Reformation 2.0

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Until 500 years ago this year, one church had controlled all of Western Christianity since the Council of Nicea. It had become grievously corrupt, in part because it had become interwoven with the state. One particular abuse was the last straw that enraged a young monk, Martin Luther, so much that he sent a message to his bishop condemning the practice of selling indulgences to political leaders to raise money to build St Peter's Basilica in Rome. An indulgence was like a theological "Get out of jail free" card. No matter how serious the sin, the rich and powerful could buy an indulgence and have the church's guarantee that they could get into heaven, without having to confess and do penance.

Luther's 95 Theses, that legend says he nailed to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, went as close to viral as something could in the 16th century thanks to the then-recent invention of the printing press. And thus, the Protestant Reformation began. Western Europe was ripe for it. This was an age when the idea of nationalism was rising. Political leaders had found the church's interference and dominance tiresome. So breaking with Rome was as much a political act as a theological one.

A number of others followed Luther's lead, the most notable being John Calvin. While all shared a revulsion for Rome, they were not of one mind on countless theological niceties, like what really happened when the bread and wine were blessed at communion. Unfortunately, the major figures of the Reformation — Calvin, Luther, and others — did agree on one thing. They all wanted to substitute their brand of "purified" theocracy — that is, a church-run state — for the dominant corrupt version. They fully intended that their new, improved Christianity would become the new, improved law of the land, legally eliminating all wrong thinking that differed from their own, more righteous ideas. The religion of each country's ruler determined which version of Christianity would be the civil law in this new age of nationalism. So, if you were Catholic and your king became a Calvinist you had to convert or face harsh retribution.

The Reformation needed reforming right from its inception.

Our focus today is: what might the church — should it still exist — look like 500 years down the road? Let me say right up front, I'm not optimistic we can find a map that will get us there. The seeds of the problem go back to the early church losing sight of Jesus' vision of creating a kingdom of heaven here on earth, not another human institution that would eventually be corrupted by humankind's desire for power and control over others.

If there is a way to refocus the church's purpose to be in line with Jesus' vision, we need to understand how the church went awry early on. I would argue that it was rooted in the early debates about who Jesus was, as opposed to what he did. Arguing about right belief, orthodoxy, became a blood sport. It was the litmus test of who was in and who was outside the fold. That debate over right belief continues to the present day. There is one exception and that is amongst Unitarians. Unitarians were amongst the radical reformers

that first tried to reform the reformation. The beginnings of their story might give us some insights about how to go about rebooting the Reformation.

The story began in the Transylvanian Alps of Hungary, thanks to Francis Dávid. He is considered to be the Father of Unitarianism. Born sometime around 1510 in the city of Kolozsvár, he would die in a cold, dark castle dungeon in 1579. His crime against the state was "innovation". It doesn't sound like a crime deserving of draconian punishment, but here is the backstory.

Dávid had considerable intellectual gifts. His Catholic teachers recognised this and sent him to Wittenberg and Frankfurt to continue his studies. There he encountered the Reformation. Upon returning to Transylvania, he engaged in debates defending Catholicism over Lutheranism. He must have been quite an orator, for most biographies list him as having won nearly every one of those religious debates.

These debates would gather preachers and leaders together to consider the merits of the differing positions. Dávid, while defending Catholicism, was swayed by the soundness of the Lutheran arguments. Afterwards, he became a Lutheran preacher and bishop.

As the Reformation continued, there were other debates. Dávid was called upon to defend the Lutheran position over and against the even more reform-oriented followers of John Calvin. Hundreds attended these debates. Again, Dávid won the opinion war. And yet again, his mind was swayed by the arguments put forth by the Calvinists, and he became a Calvinist preacher and leader.

Unitarian Universalist historian Earl Morse Wilbur noted (*A History of Unitarianism*, p. 64): "Dávid… having an inquisitive mind, was much more inclined to pioneer in fresh fields than to rest content in those already won…"

Transylvania's young king, John Sigismund, was involved in these religious debates. He realised that with these increasingly divergent religious positions, there was no possibility of compromise among the various interpreters of proper doctrine. Rather than resort to war and the violence that was sweeping across Europe with the Reformation, King John issued an edict that each person was free to support their chosen understanding of Christian doctrine.

His Edict of Toleration allowed Dávid, his court preacher, to begin to explore questions concerning the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus more widely. He was drawn to unorthodox interpretations of Christian doctrine that formed the basis of the Unitarian position.

This was part of what church historians call the Radical Reformation. The Reformed clergy were up in arms. So, the king scheduled another round of debates.

He invited believers in the "Unity of God" position to debate the Trinitarians. And the debate lasted ten days, beginning at 5 a.m. each day. A chronicler later noted:

"One heard all over Transylvania in the villages and in cities, even among the ordinary people, the great disputes during meals, during drinking, in the evening and the morning, at night and daytime, in the common talk and from the pulpits, talk of these debates, even accusations and fights between the representatives of the two religions".

Dávid represented the Unitarian position, God was one and Jesus was born human. He didn't just argue for the sake of arguing; nor did he make things up off the top of his head. Adhering to Reformation practice, he relied on scripture to buttress his arguments. And in the end, Dávid's arguments were deemed stronger, and many in Transylvania embraced Unitarianism.

A second debate was held the following year, and here the King declared that he himself was Unitarian and there should be religious toleration in the land – and that included this new religion. This particular debate was held in Hungarian – rather than Latin – so that everyone could understand. Tradition has it that just after coming home from the debate Dávid stood on the "round rock" at the corner of Torda Street in Kolozsvár and preached so forcefully that all who were there were converted and became Unitarian. He was supposedly carried into the great church, Saint Michael's, where all could hear his words.

