Evaluating the Reformation's Impact on the Modern Church

Jacob Tivlumun Hundu

Abstract

The paper aims to evaluate the impact of the reformation on the modern church. The essential religious nature of Reformation doctrine and practice must be balanced with broader influences that are political, social, cultural, and technological. The following questions are addressed in this paper: What were some of these causes for the Reformation's timing, and what were they? What were some of the beliefs and customs that distinguished the Protestant and Catholic confessions that came out of the Reformation? In the 16th and 17th centuries, what results did the Reformation have? How well did it succeed in re-founding the Ancient Church, clarifying doctrine, and upholding Church unity?

Keywords: Church, Catholic Church, Protestant Church, Reformation, and contemporary church

Introduction

A vital element to consider when approaching the Reformation is that the church had been present for fifteen centuries. Several events occurred during the time that represented a turning point in the existence of the church. The Constantinian Peace of 313 A.D. was perhaps the most notable of these. Christianity was accepted by the Roman State for the first time in its history. The story of the church is presented in the framework of Christendom from this point on. The church was inextricably linked to the political power structure from the

300s to the 1500s. It grew in authority in its own right. It also became tainted (Nations University, 2020).

Before the 16th century, neither political conditions nor printing capabilities could sustain a grassroots attempt to change a powerful pope. The Renaissance appeared to have all the necessary components. The Renaissance provided the pope with a chance to prioritize artistic, architectural, and sculptural interests over the spiritual requirements of Christians. Renaissance humanism was primarily a cultural and educational institution.

However, a renewed interest in retrieving historical textual sources began to expose long-forgotten concepts. At the same time, when nation governments developed, the papacy's ability to execute its edicts eroded. The goal of monetary gain was fostered by explorations into the New World. Furthermore, the printing press made document circulation more accessible and inexpensive. The fire was started with just a match. Martin Luther was the right person for the job. Others lit in Switzerland and England, but he was not the only one.

Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and theology professor at the University of Wittenberg, nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the town church on October 31, 1517, beginning the Reformation. Luther's theses were intended against the selling of indulgences, a fundraising effort allowed by Pope Leo X to assist build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Churchgoers were told that by purchasing these indulgences, they would gain sin forgiveness and time out of purgatory. Johann Tetzel, the campaign's principal booster, even devised a marketing slogan for it: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Luther was rightfully outraged by this behaviour and demanded its abolition. The call for church reform soon expanded beyond indulgences, sweeping throughout Europe from Erfurt, a tiny German university town. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and their successors took on the task of restoring the church to biblical faith and practice, which had

been veiled by centuries of tradition. They sparked a movement that has affected church history and Western society in a variety of ways up to the present day.

The Reformation had an impact that extended beyond Europe to the New World and Africa. As European nations discovered North America, they paved the way for the Protestant faith. In Latin America, the influence was less profound, since the powers that developed here and later introduced new inhabitants were Roman Catholic. The colonists introduced the Catholic faith as well as various kinds of Protestantism to Africa. The purpose of this article is to assess the reformation's influence. Below is a discussion of the impact of the reformation in various areas:

The Reformation transferred spiritual and theological authority to the Bible

John Wycliffe opposed medieval traditions including absolution, pilgrimages, indulgences, and the theory of transubstantiation, that is, the idea that bread and wine become Christ's corporeal flesh and blood, in 14th-century England. He did it by referring to the Bible: “Neither the testimony of Augustine nor Jerome nor any other saint should be accepted except in so far as it was based upon Scripture,” Wycliffe claimed (Dragos, 2017). Later, at the Diet of Worms, Luther famously stated at the debate, “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God” (Bainton, 1953 pp.185-186). The Reformers were turning to God's revelation as the last judge of truth, as these proclamations indicate, in opposition to Rome's claim of papal infallibility and misuse of tradition insofar as it contradicted biblical teaching.

The Bible became accessible to laypeople during the Reformation

The Latin Vulgate was the only Bible that the Western church had access to before the Reformation. This was not only restrictive, but it also had some translation flaws that reinforced negative views. For example, instead of saying "repent," Jesus says in Matthew 4:17, "perform penance." The consequences are clear. In the 15th century, Wycliffe began to change this by translating the Bible into the vernacular. Martin Luther followed in his footsteps by translating the Bible into German. The Bible was later translated into English by William Tyndale, who was inspired by Luther's work and claimed to be the first to do it using the original Hebrew and Greek. This was congruent with the Reformers' insistence on the authority of Scripture for matters of faith and practice, and the need for individuals to feast on the Word of God for spiritual nourishment. This was Luther's dream - that people "might seize and taste the clear, pure Word of God itself and hold to it" (Gonzalez, 2010).

