

“From Protestantism to Protest”
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Ephesians 5:8-11 and John 2:13-22

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Daniel arap Moi, former president of Kenya, once quipped, “How could subversive documents come from the house of God?” In 1980s postcolonial Kenya, it was a reasonable question. The Kenyan church, mired in tradition, had never been a source of social change before. With its eyes firmly fixed on heaven, it had ignored the violence, corruption, and white supremacy on earth. Like many Americans today, the government expected the church to stay out of politics. The church’s role was to worship and save souls. Social change was not in its jurisdiction.

So when Timothy Njoya, a Kenyan pastor of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, preached a sermon on the Gospel of Luke, calling for genuine democracy and the release of prisoners of conscience, he was labeled a “subversive,” banned from radio and television, and eventually detained without trial and tortured.

It was at that moment that many expected the church to falter. But something surprising happened. Thousands of Kenyans began going to church, and the church began to awaken. Njoya’s church was overwhelmed with requests for sermons. Njoya says that President Moi gave the gospel a special gift when the government arrested him, “propelling faith to become the forum for change.”

Blaine Harden of the *Washington Post* wrote at the time, “The church has emerged as one of the few institutions willing to challenge the policies of Kenya’s powerful president.” That was because, as one elder from Mombasa put it, “The Presbyterian church gets its theology and government from the Bible and the Holy Spirit, not from the state”—or, as Njoya likes to say, echoing Paul, “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9).

To President Moi’s quip, Njoya and Presbyterians all over the world answer: when it comes to the powers and principalities of this world, the house of God is always subversive.

For many of us in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our participation in Christ’s new creation generally risks less and comes in subtler forms than Njoya’s. But our *Book of Order* is clear: “The Church bears witness in word and work that in Christ the new creation has begun, and that God who creates life also frees those in bondage, forgives sin, reconciles brokenness, makes all things new, and is still at work in the world.”

In Jesus’ time, the house of God was the temple. For 46 years, it had been under construction—a massive restoration and expansion project begun by Herod the Great, the king of Judea and a puppet of Rome. The temple was grand and beautiful. But it was also tainted, for Herod had murdered members of his family, and it was he, according to the Gospel of Matthew, who ordered the Massacre of the Innocents at the birth of Jesus.

The temple Jesus found in Jerusalem was bustling. He entered the outer court of the Gentiles, the only sacred place where non-Jews could stand before God, and there, he found a marketplace, ringing with the sound of coins and bellowing animals. The temple tax had to be paid with imageless coins, minted originally by Herod, and so moneychangers were necessary to exchange and replace Roman coins, which bore the face of the emperor. Worshippers, intent on making a sacrifice, had to buy animals without blemish. So all of this hustle and bustle was quite necessary for the operations of the house of God.

What happened next is one of the very few stories that occurs in all four Gospels; it is thus to be understood as an essential part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus drove out the moneychangers and overturned the tables. In speaking against the temple leaders, Jesus was making both a religious and a political protest. He was announcing the word of the Lord, which required a community that cared for the least of the these. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus condemned the religious leaders for turning the house of God into a "den of robbers," where price-gouging led to the exploitation of the poor.

In John, Jesus' accusation went one step further. He condemned the whole temple practice. He announced the day of the Lord, alluding to the prophet Zechariah, who said, "There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day [when the Lord comes to Jerusalem]" (14:21). That day, Jesus was saying, is now. God is to be found, not in a temple, but in Jesus Christ, and, by extension, in the body of Christ, God's people, us. How we relate to God has changed. In Matthew, Jesus will quote the prophet Hosea, through whom God says, "My judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (9:5-6). God is to be found in grace, not in the barter and exchange of promises.

Fifteen hundred years later, the leaders of the Reformation will say the same thing. They will launch a protest that will change the face of the church forever. God's grace is not to be bought and sold; it's not to be earned. It is given freely in Christ.

And now here we stand, the disciples of the One who overturned tables, poured out coins, and drove out wrongdoers. We are the children of the man who nailed 95 theses to a church door. We are the inheritors of a tradition that founded public education, sought the abolition of slavery, elevated the rights of women, and was one of the first to ordain and marry LGBTQ persons. We are the flame carriers of revolutionaries like John Witherspoon (the only clergyman, a Presbyterian, to sign the Declaration of Independence), or like Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who stood in protest of the Nazi regime and died opposing it), or like Martin Luther King Jr. (who overturned a segregated temple and nation). We are a people of protest.

Do we remember? Have we inherited the teachings of Jesus and the Reformation, only to forget the spirit in which that theology was formed? Today, it is not uncommon to hear churches object to new ideas simply because they've never been done before. It is not uncommon to find Christians who treat the house of God as an exclusive social club intended for their comfort rather than their transformation. It is not uncommon to find Christians who somehow separate their faith from their everyday lives, and allow the poor to be trampled, the immigrant to be

excluded, the teenager to be shot in school, the woman to be assaulted, the person of color targeted for incarceration, and the transgender person refused a bathroom.

Where is the fire that turned over tables and braved the cross?

The word *Protestant* comes from the Latin “to witness” and from German Reformers who were dissenters. The word isn’t simply negative, as used today, but originally meant to protest or testify FOR something or someone.

We are called to protest, to testify, *for* the new creation that Jesus announced in the temple and embodied on the cross and in the empty tomb. We are called to challenge any system, be it religious, cultural, or political, that denies the new creation that proclaims liberty for the oppressed, sight for the blind, and the day of salvation.

We protest, not because we are righteous, but we know how much we ourselves need the righteousness of God. We must always remember that we are witnesses to the light, not the light itself. We are witnesses to the One who overturns tables, not the table turners ourselves. God—not our egos, not our politics, not our vision but God’s—must always be at the center. We do not set the agenda.

The 17th century motto of Protestantism says: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, which is translated as, “the church reformed, always being reformed by the word of God.”

Note the passive voice: we are not the agent of our own reform; God is the One who reforms this temple. We are a part of that temple; we too must be reformed, and in fact never cease being reformed, our ideas changed, our allegiances challenged, our sins repented.

To be Protestant is to submit to the subversive, world-turning, life-changing work of God, and then, to tell... everyone. To open their eyes to the coins already at their feet, to the tables already smashed, to the people already loved, to the cross already broken and the Christ already risen.
Amen.