Hispanics in the New Reformation

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It is customary to use the term “Reformation,” with a capital R, to refer to a series of events that took place in the sixteenth century. At times, that term was reserved for the movement that gave rise to Protestantism. More recently, however, most have come to the conclusion that there was a Catholic as well as a Protestant Reformation, and that much as these two movements clashed with each other, they also had similar goals. Today, almost five hundred years after the event, practically all are agreed that a reformation was needed in the church, even though some would have wished that it had taken another direction. History books tell us that there was corruption, that ecclesiastical positions were bought and sold, that the prestige of the leaders of the church had waned, and that therefore a reformation was very much in order.

Yet, if I had been living in Europe on October 30, 1517, the day before the Protestant Reformation is said to have begun, I probably would have felt no need for reformation. In fact, I would have said that things were going pretty well. Just about everybody in Europe was a Christian, the main exception being the Jews. The papacy had gone through a turbulent period in which two or even three people at the same time had claimed to be the legitimate pope. It had also gone through a period of exile in Avignon, during which it had been a puppet of French policy. But all that was left behind. The pope was again in Rome, and nobody disputed his legitimacy. Furthermore, the pope was a power to be reckoned with in Italy, and there was even

the possibility that eventually all of Italy would be unified under papal leadership. Meanwhile, Rome was a center of culture and the arts. The best artists of the time flocked to Rome, to work for the church. There was also an extensive building program going on, which included plans to complete the beautiful and enormous Cathedral of St. Peter.

This reminds us that the need for reformation is most often felt at the periphery long before it is felt at the center. And even then, when the center comes to the conclusion that reformation is needed, it often deludes itself into thinking that all that is needed is a minor adjustment, that it has the power to bring about the needed reformation, and at the end of the day it will still be the center.

We must understand this, in order to understand not only the Reformation of the sixteenth century but also the coming great reformation of the twenty-first. Most often, corruption in the church is not primarily moral corruption. It is not that people in the church decide to be hypocrites and lead immoral lives, to mismanage funds, to use ecclesiastical posts to their own advantage. If it were so, corruption would be much less insidious than it really is, and we would be fairly safe from it, for most of us are not hypocrites—at least, not all the time.

The fact is that the corruption that existed at the beginning of the Reformation was hidden under a vast mantle of success—and that is the most insidious of all corruptions. In many ways, the ecclesiastical institutions of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were functioning

well. Money was flowing into the coffers of the church. Rome had never been as rich as it was then. Indeed, this was the Golden Age of Rome, when many of its most famous churches, palaces, and monuments were built. To any impartial observer in the early sixteenth century, especially one living in Rome as part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the church would have appeared as the most powerful and successful institution in Western Europe—and even, surprising as it may be, as its most respected institution.

That is the nature of corruption in the church. Corruption does not just happen. Nor is it that people invent corrupt institutions. In the field of animal and plant life, corruption takes place when a living organism dies. Likewise, in the life of the church, corruption takes place when institutions and practices that originally made sense become irrelevant. The institutions seek to preserve themselves even after their reason for existence is no longer there. They resist change even when changes in society at large make change mandatory—such is the nature of institutions. They particularly resist change when their irrelevance and even their failure can be hidden behind a smoke screen of apparent success. It is when that happens that corruption sets in, as it does in the case of a dead animal.

The reason why it is so difficult for the center to see the need for reformation—and when it sees the need, the reason why it is so difficult for the center to undertake real, radical reformation—is that the center is the last to perceive the depth of the crisis. If my heart is not pumping enough oxygen to my body, the tips of my fingers feel it long before my heart has any

idea that it is failing to do its job. Likewise, in the church, reformation most often comes from the periphery: from Antioch rather than Jerusalem in the early church; from Wittenberg rather than Rome in the sixteenth century; and it will come from the younger churches in what we used to call the mission field, from Hispanics and other minorities, and from women of every race and land in the twenty-first.

There are many aspects of church life that one could examine with this in mind. Let us begin with the matter of how the church is organized and how leadership is appointed. In the very early centuries of the church, leadership had been named by election. Christians in a city would elect, for instance, the person whom they wished to have as their bishop. The election was then confirmed by other bishops in neighboring areas. Thus, a balance was kept, so that the church in each place could elect its own leadership, and yet the church was not fragmented as a result.

Then, in the fourth century, partly through the conversion of the emperors and the higher classes in society, a mass conversion began, so that soon practically everybody in a city was a Christian, and being a bishop was a rather prestigious matter. Since rich believers often left land holdings to the church, and land was the basic form of wealth at the time, the church became wealthy, and those in authority over the church had command of enormous wealth. Eventually, elections for bishops became an occasion for riots. In the early Middle Ages, in Rome and also in other major cities, two or three powerful families fought each other to make certain that one of their members was elected bishop. At times a mob, either paid or stirred up by a political

faction, would break into the church when an election was taking place, and force their own candidate on the rest of the city.

