

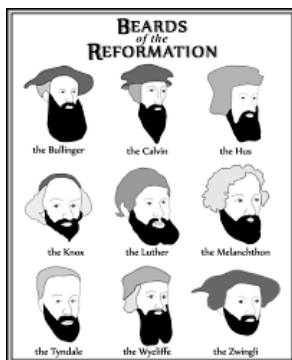


I want to admit to you all
that I have always loved plaid.
Even before I knew there was a thing
called a kilt,
I loved plaid.

And I have always loved fall
and cooler weather—
because well,
jacket season.

As a kid, we were not allowed
to celebrate Halloween
but our church and school
—which were one in the same
when I was in elementary school—
did celebrate reformation day.

We were encouraged to dress up as Bible characters,
though I don't remember anyone dressing up
as Martin Luther, John Knox,
John Calvin or Ulrich Zwingli
—all famous reformers.



And like many of us,
each year when we celebrate Reformation Sunday
I look forward to the plaids,
the tartans, the music, the bagpipes.
I look forward to naming aloud
our loved ones who have died in the past year
which brings to our minds and hearts
all sorts of saints.

I look forward to the particulars of our specific
tradition and heritage as Presbyterians
(So today is a good day to have shortbread cookies)
and I'm reminded how thankful I am
for being a confessional church
in the Reformed tradition.

Now, in case you are wondering
if my saying we are a *confessional church*
hinges on saying *a confession*
every week in worship,
the answer is,
no.



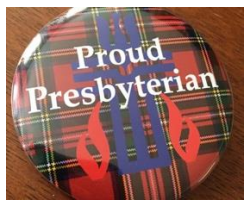
In fact, what is meant
by being the confessional church
is that for centuries the Church, (big C Church)
has sought to ground herself
in the authority of scripture
AND, and,
the understanding of our calling
to interpret those scriptures
with divine guidance.
Reformed believers don't read the Bible blindly,
but with a keen sense of mystery,
an ever-evolving understanding
of God's work in the world

and willingness to discover God in both
traditional and the progressive.
In interpreting the scriptures together
we bring the Word of God
into our life of faith
and *confess* how the Spirit of God is moving,
working and reforming
the very essence of the church in the world.

This is what it means to be confessional.

When what is read and studied in Scripture
seems to speak to the particular moment,
offering guidance or even rebuttal,
a confession is often penned.
Many of the written confessions
throughout the Church's history
have guided the worship, governance, and discipleship
of believers within the lives of denominations.

Think of the Westminster Confession of Faith,
many of you likely studied the shorter catechism
that comes from that confession.
Reformed churches often have adopted the same creeds,
like the Nicene and the Apostle's Creed.



And many churches, like ours,
have particular creeds and confessions,
like the Scots' Confession
and Brief Statement of Faith,
that bring out the specific tradition
and heritage of denominations.

We are decidedly
a people of the Book
and we love words, liturgies, and stories.

The real beauty, gift, and challenge
of the reformed tradition
is in its very character:
to be the church reformed
and always being reformed then,
is to be the church that understands
that within its DNA
is the impulse and invitation
to discern when it is time to reevaluate.

Discerning when to rearrange
harmful systemic religious structures,
when to amend harmful ecclesial policies,
and when to renounce and reverse violent idolatrous ideals.
Sounds a bit heady doesn't?

Simply put,
the Reformed tradition of the confessional church,
is to change and adapt
and allow ourselves
to submit to the wild and untamed
fiery urging of the Holy Spirit.
Sounds a bit daring doesn't?

Many of us today
don't want to be tied down to a label.
We don't want to be put into a box.
But to be a labeled and identified
as belonging to the Reformed tradition
is to be a Christian tied intimately
to the Spirit of God—
that ever dynamic energy of God;
that existence and very real presence of Christ's love
as continued witnesses
in and for the world.



This morning, on Reformation Sunday,
we find ourselves 504 years from October 31, 1517.
It has been over 500 years
since the church was profoundly changed
—which means that for over 500 years
the church has promised
that she is willing be reformed
again, and again
for the work of God in the world.

What quincennial
—that’s 500 years in fancy talk—
it has been.

You have heard Whit and I preach
that church historian Phyllis Tickle
said that every 500 years or so
the church goes through a giant rummage sale,
deciding what to keep
and what to do away with.

Of course, it is no surprise
that the past year and half
has sped up that purging process.
I wonder in what ways do you see
that need for reform in the Church?
Really and truly,
in what ways might we,
together as a community,
discern where the Spirit is calling and urging
for us to be reformed
after such a global upset in our lives?

Because there are always things to get rid of.



John Bates told me a story years ago
of a Presbyterian pastor
beginning his first call to a church.
This young minister followed an old pastor
who'd been at the church for 100yrs
and he was nervous
about his first Sunday communion.

After worship, he felt good
and everyone was polite
and told him it was a great service
until Mrs. Cranford—you know her—
she knows everything
because she was there
when Moses gave the 10 commandments
and she told the young preacher,

“Well not too bad. But you forgot to touch the radiator.”

The pastor, obviously confused, asked her what she meant.

*“Well pastor, Rev. Jones before you
always touched the radiator before communion.
You forgot to touch the radiator.”*

Confused, the new pastor called Rev. Jones

Monday morning

and asks about the radiator.

Rev. Jones laughs and tells him,

*“It's that doggone carpet son!
It is such high pile carpet
that if I didn't touch the radiator
I would get shocked
when I picked up the plates*

and drop them.”

Isn't that great?

