

# Why the Reformation Still Matters

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On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther nailed a notice to the northern door of the *Schloßkirche* in Wittenberg. It was a notice of debate, of a debate that would never actually be held in the end. It was to be an academic debate, but the issues at stake were much more than academic. They concerned the nature of the Christian life and the availability of forgiveness. Oh yes, they were also about the power of indulgences and ultimately the authority of the pope. But Luther's vision was much larger and not purely negative or reactionary. In these theses he began to develop a positive vision for the Christian life, the place of repentance, faith, and the gospel of Christ. I say 'began' because the *95 Theses* themselves are not a consistently Protestant document. At the time, Luther was still operating within an essentially Catholic framework. However, alongside the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* published a month before, a trajectory was being set that would lead to sweeping change in the lives of Christians all over Europe and the world. And we still feel the impact 500 years on.

It ought not surprise us that some have suggested this is not an anniversary worth celebrating. Some decry the resulting division. Of course there had been major lasting division before, most notably in 1054 when the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople anathematized each other. But throughout Europe there had been only one church and now, after the Reformation, there were several denominations. Was this not an assault against the unity of Christ's church for which he prayed in his great High Priestly prayer (John 17)? Some oppose the doctrine that was championed by the Reformers, the doctrines of justification only by faith, the priesthood of all believers, the authority of Scripture over all church pronouncements, of predestination and the sovereignty of God in all things. Some claim the Reformation was a mistake of which we should all repent. Some point to the bloodshed and violence of the era and what was unleashed afterwards. The religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries played a major role in undermining Christian witness in Europe, setting the stage for scepticism, Enlightenment rationalism, and the secular materialism and atheism of our own time.

So we are bound to ask whether we should rejoice in this anniversary. Is the Reformation something to be happy about, something to be proud of? Is it still relevant? Does it still matter? Should anyone other than historians get excited about it?

You won't be surprised to hear me say there are very good reasons to get excited about the Reformation on this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To start with, the Reformation remains, for all the assaults upon it over the last century in particular, one of the landmark and seminal events of human history. The events, the ideas and, yes, the men and women involved, are amongst the most interesting and influential in all human history. What they set in train literally changed the world.

About 20 years ago now, when my wife and I were coming to the end of our time in Oxford, a friend from Australia and his wife dropped in one Saturday morning. They had been touring around England and were just about to head home. But my friend Bruce—yes, that really is his name—wanted to see two more things before they left. He wanted to see the cross on the road where Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was burnt for his faith and he wanted to see the monument known as the Martyrs Memorial. For those who do not know, the Martyr's Memorial is a monument that was erected in 1841 in memory of the Reformation martyrs Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, but also as a protest at the Tractarian movement which sought to return much Roman ritual and many Roman ideas back into the Church of England and was based in Oxford. Well, my friend wanted to visit it and take a photograph or two. So I offered to take him down the road.

What happened that morning was memorable. There was a protest against landmines going on in the city and the protestors had placed single shoes on each step of the memorial and had stuck a huge sign across the front of it, completely obscuring the plaque. My friend was initially disappointed but undeterred. He went over to the lady who seemed to be in charge. He politely explained that he had come 10,000 miles to see this memorial and would she mind moving some of these things so he could get a photograph? He promised to help her replace everything after he had taken the shot.

Muttering not at all under her breath, the woman started removing the shoes and then the sign. My friend walked across the intersection to position himself for the shot. When the time came his camera would not work because the battery was dead! He had to wander back across the intersection, take out a new battery and return to his position. You can imagine

what was going on in the mind of the lady protestor at the time! When it was done, Bruce came back and, true to his word, began to help her put the shoes back in place. But she waved him away, saying something like ‘This is just the thing we need to get away from in Oxford. No one wants this’, pointing at the martyr’s memorial itself. When it was clear she would not let Bruce help her reset her protest, he left to visit the cross on the road around the corner. As she shouted at him while he was leaving, he turned around and said, ‘But you’ll enjoy the freedom they died for, won’t you?’

