

Post Tenebras Lux

On Oct 31, 1517 (506 years ago on Tuesday), Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses to the chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany, thus launching the Protestant Reformation. Every year about this time, I like to dedicate a message to exploring what the Lord did through the Reformation. Over the years, we have looked at various elements of the Reformation—several of the leaders, the famous *Solas* of the Reformation, and the primary doctrinal teachings of it.

The Protestant Reformation was an attempt to return the church to a more biblical path. The Reformers sought to develop a theology and practice that conformed more closely to the NT. Some branches of the Reformation were more successful at this than others, but they all wanted to bring the church back to a more biblical form of theology and practice.

The Protestant Reformation was a revolt against the authority of the RCC and its head, the pope. The Reformers, like Wycliffe, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Hus, and Knox, believed the RCC was corrupt and that the pope did not have the authority to impose unbiblical teachings and practices on the church.

The consequences of the Reformation still persist today. Protestant, evangelical and fundamental Christianity trace their lineage back to the ideas rediscovered during the Reformation.

Today I'd like to consider a phrase that became something of a motto for the Protestant Reformation: *Post tenebras lux* is a Latin phrase meaning “after the darkness, light.”

Why was this phrase so suitable for the Protestant Reformation? The Reformation was a rejection of RCism—what the reformers saw as “the darkness.” The Reformation happened at the end of what many called the “dark ages,” an era dominated by the RCC. Many things about the RC system of worship and theology were unbiblical and corrupt—that's why it was a dark age. But after the darkness came “light,” i.e., the Reformation. The reformers sought to bring light back into the church. They wanted to bring it back to a biblical position on worship and theology.

Today we'll look at why the RC system 500 years ago was so dark and then how the Reformation brought light back into the church.

I. *Post tenebras* – After darkness

What was it about the RC system that the reformers would describe it at “darkness”?

A. The Bible was in the dark.

1. The great scholar Jerome had translated the Bible into Latin back in the 5th century, and from that time on the church had been using that translation. By the time of the Reformation, the Latin Vulgate had served the church for about 1000 years.
2. The RCC insisted that the Bible should remain in Latin and *not* be translated into the common languages of Europe. They believed that only learned clergymen needed to read the Bible. The average person could not understand it and would misinterpret it, they claimed. The church would tell people what the Bible said.
3. The Roman church tried to prevent the Bible from being translated into the common language of the people. They wanted to control access to the Bible; they didn't want common people comparing what the Bible said to what the RCC taught.
4. Thus, for the average person before the Reformation, the Bible was a closed book; most people were ignorant of it because they didn't have a copy of it in their own language. The Bible was in the darkness.

B. Teaching about salvation was in the dark.

1. The RCC taught that salvation was primarily a matter of observing/practicing the sacraments. I.e., Sacramentalism—God's grace is conveyed through the sacraments.
2. In the RC view, the sacraments are the means of salvation. The sacraments are *not* mere signs and symbols; they actually grant what they signify. Sacraments were the channel of saving grace.
3. That's why it's so important to go to mass—you are being saved through those sacraments. Same with confession.

4. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: “The sacraments are [effectual] signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, *by which divine life is dispensed to us.*” “The sacraments give grace of and by itself, by its own power.”¹ I.e., salvation comes through the sacraments; they confer the grace they signify.

a) They taught that baptism actually conveys salvation; it does not merely symbolize it, it provides it.

The Catholic view is that baptism is the means used primarily by God to forgive sins, convey grace, begin new life, and incorporate a person into the Body of Christ.

b) They taught that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are actually and physically the body and blood of Christ, not mere symbols of Jesus’ body and blood. Taking the Lord’s Supper amounts to receiving Christ.

Under the RC system, the LS was understood as an unbloody sacrifice of Christ. The RC altar is in the central place in the church because on that altar they reenact the sacrifice Christ every time they celebrate the mass.

That’s why Jesus is still on the cross in a RC church.

The RCs had several other sacraments that they taught were the means of salvation: confirmation, confession to a priest, marriage, holy orders, and last rites. If you participated in the sacraments in faith, then you would probably make it to heaven. Or at least, you would not spend too much time in purgatory before finally getting to heaven.

These unbiblical ideas about salvation kept the church in the dark. Sadly, the RCC retains these same doctrines today; they are still in the dark regarding salvation.

