



500 Years and Counting

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This year marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses, which marked the “official” beginning of a movement that profoundly influenced the history of Christianity and Western civilization: the Protestant Reformation. It is possible that for some of us it is clear what this is all about, but for others it is not. For this reason, I begin this essay by sharing a brief historical account.¹ Someone rightly said that people who do not know their history are condemned to repeat the same mistakes, and this includes the church.

A Brief History

When we look at the beginnings of the church in the first centuries after Christ, as the New Testament testifies, we find that believers were persecuted, tortured, and murdered for their faith in Jesus. The church was developing in the midst of an empire that demanded worship and loyalty to its gods, including the emperor or Caesar. When believers affirmed that their worship and loyalty would be only for Christ, they were regarded as “atheistic” people (How ironic!), and were condemned to cruel punishments. Amid this persecution, many believers preferred to be burned or torn apart by wild beasts in a coliseum rather than deny their devotion to the Lord who brought them out of darkness into the marvelous light.

Three centuries passed and something interesting happened: the Roman emperor Constantine embraced Christianity and declared it a legal religion of the empire. This meant a drastic change from the first three centuries our Christian ancestors endured. The church was now in a safer position. Laws were developed to abolish gladiatorial death struggles, to improve the laws of marriage, and even the conditions of slaves. Christian leaders began to acquire positions of power and influence in the government that once persecuted them. Churches began to enjoy certain tax exemptions. The church had access to free worship for which it openly used the tools of architecture, sculpture, painting, and other arts.

Anyone would have said that the “Kingdom of God” had taken over and believers were practically in the paradise so longed for. From that context, the gospel could flow freely and reach growth never imagined. However, all these blessings also brought certain complications. Christianity was no longer something to suffer for, but instead became something to benefit and profit from. Many political leaders, following the example of the emperor, left paganism to embrace Christianity, but in doing so they brought into Christianity pagan practices and lifestyles that ended up secularizing the church.

Thus, the political power of the church continued to develop over the centuries to such an extent that it survived the fall of the Roman Empire. Seeing the corruption existing in the church, there were pious women and men who decided to withdraw from society to practice the faith,

1. In this historical account, I have relied upon Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of The Presbyterians*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1983).

eventually forming monasteries. The political power of the church continued to grow during the Middle Ages so that there were emperors and kings who responded to the directives of the highest ecclesiastical leaders. The church became materially rich in such a way that, while some opted for a humble monastic life, others opted for the prestige and abundance of the life of the clergy. The church even came to collect more and more taxes. This practice degenerated to such a degree that, in order to build the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the highest leader of the church established a system of marketing and selling divine pardons ("indulgences"). This system provided the opportunity to acquire, for a sum of money, a document certifying you as a pardoned person and free from certain punishments after death.

In the middle of so much corruption, there were believers who raised the alarm, calling the church to repentance and a return to biblical teachings. One of those believers, perhaps the most recognized, was a monk named Martin Luther. From a young age, Martin had felt the guilt of sin and had looked for many ways to get rid of it and feel saved. He spent long hours in confession, severely punished his body, and made terrible penances to be saved according to the methods taught by the Roman Catholic Church. But on one occasion, studying Paul's Letter to the Romans (1:17), he had an encounter with the biblical truth that "the righteous shall live by faith." When he found the message of life and free hope that Christ offers us, Luther challenged the teachings and practices of the church of his time, giving way during that century to a reform movement (or rather reforms) in Christianity that eventually encompassed all of Europe.

Among the key points or teachings that were rescued, we can mention:

- The access of all believers to the Bible in their own language (previously, only the clergy read the Scriptures).
- Salvation is not something that is bought or won; it is something that God gives.
- All human beings can have direct access to God in prayer without the need of any mediator other than Jesus Christ.
- The Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice for the believer.

That is the story we joyfully celebrate. In this movement of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we find the origins of our Presbyterian and Reformed Church.²

Remembering the Reformation

Having been a part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) since my childhood, I have memories of the annual celebrations of the Day of Reformation. It was customary in my home presbytery to hold a great event where people from all congregations gathered to perform a worship service to God on the Sunday closest to October 31. In such assemblies, sermons and speeches were shared praising the courage of those who became involved in the Reformed movement, even during great setbacks and persecutions, similar to what happened to the people of the early church. I remember that in those celebrations, I learned two memorable phrases that give identity to Reformed theology. The first phrase was, "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum Dei*" ("The church reformed, always being reformed, according to the Word of God"). The second phrase was the five *solas*: "*Sola Scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, and Soli Deo Gloria*" ("by Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, by Christ alone, to the glory of God alone").

2. It should be remembered that the above is only a summary, just a few broad strokes of a much more extensive history. The page requirements for this essay are not sufficient to provide a detailed account about the lives and teachings of all the reformers, such as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin.

I also remember in those speeches the marked emphasis on the past, often at the expense of the present and the future, which has always aroused my curiosity.

