

We Believe. In You.

I Peter 2:4-10

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Has anyone ever discovered that you are a church member? Have you ever been asked about the kind of church you attend? Have you ever encountered clarifying questions when you said you attended “The Church in Aurora?” Questions like: “Which church in Aurora?” Have you ever noticed a certain perplexity when you said that you attended a Community Church? Were you asked, “What do they believe?” or “How do they worship?”

I get those same questions by clergy of other denominations. According to the last count the Ohio Council of Churches is comprised of 17 Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant denominations representing 6 thousand Ohio congregations and 3 million Ohio worshippers. Somehow I ended up being President of that organization, which may be a dismal commentary on the state of ecumenism in Ohio today. But one of the blessings of that experience has been regular contact with the judicatory heads of the various faith traditions in Ohio—primarily referred to as bishops, such as Bishop Elizabeth Eaton who last August was elevated to become the first female Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (name dropper alert).

Last fall I was hosted by Episcopal Bishop Mark Hollingsworth in his office suite at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland. His is a sweet suite I can tell you that. We were joined by Bishop John Hopkins of the United Methodist Church, among others. Both Bishops were keenly interested in the question of spiritual authority in Community Churches. Who owns the building, if not the diocese or conference or what-have-you? Who picks the pastor? Who determines the theology or official stance on issues?

I explained that authority of Community Churches is vested in its members. The members own the property, choose the pastor and chart the course. I could tell this seemed like a chaotic plan to them, as if such a groundless organization could quickly and easily veer off into some cultish directions (although they were polite enough not to suggest such a thing). I mentioned that the church I served had maintained an amazingly consistent identity for over two centuries—longer than 99% of congregations west of the Ohio River and a good percentage east. I was polite enough not to mention that we have thus far avoided the declining fortunes experienced by old line denominations such as theirs.

Like all Christian Churches we believe in God and in his Written Word the Bible and in his Incarnate Word Jesus. What makes us distinctive is that we connect believing in God with believing in you. We believe you are children of God no better or worse than any other regardless of denominational distinctions. We believe you are vessels of God’s Holy Spirit. We believe you should have the undisturbed right to follow the Word

of God according to the dictates of your own conscience. We believe you are capable of owning the building and calling the pastor. We believe. In you.

We also believe that this connection between believing in God and believing in his children is a stream of Christianity that goes way back to the beginning and is rooted in scripture. On this Community Church Sunday we are going once again bring the Bible to bear on the subject using a text which just happens to be assigned for this day by the Revised Common Lectionary. It is from Peter's first epistle, or letter, and it uses a variety of metaphors which are near and dear to him.

He writes: *As you come to him the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house...* (Verses 4-5). Stones and rocks are a favorite image for Peter ever since Jesus gave him his nickname. His real name was Simon, but Jesus affectionately called him Petros, or Peter, meaning "rocky." When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Son of God, *Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it* (Matthew 16:17-18).

Jesus would build his church upon living stones like Peter. Peter says: *you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house—a temple where God's Holy Spirit dwells. A temple needs priests, does it not? Here Peter switches metaphors. God's people are, as he put it, to be a holy priesthood. A little later in our text he calls God's people a royal priesthood* (Verse 9). From this text, and others like it, the great religious reformer, Martin Luther, derived the notion of "the priesthood of all believers," but we get ahead of ourselves.

What Peter is relaying from Jesus is a radical concept for his day to the point of being illegal. Jesus and all of his original followers were Jews. They belonged to the institutional religious establishment of their day. There was the temple in Jerusalem, and synagogues elsewhere. There was a religious hierarchy from the High Priest to the scribes and teachers of the Law. There were religious parties like the Sadducees and Pharisees. It was a clearly defined system and it did not take well to the likes of Jesus.

Jesus interpreted scriptures differently and acted upon them differently. "By what authority" the religious establishment wanted to know? Worst of all his preaching and teaching so resonated with the people that he threatened the whole system. Something had to be done about Jesus. It was the religious establishment that drug him before the Roman authorities and clamored for his crucifixion when even the Roman Governor, Pilate could find nothing against him.