In response to that, a centralized system was developed for making ecclesiastical appointments. Some devout and zealous popes who saw the manner in which the old system was corrupted developed a new system for the appointment of bishops, and even a system for electing popes through a college of cardinals. This was indeed a reformation in structure, and it worked fairly well for a time.

But then other forces came into play. The monetary economy made its way first into the society at large and then into the church. Clearly, if everything in society works on the basis of money, the church also needs money in order to function. Thus, a very efficient system was developed to raise funds and to pay for the expenses of the clergy. This system included having people pay for the services of the church and then having parishes contribute to the expenses of the diocese. Eventually, a system was developed, so that ecclesiastical positions were sold very much in the way that Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises are sold today. The value of a position depended on how much income it could produce. And part of that income was produced by selling sub-franchises and other services. Those who saw how the system of ecclesiastical appointments had been corrupted called this "simony," after Simon Magus, the character who appears in Acts 8 and who tried to buy the power to confer the Holy Spirit.

But in truth most did not see the corruption until it was grossly abused. Most Christians simply took for granted that this was the way the church had always functioned, and if they saw any problem with it, they figured others knew better. Even John Calvin, the great reformer of Geneva, was able to finance his studies on the basis of what was then called a "benefice," that is, an ecclesiastical position whose income he collected and then paid somebody else to go do the work he was not doing. And Calvin was well on the way to reformation before he realized the corruption which this implied and gave up his benefice. Furthermore, since the money generally flowed from the north to the south--from Germany, the Netherlands and Great Britain to the powerful Italian and Spanish houses that controlled the papacy—the northern countries had a more acute sense of the corruption of the system than did those closer to the centers of power.

Are there parallelisms today? One comes immediately to mind. In my own United Methodist Church, there is a sacred institution called the “itinerant system.” What this means is that ministers are assigned to churches, rather than being called by congregations, and that they usually remain in a particular church for a limited time and are then appointed elsewhere. When the system began, it was a means of making certain that each minister was appointed to the church that most needed him –I say “him,” because at that time all ministers were men. Also, the nation was expanding westward. (It was doing so at the expense of the native inhabitants of these lands, but that is a subject for another day.) In that westward expansion,

new churches were being founded constantly, and the itinerant system made it possible for Methodist ministers always to be at the very frontier, responding to new needs as they arose.

The system was harsh. Every year ministers had to pack all their belongings and their families and go to Annual Conference not knowing where they would be appointed next. But it worked, and that was one of the reasons why Methodism was so successful in its expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The system worked, among other things, because all ministers made approximately the same salary --which in any case wasn't much. It also worked because there were few extremely large and prestigious churches, so that a minister's prestige was not inordinately involved in whatever appointment he received.

To this day, the itinerant system is one of the foundational elements in United Methodist polity. In theory, the system has changed little. It has, however, become more humane; ministers and their families know where they are to be appointed before they go to Annual Conference, and churches and ministers are consulted before appointments are made.

But in fact, the system has changed drastically, not so much because of these adjustments but because society has changed. For two centuries, the church has existed in a society in which people's worth is increasingly measured by how much money they make, and by how much

responsibility they have. A successful career in the society at large is one in which a person makes more money each year and moves upward along the organizational ladder. Partly due to the influence of the society, churches began paying their pastors different salaries, according to how much they could afford and how much seemed to be required by the law of supply and demand for the kind of pastor they wished, so that today there are very substantial differences in salary from church to church. And this in turn has brought about significant changes in how the itinerant system works. Normally, pastors are no longer appointed solely on the basis of what church needs them most. It is necessary to take into account whether an appointment will imply a cut or an increase in salary, and how much. A pastor's career becomes very similar to that of a business executive, moving to ever higher paying and bigger jobs. A move that is not in that direction is considered a failure. In consequence, the ablest pastors tend to end up in the larger and richer churches, which probably need them least, while the small, struggling churches, those which probably need the best pastors, are often left with those the larger churches don't want. Furthermore, when it comes to the really large and wealthy churches, many of them practically choose and call their own pastors, paying little more than lip service to the itinerant system.

In theory, the system has not changed. It is still an itinerant system, with pastors being appointed by the bishop and moving periodically from one church to another. But in fact, the system has changed drastically. It has changed to such a point that it has been corrupted and stands in need of reformation.