Throughout my years in the PC(USA), first as a member and then as Minister of Word and Sacrament, I have met people who express great pride in our roots in the Protestant Reformation. I confess that a great pride and, above all, a deep feeling of gratitude for our Reformed theological heritage also permeates me. However, I see in many sisters and brothers the tendency to understand the Reformation as a set of ideas and postulates to which to adhere, again, with a strong emphasis on the past, discarding the importance of the present and the future. Looking at the past is very important. In no way, should we undermine the value of having to remember, study, and consider the past.

But it is important to look at the reason or reasons why we look at the past. First, it is important to look at it to remember that we were not the originators of the Christian faith. Millions of faithful have come before us. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews calls them “so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1, NRSV), people who have given their lives through the ages to convey the message of God’s grace in Christ.

Secondly, it is important to look at the past to examine the lessons learned and the legacies of those who have preceded us along the way, considering their achievements and failures, their successes and their mistakes.

Thirdly, it is important to see the path already walked to realize that we must continue forward. In this way, we celebrate and find encouragement, knowing that the God who directed our ancestors through trials and struggles is the same God that accompanies us in the present time and propels us into the future.

Looking Forward from the Reformation

The path of faith is not static, but dynamic. Celebrating the Reformation is something that should encourage us to continue the journey. The verb “reform” means “to put or change into an improved form or condition.”³ The Reformation implies a constant process of transformation and improvement. It is not something that ends, but something continuous.

As I reflect on the Reformation, I recall the words of the apostle Paul to the Romans: “But be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2, NRSV). As Presbyterian people in the Reformed tradition, we must recognize that we have received a wonderful legacy, a path on which we must continue our journey of transformation and witness to divine grace. From this heritage, I would like to emphasize several aspects, expressed in the form of an invitation.

Emphasis on the Study of Scripture

We must continue to affirm the centrality of the Scriptures. Scripture is, par excellence, the rule of faith and life for the believer. The second of the questions for ordination, installation, and commission of officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reads as follows:

“Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?”⁴

3. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “reform.”

4. *Book of Order*, W-4.4003b.

We do not consider the Scriptures as marginal, but as fundamental and indispensable. However, it is important to note that the centrality of Scripture does not imply that we understand the Bible as a recipe manual to be interpreted literally. On this point, the Confession of 1967 illustrates:

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.⁵

Despite advances in biblical research over the last 200 years, many sectors of Christendom in our time promote a quasi-magical understanding of the Scriptures. This understanding often degenerates into the promotion of a toxic, superficial faith prone to serious abuse and distortions, which in turn leads people—who are thinking, frustrated, and disappointed by what we might well call “bibliolatry”—away from the church. Just as the Reformers did in their day, we Presbyterians in the Reformed heritage can and must cultivate and promote the serious study of Scripture, highlighting the ever-relevant testimony it gives us of the grace of God in Christ.

Emphasis on Affirming the Confessions

Following that same line of thought, we must continue to affirm the confessional nature of the church. Joe Small reminds us that since their beginning, the churches of the Reformed tradition (especially those who have followed the inheritance of Calvin and Zwingli) have been characterized by the conviction that each one is called to confess the faith in its time and place (*in tempore, in loco*).⁶ The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) does not adhere to a single confession of faith, but has twelve confessional documents representing Christian testimonies in different times (*tempore*) and places (*loco*), from the first centuries of Christianity, through the times of the Reformation, to the contemporary age. The transmission of the message of the kingdom of God in a relevant way is something that is present in the DNA of the Reformed tradition.

The Scripture states that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8, NRSV). Our Lord and God does not change, but the human being changes, and with it our ways of explaining and understanding the divine evolve. The metaphors of an agrarian culture on the other side of the world will not necessarily have the same value for a city culture at another time and place. The problems and concerns of medieval Europe will not necessarily be the same as in the Americas of the twenty-first century. Challenges and circumstances change with contexts. That is why it is necessary for the church to keep looking for ways of professing and proclaiming the faith that are pertinent and that can reach the hearts of the people for which it testifies, all without denigrating the value of the inheritance received. One of the virtues of our

5. *Book of Confessions*, 9.29.

6. Joseph D. Small, *To Be Reformed: Living the Tradition* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2010) 4.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is that the adoption of a new confessional document does not cancel or eliminate the confessions of previous centuries, but adds to the testimony that these offer us and enriches it for a new generation.

Emphasis on Education

I invite us to continue to promote education. One of the disadvantages of medieval times is that education was very limited; it was restricted to clergy and the wealthy classes. The Protestant Reformers were highly educated people, but they did not regard education as a personal treasure kept for the few; instead, they promoted instruction and knowledge for the masses. This can be seen, for example, in the Reformers' work to make worship and Scripture accessible to people in their own language, rather than in Latin.

