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Commemorating the Reformation for the 500th Time

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A Compelling Pastoral and Discipleship Opportunity

I am hearing a lot about ways to commemorate the Reformation, especially as we approach the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting of the 95 theses in 2017. I am feeling a bit ill-equipped to approach this thoughtfully. What advice do you have?

I have been hearing a lot about this milestone as well. It's been the subject of everything from syndicated talk radio discussions on both Protestant and Catholic networks to publications of an official joint Protestant-Catholic task force focusing on the commemoration. Among Protestants, conferences, books, and blogs have already emerged featuring strikingly different postures—some aimed at sharpening the skills of protest and some aimed at building bridges across traditions. And the pope has already announced his intent to mark the occasion by worshipping not in Rome but in a Lutheran church in Sweden.

There are layers of complexity to this discussion that will take some time to pray about and think through. That's why my response here is longer than usual. It's also why I didn't want to wait to reflect on this until 2017.

PASTORAL COMPLEXITY

First, consider the stunning developments in Protestant-Catholic cooperation and mutual learning in the past 50 years since Vatican II. Some of this is very local in expression: Protestant pastors meeting with Catholic priests to study the Bible together, Catholic and Protestant women and men participating in common prayer groups, Protestant and Catholic neighbors working side by side on common causes, Catholic and Protestant worship services featuring remarkable convergence in song choices—in ways that might surprise many worshipers.

In many cases, Protestants have rediscovered how Catholics affirm every line in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, how they read more Scripture in worship than in most Protestant services, and how they organize their year around the life of Jesus. In a few places, Catholic and Protestant parishes and congregations hold joint services for key days in the Christian year. Some—remarkably—do this on Ash Wednesday, which many Protestants long disdained as a hopelessly irredeemable Catholic observance.

All of this local activity is reinforced by official denominational decisions in which many Protestant denominations recognize Catholic baptisms, and Catholics return the favor. In these places, people on both sides of the divide approach each other as two separated parts of the same family, rather than thinking of each other as representing two different religions. Add to this the symbolism of popes and denominational leaders meeting together, offering apologies, and seeking forgiveness. For many people the last 50 of these 500 years have been a time of bridge-building.

At the very same time, in our globally connected world, I am aware of the many places in the world in which Protestant and Catholic communities remain deeply and stubbornly divided. In some places, the memory of Protestant-Catholic violence is still vivid, even if it has not been prominent in recent newspaper headlines (Northern Ireland). In others, Protestants still fear acts of vandalism and bullying on Catholic feast days (Mexico) or feel isolated and misunderstood (Italy), while some Catholics in turn feel isolated, lonely, and demoralized in majority Protestant contexts (I am thinking of a comment of a Catholic priest who lives not far from where I live).

In some places, Catholics and Protestants think of themselves as part of two different religions (one "Catholic" and one "Christian"), and in some languages (e.g., Spanish) each tradition uses a completely different word for prayer, which makes it nearly impossible to imagine coming together to pray. In these contexts, the idea of a joint worship service is unthinkable, the idea of Protestants observing Lent is offensive, and the practice of even walking into the church building of the other tradition is avoided.

These diverse experiences—of stunning unity and of persistent divisiveness—are both a part of life in the worldwide church today. Sometimes they are compressed with intensity into the lives of individuals and families. I have had both perspectives represented in various courses and seminars I have been a part of.

In the past year, I had the opportunity to participate in two conferences: one 99% Catholic and one 99% Protestant. In each one, I spoke about differences in Protestant and Catholic worship. In each one, I subsequently had the privilege of hearing poignant, heartfelt stories about life journeys lived near the Catholic-Protestant border: Catholics who had become Protestant; Protestants who had become Catholic; Protestants who were dating Catholics and were trying to figure out what the differences meant; Catholics whose children were marrying Protestants and were trying to discern how to respond; Catholics who led worship music at a local Protestant church, and vice versa. These people live every day at the nexus between Catholic and Protestant communities, and this location forms a large part of their Christian identity.

Roughly half of these stories were positive: people loved discovering just how much these different traditions held in common, and how concerned each community could be to promote Christian discipleship. Roughly half, however, were deeply painful stories, involving split families, long-standing arguments, and stubborn prejudice. Some of that pain was based on misinformation, innuendo, and stereotypes.

Some of that pain emerged because people had experienced the worst aspects of the other tradition. Former Catholics lamented the lackluster faith they perceived in their home parish, or the horrors of clerical abuse. Former Protestants lamented how little Scripture was ever read or sung in their home congregation, or the way their church was too centered around the personality of their pastor. Some recounted their own encounter with abusive behavior. No tradition is immune from tragedy, distortion, and profound pain. When we experience the worst a tradition has to offer, we live with profoundly different impressions than when we experience the best it has to offer.

