

## Consequences of the Protestant Reformation

On Oct 31, 1517 (508 years ago), ML nailed his famous 95 Theses to the chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany, thus launching the Protestant Reformation.

The 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 thorough than others, but they all wanted to bring the church back to the Bible.

The Reformation was a revolt against the authority of the RCC and its head, the pope. The Reformers, like Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, 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. Those who survived persecution broke away from the RCC and started new expressions of Christianity.

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

**Quote:** 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. This restoration had an unparalleled influence on churches, nations, and the flow of Western civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Evangelical Christians ought to understand and value the contributions of the Reformation to our way of life today. Many aspects of life that we take for granted flow from the Reformation. Many people today enjoy the benefits of Reformation ideas without even recognizing where those benefits came from. We need to understand the value of these ideas and retain our commitment to them.

Today I want to briefly review the five famous *solas* of the Reformation, and then I want to consider the consequences of the Reformation in various areas of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Lawson, "The Reformation and the Men Behind It" <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/reformation-and-men-behind-it>. Accessed 27 October 2014.

I. The Reformation is built on five *solas*.

*Sola* is the Latin word for “only” or “alone.” These *solas* provide an outline for most Reformation thought and principles. I.e., we can summarize the main principles of the Reformation through these five *solas*.

A. *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture Alone

2 Timothy 3:16 *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*

1. The RCC claimed that the highest source of authority was the church itself—that is, church tradition, church councils, and church officers, especially the pope. They taught that church is the final authority, not the Bible.
2. For the reformers, *sola Scriptura* meant that the Bible is the highest authority for Christians. The primary authority is *not* the church, church councils, or the pope.
3. The reformers knew that the church, councils, and popes have made many errors over the years. What they say and teach is not inspired. They often teach error.
4. The only *inspired* resource we have is the Bible, so it has to be the highest authority.
5. We still believe that today. Churches that came out of the Reformation hold that the Bible is the only inspired and infallible authority for all matters of faith and practice.

B. *Solus Christus* – Christ Alone

Col 1:18 *[Christ] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.*

1. *Solus Christus* means that Christ has done the necessary work of salvation completely, so that no merit on the part of man can add to his completed work. We believe in the sufficiency and exclusivity of Christ.

2. Any attempts to add to Christ's work is a perversion of the gospel and is no gospel at all. Read Galatians—"another gospel."
3. Any attempts to add the works of anyone else is a perversion of the gospel. The RCC and Eastern Orthodoxy teach that Mary and the saints have a role in our salvation. We should pray to Mary and the saints to help us in our time of need. We also need priests and the pope to tell us what to believe and how to live.  
Cf., the treasury of merit.
4. The reformers disagree with that, and so do we. The virgin Mary and the saints have no role to play in salvation. Christ is sufficient for salvation and sanctification.

C. *Sola Gratia* – By Grace Alone

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

1. The RCC does not deny that grace is necessary to be saved. However, they also teach that our own efforts are also necessary for salvation. God does his part, and we must do our part.
2. The Bible teaches that God saves sinners purely out of mercy and grace, not because of any of our works.
3. Those who believe in Jesus receive salvation by grace alone; our works add nothing.

D. *Sola Fide* – Through Faith Alone

*Romans 3:22 the righteousness of God [comes] through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.*

*Romans 3:26 [God is] just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

*Romans 3:28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.*

1. The reformers rediscovered the idea that repentant faith is all that is needed for genuine salvation.

Rom 1:17 ... *as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*

2. This doctrine—justification by faith alone—is the cornerstone of the Reformation. The reformers recovered and proclaimed the biblical doctrine of salvation by faith alone without the deeds of the law. This is the idea that transformed the world.
3. We still proclaim this great truth today.

E. *Soli Deo Gloria* – For the Glory of God Alone

1 Corinthians 10:31 *Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*

1. The reformers had a high and exalted view of God. God is glorious, worthy of praise and adoration. He is majestic and worthy of honor.
2. The primary goal of the church is to bring glory and honor to God by doing what God wants in the way God wants.
3. We don't give glory to the saints or to the pope; we don't venerate Mary. We glorify God alone.

These five *solas* were the foundational ideas of the Reformation. These are the doctrines that set Protestants apart from the RCC.

