

# A Call for Reformation as a Church Year Dawns

Colleagues,

Advent launched again last Sunday to do for the Christian world as the days surrounding January 1<sup>st</sup> do for the secular one. Four days in, it's tugging eyes toward the future in a move that also drives a reappraisal of the present. The word we use in church for "reappraisal" is "repentance." We'll hear about that these next two Sundays as John the Baptist takes his annual turn on the center stage of lecterns and pulpits. May those who deliver John's word be astute enough to remind us all that repentance is reappraisal on steroids. At issue is no mere adjustment of habit and procedure, but an overhaul of worldview and mindset. Or as Bruce K. Modahl describes it in today's offering, it's a matter of getting bent *into* shape, where the mold is Christ and the power that drives the bending is none other than the Holy Spirit.

Unholy spirits are raging as ever in the world this week, no less in the U.S. than anywhere else. Such is their noise and fury that some may wonder if Bruce's essay isn't somehow beside the point of the matters we ought to be exploring at the moment—guns, and wrath, and folly, and lies, and the impotent vitriol of our political discourse, to name a few. I think you'll quickly see that the contrary is the case. Unless Christians are repenting together around their Christ, they have nothing to contribute to the day's madness except more noise, more fury. Bruce will show why. Amid his observations you'll see outlines of the only Advent agenda that makes any sense at all for a church that aims to deliver a whiff of genuine promise to a hope-starved world.

Bruce sends this, by the way, from Fernandina Beach, Florida, where he lives in retirement from three and a half decades of pastoral ministry, the final two spent as Senior Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois. Grace is an independent congregation served by ELCA pastors in buildings abutting the campus of Concordia University (LCMS). Arrangements like that are conducive to the clarity of thought you're about to encounter. You'll find more of it in Bruce's recent contributions (since 2014) as a Crossings text study writer.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

---

## **Getting Bent into Shape: A Call for Reformation**

by Bruce K. Modahl

It has been some years ago now (George W. Bush was president) that a friend came into town to go with me to a five-day preaching conference. This event is held every year. The host churches are large, old, gothic places located in the heart of major cities. Close to 1000 pastors come from all over the country. The participants are Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, some Lutherans and Episcopalians and a smattering of Roman Catholics. It is a preaching conference for the mainline or old-line churches. The less kind call it the sideline.

On the political spectrum my friend is just to the right of Rush Limbaugh. He considers Bill O'Reily a moderate. He started squirming right away on Monday because of the constant potshots taken at the current administration in Washington. The potshots

coming from the dais were one thing. But with every potshot the people all around us sniggered, applauded and laughed. To a speaker that sort of response from an audience is gas on the fire so they gave us more of it. I don't share my friend's political views. I thought many of the potshots were funny. But it got to the point that I had to check the program to see if this was indeed a preaching conference or had we wandered into an event sponsored by [MoveOn.org](http://MoveOn.org).

One speaker compared the neocons and fear mongers in Washington to the Siths, the scary species in what was then the latest Star Wars episode. One lecture was entitled "Preaching across Differences." But even that presenter spent a good bit of her time ridiculing right-wing religious leaders. "Tune in to 'Feeling the Hate' with the National Religious Broadcasters," she quipped. And when she actually got to the point of addressing those who have different opinions on politics and social issues her advice amounted to pointers on how to enlighten those in the dark and open closed minds. Two days into this and during one particularly partisan lecture my friend leaned into me and said, "I don't know that I belong here."

At big-box churches in the suburbs, the antithesis of mainline Gothic, pastors gather for similar events. Only these are from the other end of the religious-political spectrum. A speaker at one such gathering said, "If we have to give equal time to every opposing viewpoint there would be no time to proclaim the truth." And then he mocked liberal Christians by adopting a lisping, limp-wristed voice. Using that voice he said, "Those who want to share and be sensitive to the needs of others are wrong." The place erupted in applause and laughter. If my friend and I attended that conference I would be the one leaning into him and saying, "I don't think I belong here."

