

# CONVERSATIONS

## Three Fulcrums for Reform

Tom Trinidad

As I remember it, we were assembled in the back room of a brewhouse. It was an unofficial gathering scheduled during the Society of Biblical Literature/American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Philadelphia in 2005. It was not the kind of venue one would expect to hear such an audacious claim.

Phyllis Tickle was introducing the conversation by sharing the whimsical assertion that every 500 years or so the church has a giant rummage sale—older forms of thought and practice giving way to newer ones. As we approach the turning of one of those 500-year periods, Tickle claimed that just as the last cycle galvanized around the writings of Martin Luther, so sitting next to her was an author whose writings were giving expression to the new directions to come.

Being a newcomer to this conversation, I was a little skeptical. “You really mean to claim that we are on the threshold of a new reformation, and that a Martin Luther is sitting in our midst?”

Martin Luther (1483–1546), of course, is the reason we say we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was on October 31, 1517 when the theology professor from Wittenberg sent (“posted”) his *Ninety-Five Theses* to surrounding bishops for debate. Planted in the soils of humanism—a growing interest in classic Latin and Greek writings—and coupled with the recent invention of the printing press and an enthusiastic student body, Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* became the first viral text and provided the spark that ignited what we call the Reformation.

In actuality, the church, along with the various societies in which it existed, had been moving in fits and starts towards reformation for a while. The 300 years prior to Luther saw various groups around Europe initiating reforms within their inherited traditions. In the decades following Luther, when the tipping point had been reached and they could no longer be exterminated as heretical, the themes of these reforms found full expression. They included emphasizing preaching, making the Bible available in people’s native languages, redesigning worship to be more accessible, and simplifying devotional practices.

We now recognize that “The Reformation” encompasses not only Protestants, as we came to be called, but also the Roman Catholic Church. Now, 500 years on, what might we envision for the next 500 years?

Just as Luther did not envision the thousands of Christian denominations that have come and gone or still exist 500 years later, so it is impossible for us to predict with precision what will happen in the next 500 years. In other words, what appears in the church today to be either dying or promising new life may in 500 years be nothing more than an historical footnote. Still, there are some aspects of Christianity that have survived, even when they might have caused the every-500-year evolutions of the church. I want to present three, each of which has served as something like a fulcrum for reform.

## Liturgy

The first is the liturgy of the church. When I was a college chaplain, one of the Christian groups on campus attracted new students by boasting that they had no liturgy. They were referring to things like corporate prayers of confession and responsive readings. Those are liturgies, of course, but they are not the liturgy of the church.

Liturgy is the formal name for the church at worship, and while some communities may not use printed texts in worship, they certainly do have liturgy in this larger sense. Their worship services adhere to a predictable flow even if it is invisible. It is this sense of the liturgy which will remain with the church for the next 500 years, and which will benefit from the contributions we Presbyterians have made.

Shortly after Luther's posting of his *Ninety-Five Theses* in Germany, his contemporary, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), started reforming the liturgy in Switzerland, preaching through books of the New Testament (called *lectio continua*), stripping the sanctuary of artwork, and substituting a simplified communion service for the Roman Mass.

John Calvin (1509–1564) would contribute to liturgical reform by focusing the church's attention on the psalter (the book of Psalms used in worship), and advocating frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper. By now a recognizably different stream of reformation than the one occurring under Luther's leadership, "Reformed" theology captured the attention of John Knox (c. 1513–1572), who planted it firmly in Scotland, while Anglicanism, a third stream, was taking root in England.

England's liturgical reform under Thomas Cranmer (1498–1556) was theologically influenced by Reformed thinking, but went the direction of liturgy in the textual sense, producing the *Book of Common Prayer* still in use today in Anglican and Episcopal churches. In the 1640s, however, the Westminster Assembly produced *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, reflecting the concerns of Reformed Scotland. This *Directory* exerted the greatest influence on American Presbyterianism, and we will return to its present form below.

Liturgical texts have shaped the church and Christian identity in powerful ways. Just think about the "Lord's Prayer," which is the most common and enduring liturgical text used in Christian worship. Still, the most accessible and affective force in the church's liturgy is its music. This is why Calvin commissioned the Psalms to be arranged for children's voices, for example, and why more recently the introduction of Christian popular music in worship through praise songs created such controversy.

Hymnals provide the liturgical foundation for at least a generation of worshipers, and our most recent hymnal, *Glory to God*, lays down a strong foundation that will bless the church for decades to come. Just as we still sing hymns penned by Luther, the church 500 years from now will be singing some of the hymns contained in *Glory to God*.

One of the reasons is that *Glory to God* lifts us above the discussion of "hymns versus praise songs" and "traditional texts versus contemporary ones." On one hand, it preserves many of the hymns that Presbyterians have become accustomed to while also including some beloved hymns from other Christian traditions. On the other hand, it introduces new words to existing tunes and entirely new "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16). With its broad repertoire of music, spanning time, style, and culture, *Glory to God* recognizes the gifts of God's Spirit continually reforming the church by inspiring the reform of worship.

