

# Change or Decay

Matthew 3:1-12

## Reformation Sunday

30<sup>th</sup> October 2011

One of the most famous symbols in the world today is the apple on the Apple computer, the apple with the bite out of it. One theory behind the origin of this logo goes back to a man called Alan Turing, an English mathematician, logician, cryptanalyst and computer expert, who was very much involved in Second World War efforts to break the codes used by the German Navy, generated by the famous Enigma machine.

After the war, Turing turned to peace-time applications of his work and was employed at the National Physical Laboratory, developing the first stored-programme computer or automatic computing engine. Unfortunately, though, brilliant mathematician and scientist though he was, Turing was persecuted for his sexual orientation. In 1952, homosexual acts were against the law and he had to suffer through a criminal prosecution that led to the choice of chemical castration or prison. His conviction also led to the removal of his security clearance and so virtually ended his career in government research agencies. In 1954, at the age of 42, Turing committed suicide by cyanide poisoning. Beside his body, lay an apple with a bite out of it, leading to speculation that this was how the poison was delivered.<sup>1</sup>

Apple Computers have always denied that this is the meaning behind the origin of their logo but, still, what a coincidence! It makes one wonder!

Now, something that is not in doubt, and something recently-deceased Apple CEO, Steve Jobs, would not have denied, is the debt that he owed to Alan Turing. If Turing had not made the amazing advances he carried out in computer science, then Jobs – and Bill Gates and so many other great computer geniuses of our time – would not have been able to do what they have done in developing the personal computer. Without Turing, without the work he did especially in understanding the role of algorithms, the step-by-step procedures computers use in making calculations, then we would not have the PC on our office desks or the laptops in our homes or our iPhones and iPads. Turing was the father of computer science. He was the trailblazer who opened up and prepared the way for the radical changes that computerisation have brought to our modern society.

I often think that we don't properly appreciate those whose role, in different times and centuries, is to prepare the way. We hail those whose names become synonymous with the radical changes and momentous achievements that take place in human history. But, so often, we pay scant attention to those who, by their endeavours, set the scene, establish the context, open up the possibilities that allow others to come along and bring a movement or a development that has been going on for decades or centuries to fruition.

Looking back 500 years to the times of the Reformation, we think so easily of the great names that have long been

associated with this period in Christian history. Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Philip Melancthon, Ulrich Zwingli, to name but a few. But there are others in the background who deserve recognition for, without these almost anonymous catalysts of change, the Reformers would never have been able to do what they did.

One such herald and harbinger of change was 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian Dominican monk, Girolama Savonarola, who, just over 500 years ago<sup>2</sup>, was hanged in the city of Florence and his body burned for offences against the state and the church.

In 1452, some 30 years before the time of Martin Luther, the earliest of the major Reformers, Girolama Savonarola was born into a middle-class Italian family. After beginning medical studies, he experienced some troubling visions and decided, much to his father's great displeasure, to seek peace of mind by taking holy orders. Although hidden away behind cloistered walls of the Convent of St. Marco in Florence, the young man could not cease to be troubled by what was happening in the society of his day, by the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and by the decadence and corruption of the great Renaissance city in which he was living. And, in particular by the immoral vain-glorious, pleasure-seeking lifestyle of the powerful Medici family.<sup>3</sup>

Now, if Savonarola had stopped there and contented himself with being the hammer of Florentine secular society, he may have lived to collect his pension. But in the 1490s, he also spoke with increasing passion about the glaring abuses within the Roman Catholic Church, the immorality of many clergy, particularly those in Rome, especially endearing himself to Pope Boniface VIII when he referred to him as beginning his papacy "like a fox and ending it like a dog".<sup>4</sup> This was an offence too far and so he was disciplined by the church, forbidden to preach, charged with heresy excommunicated and, finally, put to death in the main square in Florence.

Now, as I have said, Savonarola was a trail-blazer, preparing the way for the great tidal wave of change that lay ahead. He was a forerunner of the Reformation. He was like John the Baptist, charging ahead of the pack, "exalting the valleys, bringing the mountains low and making the rough places plain."<sup>5</sup> Without his courage in standing up to the immorality of secular society and the abuses within the church of his time, leaders such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and others would not have been able to undertake their total overhaul of theology and radical re-thinking of the church in the 1500s.

And we in our time have also great reason to be thankful that Savonarola played this preparatory role. Without his reforming zeal, we would literally not be sitting here today in a church of this kind, free to worship in the way we see fit,

free to study the Bible, free to have lay people engaged in the governing of the church, free to have women serve as elders and clergy among the many other freedoms we enjoy.