Something is wrong here. What constitutes our belonging is being

in Christ by faith. We are baptized into Christ. That is not what seems to matter. Something is wrong here. What forms the church is the gospel, the good news that we are justified, that is declared righteous, by God's grace, by God's free gift, through faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit forms the church by that gospel. Luther said the Holy Spirit uses the Gospel to "call, gather, enlighten, sanctify and keep us." The image that comes to mind is a lump of clay with the cross pressed into it. That is the shape we are in. But the churches gathered in these disparate places seem to be formed by something else. Something is bending the church out of shape. Triumphalism does it. Triumphalism is, "We are saved and they are not. We are right and they are stupid." Triumphalism is incompatible with the cross. It distorts the cross. It bends the church out of shape today just as certainly as it bent the church out of shape in Luther's day.

What bends the church out of shape is adding something to the gospel. "Yes, we believe Jesus Christ was crucified and raised for our salvation. But if you expect to be saved, if you really want to be a Christian, then you must do enough good works or buy enough indulgences to cancel out your sin." That is what bent the church out of shape in Luther's day.

In the first century some representatives from the bishop's office in Jerusalem came to visit the churches in Galatia and found they were ignoring some of the Old Testament laws. They said, "We believe Jesus was crucified and raised for our salvation but if you expect to be saved, and if you really want to live as God's people then you must also be circumcised and observe the dietary laws." That is what bent the church out of shape in Paul's day.

Nowadays, we hear, in effect, "We believe in Jesus Christ crucified and raised for our salvation but if we are to be right

with God and with one another, and if we want to live as Christians then we must also hold to this particular set of opinions on the current political and social issues. If you want to belong here that is what you must do." This is what is bending the church out of shape in our day so that some will say, "I don't belong here."

It happens by adding something to the gospel. That addition is the hallmark of triumphalism. When we add something to the gospel we are in effect saying, "Jesus' death and resurrection are not enough." The issue here goes far beyond being civil with those with whom we disagree. The problem goes much deeper than our civic life. When we add something to the Gospel we belittle Christ's work on the cross. We rob the cross of Christ of its power. We offend God.

The church is bent out of shape and needs reform. It needs to be bent back into shape. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel to reform us. There is pain involved. Getting bent into shape hurts. The truth hurts, we say. First and foremost Jesus is the Truth. We see hurt looming before us at the cross. It hurts to admit that our sin requires nothing less than the death of God's Son. Our brokenness requires a crucified and risen savior. The Truth convicts us of the fact. The Truth humbles us. It frees us from any notion of our own righteousness. And it frees us from any notion that we are worthless. God in Jesus became one of us. We are so filled with worth in God's sight that he gave his Son for us. We recognize our own worth in the face of Jesus. The Truth opens up to us the new world of the kingdom of God in which we live with one another not by being right but by God's grace. By God's grace we are managers of God's mercy in our daily lives and so extend God's kingly rule day by day into new territory. As Christ humbled himself, we practice humility with each other. As Christ sought and loved and called and welcomed all to new life, so do we. This does not mean we avoid discussing difficult

issues. On the contrary I think because we are secure in Christ we are free to do so. My friend and I discuss and argue and sometimes we have to apologize to each other for the way we have expressed ourselves. But we stand next to each other in worship, embrace when it is time to share the peace and come one behind the other with our hands extended as the beggars we are for the bread of life in Holy Communion.

Wesley J. Wildman wrote, "When the going gets tough and worldview conflicts cause fights, that's the time to retell the old, old story" ["When Narratives Clash," *Congregation* (Fall, 2005:28-35), 35]. We tell how Jesus overcame the biggest barrier of all, the one between God and us. We tell how Paul engaged in the hard work of gathering so many different kinds of people into Christian communities. These were people who otherwise would not have anything to do with one another. But in Christ, Paul said, there is no longer slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile. And while we might have red state and blue state, red church/blue church is not the church. Red church/blue church is the church bent out of shape.

It is time once again for reformation.