

Reformation Day 2022 Branches of the Reformation

Oct 31, 2022 (tomorrow), is the 505th anniversary of the event that sparked the Protestant Reformation. On this day in 1517, an obscure monk and scholar named Martin Luther attached a document titled *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg, Germany. Most church historians see this act as the birth of the Reformation. Luther became one of the great champions of the Reformation, along with other leaders such as John Calvin, John Hus, Huldrich Zwingli, William Tyndale, and John Knox.

We should review briefly what the Reformation was all about. As one writer put it—

The Protestant Reformation stands as the most far-reaching, world-changing display of God's grace since the birth and early expansion of the church. ... The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, next to the introduction of Christianity, the greatest event in history. It marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. ... The Reformation was, at its heart, a recovery of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, and this restoration had an unparalleled influence on churches, nations, and the flow of Western civilization.¹

Today I want to talk about the branches of the Reformation. The Reformation was not one giant event led by one preacher. Martin Luther is closely associated with the event, but the Protestant Reformation was much larger and broader than Luther and his influence. The Reformation branched off in various ways not long after it began.

We'll be looking at four of these branches. I'm not going to get into Anglicanism/Church of England as a branch of the Reformation.

¹ Steve Lawson, "The Reformation and the Men Behind It." <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/reformation-and-men-behind-it/>

I. The Lutheran branch

- A. Martin Luther never intended to be a revolutionary. He never really wanted to separate from the RCC. His intent was to promote a minor correction/reform in the behavior of the church.
- B. In particular, Luther stood against the selling of indulgences. Last year, if you recall, my message on Ref. Sunday was all about Luther's 95 Theses against indulgences. [explain indulgences]
- C. Luther's paper set off a series of events that led him to withdraw completely from the RCC and establish a new church—the Lutheran Church.
- D. Luther started a new church, but he wanted to keep almost everything from RC practice that was not completely corrupt. He didn't want a thorough renovation of Christianity. He just wanted to get rid of the most objectionable and offensive elements of the church, the most obvious corruptions so common in the RCC at his time.

E.g., Luther got rid of unbiblical and unnecessary things like prayer to the saints, masses for the dead, veneration of relics, sales of indulgences, acts of penance, and the mass as a sacrifice. None of this is biblical, and much of it is highly offensive and corrupt. These were necessary reforms.

And had the RCC reformed slightly, the Reformation never would have happened.

- E. The Lutheran church kept much of the worship system—the liturgy—that was in use at the time. They kept the liturgical nature of the worship service.

If you attend some Lutheran churches today, the worship service—the liturgy—is quite similar to what you'd find in a RCC. The Lutheran church is almost RCism "lite." They've removed many of the most corrupt and unbiblical things, but kept much of the rest—at least in some Lutheran churches.

- F. Luther believed in what has been called the Normative Principle of Worship. It states that whatever the Bible does not *prohibit* is *permitted* in Christian worship. As long as the Bible doesn't condemn or forbid some activity, then the church is free to use it.

Many churches today follow this way of thinking. It's one reason we have so many crazy things going on in churches today. Anything the Bible doesn't expressly forbid is a viable option.

E.g., the Bible doesn't prohibit hosting a circus in the auditorium, so we could do that. The Bible doesn't forbid stand-up comedy or karate demonstrations or rock 'n roll bands, so we could do that. Maybe we should have a professional wrestling demonstration. As long as the Bible doesn't forbid it, we are free to do it.

Trans: The Lutheran branch of the reformation took some necessary steps in the right direction, but it did not go far enough; more reformation was necessary.

II. The Calvinist branch

- A. John Calvin, who was the main influence of what eventually became the Presbyterian Church, agreed with much of what Luther taught, but he took things a bit further than Luther did in trying to restore the church to a more biblical model.
- B. Luther changed the worship of the church somewhat, and Calvin changed it a bit more.
- C. Calvin and his followers developed what has come to be known as the Regulative Principle of Worship.
1. **Positively** stated, the Regulative Principle of Worship states that the *corporate worship of God* is to be founded upon specific directions of Scripture. God has told us how to worship him, and we must simply follow those directions.

2. **Negatively** stated, we cannot allow any forms of worship that are not biblically authorized. God prohibits any worship practice not specifically, positively taught in Scripture. If the Bible does not teach a certain practice, we can't do it.

John Calvin put it this way: "God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his Word."

The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689: "The acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped ... [in] way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures" (22.1).

In other words, worship must be biblical. Anything we do in the worship of the church must have a biblical basis. It's not enough to say that we can do anything not prohibited by the Bible. We must insist that what we do has biblical sanction/authorization.

3. Before the Reformation, churches commonly included things in their worship services that were simply unbiblical. Many traditions that had no basis in Scripture were part of the worship service. They had tradition and history, but not Scripture. That's one reason the church needed to be reformed. The church had imported many practices that had no biblical basis, e.g., prayer to the saints, indulgences.
4. Calvin and his followers insisted that all Christian worship practices must have biblical warrant.