The Reformation Raised Questions About How People Got in Right Standing With God

With Augustine as a model, Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and others came to consider grace as the litmus test for all other doctrines. Every aspect of salvation was solely dependent on God's grace. This was in contrast to the late medieval superstructure of penitential works that may be undertaken to absolve a person of sin or reduce the time spent in purgatory (or the time spent in purgatory by departed family members!). This perversion of Christian doctrine, known as salvation by works, resulted in jingles that could be heard on town streets and were designed to motivate laypeople to take action. "As soon as the coin in the coin coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Another one was: "Place your penny on the drum, the pearly gates open and in strolls mum" (Gonzalez, 2010). To trade monetary offerings for forgiveness, a purgatory business was established. The

reformers preached that if a person's faith was joined with Christ's work, that person would be justified (forgiveness).

The Protestant Reformation Exposed Profound Corruption in Church Leadership

Scott Kisker (2017) correctly pointed out that the Protestant Reformation was a church split over a contentious construction project. In some ways, it's true—St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was funded through the exploitative sale of indulgences. However, the list of flaws in late medieval church leadership continues. Pontiffs' (the official title for the Pope's office) mercenaries serve as standing armies. To attract more money, bishops of the church served as dukes and oversaw multiple sees. Some monasteries were converted into opulent estates for the noble class's illegitimate children. The centuries preceding the Reformation revealed the profound corruption that occurs when church leadership is seduced by wealth and power. This context must be kept in mind when reformers levelled harsh criticisms, such as the title Antichrist, at church leaders.

The Reformation prompted the Roman Catholic Church to embark on its own reform

Dragos (2017) succinctly observes that during the Counter-Reformation, many inside the traditional structures of the church attempted to change themselves in response to the Protestant movement. Even while many religious organizations connected with Rome, they saw that something was amiss with the church's life. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was one such reactionary meeting, and other attempts to re-order the church to be true to itself and God included efforts to correct abuses, clarify Catholic doctrine, renew the spirituality of its societies, properly train its priests, beautify its liturgy and art, and spread the Christian faith. To help carry these out, new religious groups such as the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) were formed.

The Church-State Relationship was Reconfigured away from Christendom

The English Act of Supremacy, issued by the English Parliament in 1534, established King Henry VIII as the head of the English church. On the surface, this cemented the alliance between the church and the state. In actuality, it severed England's religious-political links with Rome and worked to secularize the country. When Protestant rulers across Germany broke away from Rome (and the Holy Roman Empire), they felt free to build their own pathways to power, free of religious authority. The Parliament system, which grew to legitimize monarchs, was one of these approaches. Luther's "two kingdoms" doctrine formalized this split between church and state; God established the kingdom of believers, which must work under the gospel, and the kingdom of the state, which must operate under the law. Of course, Luther found it difficult to preserve this distinction, but he eventually came to embrace the state's enforcement of Christian orthodoxy (Shelley, 2013).

Emphasis on Evangelism

Szterszky(2017) maintains that with this growing emphasis on the church as a group of believers came the recognition that not everyone in the larger society was a Christian. Many people in the world had never heard of God and needed to hear the Gospel. The church had always been aware of this and had always dispatched missionaries. However, with the Reformation, evangelism gained fresh vigour, giving rise to the different foreign and domestic missionary groups.

Exploring and celebrating the creation

The Renaissance, which preceded the Reformation, sparked a renewed interest in the natural world, which was reflected in more realistic art and the emergence of the scientific method. Now, the influence of the reformers broadened the scope of the arts and sciences in light of Scripture's portrayal of a good creation and the cultural mandate to care for it. Religious themes were no longer the exclusive domain of works of art. They could depict anything, including landscapes, bowls of fruit and wine, typical domestic scenes, or even fantastical subjects conjured up in the artist's head. Similarly, lyrics in music don't have to be religious or even exist at all—just be beautiful for their own sake. With the belief that a wise God had created an orderly universe that could be understood and was worthwhile for discovery, the scientific inquiry was also advanced by quantum leaps. The Reformation continued the Renaissance's work while adding biblical truth to it. God's entire creation had evolved into a worthy topic for celebration and study (Szterszky, 2017).