There, in that little exchange, you see the contrasting reactions to the Reformation today: something we would do best to forget, something to be embarrassed about, even ashamed about; or, on the other hand, something worth celebrating, something that brought in its train a remarkable freedom that impacts believer and unbeliever alike.

So, this morning, I want to tell you why the Reformation still matters, why it is not something to be embarrassed or ashamed about, and why we should be celebrating at full voice what God did then and is still doing today. And I have 5 points to make: It matters,

1. because of the change that was made;
2. because of the doctrine that was taught;
3. because of the blood that was spilt;
4. because of the error that persists; and
5. because of the gospel mission that remains.

And I hope you don’t mind if I am a little self-indulgent and major on Luther as we move through. After all, it is Luther who stood at the centre of the action in 1517.

First then, the reformation still matters,

## **1. Because of the change that was made**

One of the things I love about the Reformation period is that it was a period when faith and life were tightly interwoven. You could tell, almost immediately upon entering a house, whether it was a Catholic home or a Protestant home. And it went way beyond simply the crucifix on the wall. In more wealthy families there would be a family Bible in pride of place if the family were Protestant. The father’s role as a spiritual leader of the household was a lot more obvious: he led prayers in the home and read the Bible to his wife and children; he saw

his life's work as a vocation and family life as a means of honouring the Lord; he took church attendance seriously and made sure the rest of his family did as well. In the conscientious Catholic home, on the other hand, there was more likely to be a family 'shrine' with a crucifix and a set of rosary beads, perhaps a missal as well. The sacraments under the control of the church would be much more prominent in everyday life and there would be a clear sense of 'the religious life' as distinct from the life of 'ordinary' people. The Reformation produced a revolutionary change in the homes of ordinary people. The single celibate life was no longer the Christian ideal. The Christian family became the centrepiece of a new piety, the arena of a more earthy and far less remote understanding of discipleship. The Reformation dramatically touched their everyday lives and made a difference. Steven Ozment's book, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution*, has a delightful chapter on the impact of the Reformation on family life and another entitled 'The Religious Beliefs of Teenagers'<sup>1</sup>

The late Professor George Yule used to deliver a lecture with slides on the impact of theology on church architecture, to make very much the same point. He would show the interior of the medieval church, with its prominent rood screen which separated off the holy area (in which the priests and choir did their bit) from the body of the church, an empty space where parishioners would gather and stand around gossiping and transacting business and much else besides, merely stopping every now and again to cross themselves when they heard the bell and lining up to receive the communion wafer when the procession came out of the sanctuary to offer it to them. The divide between the religious life and ordinary life was embodied very dramatically in this way. Inside the sanctuary the central place was given to the altar with its finely coloured coverings and often a large crucifix or painting of the crucifixion behind it. There might also be statues and pictures on the walls of the church as teaching aids for the people.

However, as reformation became official policy in cities and regions on the continent and in England, churches were stripped of altars and images, rood screens were removed and walls were whitewashed. In Lutheran churches the pulpit, the baptismal font and the altar were all put in the front of the building — word and sacrament kept together, all the liturgical action happening in the same space. In England, altars were replaced with tables, and in some instances these were placed in separate 'communion rooms'. In the centre at the front of the building was placed the lectern, to which was chained a copy of the Great Bible, an

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<sup>1</sup> S. E. Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

architectural reflection of the priority given to reading the word in the Anglican services constructed by Cranmer. To the side was the pulpit, though in some churches influenced more by Puritan emphases, the pulpit replaced the lectern at the centre. Things would move back in the other direction again with the ascendancy of the high church party in the seventeenth century and especially after the restoration of the monarchy, when there was a more moderate attitude towards catholic liturgical practices.