The reform of worship represented by *Glory to God* isn't limited to the wide scope of its music and lyrics. Rather it is the underlying theological structure of the hymnal that will continue to bear testimony and fruit in the life of the church. This structure is evident in the Table of Contents. There we recognize immediately the Reformed theological emphasis of "grace and gratitude."

The hymnal is organized in three main sections. The first is "God's Mighty Acts" and includes creation and providence, the various covenants, the saving work of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing witness of the Holy Spirit in the church. The third section is "Our Response to God" and includes praise, collaboration with the Spirit, and ongoing hope. God acts; we respond. God initiates; we follow. God approaches us in grace; we answer in gratitude.

But what about the second section? It is called "The Church at Worship," that is to say, the liturgy as I have been discussing it. In 500 years, the church will gather in worship, responding in gratitude for God's gracious forgiveness of our sins and for God's commissioning of our lives to service.

## Theology

And this brings me to the second fulcrum our Presbyterian heritage offers the church for continued reform over the next 500 years: our theology.

Luther's reform initiative hardened into a divided church in part because the Pope was reluctant to call a council to address his critique. The Pope did not want it to appear as if his authority derived from or was subordinate to a council. By the time the Council of Trent was finally called to convene two decades later in 1537 and actually began in 1545, it was not to pursue reconciliation, but rather to codify how Roman Catholicism differed from Protestantism.

On the other hand, Luther's reform initiative did not spread as quickly or as far as Calvin's, in part because Calvin's Presbyterian organization of the church was more easily exported and implemented than Luther's, which continued to resemble the hierarchies of church and empire.

These two observations help us to appreciate the aspect of Reformed theology I believe will continue to form the church 500 years from now. We Presbyterians eschew centralized ecclesial authority. In other words, we do not look to a bishop for direction. And we value the contextual nature of the church. That is, we do not depend on political alliances with princes or presidents to organize and maintain our witness. Presbyterians are committed to ongoing reform within and according to their contexts, and this characteristic will lead us as faithfully the next 500 years as it has the last.

For example, consider the *Book of Confessions*. We receive this compendium of statements of faith from various times and places as "reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do" in the words of our ordination vows. We recognize the authority of these particular confessions, but the greater point is that our tradition compels us to confess our faith in various contexts. These confessions guide our faith at their writing, add to the tradition of faithful interpretation of Scripture, and offer guidance to the listening church in the future. The discipline of confessing the faith will help preserve us for another 500 years.

Now let's return to the Westminster Directory of 1645, which provided the basis of American Presbyterian worship. Like our Scottish forebears, we were reluctant to bind our liturgy to specific texts. Rather, it has been our practice to offer form and encourage freedom. Even within our *Book of Common Worship*, which does have complete liturgical texts, there is also always a sample outline that can be adapted in particular contexts.

Our newly adopted “Directory for Worship” is essentially a revision of the 1984 Directory, but with some important additions. As does the *Book of Confessions*, the new *Directory* reflects our theological conviction regarding the contextual expression of our faith. It makes this clear in the new section on culture: “Christian worship is contextual—emerging from a particular community and incorporating the words, images, symbols, and actions that best convey the good news of Jesus Christ in that gathering of God’s people.”<sup>1</sup>

The concern among reforming liturgists 500 years ago was to educate the faithful in the distinct understanding of Christian doctrine represented by the evolving branches of the Reformation. Among the particular expressions of reform were the authority of Scripture and its relationship to tradition, the purpose of preaching, and the correct understanding of the sacraments to which we turn next. The reformers were not aware of “culture”—their culture was Christian, at least in the nominal sense. Thus they did not consider matters of culture, either the influence of culture upon them or how to maximize the impact they have upon culture.

Since then we have become hypersensitive to the diversity of cultures. We now realize how Christian worship evolved within and reflected particular cultures, and how sometimes we let culture so influence us that we lost our way. On the other hand, we are also better equipped to discern how to bear faithful and effective Christian witness within different cultures. This awareness, reflected in our *Book of Confessions* and the “Directory for Worship” in the *Book of Order*, will be increasingly important as cultures continue to change. We see this already in our own time as we have witnessed our American culture become less Christian and more pluralistic. Just imagine how important cultural awareness will be in another 500 years!

## The Sacraments

Finally, I want to identify sacramental celebration as the third fulcrum of the Reformation that will continue in the next 500 years to move the church.

It is popular to note that the meal Jesus intended to unite his followers has done the most to keep us divided. This stigma on the body of Christ was especially noticeable during the Reformation when, it can be argued, parties formed over differences in sacramental practice.

Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* questioned the sale of indulgences which were credits awarded by the Pope towards reduced time in Purgatory. This was already an attack on the sacramental theology of the Roman Catholic Church, but was to pale in comparison to the critique he leveled in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) in which he argued for a complete overhaul of the sacramental system, including reducing the number of sacraments from seven to two.

