

Was the Reformation a good thing for Christianity?

By Graham Osborne

If you read my column regularly, one thing you will notice is my great desire and concern for Christian unity. I have tremendous respect for our separated Protestant brothers and sisters in Christ – those denominations not in full communion with the Catholic Church. Many of them are some of the finest Christians I know. And there has been incredible ecumenical dialogue and progress made as of late, with much doctrinal clarification occurring –and the discovery of plenty of common ground.

And there has been an incredible inflow of Protestant pastors converting to the Catholic Church over the last few decades as a result, including the likes of Scott Hahn, Steve Wood, Francis Beckwith, Marcus Grodi, Tim Staples, and countless others. We have never seen anything like this since the Reformation, and it is very encouraging.

We are not each other's adversaries. Far from it. We are brothers and sisters in arms, linked in an epic battle against principalities and powers of evil. A battle that has been won by our Lord, to be sure, but yet still rages on.

It is from this vantage point that I want to discuss a very sticky topic: was the Reformation a good thing for Christianity or not?

My answer is that it was an absolute tragedy! Why?

Luther's initial reform efforts certainly did address some abuses in the Church, no question. But let's leave that for a moment and focus on something even more important.

In John 17:17-23, Jesus' final prayer before he is arrested is a prayer for the unity of his followers. But the unity he prayed for was not some "we all love Jesus good enough, let's agree to disagree" unity. Twice he prays for "*perfect*" unity, the *same* unity he has with the Father.

And then Jesus adds a final, incredibly important point: by this perfect Christian unity, the world will come to "know that you [the Father] sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me." What a powerful statement! This is the heart of evangelization –that God so loved the world that he sent his only son [cf John 3:16]. And Jesus is saying that the world will come to know this by the perfect unity it will witness in his followers. Profound!

Christian unity is the foundation to evangelizing the world. But nothing in the history of Christianity has fractured that unity more than the Protestant Reformation. Were some Catholics in Martin Luther's time abusing the church's teachings, particularly in the area of indulgences and purgatory? Absolutely. Had a certain laxity crept into some areas of the Church? Without a doubt. But was the Church's doctrinal teaching in these areas wrong? Absolutely not!

The problem was that, eventually, Luther was no longer just opposing corrupt individuals in the Church [and we should expect weeds and wheat in the Church, just as surely as

Jesus picked twelve and one was Judas]. He began to attack the Church's authority and doctrinal teaching itself, eventually rejecting both. In the process, he introduced several new teachings, and these still remain the main divisional problems today.

His first doctrinal novelty would be *Sola Scriptura* – Latin for Bible Alone – the idea that we follow the Bible alone as the sole way to know God's truths, and that everything to be believed is in Scripture alone. The authority of the Church and Oral or Sacred Tradition are both rejected. But several problems arise immediately.

The first is that this just isn't what Jesus established. Jesus founded his Church on rock, and he is the wisest of builder – that Church will never fall [cf Mt 16:16-19, Mt 7:24-25]. He then left his truths to it, and sent the Holy Spirit to guide the Church into all truth and protect it from teaching error. He did not first give us the Bible –and especially not the Bible *alone*. First, he gave us the Church.

But here is the stunner. The teaching of *Sola Scriptura* is *not* found in the Bible –it is unscriptural itself! By its own definition, it refutes itself! Additionally, we can't know which books even belong in the Bible from Scripture *alone*. It contains no Holy-Spirit inspired table of contents! Even Martin Luther himself would eventually acknowledge that all Christians owe their knowledge of which books belong in the Bible to the Catholic Church.

Additionally, the New Testament wasn't even finished until roughly 70 to 90 A.D., and we would not have the Bible in finalized form until the late 300's. How could the Church be "Bible Alone" if it didn't even have the Bible for some 400 years, and especially during those critical first 40 years before the New Testament was completed?

Furthermore, for the first 1500 years of the Church, most couldn't read. And before the printing press in the 1400's, Bibles were all hand written and prohibitively expensive. Very few could afford one. Unquestionably, the early Church was not a *Sola Scriptura* church, but a predominantly oral tradition church. "Stand firm and hold to the *traditions* you were taught by us, whether by word of mouth or by letter", St Paul would write in 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

The other problem is that *Sola Scriptura* simply doesn't work! Its fruit has been the staggering division that has swept over Christianity over the last 500 years. If there is one Holy Spirit, one Bible, and one set of unchangeable truths, how is it that we now have literally thousands of Christian denominations today? If *Sola Scriptura* worked, people would be reading the Bible and all coming up with the same basic understandings. But instead we have innumerable conflicting interpretations and doctrines, resulting in split after split, and leaving us with thousands of different denominations. And these divisions are not based on minor things, but often over core beliefs of eternal significance, such as salvation, the necessity of Baptism, divorce and remarriage, active homosexual lifestyles, abortion and much more. Luther himself would eventually lament that "there are almost as many sects and beliefs as there are heads."

The second pillar of the Reformation has been dubbed *Sola Fidei*: Faith Alone. Simply put, this doctrine holds that we are justified [made right with God] and saved by our faith alone.

But incredibly, the only place where the words “faith” and “alone” come together in all of Scripture is James 2:18-26, and it irrefutably denies Luther’s teaching: “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone... faith apart from works is dead.”

And Jesus himself also answers our question with crystal clarity: “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “... If you would enter life, keep the commandments” [Matt 19:16-17]. We must keep the commandments – do good works – to have eternal life. We are *not* saved by our faith alone!

The Catholic position holds that we are justified and saved by the grace of God alone [ironically, a statement most Protestants would agree with], through “faith working in love” [cf Gal 5:6]. Simply put, the Church teaches that faith in Jesus Christ and grace-inspired good works – our free will responding freely to God’s grace to choose to do the good works that God desires and has prepared for us to do [cf Ephesians 3:8-10, 1 Cor 12:4-6] – both come from God’s grace, and are *both* needed for salvation.

So how did Luther miss all this? Unfortunately, he mistook the “works of the law” [the Old Covenant’s 613 Mosaic Laws – including circumcision, dietary restrictions and more], denounced in Romans and Galatians, for the grace-inspired good works mentioned above in places like James 2:19-26. St Paul was emphasizing the necessity for certain Jewish converts to believe first in Jesus, and not to rely on these Old Covenant works of the law to save them, because without faith in Jesus, they couldn’t be saved.

But if someone thought for one minute that St Paul was preaching against the need for good works in Romans, you simply need to read what he says right at the start of Romans: “God, who will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek... immortality through perseverance in good works [Rom 2:6-10]. End of argument!

Catholic teaching emphasizes that it is God that is freely working through us when we do these grace-inspired good works. Philippians 2:12-13 shows this clearly: “God is the one who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work.” And similarly, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: “there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.”

So it is clear that Scripture refutes Luther’s novel doctrines. And if these two pillars of the Reformation crumble, what are we fighting about? There is no denying that Luther stirred some needed reform and zeal back into the Church, but his “reformation” went too far when it split the Church. Egotism and pride on both sides escalated this dispute to unimaginable levels. It’s time to put this all behind us.

There has been so much positive progress in ecumenical circles in the last few years, it is difficult to write on a touchy topic like this. But the danger in painting Luther as a hero is that we run the risk of endorsing his teachings as worthy of belief as well. True ecumenism does not lie in agreeing to disagree, but in seeking the truth together as brothers and sisters in Christ. What we can be certain of is that truth will lead to true Christian unity – a unity that will evangelize the world.