

God Still Leads Today: Scripture Must Reign Supreme

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The Reformation is Relevant

Two thousand seventeen marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and the question has been asked: Is the Reformation still relevant for today? The short answer is: Yes, the Reformation is still relevant for today. But if the systematic theology of the Reformation is not appreciated with renewed interest, everything the Reformation stands for will be for naught.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) kick started the Reformation in 1517 when he nailed, what has become known as, *The Ninety-Five Theses* to the castle doors in Wittenberg, Germany. In a nutshell, Luther was reacting against trends toward secularization in the Church that developed during the Renaissance period (1300s-1500s). He primarily opposed the selling of indulgences, but he also opposed the construction of the opulent St. Peter's Basilica, which he visited, and experienced firsthand what the sale of indulgences was producing (he would have rather seen the money go towards ministering to the poor).¹ When asked to recant his position at the Diet of Worms in 1520, Luther said he would if it could be shown by "Scripture and plain reason" that he was mistaken.² Therefore the Reformation became not only a justification by faith issue but about the authority of Scripture and the sovereignty of God as well. This was a clear contrast to the humanistic-secular ideologies of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and their derivatives.

¹ Martin Luther, *The 95 Theses*. <<http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>> Viewed Sept. 8, 2016. Also see: Southwest Advantage, *Social Studies and Languages*. (Southwestern: Nashville, TN, 2011). p. 500. Also see: Timothy West. *Martin Luther-PBS Documentary, Part 1&2*. (Dir. Cassian Harrison. Devillier Donegan Enterprises, 2002). <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyVrPIp4QsA>> Viewed Sept. 1, 2016.

² Robert Clouse, Richard Pierard, and Edwin Yamauchi, *Two Kingdoms: The Church and Culture Through The Ages*. (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1993). p. 248.

We live in an increasingly secular society today in Canada. In 2014 one quarter of the Canadian population identified themselves as a “none” when asked about their religious affiliation on the census. This is up significantly from the 1980s, when only one tenth of the population identified themselves as a “none.”³ What would happen if we raised a whole generation without religion or beliefs?

Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984), when he outlined the fall of the Roman Empire in *How Then Shall We Live?*, concluded that when a society neglects “an inward base” (meaning a biblical base) it would collapse.⁴ He discerned that a society in the midst of collapse would experience: economic chaos, threat of war, random acts of terrorism, a shrinking middle class, and food insecurity.⁵ While these issues certainly existed in Schaeffer’s day, they seem more significant in our own day and age. Therefore the Reformation – a call back to a biblical base – is as relevant as ever. Just as Luther sought to address the issues of his day, the time seems right for a renewed interest in the Reformation to address our own societal needs.

The Main Issue Defined

There are many religious affiliations (there are twelve choices on the census) but in the simplest terms there are just two ways of looking at the world – through a Christian lens and through a non-Christian lens. Whether the Bible is referring to the righteous or the wicked, the wise or the fool, the believer or the unbeliever, there is an understanding that a dichotomy exists between the Christian and non-Christian worldviews – to the exclusion of all others. Clearly the Bible identifies only one correct way of seeing the world and life [see John 14:6].

Man has been trying to make himself superior to God ever since the Garden of Eden, so this is a very old conversation. The Renaissance was a reinvention of a man-centered value system due to the rediscovery of Classical Greek literature, while the Reformation rejected the notion that man, starting only with himself, could answer all the questions of life. The Reformers accepted the authority of Scripture rather than human ingenuity as the foundation for understanding reality. It was *Sola Scriptura*.⁶

John Calvin (1509-1564) became the most prominent figure of the Reformation. His life-long work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is a comprehensive systematic theology and apologia of the Reformation faith,

³ Joseph Brean, “One in four Canadians declare affiliation to no religion, but why are so many ‘nones’ surprisingly religious?” *The National Post*. May 26, 2014. <<http://news.nationalpost.com/holy-post/one-in-four-canadians-declare-affiliation-to-no-religion-but-why-are-so-many-nones-surprisingly-religious>> Viewed Sept. 2, 2016.

