



NEW LIFE

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“For the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:9)

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THE REFORMATION AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

By Mark Chen

Wait a minute, “The Reformation and Christian Unity?” Isn’t the Reformation about schism? Isn’t it about a tubby monk in a black robe vandalizing a church door and inciting people to rebel against the established church? Where’s the Christian unity in that? There wasn’t any, some would say.

And that’s the common critique of the Reformation, particularly by Romanists and those who’d like to see a greater visible unity among Christian groups. In an age where Christian unity is taking a more visible and organizational form, what lessons can the Reformation teach us about unity?

Reformation, Not Revolution

The purpose of the Reformation was just that – reformation. It didn’t intend to split the visible church. Luther did not have an impious destruction of the church in mind, but rather its basic Christian renewal. And that was the catalyst for the nailing of the 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Church.

Even before his conversion, he wrote against specific abuses in the church – his aim was to rid the church of such excesses and hypocrisy. And after his conversion, the Protestant doctrine of justification took a much larger role in his criticisms; he taught that men were not simply justified by being a member of the church or by buying indulgences – once again his aim was a spiritual renewal of the church.

When Calvin wrote his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to plead with the French King not to persecute the French Protestants, he argued that the Protestant Reformation was not teaching another religion, but rather the faith of the Early Church Fathers. In fact, all the Reformers, in defending their faith, not only quoted from Scripture, but also the Apostolic and Early Church Fathers. This was to show that Reformation religion was an ancient faith, and that it was the Roman Church that had departed from this ancient religion to espouse a man-made tradition.

Now, it is important to note they thought the Roman Catholic Church was worth saving; they never denied that there were true believers in the Roman communion, and never doubted the validity of some of her ordinances. But in Luther’s words, it was a crippled church, and so the rehabilitation of the church depended on a Reformation.

They never had a church split in mind. But if they never intended to split the church, and we ask the obvious, why did the church split?

Truth Above Visible Unity

There were many reasons why the church split. One obvious reason is the fact that the biblical teachings of the Reformers were contradictory to the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church.

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And by teaching them, the Reformers hit a vital nerve of the established church. They undercut the importance and value of the Papacy, making of no importance the indulgences the papacy claimed to administer; in other words, eternal life and other spiritual benefits were not dependent upon the Pope, as once thought. All that was needed was simple faith in Christ and trust in God's Word.

And when threatened with excommunication and expulsion from the Roman Catholic Church for their teachings, they faced the option of either separation for the truth's sake or unity in unbiblical compromise. Neither option was utopian, but the former one was correct according to Scripture. And it was justifiable, for by that time, they were convinced that there could be no reconciliation or reformation if Rome continued to view herself as infallible and the only true church.

And because of that, to defend the truth of Scriptures and to live out the Reformation, the Reformers separated themselves from Rome. But while they separated and formed other congregations, the Reformers still acknowledged that they were part of a larger church. However, this was not the view of some, namely the Radical Reformers.

Schism and Schismatics

The Reformation was not the uniformly glorious and moral movement that many claim it to be. It had its own share of human and ecclesiastical excesses. One such example is seen in the Radical Reformers (and the reaction to them). These were men who did not acknowledge there was a larger church and that the only church spoken of in Scripture was the local church.

And as such, they focused inordinately on the purity of the Church. No doubt, each congregation should strive towards purity of doctrine and practice. But both Luther and Calvin taught that there was no perfect church on earth, and as long as the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments were pure, that church no one should abandon on account of every trivial difference. Even the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error.

But because Radical Reformers were ceaseless in their quest for purity, they caused schism wherever they were, leading to them being pejoratively called *Enthusiasts* (as they were all sense and zero sensibility), *Cathars* (ancient heretics notorious for their spiritual snobbery), *Revolutionaries*, and *Donatists* (another ancient group of heretics known for their schismatic behavior). One of the motivating factors for their extreme separatism was their eschatological mindset – their belief in Christ's imminent return caused them to see error everywhere and to set up their pure and true congregations.

An interesting account is told of John of Leiden, who went to Münster and became one of her prophets; he led the people of the city to expunge all those who didn't believe as they did. He proclaimed himself the Anointed of God, took the name King David (along with 16 wives), and fought with the rest of the Christian world, until his movement and he were thankfully crushed. Fortunately, the Radical Reformers did not constitute a large part of the Reformation. On the whole, despite some disagreements, the Reformers themselves adopted a catholic and generous spirit.

Charity and Unity

Despite their justifiable separation from the Roman Catholic Church and the Radical Reformers, the Reformers did strive for unity. They didn't always achieve it, but they certainly did try.

In 1529, Protestants met in Marburg to discuss their similarities and differences. The chief participants were Luther and Zwingli, another prominent Reformer. They had much to agree on, in fact, 14 points, but they parted without agreeing on the 15th, being the nature of the Lord's Supper. It would not be the last time that Protestants would be out of agreement. But what follows is more encouraging.

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The next year in the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, Luther's friend Philip Melancthon wrote the Augsburg Confession, as a careful and cautious summary of Lutheran doctrines. In the preface, there was a plea for Christian unity, and a promise that the Lutherans were "*neglecting nothing that may serve the cause of Christian unity.*" And this promise was indeed fulfilled, for 10 years after Augsburg, Melancthon produced a revised edition, The Variata. He rewrote some parts in order to make peace with Calvinists. And John Calvin himself signed the 1540 version.