Jesus is the classic religious reformer who wrests authority from "the authorities" and gives it back to the people—common people like a fisherman named Simon, a tax collector named Matthew and so forth. "The authorities" try to stamp out his band and his brand but they cannot. It is a spiritual reformation whose time has come. Even the

foremost persecutor of the early Christian Church, named Saul, converts and becomes the new faith's chief evangelist (renamed Paul).

In time even a Roman Emperor named Constantine converts to Christianity. The downside is that the Church becomes institutionalized again with a basilica in Rome named after Rocky, er, St. Peter. A whole hierarchy develops including religious orders and priests and bishops and archbishops and cardinals and a supreme bishop in Rome known as the pope. Traditions build upon traditions. The bigger it becomes the more confusing it becomes for the common lay person. And eventually abuses creep in.

Enter again a priest named Martin Luther. He begins that most heretical of all pastimes: questioning. Where in the Bible is there anything about granting indulgences for instance? If you had a loved one who died and you were concerned about that loved one's status in the hereafter, you could ensure forgiveness of sins by purchasing an indulgence from the Church. Indeed, if you had your own share of sins needing forgiveness, just purchase the occasional indulgence. What a racket for the religious powers-that-be.

The only problem, according to Luther, is that the practice had absolutely no biblical foundation. The common folks did not have any way of knowing that because the Bible was literally chained to the pulpit for the exclusive use of the clergy. And just in case there were any prying fingers and sneaky eyes, it was written in the Latin language that nobody but the clergy was trained to read. But Martin Luther was a priest trained in Latin and he read the Bible and he began to question certain practices.

For that he was branded a heretic and condemned to capital punishment. Sound familiar? Once again we have a religious reformation whose time had come. All of a sudden the Bible is illegally translated into the language of the people and distributed and studied by common folks. All of a sudden religious protesters separate from the established church to start their own Protestant churches. All of a sudden whole countries establish state churches of their own.

The Church of England separates from Rome when Henry VIII requests an annulment from Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn. Unfortunately the pope is concerned about what Catherine's nephew will think, who happens to be the Roman Emperor in the castle next door. As a result, Henry establishes The Church of England where the Supreme Head is, you guessed it, the King himself. He grants himself an annulment and marries Anne. As you may also have guessed, abuses begin to enter The Church of England.

Some try to purify the church from within, known as Puritans. Others feel the situation is hopeless and separate from the church, known as Separatists. Eventually King James (of King James Bible fame) declares: "I will make them conform themselves, or else I will harry them out of the land, or else do worse." Some separatists get the point and head out on the Mayflower for Plymouth Rock. There they establish Congregational Churches—churches which are congregationally owned and operated.

As civilization spreads west, so do the Congregationalists. A church is established in a wilderness outpost called Aurora, Ohio. As it is written in A History of The Church in Aurora: "The members of the first church in Aurora organized themselves under the Congregational form of government. Churches in this category were self-governing. Congregations selected their own pastor and elected their own church officers. No church hierarchy had authority over them."

"The rest," as they say, "is history." It is history repeating itself over and over again in terms of religious reformation. It is a return to what the Protestants called "the priesthood of all believers," and what Peter called a royal priesthood. It is the freedom to worship God, not according to the dictates of a king, or the dictates of a bishop or the dictates of a Pharisee or the dictates of any external authority; but according to the dictates of conscience as each is led by the Holy Spirit.

We respect the freedom of others to believe in the pope, or a protestant bishop, or denominational dogma. They believe in God their way, and we respect that. We believe in God too. We believe in a God who has a long history of speaking through the voice of his people, often over and against the religious institutions of their day as did Jesus Christ. Jesus believed in everyone from mongrel Samaritans to the worst of sinners—that they had potential to be saints. We believe in Jesus. We Believe. In You.