

2017/1: Celebrating The 500th Anniversary Of The Reformation (Acts 20:17-38)

by BS Poh

It is safe to claim that the Reformation of the 16th century in Europe has impacted the world, directly and indirectly, for good. This year marks the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation. How should it be rightly celebrated?

I. What was the Reformation?

On 31 October 1517 Martin Luther nailed his “Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The event sparked of a spiritual movement that spontaneously spread across the nations, and continues to reverberate down the centuries. The Reformation was a work of the Holy Spirit, a true revival, and the mother of all subsequent revivals. Luther was the instrument used by God to start off the Reformation. He was a Roman Catholic monk and theologian who had been much exercised over the superstitious beliefs and practices propagated by the Roman Catholic Church.

The Ninety-Five Theses consisted of propositions of biblical truths, contrasted with the false teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, that were put to the public for debate. It began with the claim that repentance from sin, shown by a changed life, is essential to the Christian life. The Pope has no power to save. The buying of indulgences — i.e. certificates pronouncing remission of sins — from the church cannot give salvation. The Ninety-Five Theses ends by urging Christians to follow Christ, whose death on the cross alone saves. Although the Ninety-Five Theses does not explicitly mention “justification by faith”, this doctrine lies at the base of Luther’s experience of salvation and was the spur to his action on that fateful day.

The fire of Reformation burned in the hearts of the people who discovered salvation by grace, through faith, in Christ, alone. The teaching of Martin Luther spread throughout Europe. Luther, now excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church, founded his own congregations. Other men were raised up by God to strengthen the cause of the Reformation. John Calvin escaped France and settled in Geneva to preach there. His “Institutes of the Christian Religion” helped to consolidate the teaching of the Reformation. Other notable Reformers included William Farel, Martin Bucer, Philipp Melancthon, and Heinrich Bullinger. John Knox brought the Reformation to Scotland. From the mid-16th century, a band of preachers arose in Britain who preached the truths of the Reformation. They have been called the Puritans — also dubbed the second-generation Reformers. Various Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed Baptist, and Reformed churches of today would own the Reformers as their spiritual forefathers, and the Reformation as their historical root.

II. Why was the Reformation important?

The Reformation recovered — not ‘discovered’ — many important truths of the Bible that had been obscured by medieval Christianity (i.e. the Christianity from 500 AD to 1500 AD, corresponding to the fall of the Roman Empire up to the rise of the Ottoman Empire). The doctrine of “justification

by faith, in Christ alone” recovered at the time, constitutes the core of the gospel. The sole authority of Scripture — in contrast to the authority of the Pope, the church, and the state — was recovered. Alongside the sole authority of Scripture, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God was recovered. The doctrinal characteristics of the Reformation have been described by the five “sola’s” — viz. *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola fide* (by faith alone), *sola gratia* (by grace alone), *solus Christus* (in Christ alone), and *solus Deo gloria* (all glory to God alone).

Apart from important doctrines, the simplicity of New Testament worship was recovered. The mystical ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church were rejected — e.g. making the sign of the cross, the burning of incense, the wearing of surplices, the use of Latin instead of the vernacular languages, etc. Martin Luther advocated the Permissive Principle of worship (also known in the past as the Normative Principle), which states that whatever is not forbidden by the word of God may be used in worship. With time, it became clear that John Calvin’s Regulative Principle of worship was the more accurate expression of the biblical teaching on worship, viz. whatever is commanded in the word of God is to be followed, while whatever is not commanded is to be rejected. The Regulative Principle takes into account issues connected with the circumstances of worship that are to be determined by the general principles of Scripture and common sense. These have been called “non-essential matters” or “adiaphora”. Examples are the times and duration of worship, the number of hymns to be sung, and the order of the elements of worship.

The Reformation also recovered the liberty of conscience and mission-mindedness. These were characteristics of the dissenting groups that existed alongside the Establishment (or Catholic) churches through the centuries — including the Albigenses, the Waldensians, the Lollards, the Hussites, and the Anabaptists. The Protestant churches founded during the Reformation recovered these characteristics. Reformed teaching asserted that the Pope has no power to save and no authority to determine one’s faith. Salvation by grace, through faith in Christ alone, liberates us from God’s condemnation and the fear of men (Matt. 10:28). The teaching given to the apostles, “When they persecute you in this city, flee to another (Matt. 10:23),” was not merely to save their own lives, but for them to continue preaching the gospel. In the 17th century, a number of Separatists (or radical Puritans) fled to continental Europe to avoid persecution in Britain. The Mayflower Pilgrims founded modern America because they sought freedom to practice what they believed to be true. The Particular Baptists who stayed back in Britain weathered the persecution but remained mission-minded. Men were sent out to plant churches in other parts of the country. In the 18th century, they pioneered modern missions when William Carey was sent to India. Social, economic, and political enlightenment follows directly, and indirectly, from the influence of the gospel. The converse is also observable — wherever the liberty of conscience is denied and the gospel is suppressed, there you find backwardness and unhappiness among the people.

