

## Judging the Impact of the Reformation

By [Jonathan K. Corrado, PhD](#)

### Introduction

Today, if you were to question a practicing Protestant what the most serious danger to Christianity is, he may discuss cultural enmities, the political atmosphere, or spiritual relativism in the denominational church. However, if the same question would have been asked to a Protestant a century ago, the Roman Catholic church would have ranked high in his answer.

Nowadays, much of the antagonism that previously existed between Catholics and Protestants has gone by the wayside and more often than not, the two groups find themselves upholding similar values and joining ranks to fight abortion, defend traditional marriage, and working to preserve freedom of religion. Additionally, as doctrine decrescendos in today's Protestant atmosphere, evangelically based Protestants quite often share more theological harmony with a Roman Catholic than with the liberal membership of their particular denomination.

Regardless, the theological gulf between Protestantism and Catholicism is still extensive and in places quite profound. The purpose of this article is to explore the impact the Reformation had on the Protestant and Catholic church by surveying the matters of doctrine and practice that is distinctly protestant, the effect of non-Catholic interpretations on the religious scene, and most importantly, an analysis of the unintended effects of the Reformation.

### Protestant Matters of Doctrine and Practice

The most efficient way to articulate the matters of doctrine and practice that are distinctly Protestant is to simply explore the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism. Below are a few of the boilerplate main points that separate Catholics and Protestants and an abridged discussion of each.

### The Holy Bible

Scripture in the eyes of a Protestant holds a different regard than that of a Catholic. Martin Luther in his theological pursuits discovered that the Bible is the inerrant, authoritative word of God and God's revelation to man that expressly allows man to enter into direct communion with Him. "Sola Scriptura" became the drum beat of the Reformation movement. On the other hand, Catholics base

their beliefs and God's authority both on the Holy Bible and apostolic traditions of the Roman Catholic church.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Church Organization**

If you were to ask a Protestant and Catholic what the nature of the church is, you would get two completely different answers. As the word Catholic means "universal," the Roman Catholic Church recognizes itself to be the one and only true body of Christ on earth under the leadership of the Christ appointed office of the Pope. On the other hand, as a product of the Reformation, the Protestant litany of denominations, falls under the umbrella of the "Evangelical" masthead, which means, "of or according to the teaching of the gospel." Therefore, Evangelicals do not embrace one united church.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Pope**

Due to specific interpretations of the scripture and the understanding of Christ as the head of the Church, Protestants reject papal authority and view Christ as the head of the church (Christ is the bridegroom and the church is His virgin bride). Catholics on the other hand interpret Peter to be the "rock" discussed in Matthew 16:18 and therefore, as appointed by Christ Jesus, the establishment of the papal office and a line of popes following.<sup>3</sup>

## **Communion**

The central element to Catholic worship revolves around the participation in the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. This ceremony observes the Last Supper between Jesus Christ and his disciples prior to His crucifixion on the cross. Upon the priest uttering the words "hoc est enim corpus meum (Latin for this is my body)," the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus, a process called transubstantiation, allowing members the opportunity to participate in an ongoing atonement and bestowing of grace. Because of the centrality and holiness of this observance, non-Catholics may not partake. In Protestant churches, baptized persons are invited and may lead the Lord's Supper and see this observance as a remembrance commemorating Christ's atoning work on the Cross and the means for justification.<sup>4</sup>

## **Sacramental System**

In the Roman Catholic Church, there are seven sacraments or rites that are instituted by Jesus and are the method of the conferring God's grace. These

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<sup>1</sup> Sproul, R. C. (2012) *Are We Together?: A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism*. Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

sacraments are Baptism, the Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the sick, Marriage, and Holy orders. Protestantism instead practices only two of these seven in name but have different interpretations as to their meaning and observance. These are communion (as discussed above) and baptism. These are perceived as symbolic ceremonies that revolve around the gospel of Christ and are accepted by faith.<sup>5</sup>

