

“Reform”

**Sermon preached by Elder Charles Youther
Kirkmont Presbyterian Church
Beavercreek, OH
March 11, 2007
Text: Romans 12:1-2
#4 in a Series of 10**

We are fond of reminding ourselves that Kirkmont is a Reformed church. What does that really mean? Most basically, it means a church that was founded during the Protestant Reformation. More accurately, though, a reformed church is one that is still based on the theology and teaching of the Magisterial Reformers—men like Luther, Calvin, and Knox.

In a very small nutshell, that would include:

- The overarching sovereignty of God—God is God and we are not.
- The fallen nature of man—the moral incapability of natural mankind to successfully earn our eternal salvation. Or, for that matter, to do anything purely righteous and meritorious before God.
- The abounding grace of God and the Redemptive Covenant of the Godhead. This latter refers to the idea that, before the creation of the world, God covenanted with Himself to redeem for Himself a people—a remnant of His creation—the Church—us.

Historically, the reformed tradition has recognized that the Protestant Reformation was not an event in time; rather, it is an ongoing process. The motto of the Reformed Church is *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*—The church reformed, always reforming, or, probably a better rendering, always in need of reforming—according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

Why this constant need to keep reforming? Our denominational constitution tells us why: The church, like everything else we do, is affected by the inescapable human tendency to idolatry and tyranny. Left to our own devices, we tend to both make gods after our own image and try to play god ourselves. Since the Garden, our repeated goal is to “be like God,” be in charge rather than letting God be in charge. Historically, then, we have seen the doctrine and practice of the church over time trend to a state that diminishes God and aggrandizes us. This state led to the first great Reformation in the 16th Century.

The same problem persists today. Ongoing reformation, therefore, is essential to ensure that the church is constantly being brought back to the Apostolic, Scriptural teachings and that human errors are weeded out and corrected.

Today, I hope to briefly look at how this imperative to continually reform works itself out for us at three different levels. Firstly, in the “big” church—in our case, our denomination—the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, better known by its rather unfortunate acronym, PC (USA). Secondly, in the local church—what the Reformers called the church particular—in our case Kirkmont. Finally, in me. And you, too, but I’m more familiar with my state than with yours, so I’ll talk essentially about me. As the final division of the church, I, myself, am guilty of the ravages of both a very human tyranny and a very human idolatry and stand always in need of constant and complete personal reform.

First, then, the reform of our denomination. The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, our denomination, is a seriously ill organization. It is hemorrhaging members—over a million losses in the last generation. Over the last fifty years or so, it has lost much of its theological and moral footing. As examples of this, elements of the church deny the most essential truths of the faith and the Scriptures, some even denying the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Others in the denomination are actively promoting sexual chaos in society and in the church, with special emphasis on advancing the gay social agenda. Others are attempting to convert the church into a sectarian political body in order to pursue their personal social agenda. Still others are actively attempting to persuade whole segments of the denomination to forsake their vows and promises and to desert and dismember the denomination.

Because of these and other problems, PC (USA) is rapidly losing its financial basis for operation. A key item of business at last year's General Assembly (the biennial meeting of our highest governing body) was deciding how much of a budget cut we needed to make over the next two years—what staff and ministries would need to go if we were to make payroll.

In another generation, if something isn't changed, PC (USA) will not exist in anything resembling the form it has today, if it still exists at all. Truly, this is an organization in desperate need of reform. We need a reassertion of our historical and Biblical beliefs. We need a revival in the leadership at the national level, by whatever means proves necessary. We need a restoration of discipline within our member bodies.

Kirkmont has, for many years, played a meaningful role in reforming our denomination. We were one of the originating churches of the constitutional change that strengthened and clarified ordination standards, ensuring that those called to leadership in the church maintained historical and Biblical personal moral standards. This last year, we provided significant input to the General Assembly action that retained what is essentially a strong pro-life position for the denomination. (By the way—never believe what you see in the media—our denominational policy condemns abortion and upholds the sanctity of human life. If you doubt that, you need to read the official policy rather than the newspapers.)

On a more local level, we have taken a leadership role in the Miami Presbytery—our regional governing body—as it attempts to define a radically reformed and streamlined structure and form of government. I understand that the new organizational structure which has been developed and promoted by the more evangelical and renewal-minded churches was passed by the Presbytery only yesterday.

Kirkmont has been active, and we must remain active if our denomination, both locally and nationally, is to be reformed according, to quote our constitution, to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. Remember—our call with respect to the greater church is for reformation, not exodus. Reformation is a long and tedious process—but we must not grow weary of doing good, we must persevere or the church of Calvin and Knox will not survive in America.

