

Is this the Beginning of the End of the Reformation?

By adminlen On October 30, 2012 · Add Comment

[In recognition of the anniversary of the formal beginning of the Protestant Reformation on October 31, I asked a good friend of mine from Singapore, Pastor Jack Sin, if I could use an excellent article on the subject of the Reformation on our page, to which request he graciously consented. I trust the article will bring insight and blessing as you read. — Pastor Len Pine]

Introduction

[Romans 1:15-17](#), 'So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.'

The Reformation has been claimed to be over or obsolete by some liberal and neo-evangelicals over these recent years. Others have said that it is an anachronism and that it is totally irrelevant today after almost five centuries.

Truth is stranger than fiction. There is never a greater need than now in the post modern era to stand up for the propagation and defense of the faith once delivered to the saints ([Jude 3-4](#)).

There are several good reasons for this historic event of the church that brought in the greatest spiritual awakening of all times (since the revival of Acts 2).

This God initiated occasion of some 495 years is absolutely relevant and needed today. What is so significant about the Reformation that redeemed men should never forget? The 16th century Reformation was God sent and ordained for a high purpose, that men be delivered from the spiritual darkness of Rome and be brought back once again into the marvelous light of the true and pure Gospel of Jesus Christ during the Dark Ages. Today we stand beholden to the Reformers for all that we inherited, namely the Reformed Faith and the glorious truths that they stand for. Though we are reformed we are still yet reforming.

Has the Reformation any doctrinal relevance today for the church? The following are valid reasons why all Protestants should continue to remember and carry on the historic Protestant Reformation of the 16th century into the post modern era.

Reformation and the Right Doctrine of Soteriology

Is salvation by works or by faith alone? That is an important question. It is not through man made rites and rituals or doing good works that we can earn our salvation. Spurgeon said if he had to contribute a stitch to the garment of salvation, he would be lost. It was solely the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit that saves and not we ourselves.

Martin Luther was greatly used of God to spark off the spiritual fire of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk, a very learned and devout priest who was well taught in the Roman traditions and doctrines, but yet he experienced no real peace in his life. He tried all that he could in religious asceticism. He even walked on his knees on the stairs of the Church of Lateran, which is supposed to accord the forgiveness of sins but yet there was no deliverance for his troubled soul. Peace for him came when the light of the Gospel shone from heaven into his distressed heart: "the just shall live by faith" ([Rom 1:17](#)). This struck Luther like a thunderbolt from heaven. He finally found the true way of salvation, not by works of righteousness but by grace through faith alone. He studied the Scriptures and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit shone light into his soul by God's sovereign will.

In the 16th century, the Roman Church needed money to rebuild St. Peter's Church and Pope Leo X commissioned a Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel to sell indulgences (i.e. forgiveness tickets) in order to raise the money. Tetzel did this gladly and came to Germany where Luther was. When Luther came to hear about this, he was greatly exercised in his heart and denounced the corrupt practices of the monk, and later wrote the famed 95 theses and posted them on the walls of Wittenberg Church just before All Saints' Day, which is 1 November (i.e. a day when people come to church to worship relics). This spelt the genesis of a God inspired movement that would deliver true believers out of the Roman yoke of bondage and brought them to the true and unadulterated gospel of Christ.

Sola scriptura, soli deo Gloria, solus Christos, sola fide and sola gratia were the impassioned cry of Martin Luther and the other magisterial reformers. Perhaps one significant event we must not forget was the Diet of Worms in April 1521, where Luther made a clear defense for the faith before Charles V and the august assembly of prelates and dignitaries and did not compromise his writings and his teaching concerning Christ as the Only True Saviour. His faith and courage were honoured by God who preserved his life for this glorious cause of the Reformation.

The Reformation and the Bible in the Language of the People

[2 Timothy 2:15](#) says, '*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*' When the Reformation fairly began, nothing alarmed and enraged the Romish priesthood so much as the spread of the translation of the Bible in the vernacular languages of the people. The key issue of the Reformation is the absolute authority of the Scriptures versus the authority of the church at Rome.

The Bible then was available only in Latin translated by Jerome of the 4th century and only the priests could read and understand and not the common people, It was John Wycliffe, professor at Oxford, a pre-reformer, who started this holy task of translating the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate. It was later done also by the English Reformer, William Tyndale, in 1525 (NT first from reliable Greek manuscripts), which cost him his life. He was burned at the stake in 1536 because he translated the Scriptures into English. The contents of the Bible spread through the land like wild fire; and from that time onwards, the Roman power had lost its influence. The leaders of the medieval church realized the power of the Scriptures that is able to make man wise unto salvation ([2 Tim 3:15](#)). God opened the eyes of King Henry VIII and answered the prayers of dying Tyndale before he was strangled and burnt in Antwerp betrayed by a friend Philip. All who hold an English Bible (or any language bible) in their hands now owe it to the Reformation for such a great privilege, for it was not so before the Reformation. Sola Scriptura, that was the cry of the Reformers and no church tradition is to be superior to the 66 books of canonical Scriptures (not mystical experiences). The canonicity, authority, inspiration and sufficiency of Scriptures must be defended today against those who believe in extra-biblical revelations in dreams and visions, the apocrypha, the book of Mormons, the gnostic gospels and others.

