

Remembering the Protestant Reformation

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By Reg Killingley

BIG SANDY, Texas—Oct. 31, 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of an important date in Christian history. That afternoon in 1517, a 33-year-old Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 theses or debate topics on a church door in Wittenberg, 60 miles southwest of Berlin. He was protesting against church practices he considered unbiblical.

Luther’s act marked a huge milestone because it opened the floodgates to lasting church reform.

Efforts to clean up the Western church had been around for centuries. They failed because the church allied itself with civil rulers to impose its version of Christianity as the only authorized one. Any challenge to either (civil government or church government) was considered a threat to their power and authority and had to be suppressed or eliminated.

If “heretics” refused to do this when asked nicely, the next time the ecclesiastical authorities didn’t bother to say please. Burning at the stake usually deterred most people from open defiance.

So we have little evidence of what proto-reformers might have believed because they had to keep in hiding if they wished to survive. They certainly didn’t broadcast their beliefs via Twitter—or use social media of any kind.

Time was right

The Great Schism of 1054 divided the Christian church between East (centered in Constantinople) and West (centered in Rome). But the Western Schism of 1378-1417, when up to three men claimed to be pope at the same time and even anathematized one another, scandalized the Christian world.

It made the church seem like any other political organization, and people were divided in their allegiance to the various men who each claimed to be the true pope.

So Christians were emboldened to challenge the monopoly of Rome and argue that the gospel had been corrupted and distorted—men such as John Wycliffe and the Lollards in England and Jan Hus and his followers in Bohemia. Hus was

put to death at the stake. Wycliffe died of natural causes but 44 years later was declared a heretic. His remains were exhumed and burned.

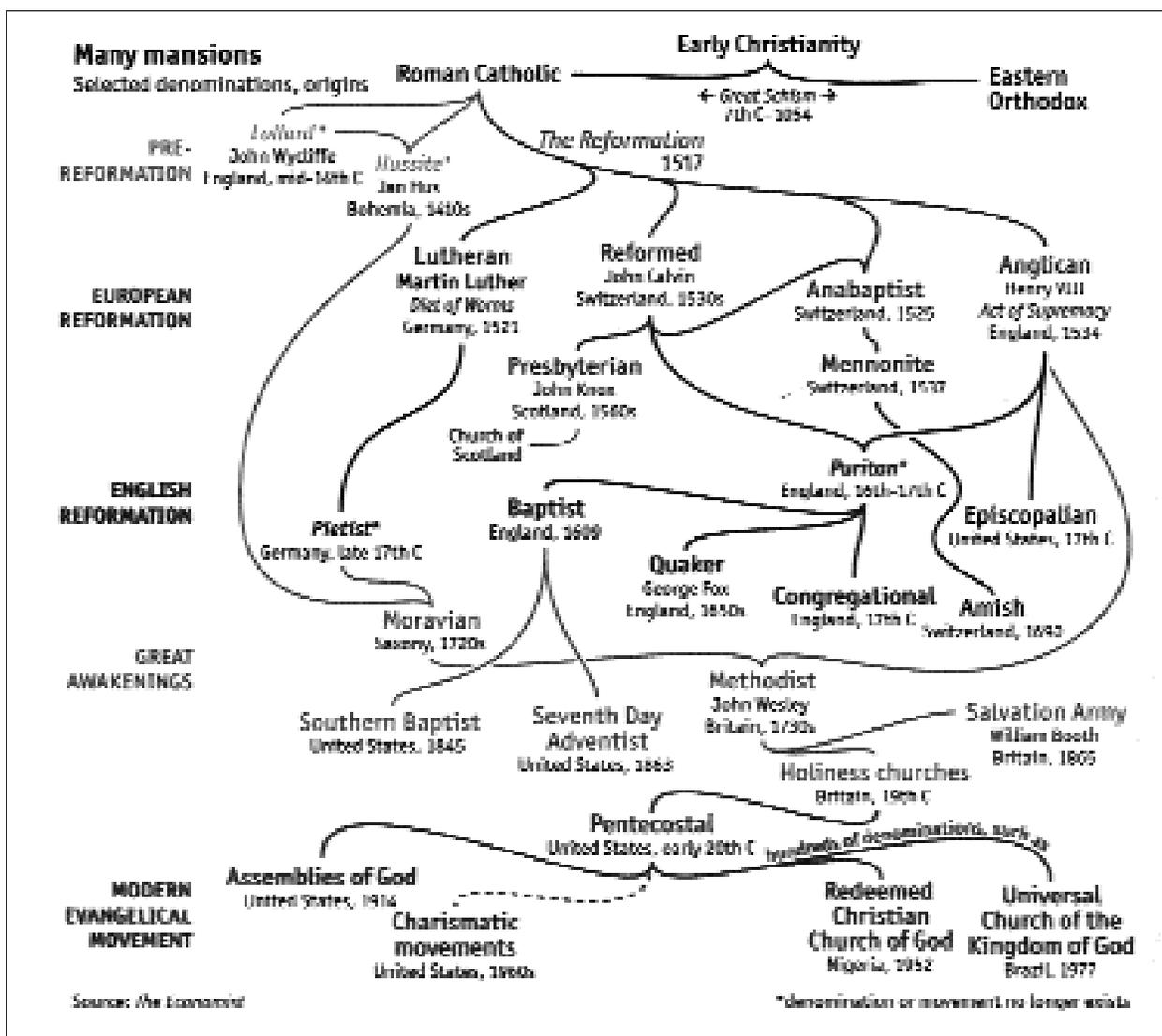
Initially, despite the evidence of previous would-be reformers, Luther appeared to believe that church authorities would be responsive to his concerns about abuse, most of which centered on the topic of purchasing indulgences for relief from purgatory, somewhat akin to get-out-of-jail-for-a-small-fee cards—purchasing forgiveness for sin, in effect. Or buying rather than begging pardon.