One common theme—in both the positive and painful stories—was a sense of bewilderment. People didn't know where to go to find out "what the Catholic church really thinks" or "what Protestants really believe." People were mystified by how two pastors or two priests could respond in such different ways to the same situation. People rehearsed deeply uninformed explanations of why Catholics ask saints to pray for them or why some Protestants can sometimes have such a consumerist approach to the faith.

The more I have lived into these stories, the more I think that the commemoration of the Reformation is a profound pastoral opportunity. In fact, I have begun to think that long before the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is ever commemorated in a public worship service, it should be contemplated in the prayer-soaked conversations of pastoral care teams, discipleship groups, and conversations among pastors and elders.

This approach will lead us beyond a simplistic commemoration that only serves to perpetuate aspects of these deep pastoral challenges.

For come 2017, we can't just sing "kum ba yah" and ignore the pain between Catholic and Protestant brothers and sisters over the centuries and in many places today.

We can't just trumpet the beautiful five solas of the Reformation (by grace alone, by faith alone, by Christ alone, by Scripture alone, God's glory alone), and portray the contemporary Catholic church as being diametrically opposed to all of this.

As Protestants, we can't just sing "A Mighty Fortress," while remaining blissfully unaware that the very same hymn is quite likely being sung in a nearby Catholic parish!

By themselves, these approaches only reinforce simplistic understanding. They risk the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudice (in multiple directions). They risk causing further pain in divided or bewildered families.

What if we considered this upcoming 2017 commemoration an invitation to a year-long journey of learning, growth, and mutual discipleship? The point of the journey is growth in Christ. The virtues needed for the journey are courage, empathy, patience, and discernment. The outcome of the journey is not a simple solution to a technical problem, but a set of capacities for living together in the worldwide community of those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord. All of it needs to be bathed in prayer and marked by both truth and grace.

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

Here are a few elements that could be a part of the learning journey in your community.

Whenever possible, think of ways of engaging in this learning with others.

Revisit the History of the 16th Century

First, celebrate how historians can help us approach this as an opportunity for discipleship. New insight has been emerging from the remarkable work of many Protestant and Catholic historians about the nature and meaning of the Reformation, some of it based on sources that only recently have become readily available.

Some Catholic historians have explained just how corrupt parts of the late medieval church were. Some Protestant historians have explained just how coercive and violent many of the Reformers were. Some Catholic theologians have offered appreciative studies of Luther and Calvin. Some Protestant theologians have offered appreciative studies of medieval theologians like Aquinas. Social historians have only recently unveiled just how perplexed many Christians were during this period, how long it took for new patterns of piety to set in. Many of these works highlight the beauty of God's sovereign grace, but also depict the tragedy of confusion, violence, and bitter rhetoric that accompanied all of the upheaval.

Among the many fabulous books, look for contributions of Protestant historians like Andrew Pettegree, Tim Wengert, and Karin Maag, and Catholic historians like Brad Gregory (among dozens of others). Many of these fine historians are featured in readily available online videos.

LEARN ABOUT THE HISTORY OF PRIOR REFORMATION COMMEMORATIONS

Second, learn also from historians who are teaching us about the history of major celebrations of the Reformation—in 1617, 1717, 1817, and 1917. Some of these prior commemorations were good, prompting renewed interest in rereading the works of Luther and Calvin, for example. But a lot of them were not, as Catholics and Protestants sharpened simplistic protests against each other, as people sought to make money from selling materials related to the observance, or as various nations (especially Germany) chose to mark the day as a celebration of nationalism, rather than as an occasion for religious renewal. Many prior commemorations became pretexts for people to advance their own present-day theological or political agenda. Some even looked back at the Reformation not as a recovery of biblical truth but rather as a model for self-expression and freedom from any established authority.

Pondering all of this only makes us more vividly aware of just how much the survival of the church depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. Thomas Albert Howard is a leading author here, with a forthcoming book on the issue and some early articles that help us enter the conversation:

- Thomas Albert Howard and Mark A. Noll, "The Reformation at Five Hundred: An Outline of the Changing Ways We Remember the Reformation," *First Things* (Nov. 2014).
- Sarah Hinlicky Wilson and Thomas Albert Howard, "Repent and Celebrate: The Reformation After 500 Years," *Christian Century* (July 8, 2015), pp. 20-23.