About the same time, Zwingli flirted with rejecting infant baptism in agreement with other reformers in Zurich. However, he soon differentiated his reform initiatives by offering one of the most convincing arguments for infant baptism, namely that it is the New Testament covenantal sign parallel to Old Testament circumcision. Those who held to believers’ or adult baptism only would become known as the Anabaptists, that is, those who re-baptized people who had been previously baptized as infants.

Later, when Luther and Zwingli were brought together to create a unified reformation, they agreed on everything except the Lord’s Supper. From that point on the Lutheran and Reformed branches would proceed separately.

1. *Book of Order*, “Directory for Worship,” Part III of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2015) W-1.0304.

Sacramental theology has never been easy for the church. There is evidence of tension from the very beginning surrounding the rites of the Christian community. For example, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is reported to have baptized others, but later it is clarified that it was actually his disciples who baptized. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is relieved he didn't contribute to the community's discord by participating in too many baptisms. In Acts, there is confusion about the relationships among water baptism, Spirit baptism, and the laying on of hands.

In the fourth century, Augustine articulated some of his most significant theological positions in debates over baptism. Different understandings of the sacraments were part of the split between the Western and Eastern Churches in the eleventh century, and alternative sacramental practice characterized all reform initiatives prior to the Reformation. Luther debated with himself whether confession was a sacrament, Calvin could argue that ordination was a sacrament, and Martin Bucer (1491–1551) elevated confirmation to just shy of a sacrament.

Sacramental celebration is the nexus of the first two fulcrums—liturgy and theology. Whether it is because the New Testament commends baptism and the Lord's Supper, or because we have a God-given need to ritualize faith, sacramental celebration will accompany the church through whatever the future holds.

The history of the church to this point notwithstanding, the momentum of recent theological conversations suggests a future with greater shared sacramental ministry. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Formula of Agreement recognizing full communion between Reformed and Lutheran churches in America. In 2009, we Presbyterians were the first to sign on to a mutual recognition of baptism between Reformed and Roman Catholic churches in the United States. And as study and dialogue continue, we can anticipate greater convergence in the future.

These arguments that divided the church and prohibited sacramental fellowship at the time of the Reformation were important for the clarity they brought to our understanding of God's saving grace. They gave us the capacity to conceive of God's work in the world in fresh ways. And they forced us to take a wider view of God's presence in the priesthood of all believers, in adult formation of disciples, and in the writings of the ancient church.

All these developments in Christian thinking occurred in the context of discerning the theological and practical value of sacramental celebration. They also divided the members of Christ's Body from one another and often resulted in violence. If over the next 500 years, we can deepen our appreciation of the complementary nature of diverse sacramental thought and practice, the Reformation of the church will have come closer to its culmination as the body of Christ in him who is its head.

## **Conclusion**

And if we are still around in 500 years, whatever forms it takes, the church will still be a gathering of people around God's Word in worship and confession of faith, and thus will still be characterized by liturgy, theology, and sacramental celebration. We Presbyterians in the Reformed tradition have a method of existing in the world that can facilitate the enduring faithfulness of the church—a faithfulness first to God in terms of fidelity to the faith we have received (the tradition) and devotion to the God therein revealed, and faithfulness second to the world in which we live and proclaim this faith. This twin understanding of faithfulness is what it means to be the church reformed and reforming. And we Presbyterians have been practicing such reform for 500 years. May God continue to bless us and the church universal through our witness.

## Three Fulcrums for Reform

### Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel, Charles Wiley, and Alicia Demartra-Pressley

1. The author identifies worship streams in Roman Catholic tradition with its emphasis on the mass, the Lutheran tradition and its emphasis on simple sanctuary and scripture, and the Reformed tradition with its emphasis on the Psalms and taking communion weekly. How have you seen these - and other - streams of worship in congregations you have been a part of? What has changed? What has stayed the same?
2. Trinidad lifts up the rhythm of grace and gratitude in *Glory to God* (for example, the first paragraph on page three). Where do you see this pattern of God's actions and our faithful response:
  - a. in scripture?
  - b. In your congregation's life?
  - c. In your life?
3. Trinidad believes that one of the marks of the church in the next 500 years will be the possible healing of divisions over the sacraments. In which diverse sacramental practices have you participated? How have these diverse sacramental practices influenced you? When it comes to the sacraments, how might we heal divisions?
4. The author also believes that one of the marks of the church in the next 500 years will be deepened sacramental practices. How do you see this as important to the life of your congregation? Your individual spiritual growth and formation?
5. One of the developments in the Reformed tradition that Trinidad observes is that we have become much more sensitized to the importance of cultural differences for fully living and understanding the Word of God. Using particular examples if you wish, how does this help us to discern more faithful witness to Christ
  - a. In liturgy?
  - b. In theology?
  - c. In sacramental celebration?