

MY REPERTOIRE: HYMNS FOR THE STRENGTHENING OF OUR FAITH

6. “The Church’s One Foundation”

1 Corinthians 3:1-15

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet

October 29, 2017 - Reformation Sunday

In large measure, the Protestant Reformation, the 500th anniversary of which we are commemorating all day today, was a re-booting of the nature and practice of the church. Despite his 95 articles or “theses” of protest objecting to some of the actions of the Roman Catholic church of his day, Martin Luther almost surely did not mean to effect a breakaway from that church. He was hoping for a public conversation about his points of disagreement and hoped adjustments would be made in the church’s life where consensus deemed it warranted. But a slew of ex-communications of protesters by that church, of which Luther himself was a notable example, led to the formation of what in time became the Protestant Church.

The Protestant Reformation opened up scripture and liturgy to the masses of people instead of maintaining them as the provenance of clergy only. The Reformation emphasized that sovereignty belongs to God and not to the church. The Reformation spawned within the new church a doctrine of the priesthood of all believers asserting that people do not need a priest or minister to intercede to God on their behalf but that the cries, prayers, and care of the people for themselves and one another are valid and efficacious, too. The Protestant Reformation ignited a vast cultural and intellectual flowering and flourishing. It influenced social, political, and economic systems for centuries and even into the present day. The Protestant Reformation stated unequivocally that for Christians salvation comes to us by God’s grace alone through faith and not by our own works or merit.

Both for church and world, the Protestant Reformation is one of the pivotal historical events of the last five hundred years. At this afternoon’s service, four pastors from the presbytery each briefly will tell how the Protestant Reformation and the Reformed tradition growing out of it

have influenced, informed, and instructed their lives. You also may come to a greater appreciation of how they have done the same for you.

Our featured Reformation Sunday hymn from my limited repertoire is a manifesto of sorts for the church. It came into being after a nineteenth century South African Anglican bishop named John William Colenso authored a controversial book that many found heretical about scripture and various facets of the Christian faith. Bishop Robert Gray, also in South Africa, penned a spirited response in opposition to Colenso's claims and, in turn, his polemic inspired the Reverend Samuel J. Stone of Windsor, England to write the text of the hymn he titled "The Church's One Foundation." Stone alluded to the controversy within the hymn itself when he wrote about the church that is too frequently "*by schisms rent asunder*" and "*by heresies distressed.*"

The church throughout its long and winding life indeed has suffered its share of schisms and heresies. Heresies sometimes prompt examination and revision of orthodox interpretations of scripture and creed. Schisms sometimes arise as bold and faithful witnesses to peace and justice when the established church demurs. But most heresies and schisms arise from pride and hubris that caused the Reverend Stone to write of them, perhaps with a touch of gallows humor, "*yet saints their watch are keeping; their cry goes up: 'How long? ...'*" Overall, however, the hymn is a paean of praise for the church of Jesus Christ and, even with the church's imperfections, the hymnwriter echoed scripture in according the church the elevated status of being called the bride of Christ.

The central affirmation that headlines our hymn is that "*the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.*" That is the great non-negotiable of the church. In our reading today in 1 Corinthians, Paul insists the church has only one sure and true foundation. We must take care, Paul goes on to say, to build on that one foundation that is Christ Jesus. Another popular hymn says it this way: "*On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.*"¹ And Jesus himself claimed that "*(e)veryone who hears my words and does them will be like a wise person who builds his or her house on rock...but everyone who hears my words and does not do them will be like a foolish person who builds his or her house on sand.*"²

Paradoxically, in Paul's metaphor we are workers with God in building the church and at the same time we are being worked on by God. We are simultaneously builders of the church and the church that is being built. As we work to build the church of Jesus Christ, we become the materials the Master Builder uses to bring his work to fruition.

¹ Text from the hymn "Our Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," Edward Mote.

