

To Make a Difference, Revelation 3:14-22

Elgin, Reformation Sunday 2016

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Introduction

Throughout 2016 we have learned that the Bible knew ahead of time the kinds of problems that would come up in churches, and the ways to solve them. The capstone of this theme is the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, and today the seventh letter wraps it up.

The problem with the Church in Laodicea is that it had neither a refreshing spirit nor a cleansing spirit. Jesus describes this problem by referring to Laodicea's water. Archaeologists have discovered that the closest water supply was full of lime deposits, so Laodicea channeled water from another source using aqueducts. When the water reached the city it was tepid; it tasted bad for drinking, but it was not warm enough for bathing. So, when a church is neither a source for the water of life, nor a place where sins are washed away, then whatever else it might be doing, that Church is not making a difference in people's lives for salvation and redemption. Such a Church is a bad witness to the refreshing, cleansing life that comes in the presence and power of Christ's Spirit. Jesus' patience has its limits. Either that church repents and reforms, or he will spit it out of his mouth like bad-tasting water.

There is no better Sunday than when we honor the Reformation to engage this text. The Church needs continual reformation, because as we promote order and stability, there is a tendency to divert God's Spirit down *so* many channels -- call them the aqueducts of our traditions and programs and committees -- that by the time people are engaged by the ministry what they take away is tepid, luke-warm, neither refreshing to their spirits nor convicting and cleansing them of sin. Let us pray:

Father God, we are humbled to be heirs with Christ of salvation and glory. Help us by your Spirit and grace to be faithful to all that you call us to be, in Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Repent

Before this series, when we were looking at the New Testament letters from Paul and James and John about church problems and how to solve them, for the most part what we saw was the problem that people in the church were not loving each other, and the solution is to love each other more. In the seven letters to the churches other problems are described. In the letter to Laodicea Jesus points to the problem that was diverting the power and energy of the Spirit, leading to a tepid witness: The Laodicean believers had become self-satisfied and complacent. They are called to repent of that, and to own for themselves their weakness and need for God.

A text like this can tempt a preacher to go on a harangue: "Our problem is we're complacent and luke-warm and Jesus is ready to spit us out." But is that true discernment? Sweeping generalizations from many bully-pulpits have not brought about repentance and reform. The Spirit discerns and speaks the truth, rightly dividing God's word, separating joint from marrow.

I don't think that being self-satisfied describes us at Elgin Covenant: Maybe it used to, but I believe we are in a healthier place of self-understanding now. When I attend conferences, pastor's meetings, listen to Christian radio or read evangelical blogs, I do not discern that the wider evangelical movement in the United States is self-satisfied and complacent, where that might be true it is more of a problem in individuals than it is among evangelicals as a whole. I don't even discern that Laodicea's problems describe the mega-churches in our own area. Yes they are rich and seem to have everything, but consider how they take the kind of leadership we all learn from as they re-invent themselves and equip believers for redemptive ministry.

What we can take to heart is the warning that Churches lose their spiritual power when they lose their focus: This happens when believers and churches begin to take their gospel for granted and lose the sense of urgency that comes with true repentance. The first statement of the Reformation, the first argument out of 95 Arguments that Martin Luther posted on the door of Castle Church on the eve of the Festival of All Saints, was this: Repentance is the whole life of the Christian. The problem in the church in western Europe five hundred years ago, was that repentance itself, one's own sorrow for sin and felt need for God, had gotten diverted down the channels of tradition. The Church turned repentance into a program to raise money for building projects in Rome. True repentance comes from direct contact with God, but all these diversions had made that contact indirect and turned that contact sour. Lives were not refreshed, sins were not cleansed, spirits were not empowered to live in the love and grace of God.

In order to be a difference-making church for salvation and redemption –the only things that truly matter -- the call of Christ to repent needs to reach the deepest places of our hearts. When we confess our sins and our brokenness and cry out our need for God, then we begin again to live in the refreshing, cleansing power of the Holy Spirit.

The loss of true repentance in the diversions of traditions and programs meant that the Church in Western Europe needed to be reformed no less urgently and completely than the church in Laodicea. We praise God that this reformation occurred. But reform, like repentance, is not a one-time event, it is an ongoing priority in the believer's life with God, and in the church's experience of God. True repentance and ongoing reform are two sides of the same coin, two facets of one work of God's Spirit. If repentance is the whole life of the Christian, reform is the whole life of the Church.

2. Reform

The key to the ongoing effectiveness of the Protestant Reformation in the things that matter, salvation and redemption, is that its adherents remember that reforming begins with repenting. Our life in God depends on our surrendered hearts, that God will not despise those who are broken and contrite, who own for ourselves that we are poor, blind and naked and in need of God's care at every turn of our lives.

