

# The Reformation and Twentieth Century Protestantism

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October 31 is the anniversary of the Reformation of the church - "Reformation Day." On the 31st of October in the year 1517, in Wittenberg, Germany, the monk and university professor Martin Luther nailed to the door of the great Church a list of 95 propositions, or theses. That act and those theses became the source of that mighty movement within the church which we know as the "Reformation of the church." We do well to commemorate and celebrate this event of the 16th century. For it had the most tremendous significance for the true church of Jesus Christ. It was the most important act of God upon the church for good from the death of the apostles to the present time.

The date, October 31, 1517, only marks what later proved to be the beginning of the Reformation. When Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the church, he had no intention of starting the Reformation. He had no plan whatever of separation from the church whose headquarters was Rome and whose head was the Pope. His purpose with the theses and the discussion of them which he hoped would follow was the correction of certain practices and the teachings that produced those practices. He wanted the existing church to reform itself. In the 95 theses, Luther revealed himself as still very much tainted with the evils of the church as she then existed. For example, he as yet regarded the Pope as the rightful head of the church, and he was willing to allow the practice of indulgences in the church, if only the gross abuses were corrected. He himself had to develop in the truth, which, however, he did speedily, so that by 1520 he recanted his former allowance of a Pope and indulgences. The Reformation, therefore, was not Luther's intention, but the will of God. It was not Luther's achievement, but the work of God. Luther himself said, after the Reformation had sprouted and flowered: "like a blind mule I was led by Him."

Nor was the Reformation of the church a movement that was perfected through Luther and that ended with his death. It continued and advanced through other Reformers of the 16th century, especially John Calvin. It proceeded with power, and with blessing for the church in the great Synod of Dordt and the Westminster Assembly of the 17th century. It goes on today, over 450 years after its beginning. But the seed of this plant was sown on October 31, 1517. Whether Luther knew it or not, the 95 theses contained the truth that must shake the world and radically reform the church of Christ.

It is tragic that the churches today, the Protestant churches, have so little knowledge of the Reformation and so little interest in it. It is still worse that they are unconcerned about the truth that the Reformation proclaimed. The grimmest reality of all is the extent to which the churches have forsaken that truth and, by this fact, sink away again into the same evil condition that necessitated the Reformation.

Our time is a time of the re-establishment of relations with Rome by Protestants. Even those churches with the best reputations for orthodoxy are busy with "dialogues." Huge chunks of

Protestantism speak of the imminent possibility of a close relationship with Rome in the World Council of Churches. Certain seers are laying plans for total organizational reunion. From a practical viewpoint alone, knowledge of the 16th century Reformation is necessary in our day.

## **The Historical Event**

The issue over which the Reformation began was that of indulgences. This practice of the church motivated Luther to publish the 95 theses. The subject of the 95 theses was the indulgence-question. Indulgences were pieces of paper which the church sold to the people for the remitting of the punishment of the people's sins. The indulgence-business which the church engaged in was the sale of the forgiveness of sins for money. Buried away in the law-books of the church at that time was the theoretical explanation of this practice. The church said that, for every sin, there were two kinds of punishment which the sinner had to suffer: the eternal punishment of hell and a certain temporal punishment. Christ by His death paid the former debt; each sinner had himself to pay the latter. This, he would have to do either in this life or in purgatory after death. The church, so the theory ran, could help the sinner out in the payment of the temporal punishment. For Christ had given the church a treasury of merits. These were the merits that had been piled up by certain saints who in their life had done more than God required of them in His law. These merits the church could and would apply to a sinner's account - at a price. The sinner bought these merits when he bought an indulgence. The benefit to him was that he would escape that much punishment either in this life or in purgatory. Indulgences could also be applied to the dead in purgatory. One could buy them for departed loved ones and thus spare them much torment in purgatory. These were the careful distinctions and the theory in the statute-books. In fact, the people were ignorant of these distinctions and simply viewed indulgences as forgiveness, total forgiveness, of their sins. This was also the message proclaimed by the sellers of indulgences, and this was the conception of indulgences which the Popes and bishops wanted the people to have.