### **Marian Dogmas and the Canonization of Saints**

Mary, the mother of Jesus, to a Catholic, is held in extreme high regard and is bestowed the title of the “Queen of Heaven.” Catholic theology projects her immaculate conception, her perpetual virginity, and her assumption to Heaven. Because there is little Biblical support for these dogmas, they are rejected by Protestants. Additionally, the Roman Catholic church also practices the canonization of saints, in fact over 4000 of them. These individuals are dubbed models of faith and enter Heaven with excess grace that can be used to for the purging of sin. This honor also gives Catholic’s the ability to pray to these individuals in addition to Mary in an intercessory manner. Of course, this practice has little or questionable Biblical support, thus denied by Protestants. The Reformation projected the Biblical position where every person has the ability and privilege to pray directly to God once saved.<sup>6</sup>

### **Effect of non-Catholic Interpretations on the Religious Scene**

The Reformations fundamental concepts were compelling and stimulated the spiritual regeneration of succeeding generations. Discussed below are several such effects which demonstrate some of the cultural and theological seeds that were planted that propelled the movement. As demonstrated by the breadth of topics discussed, these are a simplification and generalization of complex issues of which several are still disputed.

### **Authority of Scripture**

One of the pre-Reformational figures, John Wycliffe contested medieval traditions like indulgences, transubstantiation, and pilgrimages. He did this by simply comparing the practices to scripture: “Neither the testimony of Augustine nor Jerome nor any other saint should be accepted except in so far as it was based upon Scripture,” Wycliffe proclaimed.<sup>7</sup> Later, at the Diet of Worms, Luther prominently declared, “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my

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<sup>5</sup> Sproul, R. C. (2012) *Are We Together?: A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism*. Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Workman, H. B. (1926) *John Wyclif; A Study of the English Medieval Church, Volume 2, Volume 2*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

conscience is captive to the Word of God.”<sup>8</sup> As expressed by these theologians, the Reformers testified God, through His word, as the only and final arbitrator of truth. This was of course contradictory to papal authority and Roman Catholic priestly hierarchy.<sup>9</sup>

### **How persons gained right standing with God**

As thrust by the Reformers, the doctrine of grace was the measuring stick by which all others should be measured. Salvation hangs solely on God’s abundant grace as opposed to works to gain an infusion of grace to pardon sins or truncate time in purgatory, the Catholic theological place or state of suffering inhabited by the souls of sinners who are expiating their sins before going to heaven. The Catholic doctrine of salvation by works reached a blasphemous apex via the sale of indulgences. 180 degrees out of phase from this was the protestant doctrine of Christ’s work joined to faith justifies a person.<sup>10</sup>

### **Worship and church services accessible to lay people**

Distinctly Catholic, for several centuries, mass was held entirely in Latin throughout Western Europe, where Latin understanding and fluency was limited to clergy and the noble. Even at that, some clergy had little understanding of the defunct language, thus performing the mass erroneously. Additionally, of the wine and bread of the Eucharist, the wine was withheld from the lay people and administered only to the clergy as it held more veneration than the bread. As a product of the reformation, mass was translated into local tongues, ceremonial garments worn by clergy were becoming rarer, and bread and wine was administered to all. These changes signaled the inversion of lay people from passive to active partakers in worship.<sup>11</sup>

### **Women became influential in the church**

The responsibility and calling of the Holy Spirit on the life of the believer, gender impartial, was accentuated by the Anabaptist tradition, thus welcoming women in more active roles.<sup>12</sup>

### **Confirmed the juxtaposition of God’s presence through the mediatory nature of Christ**

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<sup>8</sup> Zachman, R. C. (2005) *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>9</sup> Shelley, B. (2013) *Church History in Plain Language*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>10</sup> MacCulloch, D. (2004) *The Reformation: A History*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

<sup>11</sup> Gonzalez, J. L. (2010) *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>12</sup> Shelley, B. (2013) *Church History in Plain Language*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Per the teaching of the Catholic church for centuries, the holiness of Christ made Him remote and unable to be approached by mankind. Therefore, between Jesus and man, mediators, in the form of saints and priests, had to exist to provide intercessory translation. In sharp contrast, as attested by the scriptures, the reformers avowed the “priesthood of all believers,” which conveyed spiritual and moral obligations as those saved can approach the throne room of the universe freely and directly.<sup>13</sup>

