

## Our Heritage in the Protestant Reformation

October 31, 1517—October 31, 2024: 507<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (Quincentennial)

Romans 1:16-17

Philip Schaff (1819-1893), one of the most noted 19<sup>th</sup> century church historians, stated these memorable words at the beginning of his two-volume classic:

The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, next to the introduction of Christianity, the greatest event in history. It marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. Starting from religion, it gave, directly or indirectly, a mighty impulse to every forward movement, and made Protestantism the chief propelling force in the history of modern civilization.

The age of the Reformation bears a strong resemblance to the first century. Both are rich beyond any other period in great and good men, important facts, and permanent results. Both contain the ripe fruits of preceding, and the fruitful germs of succeeding ages. They are turning points in the history of mankind. They are felt in their effects to this day, and will be felt to the end of time.<sup>1</sup>

Typically, the last Sunday in October is devoted to the remembrance of Martin Luther's nailing of his 95 theses or "statements" against indulgences to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, thereby inviting public discussion on these teachings that arose from the Roman Catholic Church. Luther believed they were against the Scriptures and heretical. So, he chose October 31, the eve of All Saints Day (November 1) in 1517 because this was one of the most popular festivals, attracting teachers, students and people from all walks of life to the church. The door at the castle church was like a community bulletin board, so when people began reading Luther's thoughts, it started a great movement that turned history upside-down.

On Protestant Reformation Sunday, we take time to thank God and to examine the great heritage given to us as Reformed Christians from our spiritual forebears.

### 1. It is important to understand the times that led up to the Reformation.

Many believers do not realize from history that God was sovereignly preparing the times for a major movement of his Spirit in northern Europe. The times leading up to the Protestant Reformation show how God was acclimating the soil and the conditions for a spiritual revival unlike anything seen since the days of Pentecost in Acts 2.

- a. *It was a time of geographical change.* We remember the famous words: "in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." When Columbus discovered the new world, it expanded the knowledge of the world to all people. By 1517 in Martin Luther's prime, the discoveries of Columbus and other explorers ushered in an era of exploration. The oceans of the world became the trade highways of the nations. With this new spirit of exploration came an attitude of openness, for new pursuits and opportunities became reality. Keep in mind that by 1517, the world already knew great Renaissance figures such as Michelangelo (he finished

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. Vol. VII: Modern Christianity—The German Reformation. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 1.

painting the Sistine Chapel's ceiling in 1512, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Copernicus. Luther, Calvin, and other reformers were soon to take the world's stage.

- b. *It was a time of political change.* With the new world opened, people realized that this was a far bigger planet than first surmised. The Middle Ages concept of politics was known as a universal state. Now it was moving to a nation state. Nation states were organized under powerful rulers, many favoring the message of the Reformation because they knew it would form churches that would require less oversight unlike the existing churches of the time. An age of new thought caused people to look at things from new perspectives. The feudal lords of Europe became decentralized and were replaced by a contingent of nation states. Key philosophers were Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Francis Bacon.
- c. *It was a time of economic change.* During the Middle Ages, the economy of Europe was agricultural, and land was the basis of wealth. By 1500, new towns were formed, new markets were opened because of the explorations in the new world and a new class of society appeared—the middle-class merchant. This replaced the former medieval feudal noble as a leader in society. Trade was expanding rapidly, bringing new products and new markets with a new mobility.
- d. *It was a time of social change.* The social organization of the medieval society—where one remained in the class where one was born—was exchanged for a new society. It became possible to rise from a lower class to a higher class in society. If you were born a serf in medieval times, you remained a serf. That condition was now changing, as a new culture and a new society was blossoming.
- e. *It was a time of intellectual change.* With the strong influence of the Renaissance towards intellect and learning, Europe became a place for fertile discussion for new truths and learning. With the invention of the printing press and movable type by Johann Gutenberg in Mainz, Germany in the 1450's, the printing and distribution of information, especially the Scriptures, could occur. The first full Bible was printed in 1456, although the printing press was not fully disclosed until 1462. Luther was born just 21 years later in 1483. How beautiful in God's sovereignty for him to prepare the way for the Reformation with an invention that could quickly multiply the printing and distribution of the Scriptures just 55 years in advance of this spiritual movement!
- f. *Primarily, it was a time of spiritual change.* The corruption and abuse within the Roman Catholic Church at that time was well documented and felt throughout the known world. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, spiritual life was hollow, dark, ignorant and without meaning. The papacy was secularized and turned into a selfish tyranny. The writings of numerous scholars and satirists are full of complaints and exposures of the ignorance, vulgarity and immorality of priests and monks. Theology was neglected. Preaching was cast aside. Education was confined to priests and nobles, not to the laity. Remission of sin could be bought with money. The Bible was not available. The spiritual life, instead of focusing on a personal relationship with God, was reduced to a series of mechanical performances such as giving alms, performing indulgences, rote recital of ceremonies and ritualistic confessions to priests who demanded money.

