



A Reformation To Laud, Lament, Or To Long For?

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.

This October 31 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation when Martin Luther, to protest the selling of "indulgences", nailed his 95 theses to the church door of Wittenberg.

Little did he know that "one small step for man, would be one giant leap for mankind". It triggered a spiritual and cultural revolution that reshaped Europe and indeed the world, with a ripple effect to our day.

Through it the Gospel, "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), was recovered and the restoration of apostolic Christianity took a quantum leap.

Sadly though, in recent times, it has become popular to belittle the Reformers and the Reformation. Among other things, blame is placed on them for our increasing secularisation and the multiplied division of the Christian church. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While the Reformers, as men, were imperfect and had their limitations, we reject any notion that the Reformation was not an act of God in history and an advance of God's kingdom.

To underline this and to celebrate 500 years of ongoing reformation, several Christian leaders have formulated *A Reforming Catholic Confession* to which we are signatories.

It is a statement that includes the Reformed/Evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic streams of Protestant Christianity.

As signatories, we commend it to your attention: <http://reformingcatholicconfession.com>

The Challenge To Be Protestant: From Reformation To "Reforming Catholic"

For many, a new narrative tells the story of a Reformation flawed by individualism and division. It is claimed that the doctrine of the "priesthood of the believer" and the break from Roman Catholicism invested the Protestant movement with the seeds of its own demise.

This could not be further from the truth. While using human agency, the Reformation *was* an act of God in history. Through it the reformers, though imperfect, were motivated by a desire to recover apostolic Christianity and ensure the continuity and the catholicity of the faith. They promoted the ecumenical (catholic) creeds of historic orthodoxy and the oneness of Christ's body, the church. And so, as reformation continues, we are called to *maintain* the unity of the Spirit until we *attain* the unity of the faith (Eph 4:3, 13). All those who are Christ's have the spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9). God gives the Holy Spirit, like salvation, *gratis*. It is therefore not to be *attained* but *maintained*. How?—*in the bond of peace*; through relationships that honour the Holy Spirit.

The church will only move toward the *unity of the faith* (doctrinal) in the measure it cultivates the *unity of the Spirit* (vital). Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would lead the people of God into all truth (Jn 16:13-14). To the degree the church corporately imbibes the *Spirit of truth* will she corporately recover "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let us celebrate the *unity of the Spirit*. Only then will we attain *the unity of the faith*—true catholicity.

Keep being filled with the Spirit!

Read Our “*reforming catholic*” aim, paragraphs 12-20 from *the Explanation*:
<http://reformingcatholicconfession.com/explanation/>

THE GOSPEL: Justification by Faith Reaffirmed or Reinterpreted?

"If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"
Psalm 11:3

In this 500th anniversary, we celebrate the divine genius of the Reformation in its core insight: *that the sinner is not justified by works but by faith alone*.

Nevertheless, in recent times the Reformers have been criticised for completely misconstruing Justification by Faith. Certain teachers (NT Wright, EP Sanders, JDG Dunn et al) have popularised, with some variations, what has become known as "The New Perspective on Paul". Sadly, numerous neo-evangelicals have followed in its wake, not discerning its full implications for the Gospel.

Space does not permit full justice for such a complex issue. Nonetheless, as stewards of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" we have a responsibility to warn and to teach.

Streamlining their project, its essential ideas are that:

1. Contrary to previous understanding, 1st Century Judaism (Pharisees etc.) was not a religion of legalistic self-righteousness;
2. Therefore, Paul was not refuting Jewish legalism;
3. In light of this, Paul's problem with the law was not that it couldn't justify and that the Jews had misunderstood its function;
4. This logically leads to another understanding of justification by faith;
5. It reinterprets the "works of the law", not as self-justifying legalism but as Jewish dependence on badges of nationalism (covenant membership): circumcision etc.;
6. Consequently, justification by faith is radically reinterpreted as being vindicated a covenant member at the consummation, not by believing faith but by covenant faithfulness (God's and mine); and
7. This logically denies the imputation (credit) of Christ's righteousness to the sinner's account as the forensic (legal) basis of being declared righteous (vindicated / justified) before God.

And so, the consequences of this reinterpretation are far-reaching; they are foundational to the Christian faith.

Instead of addressing one's ethical standing before a holy and righteous God (as per Rom 1-3), the Gospel is recast to address one's membership in the covenant community—ecclesiology (doctrine of the church) by default trumps soteriology (doctrine of salvation), confusing and conflating the two. The Reformation is turned on its head. The focus of the Gospel is then horizontal at the expense of the vertical. Rather than my legal standing with God being secured, so as to enable me to love him and then love my neighbour, I am directed to my covenant faithfulness (works) and membership (church).

Consequently, salvation by faith through grace is, by default, replaced by a new regime of works—covenant faithfulness. How can this help but return the believer to an old sacramentalism—to a new regime of legalism? The very thing "The New Perspective" claims that Paul was not addressing! And

how will it not destroy the Reformation in a new absolutising of the church? Ritualism replaces supernaturalism—works replaces grace, and the advance of the kingdom of God is thwarted.

At this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it is time to celebrate and reaffirm the Gospel and thus the advance of God's kingdom in the earth.

Suggested reading:

William B Barclay & Ligon Duncan, *Gospel Clarity: Challenging the New Perspective on Paul*.

Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*.