The relationship between the church and the state was transformed by the Reformation. Luther had early on called on the princes in Germany to reform the church if the church would not reform itself (*An Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520) and this opened wide the door for state influence in church affairs. The Peace of Passau in 1552, which set in place the imperial principle *cuius regio eius religio* (the religion of the one who rules), cemented that relationship in Germany. Earlier, Henry VIII of England had insisted that the Pope properly had no jurisdiction in England and that the King had responsibilities before God to govern the affairs of the church as much as those of any other sector of the 'commonwealth'. He would title himself 'Supreme Head of the Church of England on earth'. The convocation did, however, insist upon an important caveat in the time of Elizabeth 'so far as the law of God allows'. For good or for ill, the temporal authorities had more say and influence in Protestant churches than they had ever been able to have under the Church of Rome. And that is saying something, since there had been a reasonable amount of political interference in church affairs across Europe prior to the Reformation. In England, church attendance, church services, the requirement of confessional subscription, and sundry other things, were legislated by the parliament with the approval of the monarch.

The nature of ministry was changed as a result of the Reformation. Ministry in medieval Catholicism was fundamentally sacramental. The priest, by virtue of his ordination by a bishop in the apostolic succession, was a dispenser of divine grace. The centrepiece was, of course, the Mass, in which, through his prayer, the elements were transformed in substance to the body and blood of Christ and the sacrifice of Calvary was repeated or at least represented. Yet there were six other sacraments as well, not to mention the provision of the sacramentals, holy water and the like, as conduits of divine grace. This ultimately amounted to a system that reinforced dependence upon the church and its officers from the cradle to the grave. Only from the priest could one gain forgiveness and the assurance of forgiveness. This elaborate sacramental system of the Roman church was dismantled by Luther's famous

*Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* from 1520, and others who followed him would do a more thorough job assessing the practice of the time against the teaching of Scripture.

In place of this priority given to the priest and his sacramental acts, the Reformation returned the word of God to the centre of Christian ministry. Again in that crucial year of 1520, Luther had thundered ‘One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ’.<sup>2</sup> It is the word of God, and not the laws of the church or the exertion of the reformers themselves, that genuinely changes lives, he insisted in 1522.<sup>3</sup> The pastor is principally a teacher, because, without the word, faith is not called forth and the Christian does not mature. Of course there were other things besides the weekday and Sunday sermons for the minister to do — but they were all very decidedly applications of the word of God to everyday life. In England Cranmer and his colleagues produced a lectionary as a means of systematically and extensively exposing the congregation to Scripture. The reforming Archbishop was convinced that regularly hearing and reading the word of God would change the individual, the congregation, and eventually the nation. For this reason his liturgy was saturated with Scripture.

One other factor is worth noting. The Reformation created an entirely new social phenomenon: the pastor’s family. Of course there had been a scandalous practice of clerical concubinage prior to the Reformation. Though a vow of celibacy was required for ordination, some parish priest houses were served by ‘housekeepers’ who mysteriously kept having children. However, the Reformation brought with it a new celebration of marriage as a holy and joyful gift of God. Luther himself married Katherina von Bora in June 1525.

Luther and his Kathe were not a Hollywood love-match, at least not at first. Both saw marriage as a vocation and as an opportunity to rejoice in the good things that God has given, to spite the devil, and, strangely, as a form of iconoclasm—tearing down the image of the ascetic holy man whose value lay in what he denied himself.<sup>4</sup> But love did come and they built a genuine ministry home, characterised by a warm and generous hospitality. There were

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<sup>2</sup> M. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520) WA 7:50.33–34 = LW 31:345.

<sup>3</sup> M. Luther, ‘Second Invocavit Sermon’ (10 March 1522) WA 10/3:13.13–20.36 = LW 51: 75–78.

<sup>4</sup> ‘M. Luther to J. Rühel, Count of Mansfield’ (4 May 1525) WABr 3:481.67–482.81–3 = LW 49:111. H. A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (trans. By E. Walliser-Schwarzbart; New Haven: Yale, 1989), 277–283.

almost always guests at their dinner table and the Luthers demonstrated a joy in life and a seriousness about the faith that was a model to others.

The Reformation dramatically changed life: life at home, life at work and life at church. Christian theology and Christian living were more closely aligned with the teaching of the Bible. And for that each one of us owes profound thanks to God. The Reformation still matters because of the change that was made.

Secondly, the Reformation still matters ...

