

“Reflection on Kirkin’ o’ the Tartans”
Emmett Powers, D. Min., Minister of Word and Sacrament
St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Beaumont, Texas
October 10, 2018

An Atheist decided to take a vacation and go fishing. He picked as his destination the Loch Ness in Scotland. While out in a boat fishing, the Loch Ness Monster approached and hissed at him. The Atheist cried out, "Lord, save me, help me Lord!" A voice from Heaven came down and said, "I thought you did not believe in Me!" Replied the Atheist, "A minute ago, I didn't believe in the Loch Ness Monster, either."

Days like today in the life of the church remind us about we faced our own Nessies and how we came to believe the gospel. These days allow us to have an interior conversation about what authentic faith means to us. They can call us to confession if we have forgotten what brought us into the church in the first place. They also connect us to our own families of generations in the past who believed. Some of them made great sacrifices for us and our welfare. The 250,000 or more presbyterians who came from Scotland, Ireland and Wales in the first half of the 18th century unknowingly cm on our behalf. They gave us not only for an opportunity for a better economic situation but also to freedom to be faithful to the religion of their ancestors, some dating back all the way to the second century in the British Isles. They might not be able to name Alban, Pelagius, Eriugena, or others. But when they came to America the brought the prayers, poems, and culture of many a generation among them. I know that many of you come from other faith traditions, yet we know that many people of all nationalities are also here today for their own economic and faith decisions. Others are here as material objects of colonialism. The hymn Amazing Grace was written by a man who sought forgiveness for his own sin in the human trade of those centuries. The great Presbyterian, reformed teacher Shirley Guthrie, began a chapter in his book

about Christian doctrine by telling this story. “Brother, have you found God?” a street-corner preacher once asked a man passing by. The man, who happened to be a Christian, answered, “I didn’t know he was lost.” Guthrie continued, “For Christians the problem is not the God is lost, but that human beings are lost.”¹ We recognize that we have often failed in word and deed despite our efforts to promote the highest good in our society. The short answer is that God is not lost in all of the dis-ease and dis-order in our nation but that we humans, we are lost. We are lost about how to be people who do justice well. We are lost at how to be merciful, characterized by lives of grace. We are lost in our humanity that more often seeks to be served than to serve, which is about how to live life with humility. I like the way Guthrie asserts the foundation for our searching out the answers about where God is in all of this: “All people everywhere may have some idea of God, but what we can know by ourselves is at best uncertain and ambiguous, and at worst a dangerous hindrance to real knowledge of the true God. The only trustworthy and sure knowledge we can have of God comes by *God’s breaking into our lives in a special way* that is not at all dependent upon what we can tell ourselves about God.”²

As Christians we hold aggressively to the tenets of our faith we have gathered together in reformed churches around the world. We celebrate one of those churches today as we celebrate our own love of our particular Presbyterian church. Yes, there are many other expressions of Christian faith, but today, we use this church as an example for the story we are telling.

Preacher Bruce Epperly reminded his listeners that “at the heart of the Protestant Reformation was the affirmation "*ecclesia semper reformands, semper reformanda*": "the church is always reformed, always reforming." While their theological children often held onto the relics of past doctrine, preferring the stability of human constructs to the dynamic movements of the Living God,

¹ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1994) 39.

² *Ibid.*, 49.

faithfulness to the Reformation is a matter of spirit and experience, and willingness to constantly share our faith in new and creative ways.”

“Reformation faith is forward, rather than backward-looking, evolving rather than static, at home in this world, rather than in a previous age or a heavenly realm.”

As they sought to articulate their reforming faith, the Reformers affirmed "five solas"—*sola scriptura, sola fides, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli Deo Gloria*. These "solas" expressed the contours of Reformation faith while not narrowly defining its meaning. To be faithful to the Reformed spirit, each of these must be constantly updated to respond to God's call in a constantly changing universe.³

These five frames of the reformation are close to our hearts as reformed Christians. We too often bracket ourselves as Presbyterians without giving too much thought about why that's so. From time to time to time we need to return to these fundamentals of our faith that help us to authentically live out the formula we cherish, "Always reformed and always reforming." Our emerging global culture will call those fundamentals into question. Good ideas for cultural awareness and tolerance will always be drivers in the culture wars the people of our planet strive for—even to the point of war. But our faith mainstays will be the certainty of our actions and confidence in our dreams. Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and only for the glory of God are the essence of our confessions, our life in the church and city as a unique community, our devotion, our prayers, and our dialogues with people outside our numbers.

Revisiting the lives of our ancestors makes us think more seriously about what we really believe and why.

³ <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Church-Always-Reforming-Bruce-Epperly-10-24-2011.html>