Keeping repentance first is the key to any effort at reform, and reform is needed to remove the blocks and diversions that we tend to set in the way of God's Spirit. One of those diversions is that for five hundred years Protestants have simply tried to replace the worldly power of the Papal Church of the Middle Ages with ourselves. What I mean is that we have tried to dominate the public sphere just as the Catholics had been doing five hundred years ago. We have tried to do that in the mistaken belief that having a better doctrine than the Medieval Church has entitled us to replace them as peddlars of influence over nations and cultures.

Let us repent of that and re-form ourselves to a new attitude towards society and government. My hope is that we have learned by now that the repentant life cannot be diverted down the channel of politics and legalism. On the right side of politics, Protestants need to abandon the notion that court decisions are the spark of revival. Convictions are important, but when we this divert our spiritual energy into public scream-fests over politics, we leave a bad taste in the mouths of worldly people who need refreshment and hope. I say again that it spoils our testimony so that souls are turned off to the living waters of Christ, waters that refresh and that cleanse.

Protestants on the left need to own that the repentant life is directly connected to God. That connection cannot be diverted by social agendas and the unsound doctrines of human goodness and works and the worship of government; when the false hopes of a false gospel are

dashed, this leaves a bad taste in the mouths of worldly people who need, above all, to be reconciled to God. But they have no idea of their real need because the Protestants on the left don't seem to have a clue anymore that sin is real, it's a thing, and not just in systems: sin is in the soul.

Getting off that election-year soap-box, we find other places where churches have become luke-warm and need to reform. A luke-warm church might be engaged in worship but is not capable of discerning the power of God that truly surrendered hearts can unleash. A luke-warm church might be in the habit of fellowship, but cannot discern the Body of Christ in its members so it becomes a place where believers snipe at each other rather than encourage each other; the luke-warm church might be engaged with worldly people in service and on public issues as a matter of conscience, but not out of God's love for the world and for the lost, because the luke-warm church is not capable of loving the lost with the love of God.

The church becomes luke-warm when too many diversions and distractions prevent its believers from reaching out to God directly; Churches program God right out of the ministry. That was true of the church in western Europe five hundred years ago, and wherever that is true today, the Church needs reformation. The Church needs to be calling believers and unbelievers to surrender their hearts directly to God and open their lives to the refreshing, cleansing Spirit.

Elgin Covenant needs God's help be a church that is continually reforming as its people put repentance first in our lives. As our hearts unlock God's Spirit for refreshing and cleansing, we might discern that there may be structures and ways of doing things that are impeding the work of God. We already know that our constitution, for example, needs to be reformed to fix some internal contradictions. As we do we can envision flexible structures that aid the body in

moving forward. Perhaps the way in which membership, service and voting rights are defined might need to be discussed as part of our reform.

Ongoing reform is not a matter of one pastor's fiat; it is a discernment of the Body of Christ. Martin Luther did not dictate change, he opened up a conversation and he is famous for his leadership in that conversation. I want to begin a conversation among you. This week I was inspired to write up something that I hope will be the beginning of a conversation. The working title is, *Repentance is the Whole Life of the Christian: Points on the Need for a Reforming Evangelicalism*. These points are on the need for a faith grounded in repentance and the Bible, because I discern that the Protestant movement in western society needs to continue to be a reforming movement.

I will make this working draft available on the church's website and in hard-copy by next Sunday, and I offer this to you as an invitation to discuss these things with me in the adult Sunday School hour starting November 20. We can talk over as much as we get through and then come back to it the next week, until we are finished. Maybe it takes a week, maybe it takes a year. I offer this because this is how I know that I can be a faithful witness and teacher among you. I hope you will join me in this adventure of discernment and grace.

Conclusion

Throughout 2016 we have learned that most of the problems in the Church most of the time have to do with people forgetting to put love for each other first. So we have encountered the solution again and again: Love one another.

For the seven letters to the churches of Revelation if we name one problem that covers most of their issues, it would be that they were forgetting that God was greater and stronger than the world, with promises that are better and more lasting than anything the world has to offer.

The world is filled with idolatry and false faith; Christians are tempted to go along with it and pretend its okay. The world displays the human tendency to make a religion out of government, and Christians are tempted to treat government the same way. But God in Christ is revealed to be holy, and perfect in love and mercy. True faith and sound doctrine sets the Christian apart in the world as a witness for God.

True faith begins and ends with repentant hearts, with hearts that are sorry for sins, that know their own weakness, that depend on God's love, mercy, and power to bring them the refreshing, cleansing water of life. In a world that is faithless, and in a church that is forgetting its priorities and needs to reform, repentance is the key to remaining faithful and inheriting the promises of Jesus Christ for eternal life. Amen.