The Reformation has transformed lives, nations, and the world more than is often realised.

III. How should we celebrate the Reformation?

Churches everywhere are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation. The Reformation was not a one-day affair. It began on a certain day, but it stretched over the centuries. Those of Reformed persuasion would argue that the effects of the Reformation continue to today. In celebration, talks and seminars are held, films on the Reformation are shown, books on the Reformation and by the Reformers are publicised and sold. All this has its value, and display various degrees of appreciation of the Reformation. The celebration may be compared to celebrating one’s birthday. A seven years old person may appear to celebrate his birthday the same way as a seventy years old person. I suggest, however, that the perception of the celebration in the one is different from the other. The seven years old merely celebrates the day, while the seventy years old person is cognisant of the significance of the day. The latter is keenly aware that seventy long years have passed, and he is now in the sunset years of his life. As a believer, he will be

thankful to the Lord for all that is past. He will resolve to live the remaining years well for the Lord, and prepare to be called by Him at any time. His thoughts would be those expressed in Joseph Hart's hymn:

How good is the God we adore,
Our faithful and unchangeable Friend!
His love is as great as His pow'r,
And knows neither measure nor end!

'Tis Jesus the First and the Last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We'll praise Him for all that is past,
We'll trust Him for all that's to come.

I suggest that Christians and churches should celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in the spirit of the seventy years old person. One does not have to be seventy years old to have his spirit. What spirit are we talking about? It is the spirit of submission to God's word, and a desire to glorify His name in practical ways. After all, loving the Lord requires that we obey His commands (John 14:15). Glorifying God involves practical and definite actions (James 1:22; 1 Cor. 10:31; 11:1). Since God's word is complete and sufficient to guide us in all matters of faith and practice, we must be submitted to His word. We must not insist on our own ways, follow human traditions, bow to pragmatism, or succumb to the fear of men. The desire to bring all matters of faith and practice to conformity with God's word has been called "semper reformanda", i.e. always being reformed according to God's word. Sadly, the spirit of the Reformation has been lost in some Reformed churches, and is not appreciated in many who would call themselves "Reformed".

Let us consider the practical actions that we may take to express the spirit of "semper reformanda". We acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. As Head of the church, and as the Mediator between God and men, He occupies the offices of prophet, priest, and king. The 1689 Confession of Faith says, "This number and order of offices is necessary (1689:8:10)".

Submission to Christ's headship would require us to submit to His prophethood, His priesthood, and His Kingship. Prophethood is concerned with doctrine and the word of God. A church that submits to Christ's prophethood would be expected to show it practically in the following ways:

- (i) The teaching and preaching of God's word would be central in the life of the church;
- (ii) Calvinism, as opposed to Arminianism, would be embraced as the biblical expression of the gospel;
- (iii) A good Confession of Faith that arose from the Reformation would be adopted, perhaps with minor amendments, to express the teaching of the church.

Submission to Christ's priesthood would require the following:

- (i) The worship services in the church would be according to the Regulative Principle;
- (ii) There would be a dedicated prayer meeting of the church each week;
- (iii) There would be biblical pastoral oversight exercised by the elders, which avoids the extremes of heavy-shepherding and non-existent shepherding.

Submission to Christ's kingship would require the following:

- (i) Biblical church discipline would be taught and practised in the church;
- (ii) The biblical form of church government would be determined and implemented;
- (iii) Organised outreach would be carried out locally, at the same time that there is wider church planting.

These matters are discussed in greater detail in my book, “Thoroughgoing Reformation: What It Means To Be Truly Reformed”. In the book, it is further suggested that Christ’s pattern of ministry is to be followed, in which there is: (i) teaching given in the church; (ii) preaching of the gospel to those outside the church; and (iii) good works done in conjunction with the teaching and preaching of the word. This three-pronged ministry is taught in Matthew 4:23 and 9:35, and was clearly adopted by the apostle Paul. In Acts 20:20-21, Paul states that he preached the gospel publicly and from house to house. In verse 27, we learn that he never neglected building up the faith of the believers by teaching God’s word. In verse 35, we learn that he quietly engaged in much good works in conjunction with preaching the gospel and teaching the word. Other passages may be consulted to show that he consciously “imitated Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Conclusion

An event, namely the nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses by Martin Luther, triggered off the Reformation. The Reformation itself was not a one-off event but a movement that stretched over at least two centuries. Its effects continue to be felt today. The right way to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation would be to engage in practical reforms in our churches, based on the three offices of Christ and the three-fold ministry of Christ. May we be blessed in the work of Reformation, and may God’s name be glorified. Amen.

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