You've maybe heard the old expression, "Ideas have consequences." These Reformation ideas had huge consequences for the church and for western civilization. So the next thing to consider today is...

II. The Reformation had major consequences for the church.

- A. Prior to the Reformation, the church was deeply corrupt. For centuries, the RCC had been the leading cultural influence in western civilization. The church controlled almost every aspect of society, and that power had led to deep corruption in the church and in society.

Many examples of this corruption:

- Powerful people bought and sold church offices (simony). Those officials often received salaries from church offices but often did none of the work.

- Priests commonly lived in open sin or kept mistresses. Even popes fathered children. At one point, there were three popes.
- The church sold indulgences, by which you could pay for the forgiveness of sin. I've mentioned before the story of Johann Tetzel and how Luther reacted against the sale of indulgences. This was the main issue that launched the Reformation.
- The church was filled with extra-biblical additions, like prayers for the dead, worship of Mary, holy water, vestments, purgatory, the sign of the cross, the veneration of relics, indulgences, and the treasury of merit. None of these has any basis in the Bible.
- The church imposed strict and barbaric penalties on those who did not accept its teachings. History is filled with accounts of how the RCC brutally persecuted those who disagreed with it. I.e., the Spanish Inquisition, burning heretics at the stake (Latimer and Ridley, 16 Oct 1555).
- Many churches maintained a collection of relics—like bits of the cross, parts of the crown of thorns, and bones of the saints. The church taught that viewing these relics had spiritual value.

E.g., a single viewing of the 5005 relics owned by Frederick of Saxony was supposed to reduce one's time in purgatory by 2M years. (Cairns)

The RCC still promotes the veneration of relics. E.g., Shrine of Mary at Holy Hill (Hubertus, WI). Holy Hill is hosting a visit from the relics of a woman called St. Therese of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face (d. 1897 at 24 years old). Her relics will be at Holy Hill on Nov 15-18; certain times are scheduled for the "veneration of the relics." I'm not sure how much purgatory time will be reduced.

- B. The Reformers deplored all of this corruption and were determined to bring the church back to the purity of early Christianity and the teaching of the NT. The Reformation was a "back to the Bible" movement. The reformers wanted to restore the church to a more biblical and pure form.

- C. Luther and the others never intended to establish a new church or a different denomination. They only intended to reform the church, to bring it back to a more biblical and reasonable standard.

Had the RCC been willing to reform just a little, the Protestant Reformation never would have happened. But the RCC was not willing. In fact, the RCC pursued a “counter-reformation” in which they reaffirmed and endorsed most of the errors that the reformers pointed out.

The RCC excommunicated Luther. He did not leave because he wanted to leave; he was kicked out. That’s the only reason he started something new, and in reality, it was not something new. The reformers believed that they were reforming the true church; they were moving the church back toward its biblical roots, not starting a new church.

- D. In the providence of God, reformation principles took hold and many powerful people took up the Reformation cause. Leaders and churches turned away from the RC institution and adopted more biblical and reasonable ways of operating. Many European nations adopted the Reformed religious tradition.

- E. The Reformation had a huge impact on churches back then, and the way we do church today is largely the result of the Reformation.

1. We don’t have priests; we have pastors or elders. And each believer is a priest; we all have free access to God. Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. 1 Tim 2:5
2. We don’t recognize the authority of the Pope over the church. Christ himself is the head of the church, and each congregation governs itself through its elected leaders.
3. The central emphasis in the worship service is the preaching of God’s Word. The pastor’s main job is to preach the word. Preaching is the focus of the worship service.
4. Our church buildings can be simple and relatively unadorned. We don’t need highly decorated and opulent places of worship. We don’t use statues or pictures of Mary or the saints.

5. 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 the ordinances.
6. We believe that people are saved by faith and without works. We are not saved through religious rituals like the seven sacraments. We are saved through faith in Christ alone.

I might note that some Protestant churches are sacramental, believing that salvation and forgiveness are channeled to us through rituals like baptism and the LS. We, as Baptists, are *not* sacramental. The channel of salvation is personal faith, not baptism or the LS.

7. 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.