The current Pope at Rome was Leo X. Leo wanted to complete the magnificent cathedral at Rome, St. Peter's. Needing money, he authorized an indulgence-selling program throughout Germany. A super-salesman in Germany was the monk Tetzl. He sold near Wittenberg, where Martin Luther labored. Tetzl outdid himself in making extravagant claims for indulgences. One of his favorite claims was expressed in a ditty:

"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,

The soul from purgatory springs."

In the 95 theses, Luther blasted this ditty expressly: "They preach human doctrine who say that the soul flies out of purgatory as soon as the money thrown into the chest rattles" (Thesis 27). It was then that Luther wrote the 95 theses, not only against Tetzl but also against the general practice and theory of indulgences. At the same time, the theses set forth the truth concerning the pardon of sins and the righteousness of sinful man before God.

Once these theses were published, the breach between Luther and the church headed by the Pope widened rapidly. In 1520, the Pope excommunicated Luther. A severe struggle

followed, for the Pope, in alliance with the emperor, exerted much effort to destroy the church now reformed and existing separately from the Roman Catholic Church. In the course of this struggle, in 1529, the ministers allied with Luther drew up a document in which they expressed their objections to the teachings of Rome. In the document, they said, "We protest." The adversaries seized upon this term and began, derisively, to refer to the members of the church now reformed as "Protestants," a name that has stuck.

This was the occasion, the historical occasion, of the Reformation. The main issue, that of the forgiveness of sins, makes plain what the Reformation was, at its very heart.

## **The (Doctrinal) Essence of the Reformation**

The Reformation of the 16th century was not an act of personal revolution by an insubordinate monk at Wittenberg. This is the analysis of it that Rome gives. Luther had no axe to grind. He had no intention of revolting against the existing institute of the church.

The Reformation was not a political movement, or an economic one. Such is the analysis of it by secular historians. According to this view, it was the assertion of independence by the German nation, the arising of a nationalistic, patriotic fervor, and the overthrowing of a foreign domination. Or, it was nothing more than the expression of resentment by the Germans at the flow of their gold into Italy. Politics and economics came to play some part later on, but the Reformation was not political or economic.

Nor was it a movement that merely corrected some abuses and excesses within the church at that time. Of late, the Roman Catholic Church has been willing to make this somewhat more favorable judgment of the Reformation. It is now admitted that the Popes of that time were worldly, that the selling of indulgences had gone to extremes, and even that the preaching, teaching, and life of the church had become very weak. This is also the analysis of the Reformation that is popular among Protestants themselves in our time: The Reformation was necessary to correct certain abuses, especially abuses in the behavior of the church-leaders and in the practices of the people. This analysis has the most important implications, which these "Protestants" are also now willing to draw out. The abuses no longer exist in the Roman Catholic Church. The Popes are no longer the worldly men which they were then. Indulgence-peddlers no longer hawk indulgences with extravagant claims and ditties. The people now have Bibles and are permitted to read them. Therefore, the Reformation no longer applies; it is merely a historical event, belonging strictly to the past. And what prohibits re-union with Rome?

Against all of these analyses of the Reformation, we must utter a vehement, uncompromising, final, "NO." The Reformation was a work of the Holy Spirit in the sphere of the church of Jesus Christ that effected a radical re-forming (a forming anew) of the church after the image of the Son of God. Especially the analysis of the Reformation as a movement for that time, directed merely to some abuses, needs to be utterly repudiated. Even though this was the amazing concession made by one of the main colleagues of Luther, Philip Melancthon, as late as 1530, at the time of the composition of the Lutheran "Augsburg Confession," this analysis is wrong. The Reformation proclaimed the truth over against the lie. It stood for the Word of God over against the words of man. It proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ over against "another

gospel" which is no gospel. It sought the salvation of the people of God out of the stark awareness that they were being threatened with eternal damnation. The significance of the Reformation was that it sought the true church over against the false church, and Christ over against Antichrist. The life-and-death significance of the Reformation for that and all time, Luther voiced already in the 95 theses of 1517: "Those who believe that through letters of pardon they are made sure of their own salvation will be eternally damned along with their teachers" (Thesis 32).