But there was too much money to be made for the church to readily let go of such a handy money-maker, especially since a lot of the money went into the building fund for St. Peter's Basilica.

Luther survived because some German princes were willing to protect him for their own political reasons. Had they not, he would have provided more kindling for the next heretic cookout, especially as a former friar.

Disagreements soon surfaced

Once the floodgates are opened, they can't easily be closed again.



Soon after Luther started the Reformation in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli followed suit in Zurich, and, a little later, John Calvin did the same in Geneva. Protestantism in various iterations spread throughout northern Europe.

But, from the beginning, divisions occurred.

In 1529, Luther and Zwingli were unable to agree on the meaning of the word *is* when Jesus said, "This *is* my Body." Luther and Calvin disagreed on the meaning of *predestination*.

Therein lay the problem of the Protestant Reformation and of Christianity in general. Christians seem to have a hard time agreeing for long or on very much.

Going back to 1054 and the split between Western and Eastern Christianity, one of the big issues that divided them was the *filioque* clause of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Did the Holy Spirit proceed only from the Father, as the Easterners taught?

Or did it proceed from the Father *and* the Son, as the Western church believed?

A layman might think what difference does it make. Yet it did, to the theologians. Differences small and large have continued to plague Christianity throughout its history, leading, inevitably, to long-lasting divisions.

The English Reformation, being English, was rather different—it was much milder to start with, at least. Henry VIII split from Rome for marital reasons.

So the church in England merely changed from having the pope as the supreme authority to having Henry as the supreme head—while some of his wives lost theirs.

But, once it had started rolling, the bandwagon picked up the pace. So some reformers—those known as Puritans—wanted to go much further and purify the church of England more thoroughly. Politically, this was a nonstarter.

Similar pressure for greater reform was also happening on the Continent.

Once the Roman church saw that the split appeared to be permanent, the political parties on either side in Germany decided on an accommodation.

In 1555, at the Peace of Augsburg, they agreed to the formula *cuius regio, eius religio* (whoever the ruler is, his religion is to be followed).

If the ruler was Lutheran, then the people were expected to be Lutheran. If the ruler was Catholic, then the people were too. That became the principle followed for a time.

Yet much religious conflict followed, much of it bloody.

In 1648, after the Thirty Years' War, the Europeans drew up another agreement, known as the Peace of Westphalia, adding the option of Calvinism to the earlier two choices.

