

## AND THE CHURCH WILL FADE AWAY . . .

(10/29/17)

Scripture Lessons: John 14:15-17, 25-27; 16:5-7; 20:19-22

*“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7)*

This coming Tuesday marks the 500th anniversary of the event that ushered in the Protestant Reformation--Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg. The Reformation is an important part of our heritage and our identity as Protestants. The events and issues of the Reformation can also teach us something about the heart of the Christian faith and the mission of the church in our time.

The Protestant Reformation was both a sad and a great moment in the history of the Christian church. It was sad because the church should not have needed such a drastic reformation; it should have been able to reform itself without causing such a deep and permanent split. It was a great moment in the history of the church because it breathed new life into a stagnant institution. It called people back to the true meaning of the Gospel—the restoration of the Holy Spirit at the center of our faith.

This emphasis on the Holy Spirit did not start with the Protestant Reformation. Joachim of Floris, a Cistercian monk who was born in 1132, espoused this theological theme long before the sixteenth century. Joachim, a mystical prophet and the abbot of his monastery carried on the twelfth-century monastic revival begun by Bernard of Clairvaux. In *The Divine Comedy* Dante describes Joachim as “endowed with prophetic spirit” and he places him in *Paradiso* next to the great Franciscan Bonaventura.

In 1202 Joachim published his *Treatise on the Four Gospels*. This work was eschatological, which means it had to do with the “last days.” However, it did not predict the end of the world, as eschatological theology usually does, but the end of the church.

Joachim’s understanding of scripture came to him as a sudden insight one day while he was studying the Book of Revelation. “Suddenly,” he says, “the eyes of my spirit were enlightened, and the fulfillment of this book and the harmony between the Old and the New Testaments was revealed to me.” I like that expression: “the eyes of my spirit were enlightened.” It reminds us of what Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians about the eyes of our heart being enlightened. The hidden truth given to Joachim was

that just as the age of Moses had been replaced by the age of Christ, so the age of Christ must give way to the age of the Holy Spirit.

In his *Treatise* Joachim makes three basic points. First, the history of humanity unfolds in three stages: the first is the age of God the Father; the second is the age of God the Son; the third is the age of God the Holy Spirit. Second, the institutional church is limited to the age of God the Son. Third, according to Joachim's calculations, the second age, the age of the church, would end in the year 1260.

Joachim believed that humanity has passed through the age of God the Father. This age was marked by the revelation of God in and through the nation of Israel, whom God chose to be a "light to the nations." This age came to an end with the birth of Jesus.

The second age, marked by the revelation of God in Jesus, was an evolution in our understanding of God. The nation of Israel was no longer central, for now we could see what God looked like in human form. The church came into being to preserve Jesus' teachings and proclaim his message. In this second age, the church was very important.

Joachim believed that the age of God the Son was about to give way to the age of God the Holy Spirit when people "would discover God within themselves" and, according to Joachim, "the church would fade away." The institutional church of his day, not surprisingly, found his teaching about the church "fading away" quite annoying!

Although I am fascinated by Joachim's thesis, I am uncomfortable with the use of scripture to predict the end of the world or even the end of the church. He was obviously wrong about his date for the end of the church, just as prophets throughout history have proven wrong in their predictions of the end of the world. I disagree with his assertion that the age of God the Father and the age of God the Son have come to an end, for many of us ground our faith in these two persons of the Trinity. I also don't believe that the time is long overdue for the church to fade away. This would be a strange message to preach only a few weeks before Stewardship Sunday!

I believe Joachim made an important point not historically, but spiritually. In the scripture passages we heard this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that he has to leave them or the Holy Spirit will not come to them. He tells them that his time with them in the flesh, as Jesus of Nazareth, must come to an end so that they can find him, discover him, experience him in a new way--as the Holy Spirit. He tells them that this Holy Spirit

will be present within them and within the church. He tells his disciples “It is to your advantage that I go.” So Jesus intended the revelation of God in him to give way to or be superseded by the revelation of God in or as the Holy Spirit.