Similarly, Heinrich Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli in Zurich, forwarded the efforts of unity. Just as Luther disagreed with Zwingli on the nature of the Lord's Supper, Calvin, too, disagreed with Zwingli. However, in 1549, Bullinger and Calvin succeeded in overcoming the differences in doctrine and produced the Zurich Consensus. This resulted in a united Reformed witness.

Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli are known as the three men of the Reformation, systematizing and promoting Biblical truths. But the fourth, being Bullinger, was the one who truly promoted unity. The Second Helvetic Confession, which he penned, came to be adopted by the Reformed Church in Switzerland, Scotland, Hungary, France, and Poland; being known as the most recognized Reformed confession after the Heidelberg Catechism. He was a personal friend and confidante of Calvin, Bucer, Melancthon, Beza, Cranmer, Hooper, Lady Jane Grey, the kings of England, Denmark, and the German princes. His work of unity and catholicity greatly influenced and advanced the cause of Reformation.

Lessons for Us Today

Often the theme of unity is given the look of suspicion in separatist churches. Naturally, we are tempted to think of any Christian unity as unbiblical ecumenism. And the topic of true visible Christian unity is never given the weight that it deserves. It is often classified as a by-the-way of Biblical Separation, rather than the opposite. But do we ever stop to consider if much of the separatism that goes on in the name of truth is really just plain old schism?

The Reformation teaches us valuable lessons, and practical ones too! Firstly, it teaches us that reformation takes time. No church is perfect and there will be plenty to reform – in doctrine, in practice, in character, and in behavior. But often we get impatient and behave more like revolutionaries – we give up hope for the church, we express our displeasure (sometimes very enthusiastically), we leave the church (often with great flourish). But the Reformation teaches us that efforts to maintain unity (while upholding the truths) is preferable, and separation to be implemented when there is no other recourse.

Secondly, the Reformation teaches us the necessity to be faithful to the truths of Scripture. In an age where the fads of broad evangelicalism bombard the church and the call to unite sounds loudly, there is a need to consider what is more important – an insatiable desire for results or a desire to be faithful?

Thirdly, the Reformation teaches us to consider the church as Christ sees her – she is his Bride, whom he is preparing for that great marriage supper – she is not yet perfect, but being perfected. And when we see ourselves as imperfect we hardly expect better from others. Schism always happens because of pride, no matter how loudly we proclaim our desire to protect the truths of Christ, doing it in a spirit that is contrary to the spirit of Christ. Schism must be crushed.

And fourthly, the Reformation teaches us to be catholic in our outlook – to maintain our distinctives as Reformed Christians, because we're convinced of the doctrines of grace, but also to be charitable and eager for biblical unity.

WELCOME TO NEW LIFE B-P CHURCH LONDON
CHURCH THEME: WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION WITH FEAR
AND TREMBLING. (Philippians 2:12)

Our worship services begin promptly at **11.00 am and 4.00 pm.**

Please stay back for Bible Study and fellowship lunch after the morning worship and for tea after the evening service. Do invite your friends to come to Church.

Worship Services			WELCOME
Morning	Today: 26/10/2008	Next Week: 02/11/2008	We extend a warm welcome to all worshippers this Lord's Day. We like to welcome Minom to our worship services last Lord's Day.
<i>Chairman:</i>	Jonathan Kim	Jonathan Kim	
<i>Preacher:</i>	Rev Yeo Seow Phong	Mark Chen	
<i>Message:</i>	The Truth Shall Make You Free	Christ Took the Dirt	
<i>Text:</i>	John 8:31-38	Ruth 4:1-9	
<i>Organist:</i>	Joy	Anthony	NEWS/ANNOUNCEMENTS
Evening			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reformation Sunday – 31 Oct marks the 495th anniversary of the Reformation. Rev Jack Sin has written an article "Spiritual Lessons and Legacies of the Protestant Reformation." This is available at the literature table. • Evening Service – Gospel Messages: For 2 Nov, the evening message will have an evangelistic theme. Please invite family and friends to attend. • Calling of Resident Minister: Continue to pray for the Lord's calling for a resident minister. The church leaders are praying about calling Rev Timothy Ki. • Pray for those who are sick: Douglas (knee pain), Maria (ankle and joint pain), Constance (left heel pain), Maureen (knee pain) • Pray for those who are seeking employment: John, Constance • Pray for Journey Mercies: Douglas (Ghana), Joey & family (vacation for 2 weeks).
<i>Chairman:</i>	Mark Chen	Jonathan Kim	
<i>Preacher:</i>	Rev Yeo Seow Phong	Mark Chen	
<i>Message:</i>	False Prophets and Teachers	God Is My Healer	
<i>Text:</i>	2 Peter 2:1-9	Exodus 15:22-26	
<i>Pianist:</i>	Sophia	Joy	
Other Duties			
	Next Week: 26/10/2008	Next Week: 02/11/2008	
<i>Ushers</i>	John / Hannah	Josh / Sharon	
<i>Sunday Sch:</i>	Hui Min	Hui Min	
<i>Lunch:</i>	Constance	Maureen	
<i>Washing-up:</i>	Volunteers	Volunteers	
<i>PA Crew:</i>	Anthony	Nicholas	
Appointments of the Week			
Fri 31 Oct	7:30pm	Young Adults Fellowship: Prayer Meeting	
Sat 1 Nov	4.00pm	Prayer Meeting & Bible Study: Led by Mark Chen	
Last Week's Worship Service Collections			
Offering: £197.02		Lunch: £44.60	
Memory Verse			
<p><i>Last Week (October 08 Wk 3): 1 Corinthians 13:1</i> Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.</p> <p><i>This Week (October 08 Wk 3): 1 Corinthians 13:2</i> And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.</p>			