## 2. Because of the doctrine that was taught

Luther and the other Reformers did not think they were inventing new doctrine but rather recovering the doctrine taught in the Bible. Yet these recoveries, if we should call them that rather than *discoveries*, radically challenged what was being taught by the Roman churches and opened up new vistas for faith and hope and love. At the centre, as far as Luther was concerned, was the doctrine of justification only by faith. It is of this doctrine that Luther famously remarked,

... when it stands by this article the church stands, when [this article] falls the Church falls.<sup>5</sup>

He would insist that ‘on this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil and the world’.<sup>6</sup> Why was this single doctrine such a big deal for Luther? Why did he conclude that *everything* rested on it? Luther recognised, of course, the prominence of justification by faith in the New Testament. That, in itself, ought to be enough for anyone to consider it important. Yet he also understood that this doctrine sits at the intersection of three great areas of doctrine.

The doctrine of justification only by faith has profound implications, firstly, for theology proper, our understanding of the nature and character of God himself. Abram’s question still stands: ‘Shall not the Judge of the all the earth do what is right?’ (Gen 18:25). The apostle Paul himself brought these two things together— the doctrine of justification and the character of God—when he wrote that the propitiation by Jesus’ blood was ‘to show God’s righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has

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<sup>5</sup> M. Luther, ‘In XV Psalmos Graduum’ (1532) WA 40/3:352.1–3.

<sup>6</sup> M. Luther, ‘The Schmalkaldic Articles, I.5 (1537) WA 50:199.22–200.5 =W. R. Russell, *The Schmalkald Articles: Luther’s Theological Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 122.

faith in Jesus' (Rom 3:26). For Paul and for Luther, the character of God is at stake in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. That is why it is critical.

The doctrine also has profound implications for Christian anthropology, our understanding of human nature, particularly under the conditions of human sin. Our situation is more dire than we ever want to admit. We are not just slowed down by the Fall, and by the choices we ourselves have made as heirs of the Fall, but such is its impact on our will that we are unable to do *anything* to assist our own salvation. In Paul's language, we are not just sick with sin but we are 'dead in our trespasses and sins' (Eph 2:1). We tend to be incurably optimistic about human nature and that optimism makes a difference to the way we think about our good works, the way we think about church and what we do in church, our assessment of what is happening in the world around us and what its greatest needs in fact are. Luther understood that the doctrine of justification only by faith must mean that the problem we have is there, not just when we are at our worst, but when we are at our best. The very best we can do in our own strength condemns us. We have absolutely nothing to plead before God but Christ and we can *never* have anything to plead before God but Christ. Our condition cannot be overcome with our own resources. We cannot even make the slightest bit of progress with our own resources. Our total helplessness is the necessary corollary of justification only by faith. If we don't believe that, the doctrine begins to unravel.

As just a bit of an aside here, when eventually the greatest mind of the era was enticed to write against Luther, after years of pleading from the Pope and his officers, Desiderius Erasmus wrote *A Diatribe on the Freedom of the Will*. It is not one of the great works of Western literature. Yet the response Luther penned stands out as one of the best things he ever wrote, *The Bondage of the Will*. In his conclusion to that work, Luther praised Erasmus:

I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account—that you alone, in contrast to all the others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like—trifles, rather than issues—in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood (though without success); you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot.<sup>7</sup>

Erasmus had seen what was the critical point of difference between Luther's understanding of the gospel and that of the Roman church. Luther insisted that an entirely false understanding of Christian life and ministry had been built on an optimistic anthropology, the assumption

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<sup>7</sup> M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525) WA 18:786.26–30 = *The Bondage of the Will*, (ed. By J. I. Packer & O. R. Johnston; Cambridge: James Clarke 1957), 319.

that there was something, no matter how small, that we can, and so must, do to prepare ourselves to receive the grace of God. Luther's point is that justification by faith alone blows that idea to smithereens. We are incapable of pleasing God, incapable of meriting God's favour, even just in part, because every part of who we are is touched by the consequences of the Fall — our thinking, our emotions, our words, our actions, our personalities, our decisions and our will. It is a dangerous delusion to think otherwise. You will never really entrust yourself to Christ, Luther knew, unless you despair of yourself. A proper understanding of ourselves is at stake in the doctrine of justification by faith. That too is why it is critical. And need I say, that is also why it is offensive to so many today, who are deeply invested in saying there is nothing fundamentally wrong with me, the way I think, or the choices I make.