I find it interesting to note that Dávid throughout his ministry only preached at St Michael's. While his faith evolved his pulpit never changed.

Sadly for Unitarians, King John died young, leaving no heir to the throne. A Catholic succeeded King John, and promptly dismissed most of the Unitarians at court. While he did reaffirm a policy of toleration for those Christian religions named in the 1571 decree, he declared that he would not allow any further religious innovation. Unitarianism continued to gain more converts in Transylvania and soon an ecclesiastical organization was developed. Dávid, now the Unitarian Bishop, was still driven toward reform of doctrine – for him, the reformation was incomplete. He questioned doctrines having to do with communion, infant baptism, predestination and the worship of Jesus. He was counselled to tone down these declarations, to keep silent, so that the newly formed church could establish itself without royal interference.

Refusing to be intimidated, Dávid preached his heretical ideas from the pulpit, and continued to do so even after the King ordered him to stop. He was the incarnation of today's Fourth Principle of Unitarianism: *We support a free and responsible search for truth and meaning*. He was arrested and tried for the crime of "innovation". Found guilty, he was condemned to prison for the remainder of his life.

It is my contention that making right beliefs the hallmark of Christianity stunted its growth and has brought it to its present state of irrelevancy for many. The church had forgotten that long before Dávid, Jesus had been put to death for innovation.

A dictionary of sociology defines religious innovation as "any change in religious practice, organisation, or belief. The major world religions have developed orthodox

bodies of belief, custom, and practice, which are regarded as part of a sacred tradition. Religious innovation is thus seen as a departure from orthodoxy that threatens tradition."

Jesus — who some argue was a Pharisee — was guilty of innovation in his challenging the purity laws, claiming the Torah was made for humankind, not humankind for the Torah. This led to the unsavoury company he kept and healing those outside the tribe. His Beatitudes that blessed those at the margins of society turned the right thinking of the time upside down and are at the heart of his innovative ministry and why he was put to death.

One would think Unitarians, being heretics and all, who have rejected doctrines and dogmas as our central organising principle, would not be resistant to innovation, but that is neither our history nor our present. For instance, Unitarians have a proud, strong tradition of having a free pulpit, which is fine as long as we agree with the message being preached. We are no different from other religious groups about our traditions, our rituals, our buildings, and our established democratic structures. We consider them sacred.

Unitarians may be generally progressive in theology, and liberal in outlook about the world around us, but they are still human. Humans tend to be risk-averse and find change daunting. We like predictability and stability. The status quo is our friend, even if we don't like it. Our enculturation and the privilege granted us at birth strengthen these attitudes as does the church which specialises in maintaining the status quo.

Like the privilege we were born with, we had little to do with our enculturation, the process whereby individuals learn their group's culture, through experience, observation, and instruction.

Most enculturation is extremely useful. Socialisation has enabled us to function as adult human beings. We have learned how to listen and speak, how to read and write, how to relate with other people for our mutual benefit, and how to function successfully within our familial, social, economic, political, and technological systems.

But enculturation becomes an influence to be resisted when it dictates the essential content of our lives: the choices we make, the risks we take and the values we hold. As we become freer, we will certainly use what we have learned, but we need not pursue the purposes and goals provided by culture.

Being freed from our enculturation has not been something nurtured by institutional Christianity. During my formation as a minister, I was trained at my seminary to judge innovative ideas against the authority of Scripture and Church Tradition as mediated by reason. Reason alone was not an authority to be trusted. Scripture as interpreted by Church Tradition did not encourage innovative ideas that threatened the power and control of the institution. Scripture that demonstrated Jesus' innovative ideas was either downplayed or reframed so as not to challenge those in power. The Nicene Creed reduces Jesus' life and ministry and vision of a kingdom of heaven to a comma between

believing in his birth and death.

On all sides, social pressures surrounding us are trying to squeeze us into various conventional patterns of behaviour. Historically, the church has been a major societal force for conventionality. But when we remember that others like Francis Dávid have resisted conformity, we might decide to design our lives around our own goals rather than accepting society's and the church's ready-made roles.

The capacity to transcend enculturation develops gradually. As one Unitarian minister put it, "We have to be born again and again and again until we die." The better we understand the social processes that created us, the greater our capacity to take responsibility for our own lives — and become self-creating persons.

As we successfully resist conformity in small matters, we exercise and develop the spiritual "muscle" that will empower us to break out of the expected patterns in important and dramatic ways.

The freedom inherent in our human spirits enables us to rise above the social circumstances that would otherwise control us entirely — if subtly. Instead of remaining normal by our culture's measure, we learn to name the internalised influences that would shape our lives if we did not exercise our freedom. And as we come to understand what is expected, we can choose which, if any, of these expectations to fulfil and which to reject and replace with purposes we freely choose.

If the church were able to step outside of the norms it created and reboot itself a new reformation would be marked by free thought, innovation, a focus on creating the kingdom of heaven and not preserving what remains of a once powerful institution stunted by demanding its followers conform to antiquated beliefs. I'm not sure what a Reformation 2.0 church would look like. Innovation is full of surprises. Unitarianism today would be unrecognisable to Francis Dávid and 500 years from now the same may be true of the church to us. My hope is that it will reflect Jesus' vision more than does today's belief-centred Christianity.