C. The structure/organization of the church was in the dark.

¹ Catholic Sacraments: Vehicles of Grace. <http://www.beginningcatholic.com/sacraments.html>

1. The RCC taught that the pope was the Vicar of Christ, the apostolic successor to Peter, and the head of the church, the chief representative of Christ on earth. He has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole church.
2. The church is the highest authority; whatever the church decided was infallible. And only the church had the right to interpret Scripture authoritatively. You had to rely on the church to define the faith.
3. Because the church is the highest authority, it could add various teachings and practices to the faith with no biblical basis whatsoever. If the church taught that a ritual or a teaching was acceptable, then it did not matter what the Bible said.

Over the years, the RCC has adopted all kinds of unbiblical practices, like prayer to the saints, prayer for the dead, the veneration of Mary, lighting of candles, use holy water, priestly vestments, purgatory, etc.

4. The RCC taught that priests were necessary to intercede between God and man. People had access to God only through the priests; without the priests, you could not worship God or be saved.

In reference to the priest's supernatural power, one Roman Catholic scholar (John O'Brien) writes:

When the priest announces the tremendous words of consecration, he reaches up into the heavens, brings Christ down from His throne, and places Him upon our altar to be offered up again as the Victim for the sins of man...The priest speaks and lo! Christ, the eternal and omnipotent God, bows his head in humble obedience to the priest's command.²

² Quoted by Eric Davis, "Reformation Reminders: Rome & Her Desecration of Christ."
<http://thecripplegate.com/reformation-reminders-rome-her-desecration-of-christ/>

5. The particular corruption that Luther so strongly reacted against was the sale of indulgences. You could make a payment to the church that would supposedly reduce or eliminate your punishment for sin in purgatory. [The story of Johann Tetzel]
6. The church valued the collection and display of relics—like pieces of the cross and bones of the saints and martyrs. A church or cathedral might become very popular and prosperous if it could claim that it possessed famous relics. People would go on pilgrimage to view these relics, and the church would issue special credit to those making such pilgrimages to see these relics.

Many things about the life and work of the church were unbiblical and corrupt; they were in the dark. In fact, the RCC still defends these unbiblical practices.

D. The worship of the church was in the dark.

1. The mass was conducted in Latin. Nothing wrong with that if everyone understood Latin. Most people understood little of what was being said. Even the priests didn't necessarily understand what they were saying.
2. The people were merely spectators at the mass. Priests would often be separated from the people by a screen or a wall. They conducted the mass while the people would just stand there and observe. The service included much ceremony and ritual, most of which average people did not understand or participate in.
3. In some churches, the priests withheld the bread and wine of the communion lest they drop the host or spill the wine/blood.

Trans: The RCC just before the Reformation, in many ways, was in the dark. Darkness penetrated their teaching on salvation, the Bible, and the church. The reformers were very dissatisfied with the way the church was doing things, and they sought to bring light into the situation.

The RCC had the opportunity to reform itself. Luther and many others pointed out and complained about these corruptions. Had the RCC responded positively to such concerns—had they made even modest adjustments to be more biblical—the reformers would not have broken away from it. Had the RCC been willing to examine its practices in the light of the Bible and make necessary changes, we would not be talking about the Reformation today; there would not have been one.

Sadly, the RCC refused to follow the light, and in many senses, it still is in darkness. It still denies the biblical teaching on these doctrines. The RCC does not have or preach the biblical Gospel IMO; they are in the dark.

The Reformers brought the light of God’s word back into the church—*post tenebras...*

II. *lux* – Light

A. The Bible came into the light.

1. The Reformers knew that ignorance of the Scriptures is what led to the darkness of the RCC in the first place. They believed that the Bible should be available in the *lingua franca* (common language) of the people. Light comes to people who can read and hear the Bible in their own language.
2. Common language translation drove the Reformation.
 - a) John Wycliffe, the “morning star of the Reformation” was one of the first to translate the Bible into English in the 1300s.
 - b) William Tyndale said that his goal in translating was that even the plowboy out on the farm would be able to read the Bible for himself.
 - c) Luther’s translation of the Bible into German (NT in 1522, OT in 1534) was one of the most significant events of the Reformation. When the people got the Bible in their own language, it brought light and necessary change.