If we are to be successful in helping to reform the greater church, we must ensure that we continue to reform our own church, Kirkmont. I can testify that Kirkmont is a good example of our ancient motto—we have been, throughout the 20-odd years that Pat and I have been here, always reforming, while always in need of reform. Kirkmont today is not the church we joined in the 1980's—it isn't even the same church that Eric inherited some four short years ago.

In general, we are currently healthier than we have been for most of the last 20 years by almost any measure you would want to use. We are stronger theologically, we have more people involved in Bible studies, we have new and vital outreach and discipleship ministries, and, to me

the best measure of all, we have more little people here Sunday mornings than any time in recent memory. Don't you just love seeing them swarming up here for the Children's Sermon?

We have a unique opportunity now for further growth and radical reformation—leadership change, while often disruptive, always brings with it opportunity. I believe, with our current Pastor Nominating Committee, we are positioned to make effective use of that opportunity.

If you haven't seen the Church Information Form they prepared, let me encourage you to do so—I cannot say enough good about it. It truly captures the spirit of this body of believers. Here is an excerpt from it:

The Congregation of Kirkmont Presbyterian Church confesses these truths:

Kirkmont is a reformed church believing the Holy Bible is infallible, God breathed and useful for doctrine and all training.

We believe the Book of Confessions is a valid expression of Christianity. We believe the Five Solas of the Reformation are valid expressions of truth.

We believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one eternal Being.

We believe Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. All have sinned and only through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, His atonement and His bodily Resurrection, may we find grace, salvation, eternal life and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. There is no other name given to humanity by which we must be saved.

We believe that the intimate relationship that God desires necessitates knowledge and obedient application of His Word.

Earlier we looked at Romans 12:2—let's go back and look at 12:1. "Bodies" here is plural—it refers to all of us, the whole congregation of believers—but sacrifice is singular—it refers to our corporate action to achieve a singular goal—spiritual service to God. The Revised Standard Version of the New Testament renders that "reasonable service," and that is probably a better rendering than the NIV's. It captures the real intention better.

We, Kirkmont, the people who make up this church, must work together to achieve the continuous reform of this, our local church. In order to do that, though, we have to each do the harder part—we have to continually reform each of us. Reforming the church is hard—reforming me is infinitely harder—so hard, in fact, that I simply cannot do it by myself.

Let's briefly look at Romans 3:23 again: All have sinned and fall short of achieving the glory. But what is the context of this well-known quotation? Romans 3:21-22 provides the context. This passage isn't bad news; it isn't about the lost—it's about the found—you and, thank God, me. This passage, key to our Reformed understanding of the Gospel, tells us that the

righteousness of God comes to us by faith, for it is those who believe and have received the benefits of God's righteousness that Paul then reminds of their natural state—Jew and Greek, you and me, all alike in that we are, by our very natures, sinners, helpless but for the grace of God, poured out in satisfaction of His own covenant of redemption. It is these believing sinners who are then freely justified by His grace through Christ, our Savior.

But this isn't the end of the transaction—we are not simply saved in order to sit around and wait on the last days. We are saved to do something! Jesus did not command us to go forward once in our lives during an altar call—He commanded us to take up our crosses daily—each and every day—and to follow Him.

Returning to our key verse—Romans 12:2—Paul reminds us that we have received this grace in order to do something. We are no longer to conform to the mold of this world—the language here literally refers to wet clay being forced into a mold in order to make an image—an icon—of the mold. The word picture here is of someone who is just fitting in to the social, religious, and political structure forced on him by the prevailing culture. We, on the other hand, are to become something new and different.

The word rendered here as “transformed” is the word that has been transliterated into English as metamorphosis—the term we use in describing the change of a caterpillar into a butterfly. It means, literally, to take on another form—to be re-formed from what we were (wet clay in the culture's mold) into something new and different—cross bearers following Christ.

What, then, can we say? We have been redeemed for reformation—we are to become something new. God has commanded our personal reformation that we may present ourselves individually and corporately, as sacrifices in service to Him, daily bearing our crosses and daily following Him, in complete assurance that His grace will accompany us on our walk. And, finally, that God has every right to require this of us, since we are not our own; rather, we were bought at a price and paid for with the sacrifice, the very blood of Christ, in fulfillment of that original covenant—we are the remnant people God promised Himself in the beginning. A remnant He has redeemed for His good pleasure.

To sum this up, then: Our denomination needs to be reformed. It will take our individual churches to do this. Our individual churches need reformed. It will take you and me to do that. You and I need to be reformed. It takes God to do that.