⁴ Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, IL, 1976). p. 29.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 246-254.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 78-82.

which articulated and preserved biblical Christianity and its practical applications. It remains on “a short list of books that have notably affected the course of history.”⁷ It is one of the main reasons that the Reformation extended far beyond what Martin Luther initiated, and its influence is still felt today.

In 1898 the Protestant reformer Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), while giving The Stone Lectures at Princeton University, acknowledged the significance of Calvin’s contributions by describing Calvinism as the fruit of the Reformation.⁸ Kuyper held Calvinism in such high regard that he valued the doctrines of the Reformation above all other forms of systematic thought.

We add Kuyper to the discussion on the relevancy of the Reformation for today because he helped carry the concepts of the Reformation into the 20th century. But more importantly he articulated the concept that Reformation doctrines were more than just theology; he popularized the idea that “principles” (a person’s inward base) determine a person’s behavior and customs. He once said, “As truly as every plant has a root, so truly does a principle hide under every manifestation of life.”⁹ In other words, a person’s theology is equivalent to their worldview, and their behavior is predetermined by that theology. This is the main issue we wish to emphasize at this time.

To illustrate how theological concepts instead of pragmatic considerations determine how people behave, consider the relationship between Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Church. Luther originally sought to bring reform to the Church but ended up creating Protestantism because he and the Church were operating from two very different guiding principles that created two very different practical realities that could not be reconciled. The Roman Catholic Church, which used the Church as the basis for authority, created the Roman Mass. On the other hand, Protestantism, which used the Bible as the basis for authority, created a more participatory style of worship where the Bible was made available in the vernacular, where there was a place for expository preaching, and a new hymnology developed.¹⁰

To summarize, there are just the two ways of looking at the world – biblically and un-biblically – which the Renaissance and the Reformation each represented in their own ways. And a person’s “starting point” or guiding principles will inevitably lead to a vastly different result from other choices. Therefore if we want to obtain practical solutions to our societal needs, it is

⁷ John T. McNeill, ed., Introduction. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1960). p. xxix.

⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*. <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/kuyper/lecture.html>>

⁹ David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.: Grand Rapids, MI, 2002). p. 19.

¹⁰ Terry L. Johnson, ed. *Leading in Worship*. (The Covenant Foundation: Oak Ridge, TN, 1996). p. 1.

important to understand the value system we are basing our decisions by. We must choose a good one if we wish to receive good results. To quote Charles Colson (1931-2012) from *How Now Shall We Live?*, “Only Christianity offers a comprehensive worldview that covers all areas of life and thought, every aspect of creation. Only Christianity offers a way to live in line with the real world.”¹¹ We need to regain an appreciation of the systematic theology of the Reformation that was based on the concept of *Sola Scriptura*.

It can't be reiterated enough the importance of understanding your guiding principles; because, as we shall see, even the inward base by which you approach the Reformation has corresponding consequences as well.

The Unintended Reformation

Celebrations for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation will include special publications, conferences and tourism initiatives. There will be lots of discussion on whether or not the Reformation is over or if it is continuing, if it is relevant or not, and what are the lessons to be learned. Lots of people will have a message that will reflect their personality, background, and interest. This essay is a case in point.

As early as the nineteenth century, Martin Luther has been portrayed as a champion of rationalism and individualism. Historians wanted to show that Germany was the mother of modern civilization even though this was far from the truth.¹² This type of thinking persists well into the 21st century.

A recent PBS documentary (2002) gives the impression that Luther was a hero of personal liberty and personal consciousness because he stood up for what he believed in; and Luther is even more amazing because he stuck it to the man to boot. In 2012, Brad Gregory coined the phrase, “the unintended reformation,” in his controversial book of the same title. The subtitle indicates that he is making the case that the Reformation inadvertently created our modern secular society with all its many “besetting problems” – which include: (i) a hyper-pluralism of religious and secular beliefs, (ii) an absence of any substantive common good, and (iii) the triumph of capitalism and consumerism.¹³

As the argument goes, since the Reformation declared that man has an individual relationship with God, man became an independent and sovereign being. Yet the Reformers would not have seen it this way. Calvin for instance would have maintained that man is not a sovereign being, that God and Scripture have authority over his life (even though this authority is self-authenticating), and God cannot be known through pure reason alone, but

¹¹ Charles Colson, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, IL, 1999). p. xi; cf. p. 273.

