



The Lasting Impact of Martin Luther and the Reformation

Brandi Klingerman- Notre Dame News

In October 1517, Martin Luther famously published his 95 Theses, unleashing criticisms that resulted in a rejection of the pope's authority and fractured Christianity as he knew it. Exactly 500 years later, Brad S. Gregory, the Dorothy G. Griffin Professor of Early Modern European History at the University of Notre Dame, explains how this eventually, but unintentionally, led to a world of modern capitalism, polarizing politics and more.

In Gregory's latest book, "Rebel in the Ranks" (HarperOne), he explains that in the early 1500s religion was more than just one component of a person's lifestyle in Western Europe and that Christianity, as the dominant religion, influenced all areas of Christians' lives. However, after Luther's initial concerns inadvertently created a movement — the Reformation — the result was a division between Catholicism and the varied Protestant traditions, conflicts among those traditions and, eventually, changes in how religion influenced people's lives.

"The Reformation gave rise to constructive forms of several different Christian traditions, such as Lutheranism and Calvinism," said Gregory. "But this also meant that people of differing faiths had to work out how they could coexist when religion had always been the key influence on politics, family and education. Although in the 17th and 18th centuries some political leaders continued to use the idea of religious uniformity to manage their territories, beginning with the 17th-century Dutch they realized that religious toleration was good for business."

This effort to coexist and the desire for economic prosperity, Gregory argues, resulted in a "centuries-long process of secularization." Religion was redefined and its scope restricted to a modern sense of religion as individual internal beliefs, forms of worship and devotional preferences. This made religion separable from politics, economics and other areas of life. With this, Western society has increasingly struggled to come to a consensus on politics, education and other social issues without the direction of an overarching faith or any shared substantive set of values to replace it.

“One result of the Reformation has been the political protection of individuals to believe or worship how they want,” said Gregory. “However, this freedom has also delivered — contrary to what Luther would have wanted — the right for people to practice no religion at all, and more, in recent decades, the seeming inability of citizens to agree on even the most basic norms important for shared political and social life.”

The Reformation’s unintended consequence of modern individual freedom has positives and negatives, he explained. Although people benefit from individual freedoms that were not available 500 years ago, these freedoms have also led, for instance, to the right for someone to purchase whatever they want without regard for the needs of anyone else.

“To match demand and thrive financially, factories produce the goods people want. In doing so, factories pollute the environment in ways that contribute to global warming. When religion was a pervasive and shared reality, individual freedom restrained the consumerist behaviors we see today,” said Gregory. “This is just one of many ways in which the long-term, unintended consequences of the Reformation are still influencing our lives today.”

The Reformation: Lasting Impacts on Church and Culture

By Subby Szterszky

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and theology professor at the University of Wittenberg, nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the town church, sparking the Protestant Reformation. Luther’s theses were directed against the sale of indulgences, a fundraising campaign approved by Pope Leo X to help build St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. By buying these indulgences, churchgoers were told they would receive forgiveness of sins and time off from purgatory. The campaign even had a marketing slogan courtesy of its chief promoter, Johann Tetzel: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Luther was rightly appalled at this practice and called for it to end.

Before long, the outcry for church reform moved beyond indulgences and spread from the small German university town to engulf all of Europe. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and their successors took up the challenge of leading the church back to biblical standards of faith and practice that had been obscured under centuries of tradition. In so doing, they touched off a movement that has shaped church history and Western culture in multi-faceted ways down to the present.

The Christ-centred Gospel of grace

Any discussion of the Reformation’s impact must begin with its central emphasis on the five solas – salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to the Scriptures alone, to the glory of God alone. This core biblical teaching of salvation by simple faith in Christ’s finished sacrifice had become muddled in the medieval church, replaced by a system of human merit mixed with God’s grace. Its rediscovery by the reformers remains their greatest legacy to the church.

As the heart of the Gospel, justification by faith in Christ alone has come under fresh attack in every era, including our own, both from the surrounding culture and from within the church itself. Even in New Testament times, the apostles had to deal with challenges to it, as Paul did most passionately in his letter to the Galatians. Martin Luther, never shy about being direct, insisted that justification by faith is the central truth on which the church stands or falls. That was as true five centuries ago as it is today.

The church as a body of believers

At the time of the Reformation, cultural Christianity dominated Europe. Everybody was considered a Christian, simply by virtue of being born and baptized into the church. But there was also a clear church hierarchy. Famous saints from the past, as well as members of the clergy, were in a class by themselves. Most average churchgoers had little part in the life of the church beyond showing up on Sunday, hearing a sermon and taking communion.

Digging Deeper

1/8/23

However, as the reformers began to read the Scriptures with fresh eyes, they saw that the church was meant to be different. Rather than incorporating everyone in society by default, the church was made up of believers, called out by God from the wider culture. Moreover, all believers had equal access to God through faith. There was no separate priestly class. Every believer was a saint who could intercede for others and have a vital role as a member of the body of Christ.