The doctrine of justification only by faith, thirdly, has profound implications for our understanding of salvation. It is this doctrine, as much as any other in the end, that points us to Christ, and Christ alone, as our Saviour. We might say that the central purpose of the doctrine of justification only by faith is to guard, protect and direct us toward salvation only by Christ. Without it we will instinctively add other things to his work: our best efforts, the ministrations of the church, our personal devotion. It is important in this connection to insist that faith is not something we *do*—a religious work—but is itself the opposite of doing, the opposite of works. Faith involves a recognition that I have no works I can plead before God and that my only hope lies in Jesus Christ. It is a wholehearted trust in the only one who can save me. Paul would insist to the Ephesians, 'by grace you have been saved through faith', but then he added 'and this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God' (Eph 2:8).

Salvation is a gift that comes to me entirely from outside of myself, from him, and it is from beginning to end an act of grace. The salvation Christ won for us on the cross was not just a top-up, a supplement that makes up for the gap between my performance and God's standard. It is complete and entire and outside of myself. And it is God who makes it mine by his Spirit bringing faith to life. This is the life-giving truth of the gospel. It gives confidence and freedom and frees us from feverishly trying to protect ourselves or promote ourselves. It makes genuine assurance of salvation a reality. That is why this doctrine is critical.

Now I've concentrated on justification only by faith because that is the doctrine that Luther saw as at the heart of it all. At the very centre of the disagreement between Luther and the Roman church was a different understanding of the gospel, a different understanding of what

salvation is and how it comes to us. And if this was the only doctrine that was taught by the reformers that would be ground to say ‘the reformation still matters’.

But if we had time tonight we could look at other crucial doctrines recovered by the Reformers:

1. That our knowledge of God, his character, his will and his plan for his people comes from his written word, the Bible, and that this Scripture stands as judge over every pronouncement of human beings, no matter how learned they are, no matter how many qualifications they have, no matter what position they hold, no matter how many of them agree. Scripture is the final authority. It alone is the word of the living God which has the right and power to bind the Christian conscience. Later generations would talk about *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone.
2. That every Christian has direct access to God in Christ through his word, and does not need an intermediary either in the form of a priest, the church, or the saints. We have been given the inheritance of Christ and can call God ‘Father’. Our faith is not dependent upon a human institution, or the faithfulness of a human authority, but on the faithfulness of God displayed in his giving of his Son in our place and for our sin. This would later be developed as *the priesthood of all believers*.
3. That the church is ‘a congregation of faithful men and women, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance’, to use the words of Article 19 of the Thirty-nine Articles. The church is then ‘a creature of the word’, brought into being by the gospel and for the gospel. It is a mistake to think of it in organisational terms or in terms of a hierarchy of offices. What matters is that the gospel is preached, in word and in the tangible word of the sacraments, and that faith in Christ shapes our life together. To have all the trappings without the word, without faith, is to have an empty shell — and Luther could use very colourful language to describe that shell.

And there are others, of course. The doctrine taught by Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Cranmer, and by many others including Melancthon, Bucer, Bullinger, and Tyndale amounted to a radical return to the teaching of Scripture. Luther himself believed it was a release from spiritual oppression. Wonder afresh at a salvation won completely and entirely *for you*, secure and immovable because it is anchored in God’s character and Christ’s sacrifice and

not your own performance. Wonder afresh at that and realise that the Reformation really does still matter because of the doctrine that was taught.

