

Shepherds' Conference  
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“Is the Reformation Over? Revisiting the Divide between Protestants and Catholics”  
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No. It's not over. The issues that led the reformers to call for the Reformation are still there and are just as important today.

The Roman Catholic church has articulated its doctrines more charitably and clearly since Vatican II than during the time of the Reformation, yet the issues that existed at the time of Luther are still there. The current catechism of the RC church is written with confidence and without the fear and uninformed attacks against the protestant church that was done by the Council of Trent. Yet the problems Luther and the others had with the RC church still exist.

On the eve of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation (10/31/17), it is good to think about the issues that precipitated the Reformation.

Eleven years ago Mark Noll and Carol Nystrom wrote, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism*. Their intent was to look at the dramatic changes in RC, and particularly in the United States. They said that on the basis of ecumenical dialogues, yet it still is probably not over since at an institutional level there were no changes to unite the two groups, yet the chasm had narrowed. They also suggest that there is an appearance of unity over the issue of justification by faith.

At the level of salvation and justification, they argue that the Reformation *was* over. They deny that the central difference between RC and evangelicalism is not justification, the Pope, Mary, etc...., but the nature of the church.

A liberal RC, a liberal protestant, a liberal Jew can agree about almost everything because they all believe almost nothing.

John Calvin helps us with this issue: *The Necessity for Reforming the Church* (available as a PDF). About 472 years ago, Martin Butzer wrote to Calvin and said Calvin needed to write a defense of the Reformation and to send it to the Emperor. In 1544, the HRE, Charles V, called a diet to engage in war with France, and he needed both the RC and Lutheran princes to support him. He had been persecuting the Protestants and he wanted to patch things up with the Protestants so that he could wage war with France. The Protestants had an opportunity to address the need for the reform of the church and Calvin was the best man to write it.

Calvin made in that paper a case for the Protestant Reformation. Beza calls it the most powerful work of the time. Calvin makes a 4-fold argument for why the Reformation is necessary: because of errors pertaining to worship, salvation, the sacraments, and the government of the church. He calls them “the body and soul of the church.” The soul of the church is worship and salvation; the body of the church is sacraments and church government. The visible structures of the church reflect an internal logic and belief system. If we look at those four topics as Calvin

outlines them, we will find out today that the very concerns Calvin articulated in 1544-45, the same issues are present in the current catechism of the RC church.

For Calvin, the major issue that divided RC and Protestantism was worship. He doesn't start with Luther's justification, but with worship. The fundamental problem of the RC church was idolatry, wanting to worship God in their own way, not God's way. Calvin argued that worship must be regulated by the Word of God alone.

## 1. Worship

God disapproves of all worship that is not explicitly sanctioned in the Word of God. True worship is according to God's Word, but what is operating in Rome is that if what is done in zeal for the honor of God, it is acceptable. (And we see this in much of the evangelical church today as well!) "It is nothing but mere corruption." Two problems of idolatry: you can worship the wrong God, or the right God in the wrong way — the latter was the problem in the RC church.

## 2. Salvation — in particular justification by faith

Calvin argues that getting justification right is essential to the safety of the church — getting it wrong inflicts a deadly wound and takes us to the brink of destruction.

Calvin insists on justification by faith *alone*; he is clear that good works are to be preformed, but the question is whether they are the ground of salvation. And he also argues that justification by faith alone is not only essential for salvation, but also for assurance. One of the famous Catholic apologists — Belarmine (sp?) — also agrees with this, though he says the fundamental problem of Protestantism is that believers can be assured of their salvation (he argued that assurance would lead to impiety).

Calvin pushes back hard against the rejection of assurance. Salvation is only based on the work of Christ for us, and not anything within us.

The distinction between the RC and the Protestant is the different definitions of justification:

- ✓ The protestant says justification is that we are *declared* righteous
- ✓ The RC says justification is that they are *made* righteous

The Reformation was not over disagreement on all points; there was agreement on some points: justification was because of Christ's righteousness, was by grace, and through grace. The disagreement was over whether it was *imputed* or *imparted*. It is about whether it is faith *alone* or faith and baptism, whether saving faith was operative or cooperative, whether it was dispensed by God or through the sacraments.

(Cf. Trueman's review of *Is the Reformation Over*). This issue of justification is still an issue today, as is clearly stated in the current catechism.

### **3. Sacraments**

Calvin was concerned about ceremonies devised by man being placed on the same level as the institutions given by Christ. “There is no use in the sacraments unless ...” — Word and sacrament had to go together.

The current catechism says Christ instituted seven sacraments. The current catechism sites the Council of Trent on transubstantiation — “Christ, living and glorious, is present in a living and real manner,...with His soul and divinity...he is offered as a sacrifice for the living and the dead.” All these things were critiqued and refuted by Luther and Calvin.

### **4. The Government of the Church**

Immorality and the lack of holiness was rife within the church leadership of RC. But the tyranny of powers which the church claimed for itself, especially in the claims of the Pope were an equal or greater problem.

In the current catechism, it still says the “bishop of the church of Rome, successor of Peter... is the vicar of Christ and the pastor of the universal church on earth....The Pope enjoys by divine institution...supreme universal power in the care of souls.” That particular claim was refuted by Luther and Calvin. Luther and Calvin called him the “anti-Christ,” but that did not originate with them; it began in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as they and then Calvin and Luther articulated that the Pope took rights and authorities that were not granted by Christ, usurping His power. Thus, that term is not a term of hatred, but merely a term that means the Pope took privileges and prerogatives that belong to Christ alone.

The same concerns in church government that Calvin and Luther had in the 16<sup>th</sup> century are still there today.

For all of these reasons, the Reformation is not over. These issues still matter and have a practical impact in daily life.