Things are no better in most other so-called mainline denominations whose systems of government are presbyterian or congregational. Just as the Methodist itinerant system has been influenced by American notions of success and by the manner in which that is reflected in economic practices, so have these other systems. In them, ministers' careers are often measured in terms of their salary, so that successful ministers are those who move to ever wealthier churches, and those who remain in smaller churches with lower salaries are often considered less successful. The result in those churches, as in my own United Methodist Church, is that many large and wealthy churches grow even larger, while rural and poor churches often languish for lack of leadership and vision. I can imagine an historian in the twenty-fifth century writing about the reformation of the twenty-first and saying something such as: “Before the Reformation of the twenty-first century, corruption was rampant in the church, particularly in its traditional centers of power such as the United States. There, it had become customary for wealthy churches to pay higher salaries, and thus to secure the pastors they desired, while the poorer churches often had to be content with the pastors nobody wanted. Ironically, at the same time that this was going on, church historians were commenting about corruption in the fifteenth century, when ecclesiastical positions were bought and sold, as if this were the most scandalous of practices. One wonders what difference they saw between the earlier practice of pastors buying churches and their own practice of churches buying pastors.”

To me, what is most significant about this situation is not that it exists, but that most mainline leaders do not see that it exists—or do not see it as corruption in the same way in which they

look at medieval simony as corruption. The reason for this should be clear. Reformation seldom comes from the center of the church. In the late Middle Ages, many who hoped for a reformation of the church would speak of a reformation "of the head and its members," meaning that reformation would begin with the papacy in Rome or with a great council of all the bishops, and from there spread to the rest of the church. But the truth was that neither the pope nor a council of bishops could really deal with a corruption that they did not fully understand, because they were at the centers of power. Likewise, it is interesting to me to see our mainline denominations in this country bemoaning their loss of membership and their loss of vitality, and thinking that they can correct the situation from the top down, by means of a new structure, or a new agency, or a new program of evangelism, without realizing that the disease is much deeper.

As in the Middle Ages, we are hoping for a reformation of the head and its members, from the top down, from the center out. But it is also clear that the most radical reformations usually move in the opposite direction: from the edge to the center. In the book of Acts, what creates new openness in the church of Jerusalem is the mission to the gentiles: The reformation does not come from the original twelve, much as we would like to think otherwise, but from others who are added later and who actually stand at the margin of the original community. And in the sixteenth century, the reformation did not start, as many had hoped, in Rome nor in the University of Paris. It started in what amounted to a hick town in semi-barbaric Germany.

The same is happening in our day. The great reformation of the twenty-first century has already begun. One can even see signs of it. But do not look for such signs in our national denominational headquarters nor in our large, high-steepled churches—or in our prestigious seminaries and universities. Look for signs of reformation in small groups of Christians, thousands upon thousands of those groups, which gather periodically all over Latin America to study the Bible, to pray, and to see what their faith has to do with their everyday life. Look for signs of the reformation of the twenty-first century in the store-front churches in the Bronx that, despite having been taught that the Gospel has nothing to do with political and social issues, are taking the lead in the struggle against drugs and against poverty. Look for those signs in the women of every race and culture who are questioning much of the given structure of the church. Look for such signs among Hispanics, poor Hispanics who must find ways to be the church without the trimmings of majestic buildings or imposing organizations.

Specifically in the case of United Methodism, why can Hispanic United Methodists see the need for reformation in a way that those at the center often cannot? Partly because, being at the periphery, they can see the impact of the existing system in ways that those at the center do not see. In the example that I have just mentioned, of how the system for naming pastors does not work, what is actually happening is that Hispanics in the so-called mainline denominations are rapidly coming to the realization that most Hispanics and other poor people simply cannot afford to be United Methodists, or Presbyterians, or Episcopalians. The systems of government of those churches, as well as those who run those systems, are so tied to the economic

structures of the present society, and to its middle and higher levels, that they simply cannot respond to the needs and requirements of people who are mostly poor and mostly marginal.

There are many signs of this reformation all around us. But, since I am at a United Methodist school of theology, and since I also happen to be United Methodist, allow me to take an example from our own denomination. Eight years ago, General Conference appointed a committee with the mandate to develop a national plan for Hispanic ministries. What prompted General Conference to do this was a combination of pressure from the relatively small Hispanic constituency within the denomination and statistics that showed that the United Methodist Church could only ignore the growing Hispanic population at its own peril. In other words, while administratively it was expected that a national plan would require some funding and some adjustments, theologically and ecclesiologically it was still very much business as usual. Then four years ago, in 1992, General Conference approved the plan that the committee proposed. For General Conference it was still business as usual, except that it now enthusiastically embraced what appeared simply to be one more missionary mandate. But the truth is that the plan, written out of the hopes and the frustrations of Latino United Methodists, actually proposed an ecclesiology that is very un-Methodist—at least as Methodism has developed in this country. This is an ecclesiology that begins from the premise that the church is first of all the body of believers and only secondarily their system of government; that it is possible to be a "people called Methodists" without all the trappings that the Discipline and custom have come to view as mandatory.