To see this significance of the Reformation, we must note that the Reformation was doctrinal in essence and we must look at the outstanding points of controversy, the main issues.

The Reformation originated in the indulgence-question. It had to do with this question: How are my sins forgiven? How is the punishment of the infinite wrath of God taken away from me, a damnable sinner? The Reformation started here, with this fundamental question: How am I, how can I be, righteous before God? Because a righteous man is a man that will be saved, it was the question: How shall I be saved? The doctrine and practice of indulgences was an answer of the church to this basic question, an answer that said: "You must pay for that pardon; you must earn that righteousness; you must save yourself." Although the selling of indulgences put this teaching into the crass form -earn salvation with money!-indulgences were not a mere, temporary excess, but an accurate reflection of a false doctrine that the church had adopted. This doctrine out of which indulgences sprouted was the doctrine that the salvation of man depended, at least in part, upon the works which he must perform. Man's righteousness before God, the basis of salvation, is made up of Christ's work and man's own works. His salvation, therefore, depends upon his own good works. The Reformation passed judgment on this doctrine, the judgment that it was no mere abuse but the denial of the gospel itself. The righteousness with which a man is righteous before God is the work of Jesus Christ and the work of Jesus Christ alone. The satisfaction for sins, the suffering of the full punishment, the obtaining of the perfect righteousness which I need, were accomplished perfectly, once for all, by Jesus in His suffering and death on the cross. This righteousness is now in Christ, and the way in which it becomes mine so that I can enjoy it is the way of faith in Christ Jesus as the crucified and risen Savior. The way of faith is the way of trusting in Christ Jesus and His perfect righteousness, whom I know as the Savior with unshakable certainty because of God's promise in His Word. To the question, "How am I just before God?" the Reformation gave a new, radically different answer, "Not by works which I do, not even partly, but by faith alone." The Reformation based this on the clear teaching of Scripture: [Romans 1:17](#) states, "The just shall live by faith"; [Romans 3:28](#) says, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

What this truth means is that salvation is of grace. Salvation does not depend at all upon man as the basis, but is God's wholly free gift to man, who is totally unworthy of that salvation and totally unable to effect it. This is the gospel! This is the good news! Justification by faith alone means that salvation is of grace alone. "Faith alone" means "grace alone." As Paul writes in [Romans 4:16](#): "Therefore it is of faith, that it might be of grace. . . ." The result of this gospel of grace is peace in the hearts of the people of God. As [Romans 4:6](#) continues: ". . . to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed. . . ." This peace is destroyed by any and every teaching

that makes salvation depend on man and on his works. For then man must be in perpetual doubt that his works are satisfactory. This gospel of grace Luther proclaimed already in the 95 theses: "The true treasure of the church is the holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God" (Thesis 62).

There are two other truths that are closely connected with the truth of justification by faith alone. The first is the truth that Christ Jesus accomplished everything that was necessary to obtain righteousness for His people. He did this by His suffering and death, once accomplished on the cross. He satisfied fully for the sins of all for whom He died, and obtained their righteousness. After His death, no payment for sin remained which they had yet to make; no work was left undone that was necessary for their righteousness. This truth cleared the decks in many ways. It demolished the fiction of purgatory. It exposed the basic error of the mass, which by its repeated sacrifice of Christ for sins denied the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross. And it set good works in a new, radically different light. They are not our payment or our earning. But they are deeds of thankfulness on the part of men who are thankful for gracious salvation. The Reformation did not destroy or deprecate good works, but it established the only life of works that are truly good.

