
Re-form-ation
Chapel in the Park United Church
October 26, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Timothy 6:2-10, 17-19 and Luke 18:9-14

Happy Reformation Sunday! Isn't Reformation Sunday your favourite celebration in the entire church calendar? No? Really? Wow. I likely have the wrong sermon planned for today then. But perhaps I know what the problem is. Perhaps you think that the Reformation is something that happened 508 years ago. An event in the year 1517 that led to the Western church splitting from "The Church" into the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and about 45,000 Protestant denominations, including the United Church of Canada. Because I will agree with you if that is what the Reformation is all about, perhaps it is a bit of a yawn to talk about today. Why should we care what happened 100's of years ago to people who are long dead?

But perhaps - Reformation Sunday is about today.

[image: shaping clay]

What you think of the image for this week? A potter working some clay? What does that have to do with the Protestant Reformation? Everything! Because for me, celebrating Reformation Sunday is our annual reminder that the church sometimes needs to be reformed. Or to tie in better with the image, the church sometimes needs to be reshaped, remolded, reworked. The church sometimes needs to be re-imagined into what we need today, not what used to work in the past. Because that is largely what the Protestant Reformation was all about. Making the church of 1517 work better for the needs of the people at that time.

Now don't worry. I know the rules. "Re-forming" sounds a lot like change. And I know that nobody ever likes change. So I want to ease us into this conversation. I will follow the tradition of a great many preachers by taking the story back in time, just to give us some runway.

[image: toronto airport]

In this case we need a lot of runway before we take off - so we will be using Toronto Airport's longest runway 05/23. I want to call us all the way back to the year 312 AD.

[image: what happened in 312 AD]

What happened in the year 312 AD you ask? Two amazing things happened in the year 312 AD. In 312 AD a new religion sprang to life. And at about the same time, a fairly modern faith was pushed into the background. In 312 AD, a new religion was formed, and a developing faith was largely relegated into the shadows. And the religion that appeared and the faith that disappeared are both called “Christianity”.

[image: religion vs faith]

If that surprises you, let me be a bit more clear. I’m using the word “religion” to mean a structure with creeds, hierarchies, and doctrinal policies. In that sense, religions are always at some level about building barriers between people. Whereas I’m using the word “faith” to mean a way of living. A way of acting. Living according to principles like love, hope, peace. In that sense, faiths are always at some level about breaking down barriers between people.

And while my use of those words may not be technically correct, that is how I usually understand the word “religion” and the word “faith”. You might think I should be using the word “spirituality” in place of faith”. But my position is based on our understanding of the person of Jesus. And the historical development of the Christian Church.

Christianity began simply enough, as a group of Jesus’s friends who hung out together. Over time they grew to become a very unpopular sect within Judaism. The movement continued to grow over time. Expanding geographically, theologically, and culturally. Early Christians were heavily persecuted as a group that did not fit anywhere, being rejected by both Jewish people and by the Romans. Early Christianity was not actually a religious movement. It was a movement of faith. It was a community of faith. Christianity was not a religion - yet.

[image: constantine]

But in the year 312 AD, Constantine the Great converted to Christianity and established Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. All of a sudden, Christianity was socially acceptable, mainstream, and started to grow, massively. Some people (including both historians today and people living in 312 AD) felt that Constantine

adopted Christianity as a way to maintain the Roman Empire.

[image: emperor constantine by pohlsander]

As Hans Pohlsander put it, “Constantine's conversion was just another instrument of realpolitik in his hands meant to serve his political interest in keeping the Empire united under his control: The prevailing spirit of Constantine's government was one of conservatism. His conversion to and support of Christianity ... served an entirely conservative end, the preservation and continuation of the Empire.” — Hans Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*[7]¹

[image: christendom]

Even if historians are wrong about Constantine's motivation, he certainly did favour a vision of Christianity that supported the Empire. The Christian religion grew out of that vision, and it flourished. Medieval Europe, for example, has a long history of concentration of power into the hands of the state (via the royalty). And into the hands of the Church (through the pope and other Church officials). This marriage between the Church and state is part of an overall picture we call Christendom. In terms of numbers, Christianity has been popular, today making up approximately 1/3 of the global population. And because of that popularity, the Church is now one of the wealthiest institutions on the planet.

Since 312 AD, Christianity as a religion has flourished. But what about Christianity as a faith? How did the new Christian religion relate to the Christian faith? Consider the basis of Christianity. The life and teachings of Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus spent his life ... well, how did Jesus spend his life? I invite you to select one gospel this week and read it through. And as you read the stories of Jesus, make a note of what Jesus actually does. Notice what verbs are used to describe what Jesus did in his own ministry. What did he do? Where did he go? Who did he spend time with? We are called to follow Jesus, so obviously we should have some idea of what Jesus did himself.

Spoiler alert: Jesus walked around small, poor, rural villages. He talked to whoever would talk to him. He talked to broken people, hurting people. People who had

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_the_Great_and_Christianity

nothing except their own selves to share. Jesus listened deeply to people. He loved them. He helped them find their healing. Jesus gave people nothing - except his time, his compassion, his love. Jesus helped people find the healing that they needed. And instead of immortalizing or monetizing his successes, Jesus just moved on to the next village. Being the presence of God to whoever needed it. Near the end of his ministry there was a big confrontation with the religious authorities (who today we might call the “religious right”) in Jerusalem. But the essence of Jesus’s ministry was sharing his life with the lost and the least - God’s children all.

The model for how we should live our lives - Jesus - was an unemployed homeless person who spent his time with a group of people who were dispossessed. Jesus died in poverty, without an indexed pension.

