

Reformation

Today is Reformation Sunday. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 points of protest against the Roman church to the castle door, he fueled a Reformation in the church that has been going on ever since. The Reformation continuously asks the church important questions – what is our foundation? What is our mission? How should the church impact the everyday lives of people?

And honestly, that includes the question, how should the church impact the political lives of people? Because you simply can't separate the reformation of the church from the reformation of government and society.

In Luther's day, the church scared people so much about purgatory and hell that they would eagerly pay for salvation. But underneath that scheme was the church's need for money to build St. Peter's basilica. And separation of church and state wasn't a thing - the pope had enormous power in the political structures of the time.

Honestly, when you read reformation history alongside this story about King Rehoboam, you realize that rulers who take advantage of people for their own gain are nothing new.

People will often say that politics and religion should be kept separate...that politics doesn't belong in the church.

The problem is that in order to make them completely separate, you really can't talk authentically about the Bible or any church history. If you've ever been to a museum in Europe, you likely realized that almost all the political history you are reading about is also church history.

In fact, the religious and political structures were so intertwined during most of human history that you simply can't talk about one without the other.

But how you talk about politics in the church matters. Politics is about things that affect the people God loves, so you can't avoid it. And because politics is about power, you really can't avoid sometimes making people mad.

But if we're going to talk politics in the church, what we use as our basis matters.

So, you might say, let's just use the Bible. Ok, but the Bible mostly tells us how not to do either government or religion. The Old Testament between early Genesis and the exile reveals a completely meshed Jewish religion and Jewish government. Originally, God conceived the nation of Israel as a people over whom God would rule as king.

Last week, we looked at the failure of the Judges in Israel. The repeated cycles of violence and oppression left the people exhausted and despairing. They pleaded with their final judge, Samuel, “ask God for a king.”

Samuel told them they weren’t going to like having a king. A king would take their money to build lavish palaces...a king would take their sons for military service and forced labor...a king would take their daughters for their harem.

The first king was Saul. He disobeyed God and was replaced with David. David was the sort of exemplary king. He had lots of flaws and committed his own terrible sins. But he was largely considered by Israel a good king...one who served their interests and the interests of the nation more than his own.

Solomon, David’s son, turned out to be exactly what Samuel warned Israel about. Solomon essentially ruled the people back into slavery. He used forced labor to build cities and lavish palaces. He committed idolatry a thousand times over.

Here’s what God told Solomon: “Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. ¹²Yet for the sake of your father David I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son.”

Solomon’s son Rehoboam had a shot to get this right. He got advice from the elders to be a kinder, gentler ruler than his father – to serve the people rather than his own ego and power.

He didn’t really like that answer. He asked his young pals and they said, no. You are king. Your little finger is bigger than your father’s...well the Bible says loin...your brain may have filled in a different word. In classic chest-thumping, cartoonish macho, Rehoboam went with his young advisors.

And the entire northern part of Israel said, we want no part of this. And they went home and made Jeroboam their king leaving only Judah to Rehoboam. The unified kingdom split.

On the surface, this is political. But scripture makes it clear that this was God’s doing. As we think about how God might be involved in a nation’s political life, letting it destroy itself has to be in the running.

For both Israel and Judah, things under the rule of kings were mostly no better than under the Judges. There were a few flashes of goodness. There were Kings who did rule with God as the true king. But they were few and far between.

Throughout the centuries since, over and over, God has tried to call God's people back. The prophets were tasked by God with getting Israel and Judah back on track. In the Reformation, it was the many reformers who tried to call the church back to what it was intended to be. In the process of church reformation, they really changed the course of all of western history.

But in every age, always, the human temptation to misuse power has sent things once again spiraling off course. The violence and misery wrought by the European religious wars after the Reformation ultimately led to the Enlightenment and the US constitutional amendment regarding separation of church and state.

But religion in this nation has developed into an often very individualistic one that's more about individual salvation than the welfare of the community. And many attempts by the church to have political impact have just fallen into the same old trap of power and the temptation to misuse power to hurt people.

For some people, especially younger people, ditching the church altogether has become the answer. For those of us who love the church and believe it still has something to offer, how do we impact the everyday lives of people? Can we find a way for the church to interact with government and the political process that is faithful? And if so, what do we use as our basis and how do we do it?

Some of us might say we just shouldn't...that the church just needs to be in the business of forgiving sins, prayer, and proclaiming God's redeeming work in Christ. But you can't really even do that without recognizing that the reign of God is not only a political term, but the reign it describes is so very different than any we humans devise.

So, one option then is to put God's reign off into some future heaven after we die.

But I don't think that's faithful to the teachings of Jesus. He certainly seemed to assume that his teachings were something his followers would put into action in the here and now.

We as the church do recognize God as ruler over the nations. But we don't get to dictate how God does that. Those who are elected to serve in some capacity would do well to heed the lesson from today's scripture – be servant leaders and seek the welfare of all the people they lead.

But all Christians, whether political leaders or not, have a call to participate in communal life for the common good. The lesson of the reformation is that we are all grounded by Jesus himself in the love and grace of God...something for which we can do nothing to earn. Jesus grounds us in a new way of life...a whole new kind of reign.

We the church are called to proclaim that reign. But even more, Jesus calls us to live it. Jesus calls us as the church to proclaim forgiveness, to care for the vulnerable, to be servants in a world of egos.

God's rule is not dependent on the political process. But part of our call is still to participate in that process for the sake of God's people...for the sake of our neighbors.

When we've got our foundation clear, when we are securely tucked into the refuge of God's grace and forgiveness, when we can say that God's command to love our neighbor is our basis for our political involvement...then we are in a solid place to challenge our own leaders and our own process.

Psalms 46 assures us that God is our refuge and strength. Living and proclaiming the true reign of God has never been popular with people in power. Their nations will be in an uproar...kingdoms will totter...but ultimately, even the Psalmist knew that God's peace and shalom will finally reign.

Our call this Reformation day is to imagine a church that truly participates in that reign.