

We Protest! *Romans 3:19-28* | 10/28/2018

Just to be clear: In politics, a *diet* is a formal deliberative assembly. The term is derived from medieval Latin *dietas*, and ultimately comes from the Latin *dies*, “day.” The word came to be used in this sense because these assemblies met on a daily basis.

In March, 1529, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, called a council of the religious leaders and the princes to deal with the growing rebellion against the established church. They met in the German town of Speyer, and the gathering itself was called the *second* Diet of Speyer, to distinguish it from a previous diet held in that city three years earlier. The first Diet of Speyer had provided a measure of religious tolerance, and in the interim between the two gatherings, the princes of several of the states in the empire had actually *encouraged* the reform movement in the churches in their jurisdictions. But now, at this second council, Emperor Charles, who had never been a supporter of the reformers, announced that he would no longer tolerate disobedience. The diet quickly moved to reinstate previous sanctions against Luther and to outlaw the changes he and others had proposed. Among those changes were such things as allowing the laity to receive the cup and not just the bread during Holy Communion, permitting priests to be married, recognizing the authority of the Bible as opposed to that of the pope, dropping prayers to saints, and several other matters.

One of the big *doctrinal* changes the reformers called for was the rejection of good works as a means of salvation and the adoption of a new theological understanding — something the reformers called *justification by grace through faith*. *Our reading from Romans 3 today is a foundation Scripture for that position*. In it, the apostle Paul argues that keeping the Law of Moses — which the reformers saw as a form of good works — does not put people right with God. Paul asserted that even if we could keep the law perfectly, we would not be justified by it because its purpose is rather to define sin, to teach us what it is. He then states what *does* put us right with God: “The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” — justification by grace through faith.

To further emphasize the point, Luther added the word “*alone*” to Paul’s statement about faith — we are justified by faith alone — because he felt that showed Paul’s actual intention in these verses. The reformers were not against good works, but they didn’t want people to view them as the pathway to salvation, when clearly, in their reading, and ours yet today, the Bible says that faith in Christ is the way.

So what happened as a result of this uncompromising ruling from the second Diet of Speyer? On April 19, while the diet was still in session, six of the princes and representatives of 14 cities, citing freedom of conscience, joined together to present *a written protest against the diet’s position*. In this document, they declared that because each person is responsible to God, they couldn’t agree to abide by the will of the majority.

At this point, Ferdinand, the emperor’s brother, who was presiding, not only refused to accept the document, but adjourned the diet. Not willing to let that stop them, the reformers sent their “Protestation” along with an appeal to the emperor, Charles V, who responded by having the bearers of the document tossed in prison.

In the language of that place and time (Latin), that protest document was called *Protestatio*, and hence, *the entire group of reformers came to be branded “Protestants.”* Thus, we who belong to any of the denominations that have sprung from the Reformation root *have our beginnings in a protest — a protest movement*, if you will.

So how do you feel about being linked historically to a protest? You may not have thought about that, but you may have some reaction when you think of protests that occur in our society today.

Think of any of the major political or social issues in play in our country and you can probably recall that at some point, groups have organized to march or rally in protest against one side or the other of the issue. Some of those protests stay within the bounds of decency and legality, but others turn confrontative and/or violent. So maybe being the inheritor of a movement born in protest gives us pause.

However, protest is not limited to angry chanting and in-your-face demonstrations. In fact, in the 16th century, protest was understood less in the sense it is today and more in terms of being *a positive witness*. Luther and his friends may well have sung, “We Shall Overcome” had the tune and lyrics been available. But in one notable scene, all Luther did was to say, “Here, I stand!”

Indeed, the reformers understood themselves as witnessing to the authority of Scripture, to the idea that every person could pray directly to God on his or her own behalf, and, as previously mentioned, to the idea that we are saved through faith and not through works.

Thankfully, Protestants and Catholics are not at war with each other today. In fact, we are more aware of how much we hold in common than we are of a few differences in emphases. Many people think of Protestantism and Catholicism merely as slightly different “flavors” of Christianity, but drawn from the same source — belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. While there is some oversimplification in that statement, it’s essentially true.

In fact, each time we recite the Apostles’ Creed, we affirm our belief in “the holy catholic church,” which, when written with a lowercase “c,” refers to the body of beliefs and traditions we have received from the very first followers of Jesus, the apostles. But there’s sometimes value in looking at history *to understand how we ought to live our faith today*. And that in light, belonging to a tradition that was born in *positive witness* is a great thing.

Our protest witnesses to hope. That is good because there is so much that is negative and destructive in the world. A look at the national and world news on almost any day provides us with more than enough evidence of that. But coupled with bad news is the conclusion by some that there’s therefore no meaning to life, or that goodness is weaker than evil, or even that there is no God. Against that, there’s the positive witness of our faith in God’s promise - that sin, destruction, evil and hatred are all temporal things, doomed for ultimate oblivion, while righteousness, goodness and love are eternal and will prevail in the end.

Movements born in positive witness often bring new vigor, renewal and fresh understandings to things that have gone stale, flat or become routine. That was certainly true of the Protestant Reformation.

One of the reformers present at the second Diet of Speyer was a professor of Greek from Germany’s Wittenberg University by the name of Philipp Melanchthon. This man was a major collaborator with Luther in planting the Reformation, but unlike Luther, who had a confrontational nature, Melanchthon was more reserved and measured in his responses. In fact, the major biography about him is subtitled, *The Quiet Reformer*. It was Melanchthon, however, who wrote the major documents of the reform. There is no evidence that he actually wrote the *Protestatio*, but doctrine and ideas that he had previously penned and voiced helped to shape the thinking of those who did write it.

A year after this second diet, Melanchthon would pen the *Augsburg Confession*. That document is not only the foundation for the Lutheran faith to this day but it also had a major influence on the doctrinal statements of the Anglicans and the Methodists. The point is, the positive witness of the Reformation helped to clarify theological understandings that shape our practice of faith yet today.

Finally, the positive witness of the reformers helped the church they were protesting against. As the Reformation continued to pull people away from Catholicism, that church reacted by dealing with many of the problems and abuses the reformers’ witness spotlighted. There arose another movement — called by historians the Counter Reformation — in which the Catholic Church underwent a housecleaning in spirit and practice that revitalized it as well.

So, what’s the message for us on this Reformation Sunday? Simply this: We belong to a movement born in witness to the positive power of faith in Jesus Christ. We continue to have the privilege of making that witness, a protest of positive faith and light, given in a world in turmoil and darkness. We protest, but in a positive way!

Pastor Keith