² Matthew 7:24,26

But Jesus Christ is the church's singular foundation. The church is built on Christ and not on our own intellect or savvy, not our own clever machinations and maneuverings, not our own reasoning or rationality, not on conventional wisdom, not on punditry or polls, not on political rhetoric or relevance. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord on which its life and ministry and thus also our lives are built.

Stone goes on to write of the church that it is "*elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth/her charter of salvation (is) one Lord, one faith, one birth...*" The Christian church is not a national church. It is not a state church. We are not Americans who happen to be Christians. We are Christians who by accident of birth or choice are Americans. Our Christian faith is our primary identifier. There also are Palestinian Christians and Argentinian Christians and Syrian Christians and Iraqi Christians. The church crosses national boundaries and barriers. It is our union in Christ that bestows our unity with other members of the church regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or geography.

Our unity with other Christians is neither aided nor shaded by our national alliances or political posturings. Our unity is in Christ. What if all Christians no matter where they live refuse at the least to make war on other Christians? There is a pathway to peace! What if every Christian prays for those who are labeled as our enemy? Another pathway to peace! No matter where in the world one lives, Christians find union and unity in our "one Lord, one faith, and one birth," in our baptism into Jesus Christ.

"One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food/and to one hope she presses with every grace endued." The church lives to bless the Lord. Not in words only, of course, but in its mission to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly; in its mission to welcome strangers, defend the dignity of all persons and peoples, and to cherish earth and sky and sea. So many of the psalms, the prayerbook of the Bible first for Jews and then later Christians also, begin, "*Bless the Lord, O my soul, bless the Lord with all that is in me.*"

To "bless" in this context according to the original Hebrew word means to walk on the right road, to follow faithfully the one being blessed, to give one's whole self to the blessed one. The church lives to bless the Lord who in turn nourishes us with all we need to live a blessed or holy life. That sufficiency is given voice in the opening words of Psalm 23 - "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*" - and tangibly is seen best in the meal offered at the Table of the Lord. Christ feeds us with himself, with provision of holy food and presence, with daily bread, with everything we need to press on in the Lord's service. Most notably, we are endued and endowed with every grace the Lord can bestow. We live by grace through faith.

“Mid toil and tribulation...she waits the consummation of peace forevermore...” The church is not above nor is it removed from the fray and fracture of life. Rick Ufford-Chase, a former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) who will be our preacher here in three weeks, has written in his recently released book: *“There is no greater calling than to live faithfully in challenging times. Most of the Bible stories we remember about the people of God are the stories of those who have overcome their fear and followed God into a new (way of living and relating).”*³

To live faithfully in these times means calling into question the dominant values of the Empire all around us and confessing and curtailing the provisions of privilege that prop up our own lives at the expense of others. It means allowing the good news of the gospel of Jesus to unseat in us the fake news and faux claims of individualism, nationalism, racism, and late capitalism⁴ that create what St. Paul calls *“the dividing walls of hostility.”*⁵

The kingdom of God in the way the New Testament talks about it arrived with Jesus. It is a reality. It is present. It is here and now. Yet, we do not yet see its full manifestation. We still await, to use Stone’s lyrical imagery, *“the consummation of peace forevermore.”* It is an active waiting, though, as the church engages and lives out the teachings of Christ. Peace is the gift of Christ. It is given and sure but the fullness of it is yet to be fully experienced. To do the things that make for peace is the calling of the church. Peacemaking is the believer’s calling. Thus, as important as the first five hundred years of the Protestant Reformation have been, what is most important for us is the living of *these* days with courageous faith, audacious hope, and ubiquitous love.

Stone continues: “Till with the vision glorious, her (the church’s) longing eyes are blessed...” Keeping always before us Christ’s vision of a world that works for everyone blesses the church as it works in the world. The church is about much more than good people doing nice things amid polite conversation. It is about being *“the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”*⁶ It is about speaking truth to power and becoming the leaven that makes the whole world to rise⁷ to become a place where justice, dignity, and compassion for all are valued and practiced.