So often, of course, we look back at the events of our Reformation history and give thanks that it is just that – history. Thank goodness, we comfort ourselves, that such times of great change are all behind us. Thank goodness that today's church does not need to be reformed in the same way.

Nothing, though, could be further from the truth. Our church may be reformed. But it needs to keep on reforming. It needs to keep on changing. Because if it doesn't, then its future will be in serious doubt. We sing the words "Change and decay in all around I see" in the famous hymn, "Abide With Me".<sup>6</sup> But really the words should read, "Change or decay" because if the church does not change then it will decay. That's the stark choice that faces us. And we, you and me, need to become the agents of change, trailblazers, forerunners, if not effecting change ourselves, preparing the way for that very change which surely needs to happen if the church is to survive and flourish.

A week ago Saturday, here in St. Paul's, our Presbytery held a workshop for elders on the subject of "Change" led by Synod Congregational Consultant, Rev. John-Peter Smit. The church, he said, is in uncharted territory in these post-modern times. The way forward is not clear. There are no magic solutions. But one thing is clear. We are going to have to change in terms of the priority we give to evangelism. To taking the good news of Jesus to people in our secular society.

In the 500 years since the Reformation, Rev. Smit said, we have not needed to do evangelism in western countries in a big way because people have naturally gravitated towards the church. For 500 years, we have operated on the Field of Dreams approach. If we build churches then people will come. And it worked well over these centuries. But now no more. There have been such radical changes in society, and in attitudes to faith and spirituality that we now have to do things differently. We have to go out from the safety and comfort of our buildings to where people are and find new ways to bring people to Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Now, when people start talking about evangelism in the church I always get a little scared because it conjures up visions of big revival rallies and house-to-house visitation campaigns which are strategies of the past that no longer work in today's world. So, if we are going to talk evangelism or the intentional promotion of Christianity in today's world, we have to do it in a much different way. We have to do it on a personal basis, on a "one-customer-at-a-time basis", attracting people to Christianity by showing those around us how Christianity has changed our lives, how faith helps us deal with life's uncertainties, how Christ's presence aids us in dealing with stress, how the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to rise above life's challenges to live a fuller and better life.

Do we have that effect on other people? Are they attracted to Christianity by the change they see in our lives? Or do they see no difference, that our Christianity really hasn't percolated down and made us any different

from anyone else?

A cartoon on my desk calendar shows a weary-looking minister leaning over the pulpit on a Sunday morning and saying to his grim-faced, joyless, congregation, "This is the fourth time this year I have preached to you lot about the transforming love of God. So why do you all still look the same?"

Oh, if we would just allow Christ to change us from the inside out, that his presence and his power became more evident in our whole beings, how it would enthuse, inspire and excite other people to want to be part of the great Christian cause. If that were to happen, maybe Christianity would "go viral", to use a modern term. It would bring about such a radical change in the lives of people and have such a transforming effect on our world that we could say that the Reformation is not a thing of the past but a reality of the present.

© George A. Turner

St. Paul's Presbyterian Church  
Peterborough, Ontario

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Turing, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turing>

<sup>2</sup> 23rd May 1498

<sup>3</sup> As one writer says, Savonarola "taught the Florentines that it was their own laxity in moral standards which was causing problems in society. He advocated putting aside material things for spiritual well-being. He believed the world had many distractions which led away from a life of godliness." But it was his prophetic pronouncements that particularly horrified his hearers. "[He] preached terrifying sermons on the horrors of hell. By the time he was finished the congregation would be reduced to tears." The Catholic Encyclopaedia,

[www.newadvent.org/cathen/13490a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13490a.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the papacy was the seat of all iniquity, Savonarola fulminated, "It begins in Rome where the clergy make mock of Christ and the saints; yea, are worse than the Turks and the Moors. They traffic in the sacraments. They sell benefices to the highest bidder. Have not the priests in Rome courtesans and grooms and horses and dogs? Have they not palaces full of tapestries and silks, of perfumes and lackeys? Seemeth it, that this is the Church of God?" Ken Curtis, *op. cit*

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 40:4 (paraphrase)

<sup>6</sup> Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847), "Abide With Me", Hymn 794, The Book of Praise, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997

<sup>7</sup> John-Peter Smit, "Leading Change in Congregations" Presbytery of Lindsay-Peterborough Elders' Workshop, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2011