Joachim said that when we experience God as the Holy Spirit within us, we no longer need the church. If he were not such an important figure in the monastic movement of his day, the institutional church probably would have silenced or killed him. But what if Joachim was right in a way he didn’t quite grasp?

Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, thought the church was important. But Luther didn’t believe that the church should assume the role it was playing in the religious life of the individual. The church had set itself up as the gatekeeper to Christ, and therefore also to God. If there were no way to God except through Christ, and if there were no way to Christ except through the church, then you would need to be a part of the church in order to be saved. There could be no salvation outside the church.

Martin Luther wanted to take the church out of the central spot. He believed that spot should be reserved for the Bible, and that the Bible, not the church, should be our guide to understanding Christ and God. He also believed the Bible should be printed in a language that the common people could read on their own. Just as with Joachim three hundred years earlier, the church found this annoying. They didn’t like losing the central spot in the process of salvation, the one and only way that people could get to God.

Luther put the Bible, the testimony of the early church, in the central position. Joachim, even though he lived three hundred years earlier than Luther, took this one step further. Joachim said that the Holy Spirit should be the center of our faith. After all, the Holy Spirit gave rise to the church and also to scripture. The Holy Spirit not only created the church, it calls us to continually reform it, leading it back as often as it departs from the path, e.g., when it becomes an end in itself. The Holy Spirit both inspired the writings of scripture and enables us to interpret them. The Holy Spirit enables the teachings of the Bible to evolve and come alive to us in our time.

Perhaps Joachim was right, even though he was wrong. Perhaps the first reformation of the church was the movement from the centrality of God the Father to the centrality of God the Son. Perhaps the second reformation was the movement from the God the Son as revealed through the church to the age of God the Son revealed through

the Bible. Then the third reformation, Joachim's reformation would be the movement from the church and the Bible to the Holy Spirit as central to our understanding and experience of God the Father and God the Son.

Where I think Joachim missed the boat was in the conclusion he drew about the church. Joachim believed that when we discover the Holy Spirit within us, when we discover our personal connection with God, then we will no longer need the church, and the church will fade away.

The church does not need to fade away. However, it may need to redefine itself. It needs to stop thinking of itself as the gatekeeper to God and devote its resources to helping people develop their own personal relationship to God. The church should help us discover God and Jesus in our own life. It should help us experience the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, our guide on the journey of life.

When we think of the implication of Joachim's teachings along these lines, we can see how important the church becomes. The church becomes like a school. You might be able to learn how to read and write, to do mathematics, to obtain an education without ever setting foot in a school, but I don't know why you would want to do it this way, why you would not want to take advantage of a school.

This is a central theme of the Reformation. Protestants believe that the individual does not exist for the sake of the church; the church exists for the sake of the individual. The church is here as a tool for God to use. It is, or it should be a servant church. In our teaching and worship and mission we should help people come closer to God. We should try to be the best tool that we can. This is why the church, just like each of us as individuals, is constantly in need of reform.

On Stewardship Sunday we affirm our commitment to share our time, talent, and treasure in the strengthening of our church. We affirm our commitment to attend worship and to grow in the faith. We commit ourselves to care for one another and to reach out to the world through our missions. We affirm our commitment to join our hearts in the fellowship of prayer, for we know that through opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, we strengthen the power of God to bring physical, emotional, and spiritual healing to ourselves, to those in need, to our nation, and to the world.

When we strengthen our church through the sharing of our gifts, we strengthen the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, in our own lives, and in the world. Let's prove Joachim wrong. We don't want his prediction to become a reality. We don't want our church to fade away! We want it to become even more strong and vital! We want it to grow and evolve that it might continue to be a fitting container for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as individuals, as a Christian community, and in this world that God has created and continues to create through us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
October 29, 2017*