The second truth intimately bound up with justification by faith alone is the truth of the total depravity of man as he is in himself, apart from the Holy Spirit of Christ and His regenerating grace. The church at that time taught that man had to perform good works upon which his salvation depended. Man could do this, the church said, because he was somewhat good in himself, apart from the work of Jesus in his heart. After the fall, man is not totally depraved. Therefore, God can demand of him that he do something to earn salvation and to effect salvation. The Reformation struck at the very heart of this error by proclaiming that man had no ability to do good works of himself, because in himself man is totally depraved. After the fall of Adam, all men are devoid of any good and have no ability for good. As [Ephesians 2:1](#) says, "(Man is) dead in trespasses and sins. How then can his salvation depend upon him and upon what he does?"

Within eight years after the Reformation began, by 1525, Luther was engaged in a fierce conflict over the question: Does man have a free will? One of his foes, Erasmus of Rotterdam, attacked the Reformation because of its teaching that the natural man was totally devoid of all good and was wholly sinful and evil. Erasmus wrote publicly, in a book called ***On Free Will***, that man, apart from Christ, had a will that could choose for God, for Christ, and for good. Luther saw this teaching as the source of the whole heresy that salvation also depends on man's good works. Against the theory of free will and Erasmus, Luther wrote the book, ***The Bondage of the Will***, concerning which he said at the end of his life that it was one of two books he had written which were worth preserving. In it Luther maintained that the very will of man is bound as a slave to sin: ". . . with regard to God, and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, he (man) has no 'free will,' but is a captive, prisoner and bondsman. . . to the will of Satan."

This immediately raises the question: Why then do some men believe in Jesus Christ, love God, and live a holy life, whereas others do not, but remain in their spiritual death of sin? The answer of the church prior to the Reformation was that this is due to the men themselves who believe.

For all have the ability, but only some exercise their ability. Once more, salvation depends on man himself. This, the Reformation denied. No one has the ability; all alike are dead in sin. The reason why some believe unto salvation is God's eternal election of them. God has eternally chosen (elected) some men unto eternal life, as Scripture teaches, e.g., in [Ephesians 1:4, 5](#): "He hath chosen us in Him (Christ), before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him: in love having predestinated us. . . ." To the elect, God gives the Holy Spirit who works faith in them and makes them spiritually alive. God has not chosen all. From eternity He has determined that some go lost in their unbelief and disobedience. This is God's decree of reprobation. According to this counsel of God of election and reprobation, He deals with all men in time and history, as Paul writes in [Romans 9:18](#): "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." God does not elect His people on the basis of their superiority, for all are alike evil and incapable of any good. His election also, the source of all salvation, is an election of grace ([Romans 11:5](#)). The Reformation confessed sovereign, gracious election. The only alternative is that which the unreformed church held, namely, an election that depends on man's own worthiness to be chosen.

It is often said that the doctrine of predestination was the invention of John Calvin. It is true that the Lutheran church did not come to give a good confession about predestination. But this was due to the fact that the man mainly responsible for the Lutheran confessions was not Luther, but Melancthon, the same Melancthon who in 1530 analyzed the Reformation as having to do only with some abuses in the practices of the church. No one, however, has ever written more plainly and more strongly in defense of the truth of sovereign predestination, election and reprobation, than did Martin Luther, not even John Calvin. Whoever doubts this, let him read ***The Bondage of the Will***. The Reformation was one in preaching God's gracious election as the eternal fountain of salvation by grace, just as it was one in condemning "free will" as the fountainhead of the error of work-righteousness, which spawned indulgences.

What solid, sure foundation did Luther and the Reformation stand on in order once more to proclaim the gospel of grace and in order to form the church anew by the power of this gospel? This was no merely theoretical question in those critical times. Arrayed against the gospel of justification by faith alone, and all the truths implied by it, stood imposing foes. The institutional church, vested with the pomp, magnificence, and authority of many centuries, condemned the teaching as heresy. Allied with the church, hostile to the Reformation as a schismatic movement, was the Empire, the civil authority, which Luther more than anyone regarded as "servant of God." Against the gospel of grace was hurled again and again the writings of many church fathers. The foes cast in Luther's teeth the charge that he stood alone. How, they asked, can you be sure of your teaching? Can all the church be wrong, and you alone, wretched monk in barbarous Germany, be right? The climax came at Worms, where in 1521 church and state assembled to demand of Luther that he recant, and where he stood alone. Yet, it was there that he said, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." How was this possible?