But there is a third reason: the Reformation still matters,

### 3. Because of the blood that was spilt

The truths we have just been talking about cost people their lives. Such was their joy and excitement at the recovery of the New Testament gospel of grace and free forgiveness, which does not depend on good works but instead makes genuine good works possible, that they literally staked their lives on it. They were the Reformation martyrs whose courage and faithfulness to the cause of Christ, in and of itself, makes this anniversary worthwhile.

The first Lutheran martyrs in the Reformation were Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes, who were burnt at the stake as heretics in the marketplace at Brussels on 1 July 1523. Interestingly, when Luther heard the news, his friend Johannes Kessler reported he said ‘I thought I would be the first to be martyred for the sake of this holy gospel; but I am not worthy of it’.<sup>8</sup> It was not unexpected when it came. The persecution of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands had been going on for two years. Luther wrote a *Letter to the Christians in the Netherlands*, in which he comforted them by remarking,

You have now become so strong and productive that you have watered and strengthened the cause with your very blood, for among you those two precious jewels of Christ, Henry and John, have held their lives of no account in Brussels in order that Christ and his Word might be glorified ... What a little thing it is to be put to shame and to be slain by the world, when those who are so treated know that their blood is precious and their death dear in God’s sight, as the Psalms say!<sup>9</sup>

Incidentally, the martyrdom of Esch and Voes led Luther to write his very first hymn — the first hymn of the Reformation — ‘A New Song Here Shall Be Begun’. The first stanza reads:

A new song here shall be begun, The Lord God help our singing!  
Of what our God himself hath done, Praise, honour to him bringing.  
At Brussels in the Netherlands, by two boys martyrs youthful  
He showed the wonders of his hands, whom he with favour truthful  
So richly hath adorned.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> WA 12:74; M. Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532* (trans. By J. L. Schaaf; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 103.

<sup>9</sup> M. Luther, ‘Letter to the Christians in the Netherlands’ (August 1523) WA 12:78.5–8, 11–14 = *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (ed. & trans. By T. G. Tappert; London: SCM, 1955), 193.

<sup>10</sup> M. Luther, ‘A New Song Here Shall Be Begun’ (1523) WA 35:411.4–13 = LW 53: 214.

They were, of course, not the last to die for the biblical doctrines which Luther had brought to light and which challenged the Roman church. John Foxe would immortalise their stories in the admittedly polemical *Book of Martyrs*.<sup>11</sup> The first English martyr was Thomas Hitton, a clergyman who had been working with William Tyndale to smuggle portions of the Bible into England, who on the orders of Thomas More was burnt at the stake on 23 February 1530. Less than a year later Thomas Benet was burned at the stake in Devon for denying the supremacy of the Pope. Thomas Bilney, trusting in Christ alone, denied the mediation of the saints and so was burned at the stake in Norwich on 19 August 1531. John Frith was burnt at the stake on 4 July 1533 after insisting that neither the doctrine of purgatory nor that of transubstantiation could be proven from the Scriptures.

The four most famous English reformation martyrs were William Tyndale, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Tyndale was hunted down, most likely on the personal orders of the king, finally captured in Antwerp, and strangled and burnt at the stake on 6 October 1536. His crime: translating the Bible into English. His last words were reported as ‘Lord, open the King of England’s eyes’.<sup>12</sup> Bishops Latimer and Ridley were burnt together outside the city walls at Oxford on 16 October 1555. Cranmer was forced to watch from a window. Latimer is reported as saying to Ridley ‘Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out’.<sup>13</sup> Only months later Cranmer faced the same fate, famously putting his hand, which had months before signed a recantation, first into the flames.

But there were others, men *and women*.<sup>14</sup> Some would claim Anne Boleyn as a martyr of the reformation. She was certainly Protestant, as her letters show, but there were, of course, other factors at play in her case. Similarly, Lady Jane Grey, the nine-day Queen of England. However, Anne Askew only preached and wrote reformation doctrine and was tortured and then burnt at the stake on 16 July 1546. It is reported she had been so injured by the torture she endured that she had to be carried to the stake on a chair.<sup>15</sup>

The courage of men and women like that, borne out of their conviction that the Bible’s message of salvation in Christ alone must be heard, and that those doctrines which diverted

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<sup>11</sup> J. Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1563; 9<sup>th</sup> edn; London: Company of Stationers, 1684).