Emphasis on evangelism

This newfound emphasis on the church as a body of believers brought with it a further realization – not everyone in the broader culture was a Christian. There were a lot of people in the wider world who didn't know God and needed to hear the Gospel. The church had always known this and had always sent out missionaries. But with the Reformation, evangelism took on a new urgency, and eventually gave rise to the various foreign and domestic missionary movements.

Language and literacy

In the centuries before the Reformation, the Bible was a closed book for most of the general populace. Books in general were rare and expensive, illiteracy was high, and church services (as well as most books, including the Bible) were in Latin, which only scholars and members of the clergy could understand.

But with the advent of the printing press, books became more readily available. At the same time, the reformers recognized that the Scriptures were the supreme authority for faith and practice in the church. They began translating the Bible into the vernacular languages and conducting church services in those languages. This blend of factors led to a level of biblical literacy unheard of since New Testament times. It also fostered the modern development of literature in the various native tongues of Europe. And for the first time, common people could read the Word of God and worship him in their own language.

Education for everyone

The wide availability of the Bible and its renewed status at the centre of church life created a heightened need for education. After all, regular churchgoers would have to be able to read, discuss and understand the Scriptures. Naturally, broader education was not limited to learning the Bible, nor was it the sole province of the reformers, having been a hallmark of the earlier Renaissance. Nevertheless, the modern concept of public education, available to all members of society, owes the bulk of its impetus to the Reformation.

Exploring and celebrating creation

Prior to the Reformation, the Renaissance had given rise to a new interest in the natural world, expressed through more realistic art and the beginnings of the scientific method. Now, in light of Scripture's portrayal of a good creation and the cultural mandate to care for it, the influence of the reformers expanded the scope of the arts and sciences.

Works of art were no longer restricted to religious subjects. They could be about anything – landscapes, bowls of fruit and bottles of wine, everyday domestic scenes, even fantastic subjects drawn from the artist's imagination. Likewise, music could have non-religious lyrics or no lyrics at all, just instrumental beauty for its own sake. Scientific inquiry also progressed by quantum leaps, fuelled by the conviction that a wise God had created an orderly universe that could be understood and was worth discovering. What the Renaissance began, the Reformation buttressed with biblical truth. All of God's creation had become a legitimate subject to celebrate and explore.

All work is a divine calling

Just as the entire natural order was now considered worthy of study and appreciation, so all forms of human labour came to be seen as valuable service to God. In the medieval church, there had been a sharp division between sacred and secular vocations, born more out of Greek philosophy than scriptural teaching. But in the wake of the Reformation, the wall between secular and sacred had been largely removed. Governors, soldiers, artists, homemakers, farmers, merchants and craftsmen were all doing the work of God, no less than pastors and theologians. This was the Protestant work ethic, marked by honesty, industry and conviction that one's calling was a fulfillment of God's purpose for their life.

The value and rights of the individual

As God's image bearers, all humans possess intrinsic value and dignity unique in all of creation. The reformers recognized and taught this truth, which in time gave shape to modern democratic societies, built around the rights and freedoms of the individual. The founders of the United States, for instance, believed it to be self-evident that all people are created equal and thus possess certain inalienable rights. Contemporary Western societies still take these truths for granted, even while largely rejecting the God who established them. In any event, it was via the Reformation that these biblical principles were brought into focus and came to dominate Western political thought.

Activism and social justice

The recognition that all people are created in the image of God naturally leads to a concern for social justice. In a fallen world, this realization doesn't always dawn quickly or easily, which is why God in his Word keeps reminding his people to care for the poor and defend the cause of the oppressed. As the Reformation brought the light of Scripture into the public arena, people of faith began to take a more active role in these social causes. The abolition of slavery, prison reform, improved working and living conditions for the poor, and the establishment of women's rights were all spearheaded by biblically informed Christian movements, mostly in Protestant countries.

The church must always be reforming

Aside from the doctrine of justification by faith expressed in the five solas, the most vital legacy of the reformers was their insistence that the church must be *semper reformanda*, always reforming. In other words, the Reformation wasn't a one-off event, a fact borne out by more than five centuries of cultural and church history.

Every era of church and culture has its strengths as well as its weaknesses and blind spots. Current Western culture has essentially abandoned God and his Word and elevated subjective feelings to the place of ultimate authority, especially in the area of sexual ethics. Large swaths of the church have followed suit, refusing to confront the mistaken ideas of the day and reducing the faith to little more than accepting all beliefs without judgment. Jesus himself has been caricatured to fit this ethos, no longer the Sovereign Lord who died for sinners and who will judge the world, but merely a life coach whose only message is that people should be nice to each other.

These challenges may be different from those faced by the reformers or the apostles before them. The solution, however, remains the same. Now as always, men and women of faith need to embrace a robust, passionate devotion to the Scriptures, and to the Christ whom they reveal. Who knows but that God will use such believers to spark a new reformation of both church and culture, to his praise and glory?

Subby Szterszky is the managing editor of Focus on Faith and Culture, an e-newsletter produced by Focus on the Family Canada.