### **Corruption in Roman Catholic church leadership exposed**

Through the selling of indulgences, the elaborate St. Peter’s basilica was being constructed in Rome, church clergy were functioning as nobility overseeing multiple offices in order to obtain more money, and the papal office hired mercenary armies to do their bidding.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Bible now accessible to lay people**

As exhorted by the Catholic Church, the only Bible accessible to the church membership was the Latin Vulgate. Not only did it impose language literacy restrictions but contained errors due to translation that propagated errant beliefs and practice. As the implications are apparent, in this example exposed in Matthew 4:17, Jesus is translated as saying, “do penance” instead of “repent.” The Reformation kicked off a chain reaction of the translation of the Bible into common vernacular first by Wycliffe, then by Luther, then Tyndale.<sup>15</sup>

### **The spread of literacy was driven across the continent**

As one of the prominences of the reformation was individual devotion based on the assumption of scripture, mobilization of the lay people to play an active role in their religious life drove literacy. Moreover, the instruction of children in biblical matters, not only rallied the youth, but inspired reading.<sup>16</sup>

### **The church-state relationship redefined**

The English Parliament passed the English Act of Supremacy in 1534, thus making King Henry VIII the head of the Church of England. On the exterior this redefined the church-state relationship. However, in actuality, it severed Britain’s connection to Rome and progressed to secularize the empire. After Protestant princes throughout Germany separated from Rome (and the now fragmented Holy Roman Empire), they felt spurned to emblaze their own avenues to power,

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<sup>13</sup> MacCulloch, D. (2004) *The Reformation: A History*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

<sup>14</sup> Reeves, M. (2010) *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing.

<sup>15</sup> Reeves, M. (2010) *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing.

<sup>16</sup> MacCulloch, D. (2004) *The Reformation: A History*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

autonomous of religious influences. One such of these new directions was the Parliamentary structure, which soon came to legitimize rulers.<sup>17</sup>

### **Roman Catholic Church compelled to self-assess**

Sometimes called the Counter-Reformation by Protestants or the Catholic Reformation by Catholics, insiders within the Roman Catholic ranks began to respond to the Protestant movement. Held between 1545 and 1563, the Council of Trent was one such response to the protestant movement engulfing Western Europe, and other efforts to right mistreatments, elucidate Catholic doctrine, refurbish the piety of its associations, appropriately educate its priests, revamp its ritual and fine art, and broadcast the Roman Catholic faith were all attempts to restore the image of the church. Fresh Catholic orders such as the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) were formed to aid in thrusting these efforts.<sup>18</sup>

### **Unintended effects of the Reformation**

The rippling effect of the Reformation had a profound effect on the Christian realm, but to a broader extent, western culture. The extent, unbeknown to him, Martin Luther launched a movement of individualism what would cultivate to influence the character of western Christian ethos and thinking. The sound of the nailing of the 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg, would be heard throughout the western world, and consequently, Christianity would be forever changed. In a broader sense, the church wasn't the only institution to feel the impact. It can be argued that the Reformation initiated successive revolutions of various sizes. The American Colony's break from the tyranny of the British system and the practice of scripture reading outside the setting of the church can in theory be linked to Luther's singular act.

Born from Luther's theological analysis and diligence, the doctrines of protestant faith such as justification by faith alone and Sola Scriptura were certainly vital elements that needed refinement in the predecessor system, but did the split from the Roman Catholic Church come in haste, leaving behind matters needed for a full systematic understanding of God and scripture? As the Reformation was no doubt a necessary event to reform religious thought and understanding, can we deliberate perpetual reform and revival as times change and the human saga endures?

### **Emphasis on Literalism over Symbolism**

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<sup>17</sup> Gonzalez, J. L. (2010) *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

As discussed above, prior to the Reformation, the Bible and its teachings were delivered in Latin, of which very few could comprehend.<sup>19</sup> This necessitated trained priests to teach lay people the scripture. Even today, most Catholic churches still have stained glass windows depicting important Bible stories and the congregation will sing hymns proclaiming Biblical truths. Again, these features were established to instruct the people of the scripture. Within the Catholic setting, the ceremony of the mass is fabricated to remind the congregation of Jesus' sacrifice in an introspective manner.