This is *not* an exaggeration. Reputable Roman Catholic scholars and historians<sup>2</sup> acknowledge openly in their writings the decay of the time and the need for moral reform and spiritual awakening in the 16<sup>th</sup> century church. A genuine spiritual revival was needed. And God sent it. In summary, the Reformation was one of the greatest long-term revivals in human history. In the midst of this changing era marked by moral darkness and spiritual decline came great leaders called by God to launch this mighty revival:

- i. Martin Luther—Germany.
- ii. John Calvin—France and Switzerland.
- iii. John Knox—Scotland.
- iv. Ulrich Zwingli—Switzerland.
- v. Thomas Cranmer—England.
- vi. Jan Hus—Bohemia (Czechoslovakia).
- vii. Philip Melancthon—Germany.
- viii. John Wycliffe—England.

## 2. What was the emphasis of the Reformation?

When you look at the writings of these great spiritual leaders against the background of spiritual darkness and moral decline, five major doctrines emerged among others that caused great discussion and eventual liberation to people throughout the northern European continent at that time.

- a. *The Bible alone* (“*Sola Scriptura*”). The Protestant Reformers believed that truth about God and life were not found in church councils, religious traditions, or papal edicts. In their minds, God had spoken clearly from his revelation—the Bible. The Scriptures were the only infallible rule of faith and practice, not some human-made decision or edict. The Bible was the center piece of the Reformation. It was the center of study, intended for people of all ages and educations to read, not just the clergy. Not only was the Bible the supreme authority, but it was also sufficient for daily life.
- b. *Christ alone* (“*Sola Christo*”). The Reformers believed that from the revelation God gave in the Scriptures, it centered clearly on the person and work of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-3, 1 Corinthians 3:11, John 14:6). Christ founded the church on his authority, not on another other human figure like a pope or a priest. Christ alone was the one who provided eternal life based upon his sufficient work on the Cross and the empty tomb. Through Christ alone, we can come to know God.
- c. *Faith alone* (“*Sola Fide*”). Luther, Calvin, and others believed, preached, and wrote that a person’s standing before God is not based on their good works or upon any indulgences they could do. God said clearly that people receive salvation by his grace through faith, not from human merit or performance so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). *Defined*: faith is trusting in the person and work of Christ as the final grounds for eternal life and peace with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick William Farrar noted: “In the sixteenth century the whole Papal system had, even on the confession of its own historians, sunk into a formalism and corruption which made it a curse to mankind.” *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1886), 308.

- d. *Grace alone (“Sola Gratia”).* In an age dominated by performance-righteousness as the way to earn God’s favor and pleasure, the preaching of the Reformation sounded clearly: “your salvation comes *not* by what you do. Your salvation comes from a merciful God who gives it to you out of his grace and love based on the work of his Son. There is *nothing* you can do to merit God’s grace. His kindness comes to you out of his sovereignty. You cannot choose God by your own reason or performance. You can only come to God by his initiating, drawing grace” (Titus 3:3-7).
- e. *God’s glory alone (“Soli Deo Gloria”).* The apex of the Reformation was that God revealed himself to humanity through nature, Christ, and the Bible for one great ultimate purpose—to declare his majestic glory to all the earth. God and God alone is the center of a person’s existence. He occupies center stage, not Mary, the saints of the past or even the Apostles. God is supreme.  
Leaders like Luther, Calvin, Knox, Hus, Wycliffe, and others preached and wrote about these great truths in their time, launching a spiritual revival and reform that affects us to this day. This Sunday, we take time to recognize and to appreciate our heritage in the Protestant Reformation.