The solid foundation on which the Reformation stood was the authority of the Word of God, the Scriptures. This was the other of the two outstanding truths proclaimed by the Reformation. The Bible alone has authority over believers and over the church. Also this truth had long since

been lost in the church. The authority was the hierarchy, the Pope and the priest. The Scriptures were almost entirely absent from the life of the church. Where they still had a place, they were the exclusive property of the Pope, for only he had the right and the competence to explain them. The Reformation asserted: "Scripture alone." The Bible, as the infallibly inspired Word of God, is the sole authority in the church. In distinction from tradition, opinions of men, even holy men, and the will of the leaders of the church, Scripture alone governs faith and life. It is over the church, and the church is not over it. Scripture is given to every believer, and not to some few in the church. Everyone can understand it who has faith, for the Spirit enlightens him. This Scripture plainly proclaims the gospel of grace, said the Reformers, and therefore we must carry on the Reformation and may not desist, for to desist would be disobedience to God's own word.

## **The Application of this Analysis of the Reformation to Our Day**

These truths are "eternal truths." What the Reformation stood for over 400 years ago is true, as relevant, and as vital today as it was then. Justification by faith alone on the authority of Scripture as God's inspired Word is the gospel. The gospel does not change from age to age; it is never surpassed; it never will become out-dated; there will never arise a new message that outstrips the gospel in importance, so that we may lay the gospel aside to concentrate on the more important matter. This is how we must view the relationship between the Reformation of the church in 1517 and our time. This is how we must understand the application of that Reformation to ourselves. The truths it set forth, we are to hold and hold dear today, for they were the truths of God's Word. It is possible that we have deeper insight into those truths - indeed, we are called to have deeper insight - but we repudiate those who pay lip-service to the Reformation as some heroic event, while they deny the truths which the Reformation proclaimed. The Reformation is no historical curiosity which we only admire, but a living, on-going reality, because of the gospel of grace it preached.

What conclusions, practical, urgent conclusions for a living church and for living believers, can we come to, from this understanding of the Reformation?

The first is that the Roman Catholic Church has not changed, not one whit, for the better from the time in the 16th century when Luther and the Reformation, in grief, had to renounce her in God's Name. In our day, many Protestants would give the impression that she has changed, so much so that now it is conceivable to have friendly relations with her and even to contemplate re-union. The reason why they say this is that they no longer know what the Reformation was really about, or care for the gospel. The Reformation was not about nice Popes and bad Popes, not about meat or fish on certain days, not about any of those superficial things that Rome lately has bestirred herself with. It was about salvation by God's grace in Jesus Christ alone! It was about Scripture, the only authority in the church and over the church! On these issues, Rome is unchanged. This is not a charge, but a statement of fact. It is Rome's own confession in "The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent" that justification and salvation depend also upon man's works and merits, and that they are anathema who preach justification by faith only. The Second Vatican Council of 1963-1965 reiterated Rome's doctrine that, in addition to Scripture, tradition is authoritative in the church ("Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation"). In the same "Constitution," this Council stated that "The task of authenticity interpreting the word of

God. . . has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church," that is, to the Pope. So little is it true that Rome has changed on any important matter, that the Council of Trent's blessing of indulgences as "most salutary, and approved of" stands to this day.

The second conclusion is that the spiritual condition of so-called Protestantism is to a large extent wretched and condemnable. It is not only the case that much of Protestantism is silent concerning the truths of the Reformation in its preaching and confession, but also that it opposes and denies these truths.