On the contrary, most fundamental protestant denominations exclude symbolism in most forms due to the veneration of relics and images in the Catholic tradition. The intent is to focus attention on the sermon, which provides the church attendee a more in-depth, literal involvement with scripture compared to a symbolic event and advocates contemplation. The traditional denominational service has the literal and cognitive understanding of the gospel and scripture as its focus. This more face value, literal approach could have been a derivative of the rise of literacy and individual access to Bible prints. Right, wrong or indifferent, is the protestant church missing an important emotional and sobering aspect of worship?

### **Shift from the Community to the Individual**

Another byproduct of the Reformation is a shifting from church theological authority to individual decision as to what is truth.<sup>20</sup> The drive behind Luther's impulse to address the abuses of the Catholic church and its hierarchy was certainly necessary and admirable, but did it swing the pendulum too far in one direction? A common historical debate is what would the world look like today if the Catholic church would have addressed Luther's concerns? Could we have had the best of both worlds?

It could have been a proportional combination of individual prerogative to contest preconceived thought, and thus ascertain more profound truth, within a kinship joined together with foundational symbolic custom and accountability. In the context of many protestant denominational church splits and divisions over, in most cases, minute matters, the question rings: did protestants depart too rapidly?

Due to the protestant onus of the individual to do their own study and reach their own conclusions regarding the scripture, in some cases this unfortunately leads to scripture being taken out of context and applied incorrectly. A Catholic on the other hand would be more inclined to seek consultation from a priest on scriptural issues, who has attained theological training and education and could provide an answer in the correct context within a consistent interpretation. There is a

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<sup>19</sup> MacCulloch, D. (2004) *The Reformation: A History*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

<sup>20</sup> Reeves, M. (2010) *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing.

widespread belief among Protestants that one can comprehend the intricacies of scripture in their own way. This combined with the many Bible translations, commentaries, and Protestant theological views yield a litany of interpretations which can be problematic in many circumstances.

The above commentary provides another vantage point of the Reformation in hopes to enable Christians to seek revival, both in their own lives and in their particular denomination.

## Conclusion

In search of peace, Martin Luther devoted himself to an exceedingly pious lifestyle. He would fast for ten to fifteen days at a time. When temperatures dropped below freezing, he slept outside without a blanket. Between his studies, he beat his body until it was black and blue and bleeding, hoping that somehow by punishing his flesh he could rid himself of the thoughts and motives that he knew were not right. Finally, in 1509, Luther decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome in hopes of finding the elusive peace for which he longed. He set out on foot and crossed the Alps. On his descent, he almost died of a high fever before making his way to a monastery at the foot of the mountains. There the Brothers nursed him back to health. While there, a wise monk approached him and encouraged him to read the Book of Habakkuk and Luther did just that.<sup>21</sup>

Habakkuk was a struggler just like Luther, and just like many of us today: If God is good, why does He allow suffering? If there really is a devil, why doesn't God just obliterate him? One verse captured Martin's imagination: Habakkuk 2:4, The just shall live by faith. He couldn't get it out of his mind.<sup>22</sup>

Having recovered sufficiently to continue his journey to Rome, he went to the Church of St. Johns Lateran, a typical cathedral of that day. There, pilgrims mounted the staircase painfully on their knees, a step at a time, saying prayers as they went. As Martin repeated his prayers on the Lateran staircase, Hab 2:4 suddenly came into his mind. He ceased his prayers, returned to the University of Wittenberg, went on to explore the revolutionary idea of justification by faith, and, on October 31, 1517, he nailed his famous 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church which started the movement known today as the Reformation, the single most important event in modern religious history.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Platt, D. and Merida, T. (2014) *Exalting Jesus in Galatians*. B&H Publishing Group.

<sup>22</sup> Platt, D. and Merida, T. (2014) *Exalting Jesus in Galatians*. B&H Publishing Group.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid



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