

Have you ever had to reshape or reform something because it just wasn't right? Like cutting a piece of plywood and finding out it didn't quite fit, or maybe having to throw something back in the washer to get the wrinkles out? Such a thing happened hundreds of years ago when it was time to reshape practices of the Christian church. We all know when it is time to fix, replace, or reshape!

For 300 years after the resurrection of Jesus, faithful followers were content to read Scripture, pray daily, gather for worship around hymns, prayers, and communion, and live lives that were in keeping with Jesus' servant love. Over the next 1200 years succeeding generations sought to institutionalize and over-explain what Jesus had left to accept by faith. Gradually concentration of power in Rome and the authority of the Pope became a concern. Many priests couldn't or wouldn't read scripture and so their teachings were guided only by their own decisions. Practices such as the sale of forgiveness raised a lot of money for the church but left a sour taste for true Christians.

Things had gotten so off track that Martin Luther and other reformers undertook a reshaping of the Church that still resonates today. This came about after he read, for the first time, the Bible. To us it seems inconceivable this was not the key to faith, but traditions and the dictates of popes and councils had replaced Scripture as the basis for faith. Luther's courageous stand began a reforming of the Church that leads us to this day.

In Romans, St. Paul clearly reminds us of the daily tension between our broken responses to God's forming us in his image, and the shape of our living that conforms more to the world's desires than the call of Baptism.

Rather than faith, we want proof. Rather than hope, we want clarity. Rather than trust in the God we cannot see we prefer ideas and practices that make us comfortable. The church gradually morphed into a new form that looked nothing like the community of believers Jesus gathered together.

Jesus had built a community through his examples of washing feet, healing the sick, and preaching the law of Christian love. This was the shape he called his Church to embrace, but over many centuries human hands and wisdom created structures, institutions, and traditions more important than love.

Luther grew up in that system. As he read the Gospels and the book of Romans, he came across words and ideas he had never heard from any priest or teacher. He was moved to challenge the status quo and initiate discussions that would hopefully return Christ's church to its scriptural roots.

There is a wonderful image in the beginning of Genesis as God, the Creator, touched the dust of the earth, molded a handful of clay, and breathed his breath of life into mankind. This is a theological statement of God's creative gift of life and a reminder that we were created in God's image.

Too often well-meaning people of faith have reshaped what we call the Church into forms and images that don't look at all like God. By Luther's day, the simple gift of the Gospel, which

radically changed the world had been reshaped by human hands. The earthly needs and judgments of men and women had become more important than the foot washing love of Jesus. Luther and others were inspired to risk everything to simply trust God's word, rather than ideas of men, to reform our relationship with God and each other.

Like a missionary on foreign soil, he came with a new language to teach an old story of God's love. Luther and other reformers discovered in Holy Scripture, many for the first time, of the graceful reshaping of life that God has been about since the beginning. And the gift of God's grace, rather than the rigidness of man's interpretation and control, became a freeing moment that returned the Church to its New Testament roots. As Christians relearned to seek God's guidance, rather than human wisdom or political expediency, a focus on God-in-the-flesh returned excitement and passion to the faithful.

In Romans, Paul reminds that the reforming, reshaping, and rebuilding our lives are called to be about has nothing to do with human hands, but with the Spirit filled touch of God who creates, restores, and renews life daily. In other words, we don't need to reinvent the wheel we call faith, we simply need to allow faith to empower us to give God glory and share his love with those around us.

Many are not aware of the many impacts of this Reformation. Luther's efforts brought about literacy in his country and created a common German language, as the Bible became the only book that many had available to them. He lifted up the role of women. He proclaimed that a shoe-maker is just as important as a priest as both are called to celebrate God's love in their vocations. Parents were reminded and helped in their role as mentors and teachers of faith for their children.

J.S. Bach was so moved by Luther's biblical roots that he changed the future of music, basing most of his efforts on biblical texts. Even the Bill of Rights in this country, and the concept of the separation of church and state was influenced by James Madison's reading of Luther's works. That is how God continues to reform his people today, and it all began with the basics of the Reformation begun in 1500. Scripture, faith, and grace alone!

In Europe, there are buildings older than our nation, which continue to serve people well. But in our country, we continue to tear down the old and build new, thinking new is better. That same progression in the Church led to the need for Reformation. Faith is an old building. Scripture is an old building. Grace is an old building. That doesn't mean they are worn out or not useful, but simply that were shared as gifts, long ago, and can continue to serve the purpose for which they were created.

What human hands shape has a shorter life span. And often what humans shape tends to mirror the human creator more than the God who has created the human.

We are the Church only because of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. God's grace continues to reform a rebellious creation as he breathes into us his breath of life. There is nothing we can do to remake creation or earn salvation, but because we are in God's hands, he does that for us.

Remember, we are not sinners to be crushed in the hands of angry God but children being loved and reshaped by the hands of a loving God. Our hope is not in human hands but those hands and feet that were stretched out on a cross only to escape the confines of a tomb!

Our call is to remember our biblical roots, daily accept the grace of forgiveness, and reform our living to better share the foot washing, holy love of Jesus. Not only is that a loving way to thank God, but through our living, God might even touch the lives of others. We don't need to build or protect the Church but simply become the Church!