One would remember that the moveable type printing press was invented by Johann Guttenberg in 1454 during the 12 – 14th century Renaissance. The printing press revolutionized the dissemination of literature in Europe during the Renaissance. For the first time in the history of mankind, identical copies of a document could be reproduced in great numbers without having to hand copy them. It was the Lord who timed the invention of the printing machine for the printing and dissemination of the Bible and Luther's 95 theses during the Protestant Reformation among others. Today we have the privilege to read the Bible in a language we understand and practise it for this is the very infallible, inerrant, inspired Word of God.

David Wells in his book, *The Courage to be Protestant*, has addressed the key issue well here :

"An authentic church is one that is God-centered in its thought and God-honoring in its proclamation and life' (p. 242). Churches must be *sola Scriptura*, seeing the Word of God as authoritative and sufficient, not *sola cultura*. Churches must hold fast to doctrine and preaching. Churches must rightly administer the sacraments while clearly proclaiming salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Churches must exercise biblical church discipline in order to protect the purity of Christ's church and reflect the holiness of God. Churches must not seek to replicate the culture but rather stand as an alternative to it: If the church is to be truly successful, it must be unlike anything else we find in life." (p. 224)

The Reformation and the Direct Access to God through Christ

How can a guilty and depraved sinner appear before a thrice Holy God? The Reformation exposed the defective practices of going through human intermediaries and participating in strange rituals before one can reach God. The Reformation opened the way to eternal life to many by showing from Scriptures that “there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5; Acts 4:12). In John 14:6, the Lord Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” The Reformation brought into sharp focus this theological fact that is so vital in true salvation. Only Jesus saves and it is by faith alone! This is the truth that leads to everlasting life for anyone who believes (John 1:12; 1 John 1:9). Justification by faith and not by works is the truth of redemption from our sins (Titus 3:5; Eph 2:8, 9).

The Reformation and Biblical Elements of True Christian Worship

John 4:20-24 says, ‘Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.’ Our Lord Jesus said we are to worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), not in outward, ostentatious forms or falsehood. Today we have the Protestant system of spiritual and reverential worship where the preaching of the word and public reading of scriptures takes central stage. This could be traced back to the time of the Apostles and to the 16th century Reformation. No more theatrical and mystical performances in the medieval church with lifeless rites and rituals that have no significance, but from the hearts of men rendering humble and sincere worship that will ascend to God as a sweet savour sacrifice (Heb 13:15). Cherish this form of spiritual true worship that is glorifying to God and congregate together regularly on the Lord’s Day to render true worship to Him.

The Reformation and the True Understanding of the Sacraments

The Bible teaches us the meaning and origin of the two sacraments. Before the medieval church taught that there were seven sacraments but the Reformation taught us that there are only two, namely the Lord’s Supper and Baptism according to the Scriptures. An ancient Church has it as confirmation, marriage, extreme unction, the eucharist, penance, baptism and holy orders. These are not taught in the Scriptures. The correct understanding of the Lord’s Supper is not transubstantiation as stated at the 4th council of Lanteran in 1215 but a spiritual memorial to remember the death of Christ till He comes, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-30 by Paul (and not for physical recovery of a sick body as taught by someone). The Reformed view taught by Calvin holds that Christ is spiritually present with the believers, not in bodily or physical form. True communicants are spiritually nourished by partaking of the bread and the wine. The Holy Spirit brings them in close fellowship with Christ, the Head of the Church and the source of spiritual vitality for all genuine disciples. Baptism as a sacrament cannot save anyone from their sins as taught by some in baptismal regeneration.

The Reformers and the Pattern of Biblical Church Polity and Governance

Titus 1:5 says, ‘For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.’ It was to John Calvin and John Knox we trace our rich heritage of leadership by the plurality of elders in the Church today. It was John Calvin, arguably the father of Presbyterianism, who taught us the leadership of a Church by elders. This, we believe, is the Scriptural teaching of Church government (1 Tim 3:2—7 and Titus 1:6—9). This was the same teaching of the teaches Scottish reformer John Knox who reformed and revived the Scotland with the Gospel and instituted a Presbyterian form of Church polity and withstood the persecution of the Queen Mary of Scots. The Bible did not teach us that the church (1 Pet 5:1-4) is to be ruled by one man who lords over all. The episcopal system can be vulnerable to ecclesiastical abuses, with power vested in one man. The Presbyterian system, comprising elders (and deacons serving under and together with them) elected by the church, gives the best formula for the effectual advancement of the Gospel and the proper management and administration of the local church.