Around this same time, then, early colonists traveled to North America. The Plymouth Puritans were forced to leave England but did not want to settle permanently in Holland, their initial safe harbor. Their only option: the New World.

A short while later, another Puritan, John Winthrop, the author of the seminal sermon that described their settlement in America as a “city upon a hill,” came over on the *Arbella*.

Point to ponder

So why is the Protestant Reformation important to us today?

1. The U.S. would not exist as currently configured without it.

The Protestant Reformation produced both religious and political change that led to ideas that directly influenced the development of Britain’s American colonies.

An example is the Protestant belief in the responsibility and importance of the individual in making choices and decisions, including the ideas of John Locke regarding religious toleration and the social contract.

2. It represents the Christian yearning for the unvarnished, unadulterated, plain truth—our desire to get to the original roots of Christianity.

Christian reformers wanted to get rid of all the accretions—all the barnacles that over the centuries had stuck onto the bark of primitive Christianity. This was the reason that the Puritans, for example, got rid of Christmas celebrations.

3. Whether we like it or not, believe it or not, accept it or not, Protestantism is in the DNA of Church of God congregations.

This is hard to accept for many in the Churches of God because it was drilled into them that Protestantism was bad and that Protestants were merely the wayward daughters of the mother church, referred to in Revelation as Babylon.

Yet many in the Churches of God have not been consistent in their rejection of what some people call Protestantism.

For instance, they have long sung—and loved!—hymns by Protestant composers.

They have freely and frequently used Bible aids such as *Strong’s* and *Young’s* and *Cruden’s* concordances, as well as textbooks on both Old and New Testaments at their various educational institutions.

They buy, read and recommend books by Protestant Christian authors.

So let’s not forget that relatives with whom we may disagree are still relatives.

Doctrinal similarities between Protestantism and the Churches of God could be noted.

Some of the similarities are major. We share the belief in the Bible alone as the rule of life (*sola scriptura*) and in salvation by faith through grace (*sola fide* and *sola gratia*).

Some of the similarities are peripheral. Many among the Churches of God have believed in the concept of British Israelism (often referred to as US&BC).

Consider that John Winthrop taught a "city on a hill" theme, which argued that Americans (as we came to be called) were a special people, chosen by God, as Israel had been.

Well, it's not a giant leap from that to the concept of American exceptionalism and, from there, to the concept of British Israelism.

Perhaps some of us have wanted to be exclusive and exclusionary because of the powerful human desire to be considered better or more authentic than others.

We see that tendency way back in the 1st century when John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us."

But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, because no one who does a miracle in my name will be able soon afterward to say anything bad about me. For whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:38-40).

4. Revelation 2 and 3 can be read as the history of Christendom from the 1st century on, warts and all.

Sadly, as we have seen, division has marked Christianity from the beginning, despite Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:11, 21-23.

In Revelation, Jesus has to reprimand the church for departing from its initial zeal (Revelation 2:4) while condemning wrong practices (verse 6), false teachings (verses 15, 20), apathy (Revelation 3:1), lukewarmness (verse 16) and even its state of being wretched and pitiful, poor and blind (verse 17).

Barely a couple of decades after Christ's earthly ministry, Paul had foretold there would be savage wolves ravaging the flock (Acts 20:29). So the need for reform has been ever present in the Christian church.

Paul also described how people could have mixed motives in preaching Christ, yet he rejoiced in the fact that, at the end of the day, Christ was being preached, regardless (Philippians 1:15-18).

Jesus, too, had explained that His church would include both wheat and weeds throughout its existence (Matthew 13:24-30).

He also warned those who were so convinced that they were true Christians and others were not that they could be in for a big surprise at the end. He said: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Appreciate the courage

With all that in mind, let's appreciate both the religious and political freedoms that the Protestant Reformation wrought for us. We are a product of the courage and conviction of believers in Christ.

For all their faults, and for all our faults, we all believe in the one Savior of mankind. If He is, as Scripture says, our Brother, then we are all brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11), regardless of how estranged and even rejecting we may be of one another.

Let us therefore seek to fulfill Jesus' prayer for his disciples and our fellow believers in John 17 to the degree and the extent that God gives us the opportunity.

Note: All Scripture quotations are from the New English Translation (NET Bible).