[image: religion vs faith]

How do we make any sense of this contrast today? How do we connect Christianity as a religion, represented by the global Church - decidedly among the wealthiest of all global institutions - with Christianity as a faith that demands that we live within and amongst the poorest of all. Is Christianity about the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the few. Or is Christianity about being the presence of God to everyone we meet. And being called to go out and meet lots of people. Is wealth - particularly vast wealth - even compatible with Christian faith?

[image: no]

The author of 1 Timothy says, “no”. As we read earlier, “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith”. The parable in Luke is even more stark, saying that those who exalt themselves shall be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

[image: religion vs faith]

I asked ChatGPT to summarize this sermon. Here’s the result. “Since 312 AD, Christianity as a religion has flourished. But Christianity as a faith - the way of Jesus -

keeps slipping through our fingers. Religion has often allied itself with power, privilege, and wealth. Faith, on the other hand, keeps drawing us back to love, humility, and generosity.

The author of 1 Timothy warns that ‘the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.’ That’s not an attack on earning a living; it’s a reminder that when money rules our hearts, compassion gets evicted.

And in our own century, wealth and inequality have become global forms of idolatry. You don’t need to memorize statistics to see that the rich insulate themselves from the suffering their comfort creates. That’s religion defending the empire again. Faith, by contrast, takes off its armour and walks among the poor - just like Jesus did.”

I have always wondered why Christianity supports people of wealth, when they can clearly look after themselves.

[image: rolling stone]

Here’s an example from an article in the magazine Rolling Stone from 2017, “As cities around the world adapt to the harsh realities of climate change, the divide between the doomed and the saved is growing starker. In New York City, the first stage of a barrier designed to prevent flooding in lower Manhattan will break ground early next year. No such barrier is being seriously proposed for, say, Red Hook, a predominately African-American neighborhood that is equally at risk. In Miami Beach, streets are being elevated and LEED-certified condo towers are rising, but in low-income neighborhoods like Miami Shores, you have to walk through shit-filled water every time a big tide arrives.”²

One UN human rights report put it this way: “The world is on course for ‘climate apartheid,’ where the rich buy their way out of the worst effects of global warming while the poor bear the brunt”.

[image: system is not broken]

Not only are the wealthy disproportionately responsible for climate change, but their justification for their own wealth is based on impoverishing others. This has been done for millennia of course. Our institutions support the wealthy, creating even more

² <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-climate-apartheid-how-global-warming-affects-the-rich-and-poor-195444/>

disparity. This has been called the “Trickle-Down theory” of economics. Where giving public money to wealthy people will somehow trickle down to the rest of us.

William Blum summarized the trickle-down theory this way,

[image: table scraps quote]

“The principle that the poor, who must subsist on table scraps dropped by the rich, can best be served by giving the rich bigger meals.”

[image: go bus]

Our double-decker GO buses have a capacity of 85 people. If we took the wealthiest 85 people in the world - we could fit them all on this bus. And collectively, those 85 people control the same amount of wealth as the poorest 1/2 of the population of this planet. There is nothing in the Christian religion that opposes that. Religion loves the power that comes with money. But for the Christian faith, that reality is completely unethical, unjust, and immoral.

Now I realize that perhaps none of those 85 people are going to hear my words today. But as we celebrate Reformation Sunday it is at least good to remember that the Church - the Christian religion - has always endorsed and supported vastly wealthy people. And Martin Luther and other reformers fought against that. And so on Reformation Sunday, this is our annual call to action to lift up the Christian faith - and what it stands for.

It is time to bring the Christian faith out of the catacombs and onto our streets. But first, let us make sure that the Christian faith is the driving force in our churches. That is what the reformation is all about today.

[image: reformation day]

To quote ChatGPT again, “Since 312 AD, Christianity as a religion has flourished. But Christianity as a faith - the way of Jesus - keeps slipping through our fingers. Religion has often allied itself with power, privilege, and wealth. Faith, on the other hand, keeps drawing us back to love, humility, and generosity.”

And I confess that is why I love Reformation Sunday. Because you and I are invited - once again - to help create a church where the impact of the powerful is minimized, while care and compassion are maximized. We are called to be people of

faith, not just religious followers.

As one critic put it - Jesus wants spiritual fruit, not religious nuts.

If you want to see Jesus today, head to a part of the city where poverty is visible. Walk around. You will meet Jesus. Of perhaps you can be as Jesus for someone you meet. Members of this congregation live all over Southern Ontario, so I don't want to make too many specific suggestions. But Thorncliffe Park is a great place to meet Jesus. As in Victoria Park in Brantford. Wherever you live, you will not have to go far to find Jesus or to be as Jesus for someone who needs to feel the presence of God today.

The premise behind the Reformation is that even institutions that we love - like the church - can be improved. Reformed. Refined. Made more relevant today. Made to work better today. We are all called to lift up the Christian faith even - if not especially - within the church.

[image: evolving christianity and rational christianity]

This is what motivated me to write my book "Evolving Christianity: Using scientific thinking to evolve Christianity to fight racism and other social diseases". It's also the driving force behind my podcast, "Rational Christianity". Your own interest in re-imagining the church might be different. You might want to re-imagine Christianity in terms of music, or art, or poetry. You might to re-imagine the church in terms of social justice, or by providing practical help to people in need, or perhaps by reaching out to lonely isolated people. There are lots of ways to bring the love of God into our world.

[image: clay]

The Reformation that started in 1517 is still ongoing today. And we can all participate in shaping the church of today. And we are blessed to be in a world where there are so many avenues where we might want to work to make the church more meaningful and relevant. Our world needs us. Our world may or may not need the Christian religion. But our world definitely needs the Christian faith.

This reformation Sunday, we are all invited to keep re-forming and re-creating. That is how we keep building the kingdom of God in our midst.

Happy Reformation Sunday!

Amen.