### 3. The effects of the Protestant Reformation.

Although numerous effects and spinoffs are attributed to the Reformation, most historians and scholars universally acknowledge five significant effects that still last to this day.

- a. *Spiritual freedom and evangelical liberty.* With the performance-righteousness that pervaded the church at that time, people were held under bondage. In many places *today* they remain under bondage. There abounds the thinking that to earn God’s favor and to get to heaven, a checklist of things must be performed. The Protestant Reformation enabled people to go back and to look at the First Century Church. It enabled them to see that the message preached by Christ brought freedom from the bondage and burden of the ritualistic law (John 8:32). This made Galatians 5:1 one of the sounding verses of the Reformation: “it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” The Reformation sounds forth this cry: “you are *FREE* in Jesus Christ! You cannot earn your way to heaven. It is a free gift of God, not merited by works whatsoever!”
- b. *The priesthood of all believers.* Through the consistent preaching of the Reformers on the accomplishment and work of Jesus Christ, people saw that they could approach God directly in prayer and in worship. Christ opened direct access to God (Hebrews 10:19-24). You do not have to go to a priest for confession. You can go to God directly because of Jesus’ work. As an eternal high priest, he prays for you and enables you to come boldly before God’s throne.
- c. *A return to early church Christianity.* The Reformation sparked a spiritual revival among people to return to the example and practice of the First Century Church. Among many things that marked the church founded by Jesus, three things stood out: 1) God-centered worship and adoration; 2) The preaching of the gospel; and 3) Church government and discipline (the “keys of the Kingdom”). These elements returned to high practice and visibility in Protestantism, and God used them to foster spiritual revival.
- d. *Worldwide Bible translation and education.* With Luther’s translation of the Bible into German in 1521-22 along with William Tyndale’s translation into English as early as 1525, along with

other attempts to translate the Scriptures into the language of the common person in the 1520s, a great movement towards Bible education and catechizing ensued. Education and learning the doctrines of the Faith were strongly practiced along with the formation of schools, seminaries, and Bible institutes. The teaching of the Bible for all occasions in life became a regular practice.

- e. *Social and governmental order with freedom.* In all the lands where the message of the Protestant Reformation gained a solid foothold, there was genuine order, peace, and freedom. The lands that did not internalize the gospel message echoed by the Reformers have lived in repression and disarray. Of special emphasis in this area is the work of John Calvin, one of the greatest leaders<sup>3</sup> of the Reformation. From his biblical expositions, sermons, commentaries and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, principles of representative government came which structured the church of his time. These principles in representative government provided the framework that significantly influenced our American founding fathers in forming a representative government grounded on principles of democracy. The heart of our representative government and republic has one taproot in the Protestant Reformation. Many of the freedoms you enjoy today come from that mighty movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### Summary and Application

On Reformation Sunday, we thank God for bringing about this great spiritual revival. We appreciate our heritage in Protestantism, and we pray for a new reformation for our time in this world where:

- There is Christ-centered worship that exalts the greatness and sovereignty of God;
- There is an emphasis on justification by faith, not upon human performance;
- Grace is the foundation of God's favor, not human works, and merit;
- The Bible and the Bible alone is the source of truth and the only rule of faith and practice;
- Christ alone is the center of our life, worship, and devotion.

Let Martin Luther's words on April 18, 1521, to the Diet (Council) of Worms, Germany motivate you to deeper commitment to Christ:

"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand. I can do no other."

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<sup>3</sup> Some have likened the Reformers' uniqueness in this light: "Luther was the great *catalyst* of the Reformation; Knox was the great *preacher* of the Reformation, and Calvin was the great *theologian* and *teacher* of the Reformation."