Learn from Contemporary Protestant/Catholic Official Discussions and Dialogues

Third, one of the richest veins of work to help us learn together emerges out of official ecumenical dialogues on some of the largest and most important differences between Catholics and Protestants. These dialogues are conducted by gathering groups of Catholic and Protestant theologians for conversation and mutual learning, often over a period of several years. The resulting documents do not represent the perspective of a single writer but rather the common understanding of groups of people. One of the most famous of these is the Lutheran/Catholic [“Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.”](#)

In the United States, there has also been a vigorous Reformed/Catholic dialogue on baptism and the Lord’s Supper. See, for example, [“These Living Waters: Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism”](#) and [“This Bread of Life: Report of the United States Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue on the Lord’s Supper”](#)

A new round of dialogue has begun on the mission and identity of the church in the modern world, with Reformed participants drawn from the RCA, CRC, PCUSA, and UCC.

Yet another vigorous conversation has emerged between evangelical and Catholic leaders here in North America. This is recorded in the document by Charles Colson, Richard John Neuhaus, and others called [“Evangelicals and Catholics Together,”](#) and, more recently, in the book by Timothy George and Thomas Guarino titled [Evangelicals and Catholics Together at Twenty: Vital Statements on Contested Topics.](#)

Informal ecumenical conversations do not require a formal national or international commission. A lot of this can also be done locally. One promising way to proceed would be for Protestants to engage the Catholic Catechism, which is available in print, but also [online](#), comparing it to, for example, the Heidelberg Catechism beginning with the respective sections of each catechism on the Apostles’ Creed (Catholic Catechism, section 2; Heidelberg Catechism, QA 23-64).

Reformed Christians will find some pages to disagree with. At the same time, there are many pages that Protestants do agree with. The catechism is not a document on which to base formal institutional unity of the church—the disagreements are strong. Still, it is a document that strongly commends mutual recognition, in which we learn to see each other as members of God’s family, united through Jesus Christ.

Learn from Pastoral Conversations

Learning from these texts is a great place to start. Complement them by learning in conversation with people near you. The vast majority of readers of *Reformed Worship* are likely to be very close in proximity to quite a few people who live at the Catholic/Protestant border: fellow church members who grew up Catholic, neighbors who are Catholic, family members who have become Catholic. What a gift it can be to listen deeply to their stories. What have been the sources of insight and discovery? Where do they experience lingering pain, doubt, or regret? While some may be reluctant to talk about it, I strongly suspect that there are lot of people who have been longing, often for many years, for some trusting forum or context in which to engage their experiences.

Some of these kinds of conversations have also been recorded in blogs and books. There is a long line of books written by people who grew up Protestant and have become Catholic (e.g., sociologist Christian Smith’s *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in Ninety-Five Difficult Steps*, or similar books by Francis Beckwith, Scott Hahn, Thomas Howard). Other perspectives come from Protestants who remain firmly in the Protestant tradition but also are eager to continue to grapple with changes in each tradition over time. See Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Really Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism.*

As we listen to each other, it’s important not to let one version of the story become the entire story. There are so many different kinds of stories at these border crossings—stories of lament and thanksgiving, barriers and bridges, stories from different parts of the world. The richer our pool of experiences, the more truthful and gracious our approach can be to each other.

DISCERNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FELLOWSHIP AND COMMON PRAYER

In many—though not all—settings, one of the most important opportunities of the next year will be to find ways for Protestants and Catholics to pray, read Scripture, and sing together. The current local newsletter for Roman Catholic musicians here in Grand Rapids, Michigan (20 months ahead of Oct. 31, 2017!) includes this note by a Catholic writer:

Ecumenism sprung to life in the wake of Vatican II; Christians of various traditions, coming together in prayer and praise, eventually became what I almost dare to call fashionable. Today many, if not a majority, of Catholics and Protestants are quite at ease praying together, but how often does this occur in a worship context? My parish gathers in worship with our Reformed neighbor once each year. Unfortunately, that is rather typical. It's time to think ahead. Let's enter into conversation with our Christian neighbors and prepare occasions for us to gather together in prayer and witness, next year and beyond. All baptized Christians make up the Body of Christ; the Christian family. It's time that we schedule more frequent family reunions. Revisit 1 Corinthians 12:26 and dare to dream about the ways in which we might better become its manifestation. What will you say when you are invited to a family reunion like this, especially if what they want to do there is to read the Bible, pray in Jesus' name, recite the Nicene Creed, say the Lord's Prayer, and sing psalms and hymns that are loved in common?

