

## Why Remember the Reformation Today?

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October 31 is the anniversary of the commencement proper of the Reformation. On this date in 1517, Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg. No one could have known how God would use the 34 year-old monk's action to challenge the corruption of the church and to recover the gospel after a thousand years of widespread darkness.

### The Use of the Reformation

In recalling the Reformation, let's be clear, first, that we are not celebrating a split in the visible church. Splits are sadly familiar to many of us, but they were not always as common as today, and they are certainly not what God envisioned for his church (John 17:20-21). It is hugely regrettable, then, that there was a split between the church in the east and the west, followed later by the development of a breach between what we now know as the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches (Lutheran, Reformed and Free). It is important to make this point, for division has become so easy for Protestants, and has done more to bring the work of the Reformers into disrepute in the eyes of Roman Catholics than just about anything else. As a result Protestant expositions of the biblical doctrine of God's free grace have gone largely unheard.

Secondly, let's be clear we do not have to copy the harshness of the sixteenth century. While we must never lose sight of the Lord's righteous anger against false teaching (Matt. 23 is a classic example), much of the acrimony of that harsh era we can let go of without betraying the achievements of the Reformers. It was shameful of Luther, for instance, to reduce the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli to tears when discussing, at the Colloquy of Marburg (1529), the meaning of our Lord's words *Hoc est corpus meum* ("This is my body"). Similarly, one looks in disbelief at Calvin's description of the Baptists of his day as "frantic blockheads" and "mad beasts" (although we ought to note that his intemperateness was directed more against their ruination of the Protestant ideal of one visible biblical church than against their views of baptism). Well did Calvin apologize on his deathbed apparently to the leaders of Geneva for his bad temper. Christ, then, is ultimately our example. Notwithstanding his ire against false teachers, he was as full of grace as he was of truth (Jn 1:14).

Thirdly, let's be clear that we are no longer applying Reformation teaching to the same context in which it emerged. Not only has Christendom passed, so

has its successor, the Modern age (c. 1750–1950). Whereas truth was generally accessed by faith in Christendom, it was sought out by reason after the Enlightenment. In today's postmodern era it is said that there is no truth to access. Truth is said to be a "social construct" (what each societal people group makes it). The cultural and religious pluralism to which this thinking leads is very similar to the context faced by the church of the first century. We should not be phased, then, by the application of Reformation teaching to the situation today that so resembles the first century A.D. After all, the Reformers gained their insights from the first-century writings of the apostles.

### The Truths of the Reformation

Among the chief truths recovered by the Reformers from under the dark cloud of Medievalism we may mention, first, the supremacy of Scripture over tradition. Good traditions have their place ~ a point that present-day Evangelicals are in danger of forgetting ~ but the gospel suffers every time we put our human traditions *en par* with Scripture. Traditions are only good when their warrant and usefulness can be proven from Scripture. By idolizing traditions that have no scriptural backing, we undermine the sacrifices of the Reformers and cease to be either Protestant or biblical.

Second, the Reformers recovered the uniqueness of Christ as Mediator. They saw clearly that only Christ, the God-man, can adequately represent God before man and man before God. This he did when making at-one-ment between us and God, by his never-to-be repeated sacrifice for sin at Calvary, and by his ongoing intercession before his Father in heaven. That said, the unique Priesthood of Christ ought not to be confused with the priesthood of all believers (another Reformation emphasis). The Reformers spoke of this only in a derived sense, for our best intercessions remain tainted by sin, and require perfecting by our High Priest in heaven.

Third, the Reformers recovered the importance of the efficacy of grace. Rejecting the notion that we are saved by the works of the law in favor of the view that we are saved through faith alone in the finished work of Christ on the cross, the Reformers understood that we contribute nothing to the righteousness required for acceptance by God. Christ procured this righteousness by perfectly obeying the law in our flesh ~ a righteousness reckoned to us in exchange for our sin, when we look believingly to Christ. But even this trust is given us of God's Spirit, such that all we "do" for salvation is to raise our empty hands to receive it!

We rightly remember the Reformation, then, when we treasure the gospel of God's grace and make it known. Many folk died for the truths we take for granted; not just the great and the famous, but quiet and simple folk, who,

though poor in this world's goods, were rich unto eternal life. They knew that it matters how a person can be right with God. The question we ask this Reformation Day is: Do we? The Reformers won us the freedom to find out.