¹² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2. (Harper Collins Publishers: New York, NY, 1985). p. 33.

¹³ Ron Rittgers, “The Reformation is Still Relevant – Really Relevant.” *The Huffington Post*. < http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-rittgers-phd/the-reformation-is-still-relevant-really-relevant_b_3015606.html > Viewed Oct. 3, 2016.

through worship, love and obedience.¹⁴ When the Reformation is depicted in humanistic terms, it is the result of “philosophical agendas” and “theological generalizations taken out of context”, which obviously shouldn’t be considered good scholarship.¹⁵ Do we need to address hyper-pluralism without a substantive common good as a society? Certainly. But in order to address these concerns, we need to begin by considering the inward base we are using to create appropriate solutions.

This situation where various points of view can exist side-by-side is a perfect reflection of the postmodern age we find ourselves living in; where objective, universal truth does not exist; where a person’s point of view carries all the weight. How can we speak into a situation like this? We begin by understanding a person’s perspective. Are they looking at the world through a Christian lens or a non-Christian one? Is the authority of Scripture and the sovereignty of God reigning supreme in the discussion? These types of questions need to be asked to guard against drifting away from sound doctrine.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The Reformation is as relevant as ever because the battle for biblical authority is far from over. Within the last five hundred years, proponents of the Reformation have fought for the importance of a biblical worldview on many fronts. The Reformation originated by addressing ecclesiastical issues; that certainly seemed to have been Luther’s original intent. Then the Reformation moved on to address wider political matters, which Calvin played a role in. Then the campaign moved to the arena of science and what the natural order looks like and how everything came to exist. Today, perhaps, we are fighting the biggest battle yet. Today the Reformation in Canada is dealing with moral or ethical (family) issues. The rising influence of the LGBT community, Pro-choice, assisted dying legislation, and the legalization of marijuana are sure to have wide spreading consequences that require a biblical response. In the midst of these concerns, we should never waver in the belief that God’s sovereign power is at work in the world today.¹⁶

We may live in an increasingly secular society but that does not mean that historical biblical Christianity is without hope. Science, technology, bureaucracy, and pragmatism have failed to provide meaningful answers to the great questions of life. In fact more questions than answers are popping up. Political corruption, environmental threats, new and deadly diseases, and the expanding income gap between the rich and poor have shattered secularism’s

¹⁴ McNeill, pp. 1-li.

¹⁵ Julian Gutierrez, “Calvin and the Reformed Tradition.” Nov. 13, 2013. Review of: *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition* by Richard Muller. (Baker Academics: Grand Rapids, MI, 2012). <www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/calvin_and_the_reformed_tradition> Viewed Aug. 22, 2016.

¹⁶ Robert G Clouse, Richard V. Pierard, & Edwin M. Yamauchi. *Two Kingdoms: The Church and Culture Through the Ages*. (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1993). p. 600.

optimism. As a result there is new interest in traditional religions, there is interest in “mini-nationalism”, walls and firm borders, as well as a rise in ethnocentric pride.¹⁷ Additionally “nones” are spiritual seekers in their own unique way.¹⁸ The time is right to appropriately address society’s growing needs.

Man starting from himself can’t answer the great questions of life. A firm biblical base must exist or society will collapse in on its self. The church’s role isn’t political, nor is it to engage in a culture war, nor is it to try and create a moral or silent majority. The church’s role is to be a community of faith that trusts that God is still leading today. God certainly has led in a way that brought each of us into a personal relationship with His Son Jesus Christ. And He is making us new creatures with the guiding presence (an inward base) of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. All we can do is embrace the concept of *Sola Scriptura* that we have learned from the Reformation and apply it to our lives in an equal and bold manner as the Reformers did. And when God has placed us in a position to influence – whether it be to an individual, a neighborhood, or a nation – we act in obedience, love and worship. To the glory of God. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 589-600.

¹⁸ Brean.

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