The Reformers taught the Bible verse-by-verse. They made great efforts to educate their people as to what the Bible says and what it means. Church became a place of education.

Light comes to us when we can read and understand the Bible in our own language. We avoid the darkness by exposure to the light.

B. The biblical teaching about salvation came into the light.

1. The Reformers rediscovered the biblical teaching that salvation is by faith alone, without works. Grace comes through faith, not through religious rituals.

Rom 3:22 the righteousness of God [is] by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe

Ephesians 2:8–9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

2. The reformers referred to this idea as *sola fide*—faith alone.
 - a) This doctrine—justification by faith alone—is the cornerstone of the Reformation. This is the idea that transformed the world.
 - b) Saving faith is understanding the facts about Jesus, agreeing personally with them, and wholeheartedly believing and trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Salvation is not faith plus works; it's by repentant faith alone.

App: Maybe you are under the mistaken idea that you are saved by the sacraments, i.e., by religious rituals. I hope you can see that that is an error. Put your faith in Christ alone to be saved.

C. The structure/organization of the church came into the light.

1. The reformers taught that *Christ* is the head of the church, not the pope. The pope is neither the Vicar of Christ nor the successor of Peter. The Bible does not allow for a pope or a central leader of the whole church—other than Jesus.
2. The church is *not* the highest authority, and neither is the pope; the Bible is. The Bible is the only source of inspired information. It's our highest authority for faith and practice. No pope or church council is inspired; only the Bible is.
3. The Reformation was a “back to the Bible” movement. If a doctrine or practice were not found in the Bible, there is no reason to believe it or practice it. The reformers believed in *sola Scriptura*.

We as Baptists would say that some of the Reformers didn't go quite far enough in regulating everything by the Bible—e.g., many of the reformers retained the practice of baby baptism without biblical warrant.

4. The Reformers believed in the priesthood of every believer. Jesus is our Great High Priest, and we need no other priest. Every believer has direct access to God through Christ. 1 Tim 2:5
 5. Indulgences, relics, prayer to the saints, prayers for the dead, worship of Mary, holy water, vestments, purgatory, the sign of the cross—all of the unbiblical additions added to the faith over the years had to go. The reformers abandoned all practices without biblical basis (except for baby baptism).
- D. The worship of the church came into the light.
1. The Reformers taught that all practices of the church should have specific biblical warrant. Church leaders have no right to invent new rituals or ceremonies not found in the Bible.

2. Worship should be simple and spiritual, not showy, ceremonial, and ritualistic. We don't need all the vestments, "smells and bells," holy water, the statues, the icons, the complicated liturgy. What we need in the worship service is prayer, singing, reading the Bible, preaching, and fellowship.
3. The Reformers insisted that the people ought to participate in the worship service. They should pray, sing, and listen to the preaching of the word in their own language.
4. The format of our worship services today is a direct reflection of Reformation ideas.

The teaching and practice of the Apostles, as contained in Scripture, is our final authority. That's what the Reformers wanted to put into practice—only what the Bible teaches and supports.

Post tenebras lux – “After Darkness, Light” is a profound and accurate description of the Protestant Reformation. The RCC in the middle ages was full of darkness, unbiblical practices, corruption, and depravity. Out of that dark situation, light began to dawn as the Reformation ignited and spread. The reformers recovered a much more biblical form of the Christian faith, and we owe them a great debt of gratitude.

Have you personally moved out of the darkness and into the light?

John 8:12 [*Jesus said*], *I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*

John 12:46 *I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.*

We must continually be moving out of the darkness and into the light. We want to move out of the darkness of ignorance and sin and into the light of obedience and righteousness. We want to escape the darkness of ignorance and apathy and move toward the light of knowledge and commitment. We must forsake the darkness of superstition and paganism we see in our world and pursue the light of God as we find it in the Bible. And we want to help others move out of the darkness of sin into the light of salvation. We do that by proclaiming the biblical Gospel and urging people to repent and believe in Jesus.

Post tenebras lux should be our motto still. We should be continually moving out of the darkness and into the light. As we celebrate Reformation Sunday, let's make it our goal to reduce the darkness by shining the light of the Gospel into the world.

Philippians 2:15 [Our goal is to be] *blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;*