Some of the reformers did not go far enough. Luther wanted remove from the church the most serious errors, which he largely did. However, he retained from the RC tradition as much as possible. I think he did not go far enough in his reformation. E.g., baby baptism

Some reformers went too far. Historians identify a radical part of the Reformation in which unstable people promoted ideas that led to disaster. E.g., the Mad Men of Munster. That was a dark spot on the Reformation, especially for Anabaptists.

The Reformation had a huge and mostly positive, purifying impact on the church. The Reformation moved the church back to a more biblical position.

### III. The Reformation had consequences for western civilization.<sup>2</sup>

Reformation ideas had a huge impact on civilization in general. The founding documents of our nation bear the marks of Reformation principles.

#### A. The idea of a written constitution is a consequence of the Reformation.

1. The reformers saw that the Bible limited the power and authority of church and of political leaders. There is a direct connection between the Reformation cry of *sola Scriptura* and the American idea of the Constitution as the supreme law of the land.

As the Bible is the controlling document for the church, so a written constitution should limit and control what a government can do. That was a somewhat novel idea at the time.

2. Later reformers championed the separation of church and state—a significant Baptist distinctive. The government should not interfere in the ministry of the church.

#### B. Religious liberty—freedom of conscience—is an idea that the reformers derived from the Bible.

1. Prior to the Reformation, the expectation was that the subjects of the realm would follow the faith of the king or the governor.
2. The reformers taught that each person was responsible for his own faith. Religion cannot be imposed or forced; each person has the right to choose his religion freely.

Religious liberty is a Reformation ideal that the founders of our nation highly valued and wrote into our Constitution.

#### C. The Reformation had consequences for law and economics.

1. Congregational church order influenced the government of the nation. Representative democracy—the idea that each person has a vote and can elect representatives—came from the Bible's teaching about church government.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of this is from *Civilization and the Protestant Reformation*, a Trinity Foundation publication.



2. The Protestant concept of the individual became central to the development of the modern property and contract law.
3. Luther and others taught that all callings--all labor, not just the labor of monks and nuns--could be done to the glory of God. This idea led to the development of the free market economy. A free society and free market capitalism come from the Bible.

Capitalism is based on Protestant Christianity. Free market capitalism and Protestantism go together.

- D. The reformers laid the foundations for both English and American civil rights and liberties: freedom of speech, press, and religion, the independence of juries, and right of habeas corpus, the right not to be imprisoned without cause. A famous German historian (Leopold von Ranke) referred to John Calvin as the “virtual founder of America.”
- E. The famous protestant work ethic emerged in Protestant countries because Protestantism promotes those virtues that led to the development of the free market: hard work, honesty, frugality, thrift, punctuality.

The theology and values of the Bible, rediscovered by the Protestant Reformers in the 16th century, were the principal ideas creating what we know as modern Western civilization.

That’s why some of us are so concerned about the current threats to western civ. Many people today are trying to destroy western civ because they hate Christianity. People are coming in to our nation and imposing ideas that undercut and destroy democracy and free market economies. In some ways, our freedoms are being used against us by those who hate Reformation ideas.

- F. The reformers had a high view of education and promoted it, especially for the youth. Under the influence of the reformers, children learned to read using the Bible and the catechism. Children learned the basics of history, religion, mathematics, and philosophy in church-sponsored schools. The reformers believed in an educated church.

Christian education is still very important today. The vitality of Christianity is reduced when Christians are biblically illiterate.

Hos 4:6 *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: ...*

Ideas have consequences, and the ideas promoted during the Reformation had huge consequences that continue to impact our world today. The *solas* of the Reformation led to the reform of the churches and to the reform of law, economics, and government. Many of the freedoms we enjoy as Americans can be traced directly back to the biblical teachings of the Reformers.

Sadly, all of these ideas are under threat these days. People deny the five *solas* of the Reformation. They deny that the church needed reform. They deny the foundational principles of our nation, such as the free market, democracy, and individual responsibility. They even deny the elements of the Protestant work ethic, such as industry, honesty, frugality, thrift, and punctuality.

If our nation fails in the future, it will be because our people denied or neglected these important concepts. If our country thrives, it will be because our people maintained their commitment to these Reformation principles.

As beneficiaries of the Protestant Reformation, we must continue to affirm and promote Reformation ideas. We must be constantly reforming, always going back to the Bible. The strength of the church and of the nation itself depends on our continuing commitment to the principles of the Protestant Reformation.