Trans: I would suggest that Calvin reformed the church in a more biblical direction than did Luther, but he still retained a few things that he should have dropped. The church needed more reforming than what Calvin was willing to do.

III. The Zwinglian branch

A. Some reformers, such as the Swiss theologian Huldreich Zwingli, did not believe that Luther or Calvin went quite far enough. Zwingli and others pushed for an even more biblical form of worship.

1. One of the most significant things Zwingli did was to remove images from the churches in Switzerland. He didn't believe it was right to use pictures/images/icons in Christian worship. He believed that the place of worship should be plain and unadorned, not highly decorated.

If you visit a RC or a Lutheran church, you'll notice that the sanctuary is quite ornate and highly decorated with pictures and statues.

2. Many churches that followed Zwingli removed the images and whitewashed the walls of the cathedrals and churches. They wanted worship to center on the preaching of the Word, not on the majesty of the buildings. God should get the glory, not people. Churches should be simple and unadorned.

Quote: In churches following Zwingli's teaching, the words of Scripture were read and preached in the language of the people. The entire congregation, not merely the clergy, received both bread and wine in a simple Communion service. The minister wore robes like those found in lecture halls rather than at Catholic altars. The veneration of Mary and saints was forbidden, indulgences were banned, and prayers for the dead were stopped. The break with Rome was complete.²

B. One of the things that Zwingli is best known for is his teaching on the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

² Steven Lawson, "Zurich Revolutionary: Ulrich Zwingli." Sep 18, 2017
<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/zurich-revolutionary-ulrich-zwingli/>

1. Luther took a sacramental view of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. He held that the sacraments, in some way, are channels/vehicles of saving grace. For Luther, baptism especially was the means by which God bestowed regeneration upon a sinner.
2. Calvin took a different view. He held that the sacraments were signs and seals of the covenant. They didn't provide saving grace, but they did signify who was saved.
3. Zwingli was one of the first to argue that the sacraments did not convey saving grace. There was no saving power in the sacraments. Zwingli said "Water baptism cannot contribute in any way to the washing away of sin."

As we find in some of the reformers, Zwingli was not perfectly consistent in his views. He vacillated between infant baptism and believer's baptism. At some points, he seems to advocate infant baptism, and at other points he advocates believer's baptism. So that was a weakness or a failure in his position.

And likewise, Zwingli had a bit of a different view of the Lord's Supper.

C. That leads us to the Marburg Colloquy.

1. Someone had the brilliant idea that the German and the Swiss Reformers should join forces. Martin Luther and Zwingli met to discuss their differences and possibly link their movements at a town called Marburg. The two men could agree on 14 out of 15 points of theology, but the last one, the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, was the stickler.
2. The Reformers understood the LS differently than the RCC had taught. They did not believe in transubstantiation (explain). Luther believed something quite similar to it, Calvin a bit less so, and Zwingli even less. But they all agreed that the RC teaching was wrong.

3. Luther was absolutely unwilling to move from his position that the physical body of Christ was indeed present in the Supper. Zwingli held, as we do, that Christ is present spiritually or symbolically, but not physically, in the Lord's Supper. Communion is a memorial meal, a symbol.
4. Luther was absolutely unwilling to budge on his understanding of the physical or "real" presence of Jesus in the LS. In fact, the historical records of this event show that Luther became fairly belligerent and hostile during this meeting.
5. In the end of the conference, Luther concluded, "Your spirit is different from ours." He would not and could not agree with Zwingli. That meant that the German and the Swiss branches of the Reformation would remain separate. Luther would go his way, and the other reformers would go their own way.
6. It's very unfortunate that these two branches of the Reformation, that agreed on almost everything else, were unable to work out their differences. Had they done so, history would have been considerably different.

Trans: Baptists don't descend directly from Zwingli, but we hold much in common. We typically point to Zwingli as a reformer who believed much like we do.

IV. The Radical Anabaptist branch (1534-35)

- A. As religious movements sometimes go, the *reformers* are followed by *radicals*. Some people were not satisfied with the reforms that had been made and wanted to go farther.

B. One thing that Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli had in common was that they wanted the church to be connected to the state. That is, they wanted the civil government to authorize and protect the Christian religion. Historians call these leaders “magisterial” reformers, because they believed in the role of the magistrate—i.e., the civil government—to participate in the affairs of the church.

1. In that sense, the reformers did not break with the RCC. Before the Reformation, when the RCC was the dominant force in Europe, the church was directly connected to the state. In fact, in some ways, the church was more powerful than the state. In some ways, the church ruled the state. Church and state worked together hand in glove.

E.g., the Holy Roman Empire—Christianity was the official state religion. The entire society was expected to participate in the Christian religion. Church attendance was enforced by the power of the law and the police.

2. Some of the reformers saw the errors and problems associated with keeping the church connected to the government. Attachment to the state inevitably corrupted the church.

The radical reformers promoted the idea of the separation of church and state. The government had no business coercing or enforcing religion. Faith in God cannot be forced; it has to be voluntary. Once you allow government involvement in the church, all kind of negative things happen—like corruption and persecution of dissenters.

