acceptance. Instead, it seeks to hold space for a diversity of differences out of which the community finds true strength.

Reformed and always reforming means that we are not done with the necessary changes we need to make. Thank God we are not done! Everyday, the news reminds us of our sinfulness, of our refusal to "love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves." In other words, this is our refusal to acknowledge one another's human dignity and therefore the holiness of God found in one another as created in the image of God.

Like in the Reformation 500 years ago, some of us will *not* see what some of us *do* see, not at first, anyway. Some of us will not see the dehumanization and murder of black and brown human beings. Some of us will not see the deep systemic racism which operates out of the white and Christian supremacy that rules this land and others around the world. Some folks will not want to come along for the ride because any new form of equity or justice threatens to undo the privileges they enjoy. Some of us will not want to participate in being change agents because it threatens our security, comfort, and relationships. Some of us will not dissent against injustice and inequity faithfully, and instead depend on others to fight for these things for us.

Even so, our reformed theology does not allow us to shut the door on those who do not see what we see. We must not cut them off from our shared community in Christ. What does it mean to be a people who are reformed and always reforming if we don't open up to change ourselves?

We leave the door open, especially for those in the PC(USA) world with privileges that are tough to lay down. We do the patient work of nourishing change even among people that refuse to participate in creating justice. We say: “We will be here. We see you. Come and join us when you are ready.”

Follow-Through: Participatory Faithful Dissent

Faithful dissent requires that we move beyond simply becoming aware that change is needed. As Presbyterian Christians, we are reformer-theologians, each one of us. Grace doesn't mean we are called to be complacent. Instead, strengthened by grace, faithful dissent invites us to show up in order to participate in making change, and doing so with love of neighbor. That means participating without putting those who have labored the most intensely at deeper risk. For those with power and privilege, it means using that privilege to embrace God's justice and liberation work in the world, following through with deep and significant action at personal cost. It means creating change that does not stop at symbolic forms of diversity and inclusion.

Simply welcoming and having representative diversity and inclusion is not enough. For many of us who are minoritized people, particularly people of color, the words “diversity and inclusion” have at best become empty promises and at worst have become increasingly sinister. These words can mean that we are accepted only as token symbols of institutions that are trying to use our bodies, words, and thoughts to say, “See! We aren't racist!” We are accepted, but never as we are in our full uniqueness. We are invited to a common table; but when we attempt to participate in real change, we are reminded that it is not our table.

For example, some of us have had to change our names to sound more “European” and “familiar” to white Americans in order to gain acceptance. Some of us are mistaken for one another just because we share a racial or ethnic heritage, as if we are interchangeable and otherwise not distinct people. To add insult to injury, we have been disciplined by the dominant culture to laugh it off and be kind to people who wound us. We have even been asked to absolve dominant culture folks for their well-intentioned racism.

Minoritized people have learned that we are here for diversity. We have learned that, more often than not, inclusion means church institutions don't change themselves to be inclusive or even to learn our names and faces. Instead, minoritized people have to change themselves to fit in. That means they must practice hiding or erasing their own particularities to be accepted and seen. This is a painful reality for many.

And I'm here to tell you it gets worse. Those of us who are willing to navigate the dominant culture are asked again and again to reveal our personal trauma and pain. We risk our own mental and spiritual health to persuade white people that they need to make changes. It is often expected that we will hide (erase) our cultures, languages, dress, food, and theological perspectives on the scriptures we all share. All so that we can be useful to the process of teaching privileged people in the church to learn to include us in real and lasting ways.

We instruct and train in anti-racism and cultural sensitivity to and for the dominant culture in the church. “Diversity and inclusion” as it is defined institutionally and by the dominant culture of our denomination may come from goodwill, but the thought behind the catchphrase has not always served minoritized people at the end of the day. In many ways, it has stolen our ideas and our energy, and it has used our pain as an illustration.

Will you join us in this love of neighbor as ourselves? Will you join us in mutual liberation? Will you work with us so that liberation is not built on the backs of the most minoritized and burdened among us?

We are Christians. We are Presbyterians. Justification in Christ is part and parcel with justice. As we consider our combined reforming efforts, let us be clear about what we will willingly reform and what is never on the table. Justice isn't justice if it's just a pretty thought. Our thoughts and commitments are the beginning of action. It is about whether or not we follow through with the motions we initiate. It is turning towards God's justice and liberation.