1. Much of Protestantism is more hostile to the Scriptures than the apostate church was at the time of the Reformation. It denies the infallible inspiration outright. It implicitly sets aside Scripture as the basis of our faith and life by its acceptance of evolution and its absurd handling of [Genesis 1-3](#). It ignores the Bible entirely as it renders its judgment on the ethical questions of our day, e.g., capital punishment, civil disobedience, abortion, and sexual morality, relying instead on science, prevailing opinion, and reason.
2. Much of Protestantism is one with Rome in making salvation depend upon man. It boldly proclaims free will and the dependence of God in salvation upon what man will do with this free will. It thereby denies total depravity, gracious election, and the efficacy and sufficiency of Christ's work. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther wrote that the issue of the enslaved human will was the fundamental issue of the Reformation. Addressing Erasmus, who had attacked the Reformation's teaching that man's will is incapable of choosing the good, Luther said, "You alone. . . have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. . . you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot."
3. Much of Protestantism no longer bothers to preach and teach the Scriptures at all. Sermons are moralistic little stories or harangues on social improvement. The church is in the streets. The heart of the Reformation and the 95 theses was expressed in Thesis 62: "The true treasure of the Church is the holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God."

This large part of Protestantism is worse off than the Pre-Reformation Church. There is worse ignorance, worse superstition, worse immorality, and, if we knew, worse terror. There is a guilt before God that He will punish with the utmost severity, for theirs is contempt for the gospel which once was showed them. [II Thessalonians 2:10-12](#) applies to them: ". . . they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

But what must our response be to the Reformation, who love the truths of the Reformation, that is, the gospel?

There ought to be a personal response. The Reformation concerned the individual in a most direct and practical way. Its truth was personal; it had to do with the question each asks for himself: How am I righteous before God, now and in the Great Judgment? As Luther put it, everyone stands on his own two feet here. And the Reformation arose in a personal way, as Luther himself struggled in utmost anxiety over that question. The Reformation intended to give peace, the peace that only the gospel of grace can give, to the individual child of God.

Who can say, "The Reformation does not concern me"? Of all miserable man's questions, the question, "How can I be righteous?" is the most pressing, save one.

There ought to be a congregational response to the Reformation. The 16th century Reformation was the Reformation of the *church*. The Reformation intended to give the church the pure preaching of the gospel, the sacraments rightly administered, and the exercise of a spiritual discipline. This was its great goal. If we have this, we have all that the Reformation desired to give. "The true treasure of the Church is the holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God." Then, we ought to rejoice and give thanks to God. If one does not have this, he ought to set about getting it, at once and at all cost.

But there must also be the response, by the individual believer and by the congregation, of a staunch willingness to defend the truth of the gospel, which includes the resolution to battle against its foes. The Reformation stood for the truth, but in the way of a battle. "We protest," the Reformation-believers said. The Reformation stood *for* something, and therefore it also stood *against* something. Protestantism at large no longer protests - except against protesting. It is not against anything. The reason is that it is no longer for anything, namely, the gospel. It is lukewarm ([Rev. 3:16](#)). We will have this willingness to defend the truth and do battle with its enemies only as it grips our hearts that the gospel is the revelation of the glory of our Savior-God in Jesus Christ. This is the greatest and most pressing issue of all life: How shall God be glorified? For the glory of God in the gospel we stand. For this we fight. For this we are willing to die.

And even this, this standing, is not our work, but God's efficacious grace in us. This is the confession of the Reformation. All is grace, even the confession of grace. "Here I stand," said Luther, "I *can* do no other."

The true church, the church re-formed, is small and weak. Opposed to the gospel and to the Scriptures and, therefore, opposed to her are many, strong, energetic foes. Above all, today as in the 16th century, the foe is the Devil and the gates of hell.

How shall we stand?

We are not fearful; we do not doubt.

*Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right man on our side,  
The man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask Who that may be?  
Christ Jesus it is He,  
Lord Sabaoth His Name,  
From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.*