3. The reformers who promoted separation between church and state became known as the “radical” reformers. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli did *not* want a separation of church and state. Promoting such a separation was considered a radical idea; it had not been a common idea before.

4. The radical reformers promoted the idea of a free church. The church should be autonomous—self-governing, not under the thumb of the government. In fact, the church should not rely on the government at all.
5. The radical reformers also believed in believers' baptism, not baby baptism. Most of the other reformers—especially those following Luther and Calvin—retained the practice of baby baptism. Zwingli apparently allowed both. The radical reformers could not find baby baptism in the Bible, and so they did not believe in it. Cf. the RPW.
6. Some of these radical reformers came to be known as “Anabaptists.” They re-baptized those who had been baptized as babies, even if they'd been baptized in Reformed churches. They did not recognize baby baptism.

Quote (Priest): Anabaptist reformers believed that each church is a local assembly of regenerate believer priests, under the headship of Christ and the proper leadership of pastor and deacons, practicing the New Testament ordinances, preaching and obeying the Word of God in purity and clarity, [and] separated from worldliness and external ecclesiastical and civil control.³

- C. Some of the Anabaptists of that era, such as Menno Simons and Jacob Ammon, established a separatist tradition that continues even today among the Mennonites and that Amish. These people, for the most part, just wanted to be left alone and avoided political engagement.
- D. Sadly, some of the Anabaptists took a major turn into very radical, even cultish behavior and practice. In this discussion, we must mention the Mad Men of Munster, because their influence and behavior marked the low point in the radical reformation. It's quite a sad and sordid tale of woe.

³ Gerald Priest, “Are Baptists Protestants?”

- E. In 1534, a group of Anabaptists seized the city of Munster, Germany, and tried to convince people that it was the New Jerusalem. They preached that the millennial reign of Christ was about to start and the events of the book of Revelation were just around the corner. Munster would be a city of refuge while the rest of the world descended into tribulation.

Illus.: Think of David Koresh and some of these end-times cults who think that the events of the Book of Revelation are about to begin.

1. Some of these radical leaders taught that they were prophets speaking for God; they based their authority on visions and voices from God. They soon got into polygamy and all sorts of irrational and wicked behavior. These leaders became tyrannical, imprisoning and killing their opponents.
2. The city authorities began confiscating private property and a kind of communism was imposed on the population. Books were confiscated and burned. The death penalty was imposed for minor infractions. Mob rule and massacres of innocent people began.
3. The crazy leader of Munster declared himself to be the “King of Righteousness over all.” The situation was so bad that even the other reformers agreed that the radicals of Munster had gone way too far.
4. After about a year and a half, Catholic military troops invaded the city and quickly crushed the rebellion. The three main leaders of the rebellion were hideously tortured, killed, and their dead bodies put in cages hanging from the St. Lambert’s Church. The dead, rotting bodies of the rebels served as a warning to anyone who would repeat the rebellion. Two of the cages are still there today.

5. In the following months, many Anabaptists were rounded up and killed for their religious views. Anabaptists from that point and for many decades after had a bad reputation for extremism and rebellion.

Quote: “Anabaptist” became a generic term of abuse throughout the Reformation for anything that seemed too radical, and the long memory of the terrifying experience in Munster led to inoffensive Anabaptists being [harassed] and killed by popular and state authorities throughout Christendom for decades afterwards.⁴

What do we learn from this study of the various branches of the Reformation?

- 1) The Lutheran branch helps us see the importance of courageous leaders who stand strongly against unbiblical traditions and theological error no matter what the cost. Without Luther, it’s hard to see how the Reformation would have gotten much traction.
- 2) The Calvinist branch shows us the importance of aligning our faith and practice with biblical teaching. The Regulative Principle of Worship reminds us to make sure that we are actually following the teachings of the Bible and not just tradition or common practice.
- 3) The Zwinglian branch shows us that we must always be reforming. Even reformers sometimes don’t follow their principles to their logical conclusions. Luther and Calvin didn’t go quite far enough in their reforms.

⁴ Kyle Orton, “The Munster Millenarians: Anabaptism and the Radical Reformation.” 21 Feb 2021.
<https://kyleorton.co.uk/2021/02/21/the-munster-millenarians-anabaptism-and-the-radical-reformation/>

- 4) The radical Anabaptist branch warns us about what can happen when people go too far. It demonstrates what happens when people are open to the idea of continuing revelation from modern-day prophets. It shows how prone people can become to cult-like claims and behaviors. It shows what happens when people strip away all connection to historical tradition and practice. It shows how charismatic figures can lead whole populations into error and extremism. It shows how religious people can become tyrants and cultists. And it shows the terrible results from theological error and sloppy biblical interpretation.

The Protestant Reformation was something of a mixture of good and bad. Our experience as a church today is deeply influenced by the Reformation. We hope to retain the positive influences of Reformation teaching. In particular, the teachings of Zwingli probably have had the most influence on our branch of evangelicalism. We retain some of what the Anabaptist taught, but we also hope to avoid the errors of the radical reformers. We do that by following the Regulative Principle of Worship. The Scriptures, not prophecy, visions, or dreams, must be our final authority for faith and practice.