In the same spirit, the missionary work of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has historically been characterized by the promotion of education wherever it goes. On this, I want to highlight two examples very close to my heart. In 1912, the Reverend John Will Harris founded a school of elementary and higher level education—the Polytechnic Institute, in San Germán, Puerto Rico. This institution grew into what is today the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico, from which I received my university degree. Likewise, in Cárdenas, Cuba, another Presbyterian missionary, the Reverend Robert L. Wharton, started the La Progresiva Presbyterian school, which would become one of the most important primary and secondary schools in Cuba. As a result of the Cuban revolution, La Progresiva closed its doors in 1961, having provided a service of excellence for six decades. It continues its educational mission, bearing fruit and touching lives through the La Progresiva Presbyterian School in Miami, Florida.⁷

One of the “great ends of the Church” includes “the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.”⁸ In the midst of a culture that systematically promotes anti-intellectualism as a virtue,⁹ it is imperative that the church affirm its commitment to support education through all means at its disposal. At the time of the Reformation, our predecessors made use of the newly invented printing press as a vehicle for reproducing and transmitting teaching to as many people as possible, so that understanding of God and God's world was available to all. Now 500 years later, we have an unimaginable resource for the Reformers: the new technologies available through the Internet—the global “network of networks” of communication.

Emphasis on the Priesthood of All Believers

Let us continue affirming—and, above all, practicing—the universal priesthood of all believers. Medieval Christianity was centered on the clergy. The clergy served as an intermediary between the people and God. The clergy were the educated believers; the clergy were the ones who received confession; and the clergy were the ones doing the ministry. The response of the Reformation to ecclesial life centered on the clergy was the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Prayers come directly to the Lord. There is no need for the intervention of an “official” priest who manages divine attention or God's forgiveness. The Reformers spoke of baptism as a ceremony for the ordination of believers. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) refers to the role of the member of the

7. www.laprogresivaschool.org

8. *Book of Order*, F-1.0304.

9. To explore more on this topic, see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201407/anti-intellectualism-and-the-dumbing-down-america>

church as a “ministry” and provides a comprehensive description of all that the ministry can include:

- to proclaim the good news in words and deeds
- participate in the common life and in the worship of the congregation
- raise each other in prayer, mutual care, and active support
- study the Scripture and the matters of faith and Christian life
- support the ministry of the church through gifts of money, time, and talents
- demonstrate a new quality of life within and through the church
- respond to God’s activity in the world by serving others
- to live responsibly in personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social life relations
- work in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment
- participate in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- regularly review and evaluate regularly the integrity of their membership, and consider ways in which participation in worship and church service can be increased and made more meaningful.¹⁰

Unfortunately, 500 years after the Reformation, we see that congregational life in many places remains a clergy-centered life. I have seen congregations where many people do not even dare to pray and prefer that it be the pastor who prays. The Letter to the Ephesians enumerates the offices of Paul’s time, indicating that their purpose is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12, NRSV).

The ministry of members, over time, has been undermined by a faith (religiosity) of consumption, when it should be characterized by a faith of action. The congregation sees itself as a spectator, when in fact it has been called to be an actor. Current times urge that we move from the mentality of consumption to a mentality of action and commitment.¹¹ In its Reformed heritage, our church has the biblical and theological resources for a consistent practice of the priesthood of all believers, or the ministry of “the saints.” We could do much better if the church—instead of being composed of people watching others do ministry—was composed of people who are preparing to serve and minister in the world around them!

The Reformation is not something that began 500 years ago and ended. The Reformation is not a piece of literature that is meant to be preserved in a library or a museum. The Reformation must continue the path of constant transformation. The question then is this: will we be willing to assume our reforming commitment in the present time?

Soli Deo Gloria.

10. *Book of Order*, G-1.0304.

11. For a deeper reading on the subject and its practical applications, see the work of Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

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Conversation Starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel

1. The author takes history seriously. He writes, “Celebrating the Reformation is something that should encourage us to continue the journey.” What about the Reformation encourages you to continue as a Presbyterian? As a participant in your congregation? In your own journey of faith?
2. Capella-Pratts observes that we can tend to interpret Scripture in a “magical” way, distorting it. Instead, he recommends the serious study of Scripture and particular interpretive guidelines. What are the strengths you bring to study of Scripture in your worshipping community? What are the strengths you want to build to become a deeper student of Scripture?
3. The author points out that the confessional nature of our denomination is vital to sharing the faith from one generation to another, from one context to another. In practical terms, what would it mean to “affirm the confessional nature of the church” in your congregation?
4. Is there a high value on education in your congregation? What do you think your worshipping community would gain from an increased emphasis on teaching? Helping all people to understand theology was a hallmark of the Reformation. How might it encourage you and your community to continue your journey?
5. Capella-Pratts concludes this Theological Conversation by encouraging us to think of ministry as belonging to everyone in a worshipping community. If you and your congregation thought of yourselves as the ministers and the pastor or pastors as the ones who equipped you, what would change? Might this be the hardest gift of the Reformation to carry forward? Why or why not?