Faithful Dissent and Resistance to Baptism as Conformity

As Presbyterians, we are baptized into a covenant with God, not into conformity with one another. And, as Presbyterians, we consider substituting anything for God to be idolatry. That's why a form of faithful dissent is written into the service of baptism:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,
do you turn from the ways of sin
and renounce evil and its power on the world?
I renounce them.⁶

We fulfill our baptismal promises when we renounce evil with our lives, not just our thoughts. And there is good news in the promise of God that we always do this with God, and not by ourselves. Even more, it means that others are also God's instruments of reformation. In the baptismal service we pray:

O Lord, uphold (name) by your Holy Spirit.
Give *him/her* the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord,
and the spirit of joy in your presence,
both now and forever. **Amen. . . .**

God who began a good work in you
will bring it to completion
by the day of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**⁷

Baptism is all about our relationships with God and one another. Conformity has everything to do with rules that are not even relevant to covenant, and have nothing to do with loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. So we renounce the power of sin.

Whether or not people of privilege are aware of it, the expectation of our common and shared baptism is often conformity. When baptism into community is conformity, the community engages in behavior that waters down or even represses the personhood and self-determination of minoritized people. When a culture is dominant, it *dominates*: resistance to anything other than a baptismal culture of covenant is something we need to faithfully dissent against together.

6. *Glory to God* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 16.

7. *Glory to God*, 18–19.

This is especially true, when it occurs in spaces we are already calling reformed and welcoming. Part of the practice and act of dissent that I describe in the opening of this essay is one of critical self-examination, rather than conformity. We are called by baptism to consider the ways in which we think and move in the world. This includes our assumptions and biases—both collective and individual—that lead to the forced hiding (erasure) of people’s particularities.

I have witnessed this dangerous practice of erasure occurring in the church when immigrants and other people of color are not attended to because they are not deemed progressive enough in their theologies; in other words, when their cultural and theological narratives do not align with the cultural and theological narratives of more liberal white and dominant culture theologies. Similarly, in some congregations of color, the radical inclusion and visibility of women in ordained ministry and queer people are still being fought for and sought.

But this should not result in writing off entire groups of *already* minoritized people. Silencing is not a function of faithful dissent for the sake of justice: covenantal conversation that challenges us is. While many of us may long for the day when all spaces, all churches, and all people will embody the radical love and justice that we seek as Christians, we are here together now, sharing this time and place, reforming our world together, and engaging the whole body in modes of faithful dissent.

Conclusion

Lasting change is achieved when it becomes part of who we are, the natural way in which we move in the world. God’s justice takes place in the world and in community when it becomes part of our core moral compass. It’s not just when it is not our personal brand of justice, but when it is shared and held accountable in communities of baptismal covenant. It is out of our deep love and commitment to the shared church and to shared community that we do not withhold our critique and faithful dissent, even from ourselves.

This is why, out of my love for the church and what it can be, I refuse to couch my critique and experiences of racism in more palatable ways. This is tough work. It’s difficult work and we are in this together. It is out of this same love for one another, and respect for all of God’s people, that we require the sharing of this labor towards justice. It is out of this love for one another that we rail against the dangerous conformity that erases cultural particularities. Faithful dissent is an outgrowth of faithful love and our shared faithful baptism.

A Legacy of Faithful Dissent

Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel

1. We Presbyterians often talk about baptism as the beginning of our life of Christian discipleship. What does it mean to you to be chosen by God before we choose God ourselves? What does it mean to you that we are baptized into Christ's church, that is, into the community of the people of God?
2. What does our baptism call us to be and to do in terms of unity and diversity? How would you define unity and diversity? What does our baptismal call mean for our relationships with others?
3. In the Confession of Belhar we confess that we believe "that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain." How is unity a Christian truth? How is unity related to diversity in the PC(USA)?
4. Hong teaches us the concept of "minoritization." In what ways do you see—in your neighborhood, congregation, or presbytery—that people who are not white are marginalized by white people?
5. In the Confession of Belhar we confess that we reject "any doctrine. . . which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin." What ways, in everyday life, can you identify that are examples of how we do not earnestly pursue unity?
6. Hong calls upon all of us to hold each other in respect while we work to open our hearts and minds to minoritized people as they are, rather than as we want or expect them to be. This can be very uncomfortable for white people. If you are white, how might you help fellow white Christians who struggle with racism and the changes that we need to make if we are going to be the whole people of God?
7. To practice faithful dissent means that we clarify what we believe and what we dis-believe. We believe God is love. We disbelieve God is hate. Based on this article, what is it important for Reformed Christians to disbelieve?