It's just a funny reminder
that just because “we've always done it that way”
doesn't mean there's not room for improvement.

Change is a necessary part of being alive.

As the body of Christ
for this place and time,
part of our identity and heritage
is let the Spirit reform us.

This doesn't mean that newer is always better either.

Being part of the reformed tradition

means that for many, many years
we have been doing things
that work and are life giving
for the church and God's people.

Our Reformed identity means
our church is willing to take a hard introspective look
and be an agent of change if necessary.

But I do want us to pat ourselves on the back

because I think our church
has done a really good job of listening to the Spirit.

I think in the past year and half
we have excelled at pivoting;
changing direction;
of adapting quickly out of need and necessity.

Which is to say that our leadership has been great,
and our willingness as a congregation

to meaningfully engage our faith,
our community and ourselves
in a new way has been amazing.

It has been glorious in fact.

Our scripture this morning comes to us
from the second letter to the church in Corinth.
Paul, writing again to this congregation
emphasizes how their congregation
makes a direct impact
on the community around them.

Listen to these words
as though he writes them to you,
FPC Hickory,
all these years later.

²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts,
to be known and read by all;
³and you show that you are a letter of Christ,
prepared by us,
written not with ink
but with the Spirit of the living God,
not on tablets of stone
but on tablets of human hearts.”



You are the letter!
You are the witness of Christ
written, not in ink,
but with the Spirit of the living God.
You!
You are that!
You are incredible!

God uses you
to write the story of God
using the ink of the Spirit.
Written on the heart which last longer than stone.
Isn't that amazing?
Aren't you glad
to be caught up in something
that has been going on for thousands of years?
And because you are incredible

at this whole being a witness thing,
Paul goes on to tell us what job we have.

⁴Such is the confidence
that we have through Christ toward God.
⁵Not that we are competent of ourselves
to claim anything as coming from us;
our competence is from God,
⁶who has made us competent
to be ministers of a new covenant,
not of letter but of spirit;
for the letter kills,
but the Spirit gives life.

Here, is a hint at the reformed motto,
that it is the Spirit's work
that reformed us
and gives us the power and faith
to submit to that continued reforming even now.

It isn't our job to reform ourselves
but to trust the nudges and pulls;
to trust the challenges and struggles
that point to the Spirit's reforming us
—to trust that all the stuff we deal with
by being in faithful community
is done to the glory of God.

Being Reformed isn't easy.

It isn't easy to be changed.

But the beautiful thing about change
that comes from God

is that it usually, almost, always (!)
is for our good.

And when it comes to our lives and what the Spirit can do,
the broadening and awakening
that can happen has no bounds.

A faith that is open to reshaping and reforming
has endless opportunities to encounter God anew.

Paul reminds the church in Corinth
that when Moses returned
from having met the Almighty,
he had to wear a veil.

But in Christ, he says,

¹⁶but when one turns to the Lord,
the veil is removed.

¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit,
and where the Spirit of the Lord is,
there is *freedom*.

¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces,
seeing the glory of the Lord
as though reflected in a mirror,
are being transformed
into the same image
from one degree of glory to another;
for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.



There is an old Jewish proverb that says,

“Before every person
there marches an angel proclaiming,
‘Behold, the image of God.’”¹

Paul says, all of us with unveiled faces
see the glory of God
as though reflected in mirror.

Every time we look in the mirror,
every time we look someone in the eye,
we are seeing the reflection of the divine Lord
—and all of us are being transformed
(We are being reformed)
into that divine image.

¹ <https://cac.org/being-gods-somebody-2021-10-29/>

One degree of glory at a time.

That is beautiful.
That is gospel.
That is the word of the Lord,
thanks be to God.

I believe that anything done in the name of Christ,
anything the church does
with scriptural, prayerful discernment,
anything that we are compelled
by the Spirit to do,
to change,
to struggle at,
to contend with as it bumps up against our culture
—anything done by the reforming of the Spirit
reforms us—it allows us
to become better Christians;
better witnesses to the world
to whom this transforming God is
and what God is up to.

Any small or big thing done in this way
changes us to be
more and more glorious.



Embolden by the Spirit to be reformed
changes us just one to degree more toward glory.
Just one degree at a time,
one tiny spark
that gets added to another spark
and another,
will create this fire
where the church is alive
and thriving in new, fresh ways.

Bishop Michael Curry says,
everybody is God's somebody.²

Every one of us somebodies
gets to be changed
one degree more toward glory.

And all those saints
who have already gone before us
that great cloud of witnesses
—they look radiant,
they look free
and they look glorious.

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.

The Church reformed
and always being reformed.
Amen.

Closing Prayer

Friends this closing prayer comes from
the early days of the Reformation in, 1539...
let us pray...

Lord God, heavenly Father,
we most heartily thank you
that by your Word
you have brought us out of the darkness of error
into the light of your grace.
Mercifully help us to walk in that light,
guard us from all error and false doctrine
and grant that we may not become ungrateful
and despise and persecute your Word,
as your people did long ago,
but receive it with all our heart,
govern our lives according to it
and put all our trust in your grace
through the merit of your dear Son,

² <https://cac.org/being-gods-somebody-2021-10-29/> taken from Bishop Michael Curry's, Love Is the Way

Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one true God, now and forever.

Benediction:

“We ask ourselves,
who am I to be brilliant,
gorgeous, talented,
fabulous?

 Actually, who are you not to be?
 You are a child of God
 ...we are all meant to shine,
 as children do.

We were born to make manifest
the glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us,
it's in everyone.”

+Marianne Williamson