

Entertaining Doubt

Matthew 11:2-5

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“Our identity as the United Church of Christ lies in our doubt of the adequacy of any human containers of the Word of God. We doubt that the depths of God’s Revelation in Jesus Christ have been fully explored.” In her insightful book *The Evolution of a UCC Style*, church historian Randi Jones Walker gives this explanation of the essential identity of our denomination. We have no common theology, no shared worship style, no unique structure. Instead, we are the people who for the last few centuries have been willing to entertain critical questions about our belief and practice.

How did this come to be? And how is this our heritage from the Reformation?

For it is a surprising heritage. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldreich Zwingli, and others of the early Reformers weren’t promoting doubt. They believed they had found the truth and were defending their concept of the truth against their theological and ecclesiastical opponents. They even fought with each other.

And what was an intellectual disagreement ended up with a century of European bloodshed and violence that lingered across the centuries as Christians of various stripes warred with one another and against Jews and Muslims and nonbelievers in defense of right doctrine.

This is why worldwide religious bodies chose to call this 500th anniversary of the Reformation a “commemoration” and not a “celebration.” While we do have much to honor from our religious heritage, we also have those things for which we must lament, confess, and repent. Which is why this 500th anniversary has been ecumenical and interfaith. Here in Omaha today the community-wide worship service will be held in a Roman Catholic church.

Protestants and Catholics have spent decades in dialogue and conversation in an effort to find agreement and compromise so that we can restore the unity of God’s church.

We in the United Church of Christ are unique in that our predecessor bodies draw from all the various strains of the Protestant Reformation. We have connections to Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. To the Radical Reformers and the English Reformers and even the early Unitarians. Which makes us a diverse, and often difficult, group of people.

And one whose defining and surprising Reformation inheritance is the entertainment of doubt.

When Luther challenged the authority of the church and state and defended his scholarly reading of the Bible, his challenge had consequences even he did fully foresee. By raising doubts about church doctrine, he opened the door for further questions, further criticism, further doubts about authority.

And over the centuries that attitude developed into its own liberal style, which took particular root in Colonial America where our traditions were nurtured.

In 1749 Lemuel Briant preached at West Church in Boston and the sermon caused controversy within our Congregational ancestors. Briant's role in history is magnified by the fact that he was the pastor of John Adams, our second President and one of the intellectuals who helped to develop American democracy.

In that 1749 sermon, Briant defended the divine right of private judgment, what would be called the "liberty of Conscience." Traditionalists believed in upholding right doctrine, while a new wave of Congregational ministers were defending conscience. Both claimed scripture and the theological tradition in their defense.

If we believe, as Protestants long have, that the Reformation is an ongoing event, that the church is always reformed and always reforming, then these 18th century American developments are the ongoing work of God begun with Luther's protests.

These 18th century American reformers laid out their doctrine for how we Christians should engage our reasoning in order to live moral, faithful lives. The historian Amy Kittelstrom summarizes them.

The first rule was for Christians to acknowledge that they are not yet in possession of truth. Call it humility, call it partiality, call it fallibility, it is objectively true from a Reformation Christian perspective that no one can claim to possess the whole truth any more than they can claim to be free of sin. Therefore all must continue to seek more truth.

In the 21st century many liberal Christians ignore the doctrine of sin, without realizing that liberal Christianity was born of the doctrine of sin. Because we are flawed, biased, sinful creatures, we can never possess the full truth and must always hold our beliefs with humility and skepticism and respect those who disagree with us.

From this traditional theological understanding, the American Reformers developed two more rules to help us in our pursuit of truth. The second rule was that "critical thinking [is] necessary to discern between doctrines." Kittelstrom describes this rule: "Truth-seekers must be open-minded, honest, and sincere. They resist appeals to authority, tradition, or superstition, thinking for themselves and being both candid about what they think and willing to consider all claims."

She explains that for our religious ancestors, critical thinking was not only a right of the human conscious, but a religious obligation. We were failing in our Christian life if we didn't engage the world with our reason.

The third rule was to "consider the effect of a doctrine as indicative of its degree of validity." This idea would come to full philosophical flower in the 19th century in pragmatic philosophy when William James would contend that the truth of an idea could be established by if it worked.

For those early Americans this was a test of religious doctrines. If a doctrine harmed people or society, particularly if it sapped our moral agency, then the doctrine should be rejected. The good and the right is what would elevate us and lead to better lives.

These three rules characterized the liberal style, as our 18th century ancestors were the first people to use this word to describe themselves. And these ideas, rooted in the theology of the Reformation but given new flower in North America, had a lasting impact.

John Adams, according to historian Kittelstrom, “believed that the truth could be known in full to no human being, and that humility and open-mindedness as well as sincerity and candor were therefore fundamental characteristics of piety.” And he carried these religious doctrines into the founding of the nation.

What developed in America, then, was a working out of some of the ideas of the Protestant Reformation to define a new style that entertained doubt. According to Kittelstrom, “once one becomes a liberal of any type, one becomes a critic, actively scrutinizing every possible article of belief or value ‘objectively,’ with an impartial eye and a mind buoyed by the reference point of perfect divine truth.”

This is not the legacy that Martin Luther intended when he posted the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. But this is how that legacy has developed here, in the United States, in the United Church of Christ.

Our right, but also our sacred duty and faithful obligation, is to think clearly, openly, critically, for there is yet more light and truth to be revealed to us by our Stillspeaking God.