³ Ufford-Chase, Rick, Faithful Resistance: Gospel Visions for the Church in a Time of Empire. San Bernardino: UnShelved, 2017, p. 40.

⁴ A term denoting “the indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy.” See article by Annie Lowery, “Why the Phrase ‘Late Capitalism’ Is Suddenly Everywhere,” in May 1, 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*.

⁵ Ephesians 2:14

⁶ Matthew 5:13-16

⁷ Galatians 5:9; Matthew 13:33; 1 Corinthians 5:6

In the last stanza, Samuel Stone writes, “*The church on earth has union with God, the Three in One...*” Therein lies the church’s power and promise, that it is the bride of Christ and God’s own possession.

The church has “*mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.*” Love never ends. We have the benefit not only of the wisdom and companionship of those who share this life with us but of all who have gone before us - angels and archangels, saints and martyrs and loved ones and all the company of heaven - who still are mystically a part of our lives. Martin Luther King, Jr. is not lost to us. Not Archbishop Oscar Romero. Not Mother Teresa. Not Peter, Paul, or Mary and I am not talking about the singing group. Not parents who have loved us or children who are gone from us in this life too soon or spouses we loved for many years. The church keeps us connected with the communion of the saints who pray for us and intercede for us and love us especially when love seems to be in short supply.

The hymn ends with these good words: “*O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we, like them, the meek and lowly, may live eternally.*” Holiness always roots us in joy. Holiness as obedience to God and love for God and God’s ways is not always easy. It often is difficult to live a life of holiness in a world whose values depart from the gospel which is why Stone asks once more for the grace of God to strengthen us, forgive us, lead us, and undergird us in our discipleship.

While the world often consigns the meek and lowly to the discard pile in the world, in Christ’s eyes they lead the parade into the kingdom of heaven because God has a heart for the bruised reeds of this life and the dimly burning wicks. No doubt the kind of care we show for the vulnerable and poor of the world, those who by earthly standards are of low estate or low value, is the measure by which the gospel and God are alive in us.

The motto emanating from the earliest days of the Protestant Reformation is “a church reformed and always being reformed.” While it is a more challenging time to be the church today than it was twenty or forty or fifty years ago, God still is working on us. Following St. Paul, we are the material God is using to reform, reshape, and recast the church for these days. With diminishing membership and declining finances the dominant pattern across the church, perhaps the remaining remnant really is the leaven that can lead the church to a depth and integrity of ministry seldom seen in its long history. Maybe we will stop measuring the number of members and the number of dollars and instead put stock in how low we are able to stoop in order to lift others up, how wide we can extend our generosity, and how broad we can make our hospitality.

The church has everything it needs to be faithful. We have everything we need to effect light and hope, justice and peace in the world. The foundation on which the church is built is rock

solid. The five hundred years since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation notwithstanding, the most compelling years of the church are still to come. And we are a part of it.

The church going forward undoubtedly will not look like it has in the past. We have to relinquish the church that was. We have to let it go. But as the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord, we are being renewed and becoming more and more what God and the world need us to be.

We can break the molds. We can cast aside the tired and weary models of church that cannot work any more. We can take risks that require us to trust God and each other more than the bottom line, the stock market, and the spread sheets. We can confess our shortcomings and ask God to transform our thinking to accommodate our new social realities. We can take into account all of God's children and not just those who look and act like us. We can consider the earth our temple and honor it and not desecrate it. We can understand that worship does not end with the postlude but with our passion for ministry in the streets and schools and among the full citizenry of our city. We can rejoice that the way onward has been prepared by the God ahead of us that we may walk into it.⁸

Happy 500, heirs of Luther and Calvin and Zwingli. But the best is yet to be as God continues to rebuild, renew, and reform the church for its contemporary service to the world on its one foundation of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

⁸ Ephesians 2:10