I know of several communities already strengthening the personal relationships between Catholic and Protestant leaders in order to be ready to pray together during 2017. Here is a fruitful place to start your joint planning (posted Jan. 11, 2016): [Common Prayer: From Conflict to Communion](#)—Lutheran/Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017 and the liturgical task force of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity.

This thoughtful material was prepared by a group of Protestants and Catholics together. It features suggested prayers, Scripture readings, and a way of thinking about this occasion that embraces both lament and thanksgiving, both confession and praise. These liturgical suggestions are based, in turn, on a prior common reflection: *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013).

One of the insights to emerge from these conversations is the encouragement to speak about “commemorating” rather than “celebrating” the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. “Commemorate” is a term that conveys dignity and weighty significance. It also steers away from “celebrating” a division in the church. Even the most strident opponents of Catholicism should agree that the Reformation was a tragedy, however necessary it may have been.

Beyond these sources, to prepare for any common prayer service as Protestants, I encourage you to buy and study a Catholic hymnal or song collection. In just about every case, you will find that 10% is unusable by Protestants, 40% may well come from Protestant sources, (a mirror of the many Roman Catholic contributions to Protestant songbooks and set lists), and 20% may look deeply biblical in content but unusual (to you) in form. You may be surprised by how beautiful this material is. The remaining 30% is likely to work equally well in Protestant and Catholic contexts without much adaptation at all. Look, for example, for hymnals from

- GIA Publications: *Worship* (classic hymnal, 4th edition); *Gather* (a folk collection, 3rd edition); *Lead Me, Guide Me* (African American hymnal), or *Oramos Cantando* (bilingual Spanish-English)
- World Library Publications: *One in Faith* or *We Celebrate*
- Oregon Catholic Press (OCP): *Glory and Praise*

As I have watched Protestants encounter these books, I often find that the Protestant understanding of Catholic theology, liturgy, and piety becomes much more informed and truthful. Disagreements don't go away; areas of agreement become clearer. The amount of shared music is often surprising.

SHAPING OUR PRAYERS: LAMENT, CONFESSION, GRATITUDE, INTERCESSION

At every step of this learning journey, consider how your learning can deepen your prayer, not only personally but congregationally.

I have noticed that in many Reformation commemorations, Protestants tend to start by deciding what to preach. And let it be said that sermons on “salvation by grace alone” are terrific. But we often miss paying deep attention to prayer. We certainly pray. But often we do not ponder how to deepen and sharpen our prayers. We may remember to pray for the other tradition to discover our truth, but we may neglect to confess our own short-sightedness. We may pray for the worldwide church generally but never think to pray that the Holy Spirit’s renewing work may be active within another tradition.

As you prepare for this commemoration, keep a journal about what to pray for—what to give thanks for, what to lament, what to ask for. Look for ways that your own congregational prayers can be deepened. Here is an initial list to help you begin.

How might we lament?

- Bewilderment of so many people
- Stubborn divides within neighborhoods and families
- For failures of faithfulness in each Christian tradition

How might we confess?

- Lack of grace and truth in our own speech
- Lack of courage to actually engage the topic
- Comparing the strengths of our own tradition to the weaknesses of another

How might we give thanks?

- For examples of Christ-centered growth in each tradition
- For historians doing good work to teach us all (when is the last time you gave thanks for an historian?!)
- For new opportunities of deep learning together
- For particular biblical insights and convictions that were strengthened in the Reformation era

How might we petition?

- That the Holy Spirit will help us all grow in Christ
- That violence over religion can cease
- That families and neighborhoods can be healed

FINAL THOUGHTS

As all of this unfolds over the next several months, it is deeply valuable to realize the limits of our own perspective. While the Reformation is a central chapter in the history of worldwide Christianity, the entire history of the church does not go through Wittenberg and Geneva. 250 million Orthodox Christians worldwide live in communities that tend to see all of this as a divide “merely within Western Christianity.”

In a very different context, I recently talked with leaders of Chinese house churches—brand-new communities emerging out of their own Bible reading rather than out of prior Christian traditions—who find it mystifying to have to decide which Christians to align with. To them, the idea of choosing a tradition that defines itself based on a 500-year old split in Europe feels all wrong.

Alongside the creation of the world and the resurrection of Jesus, one of the most stunning works of God is the Holy Spirit’s work—against all the powers and principalities—to gather a church. What a remarkable claim we affirm in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.” How grateful we can all be for the Spirit-given assurance that follows: “And of this community I am and always will be a living member.”

May God’s Holy Spirit bless the entire church in the year ahead with a journey of grace and truth.



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