The Reformation and the Reformed Creeds and Confessions

We owe it to the Reformation for the revival of the teaching of the sound theology in the doctrines of grace. The five points of Calvinism that was written from 1618 – 1619 during the Synod of Dort, as a response to the Remonstrants who were Arminian in their doctrinal persuasion. The Reformation was a ripe and proper time for creeds and confessions to be written. Reformed creeds, like the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, were written

in the Netherlands in 1562. In England, God raised up godly men, 121 Calvinistic, God-fearing men from the best of the British Isles, to deliberate and formulate the Confession, together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, from 1643 to 1649. The Westminster divines were men of great, spiritual and intellectual stature in the days of the continuing 17th century English Reformation. Today, the B-P Church still adhere to this Reformed creed which is in our constitution, perhaps, one of the finest confessions ever to be written in church history. (The Baptist Confession of 1689 was patterned after this.) Read it and understand it and know that it comes from the spiritual struggles of our forefathers in the defence of the faith during the Reformation.

Martyrdom and the Case for Truth during and after the Reformation

It was said that there are more martyrs in the last century than the last 5 centuries combined. Browsing through Foxe's Book of Martyrs, one sees the flames of faith of valiant men who stood for the truth and sealed it with their lives. As sons of the Reformation, never forget men like Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer, John Hooper, William Tyndale, John Rogers, nor events like St. Bartholomew Day of 1572 where Protestants were killed mercilessly, the Irish Massacre of 1641, the Spanish Inquisition, even the execution of the Bohemian pastor, John Hus in the Pre-reformation era in 1414. Let our hearts burn with zeal and valour and faith. When we read of such faithful men who gave their lives for the sake of truth. It was recorded that during Queen Mary's brief reign of four years, 284 people were put to death for their faith (Henry Charles Moore, *Through Flood and Flame* [Sussex: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, n.d.]; 90). Never forget this historical record of these whose lives can be described by Hebrew 11:33, 34, who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. May we never forget these faithful witnesses who died for their faith.

The Adversary and its Doctrine and Tactics

1 Peter 5:8 says, *'Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.'* There may be a change in tactics to a conciliatory strategy of good public relations but the theological content and doctrines are still the same. To get true believers confused and shipwrecked in their faith is still the aim of the accuser of the brethren. We live in momentous and hazardous times. The Reformation helps us see spiritual things in perspective. The adversary is fiercer than before with an outstretched arm of peace and unity in a compromising world, but he was exposed already in the past. Do not engage in ecumenical unity at the expense of sound doctrines and scriptural convictions. We have to be vigilant and watchful and one of the ways is to remember our Protestant Reformation and its spiritual teachings in our Christian heritage. Jeremiah 15:16 says, *'Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts.'* The pure Gospel of justification by faith alone through Christ alone is too precious to be compromised and exchanged for false peace and ecumenical unity which is popular today with a growing accommodating spirit in the church.

Consider David Wells' insightful comment here :

"Without the holiness of God, then, there is no cross. Without the cross there is no gospel. Without the gospel there is no Christianity. Without Christianity there is no church. And without echoes of the holiness of God in those who are Christ's, there is no recognizable church. What is it about this chain of connections that the evangelical church today is not understanding that is leading it to soft-pedal, overlook, or ignore the holiness of God? . . . If we could see more clearly God in the full blaze of his burning purity, we would not be on easy terms with all the sins that now infect our souls and breed easy compromises with the spirit of the postmodern age. This is what leads to the casual ways in which we live our lives with their blatantly wrong priorities." (p. 129, 133. See *The Journal of Modern Ministry* Volume 5, Issue 3, Fall 2008.)

The past and the present are as important as the future. History often repeats itself where men of frail memory forget important past events. Remember Reformation Sunday (and not Halloween the diabolical holiday that is celebrated today by many), the day to recall soberly the greatest event in church history, second perhaps only to the Day of Pentecost. Let us not go back to ignorance, superstition and church traditions; but read our Bible and know the truth in our heart and it will surely set us free. Beware of the ecumenical movement which will reach its zenith in the last days, in its deadly alliance with those of a contrary faith. Resist the onslaught of the ungodly and worldly union with unfruitful darkness, and preach the pure and unadulterated word in season and out of season. Warn others of this spiritual danger, and zealously defend the faith that was once delivered to the saints for this is our sacred duty (Jude 3). Work both privately and publicly for the propagation, defense and contention of the truth of Jesus Christ and the

maintenance of Reformation principles into the 21st century Reformation Movement. Stand only with like-minded brethren and hold fast to sound doctrines and stand firm on the infallible, inspired truths of Holy Scripture and do not ever neglect nor forget the rich spiritual heritage of the 16th century Protestant Reformation.

Conclusion

These perilous end times are also darkening days of great spiritual declension and ecclesiastical compromise and there is a grave need for greater vigilance and contention for the faith. [Jude 3, 4](#) says, 'Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.' The forces of darkness will attempt to corrupt and undermine the fervent purity of the faith and the soldiers of the cross need to be alert and watchful. Paul in [Philippians 1:27](#) exhorts us, '*Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*' and [1 Thessalonians 2:13](#) says, 'For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.'

May the Lord give to his people spiritual courage, godly discretion and prudence to stand firm for Him in these last perilous days before His soon coming.

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(NB. Read T.M. Lindsay, *The Reformation*, 2006 and David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant*, 2008.)