3. Politics and Governance

The Reformation had a direct and immediate influence on politics. The governing class ejected the Church from power where the Reformation gained root. City councils, parliaments, and royal councils all changed dramatically as a result of this. According to Rubin (2016), the Reformation marked the end of a lengthy period of difference in the coalitions that spread rule in Western Europe and the Middle East. Following the Reformation, Protestant monarchs realized that they could no longer rely on religious elites for legitimacy, so they turned to parliaments for support and money. Rubin argues that parliaments had interests more linked with long-term economic development than religious elites, which helps explain why, despite their military and geographical domination, Catholic Spain and the Muslim Ottoman Empire trailed behind following their Reformations. Greif and Rubin

(2015) also apply the notion of legitimizing agents to the role of religion in the 1640s English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution. They contend that the major transformation in English administration occurred during the Reformation when Henry VIII entrusted the Reformation to Parliament. They argue that following the Reformation, the legitimacy concept that arose during the Tudor period was that the king obeyed Parliament's rules in exchange for legitimacy and resources. The Civil Wars and Glorious Revolution, according to their theoretical model, data, and historical narrative, were the result of the Stuart monarchs' attempts to revert to the old legitimacy principle of a monarch ruling by Divine Right, which meant that Parliament would play a much smaller role in governance.

According to Berman (2003), the Reformation influenced Europe's political trajectory through its impact on the law. Berman views the Protestant Reformation as nothing less than a "revolution" in legal thought and institutions in his seminal examination of the origins of legal institutions. Luther and his supporters rejected the medieval dualism of church and state, instead of adopting the "two kingdoms" concept, which confined the church to spiritual matters and united government under the power of the prince. When adopted by legal reformers, urban judges, and territorial rulers, they laid the groundwork for integrated bureaucracies and legal formalism, which serve as the cornerstone of the contemporary Northern and Central European "civil service state." Contrary to Weber, Berman contends that it was the new "capitalist communitarianism" that arose from the Protestant reform of the state and had as concrete expressions the legal institutions of the joint-stock corporation and contemporary trust law.

Mass Education

The Reformation benefited from a rise in literacy that began in the 1440s with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg. However, reformers expanded literacy and educational chances much further. After all, knowing how to read is required whether you want to comprehend the Bible or sing along with a hymn. The widespread availability of the Bible, as well as its newfound prominence in church life, heightened the need for education. Regular churchgoers, after all, would need to be able to read, debate, and comprehend the Bible. Naturally, broader education was not restricted to Bible study, nor was it the only domain of the reformers, as it had been during the previous Renaissance. Nonetheless, the Reformation provided the impetus for the contemporary notion of public education, which is open to all members of society (Szterszky, 2017).

The Dark Side of the Reformation

While the effects of the Reformation on the church, education, politics and economic development seem to paint a largely positive picture, other research has highlighted the dark side of Protestantism. A negative effect of the reformation could be the disunity of the church. When the church was all one, we at least had some sense of fellowship. But now, all of the churches have their little groups and we condemn other churches for not being the same as your denomination. We should all come together as a body of Christ and unify instead of break apart. Although Christians can believe in different doctrines, the way we serve God doesn't necessarily matter if you believe he died for your sins. If we can come together and can be unified in our faith, then I believe Christ will expand to different people. Also, if you have faith, then you should have unity, and vice versa. Leeson and Russ (2015) cited in Becker, Pfaff and Rubin (2016) study European witch trials in the two centuries after the Reformation (c.1550-1700), which involved the prosecution of over 80,000 persons for witchcraft and claimed the lives of no less than half

of them. They argue that witch trials reflect non-price competition between the Catholic and Protestant churches for religious market share in confessionally contested parts of early modern Christendom. They provide empirical evidence that witch trials were indeed more frequent in areas with more Protestant-Catholic conflict.

Another drawback of the reformation was the Thirty Years' War, which lasted from 1618 to 1648. The following is from Theology for the Third Millennium by Hans Kung (1988):

> The Protestant Reformation led to the Thirty Years' war of Germany which, to this day, Germans cite as the most devastating war in their history (even worse than World Wars I and II); the wars in France between the Roman Catholics and the Huguenots; for Spain, internal separation from Europe through the destruction or exile of its Erasmian humanists and Protestants; for Italy, the religious expulsion of its religious non-conformists as well as their state police and inquisitions stifling the inner life; and England distanced itself from the rest of Europe and broke away from all others with the Anglican Church. The Reformation continued to set Western Europe against the Eastern Church, Russia, and even to some extent against its own people, the underground of the masses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although I wish Erasmus won the day and averted the further fragmentation of the ecclesial structure of the church resulting in the Protestant Reformation, I also would rather have Protestantism with all its flaws than go back to one church under Roman rule because of its propensity to elevate human tradition over Scripture. God shares His glory with no man (Isaiah 42:8)!

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