I suspect that when General Conference approved the National Hispanic Plan in 1992, and even when it reaffirmed it in 1996, most of those who voted for it were not aware of the radical implications of what they were doing. But the fact is that right now, and as a result of those actions, there are dozens upon dozens of new Hispanic faith communities being founded throughout the country and being founded upon ecclesiological premises that are quite different from what has been the functioning ecclesiology of United Methodism for several decades. At some point, those who consider that the Discipline is more authoritative than the Bible will probably discover their mistake, but hopefully by then it will be too late. What will have happened is that a people marginalized by a system of government that has become ineffectual, and thus corrupt, will have sensed and corrected that corruption for the rest of the church.

However, it is not just the systems of government that stand in need of reformation. It is their entire view of the gospel, their entire theological system. It is at this point that, without attempting to speak for all Hispanics and others calling for a new reformation, I and many others must part company with both conservatives and liberals; with those who tell us that it is simply a matter of going back to the "ol' time religion," and with those who tell us that it is a matter of "being with it."

The new reformation will be neither conservative nor liberal, and certainly not in between. The new reformation that I see emerging will be more orthodox than the conservatives and more

radical than the liberals. It will begin by debunking the myths by which those two traditions live. It will debunk the conservative myth that those who embrace the cause of the radical justice of God's reign will necessarily abandon orthodox Christian faith and doctrine. And it will equally debunk the liberal myth that Christian orthodoxy cannot help but be oppressive of women and minorities.

I am tempted to explain what this means by going down the list of the traditional themes of Christian theology and trying to show how they will look and how they will function within the context of the coming great reformation. But I will resist that temptation, first, because there is not enough time, and second, because I have already done that elsewhere. Rather, I shall simply offer one example of what I mean when I say that the theology of the coming reformation will be neither conservative nor liberal, and certainly not in between.

Some time ago, I walked into a poor Hispanic church in one of our barrios. As the service began, I learned that the pastor had been preaching a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments and that on that particular evening he was to preach on the Sabbath. I have heard many conservative sermons on the subject, and therefore I thought that the pastor would probably tell us that we must keep the Sabbath holy by going to church, by not engaging in business, perhaps by not going to the movies. I have also heard many liberal sermons on the same subject, most of which tell us that people have the need to rest and that therefore this commandment shows God's wisdom, keeping us from working more than we ought. But this

particular pastor followed neither of those two paths. Rather, he asked how many in his congregation had been able to find work in the week that had just ended. Only a handful had. He then asked: How is it that the society in which we live does not allow us to obey the law of God, which says that we ought to work six days of the week and rest on the seventh?

What to me was remarkable in that sermon from a pastor with very little formal education—and certainly no seminary—was the depth of his understanding of the biblical message. He argued that the Sabbath law is part of a rhythm in God's creation, a rhythm of work and rest; that God has created us for that rhythm; and that to obey the law of God requires both rest and work.

Significantly, the law of the Sabbath has often been used to argue for the right of laborers to a day of rest. That is the way in which the more liberal elements in this country have used it. But that application of the law, supporting only the right to rest, is the product of a church in which most expect to be regularly employed and ignores the growing masses of those who do not even have the right or the expectation of being able to find work.

Here we have a typical case of what I mean by the coming reformation and its rejection of both conservatism and liberalism. Conservatives would use the law of God to argue in favor of blue laws and to protect the traditional place of the church in American society. Liberals would use the same commandment to defend the right of the employed to rest and to urge the

overemployed to take some time out. Only those embracing the coming reformation will see that this commandment urges us to call into question the manner in which our society is organized. This is what will make the reformation of the twenty-first century both an exhilarating and a wrenching experience, particularly for those denominations that are commonly mainline.

What made the reformation of the sixteenth century a particularly wrenching experience, as well as a very fruitful one for those who lived through it, was the radical nature of the fundamental question it posed: Is it possible to obey the existing authorities in the church and at the same time be obedient to the Word of God? There were many different responses to that question, with a great number of variations and nuances. But the question itself was inescapable.

Today, the so-called mainline denominations in the United States are rapidly coming to a point when they must deal with an equally disturbing, but equally unavoidable question: In a society in which so many are marginalized, is it legitimate for a church to call itself mainline and Christian at the same time? This is another way of saying that the time is rapidly coming when so-called mainline churches will have to decide whether or not they are ready to relinquish the position of prestige, power, and acceptance that they enjoy, precisely because they are connected with the center of American society, in order to reach the ever-increasing number of those whom the same society marginalizes.