<sup>12</sup> B. Moynahan, *William Tyndale: If God Spare My Life* (London: Abacus, 2002), 378.

<sup>13</sup> D. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 582.

<sup>14</sup> P. F. M. Zahl, *Five Women of the English Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> J. Gairdner, ‘Askew, Anne’, in S. Leslie (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1885), 190–192.

the attention of men and women elsewhere must be opposed with the loudest voice, is another reason why the Reformation still matters. Speaking personally, I want to say that the reformed Church of England (Anglican Church of Australia, Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, etc.) is worth fighting for — not because institutions and structures matter at all, but because it was established at the cost of these men and women's lives. The insipid liberalism that characterises so much of Anglicanism worldwide today needs to be challenged because the cost of the reformation settlement was so high.

And that leads us very much more briefly to the last two of my five reasons.

The Reformation matters,

#### **4. Because of the error that persists**

Despite a century or more of ecumenical endeavour, the theological differences between the Roman church and Protestants remain today. Many of the external abuses that were rife in the sixteenth century have been addressed, that's true, but the doctrine of the Roman church remains unchanged, despite five hundred years of argument from the Bible. Ecumenical statements often obscure this sad reality. But every time there appears to be a convergence of doctrine it proves to be not because Rome has revised its teaching but because those who have represented the Protestants have given ground, or at least been prepared to take refuge behind ambiguous language. Careful reading shows the Roman church has not moved at all. The error of a church authority structure that stands alongside and often over the Scriptures, the error of a justification that accepts a role for faith but puts alongside it human effort or achievement in one form or another, the error that puts Mary and the saints alongside Jesus as heavenly intercessors, and in Mary's case the immaculately conceived co-redemptrix, the error of a priesthood that sees its role as dispensing grace through the sacraments (all seven of them) — all of these and more persist in the Roman church. Out of love for each other we need to recognise this simple fact.

The Reformation was far more than a tragic misunderstanding. There is indeed much that Roman Catholics and Protestants believe in common, but the things on which we differ really do matter. They make a difference both now and into eternity. And the differences are still there. The Reformation is not over in any sense. The call to come back to the teaching of Scripture — a call we need to keep heeding ourselves — still needs to be made.

And finally, the Reformation still matters,

## **5. Because of the gospel mission that remains**

The Reformers were concerned to see men and women brought to faith in Jesus, and to see them grow in godliness and in a life of faith worked out in their everyday situation. Their world was very different to ours, not least in the fact that most people were considered, at least formally, part of the church. It was hard to self-identify as an atheist or unbeliever, since the State would apply its gruesome sanctions. So much the opposite of today! Yet the reformers were not so naïve as to think that everyone in their city, region or country was converted. They knew too that it was only as the gospel was proclaimed with clarity and biblical faithfulness that men and women would repent and put their trust in Jesus. It was only as they came to despair of themselves and see the wonder of what Jesus has accomplished that they would be drawn by God into his kingdom.

The Reformation was a gospel movement, in a very important sense a missionary movement. Luther was convinced that the Roman church had locked the real treasure God has given us away from the reach of men and women in desperate need. Releasing the gospel, through faithful preaching, and faithful living in the light of that faithful teaching, would, he believed, make a difference. And it did, throughout Europe and around the world. That mission was essentially the same as the mission of the first disciples, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. But it had to be the true gospel, the real thing, not something encrusted with human traditions which obscured its glory, muffled its voice, and emptied its power. God is sovereign and his purposes will prevail, but he has made known the means by which that will happen, the bold and clear presentation of the gospel of the crucified and risen saviour to a needy world. So precisely because of this mission, which is ours as well, the Reformation still matters.

## **Conclusion: So what of the disunity objection?**

The Reformation still matters,

1. because of the change that was made;
2. because of the doctrine that was taught;
3. because of the blood that was spilt;
4. because of the error that persists; and

5. because of the gospel mission that remains.

But was it worth the price of division? Let me conclude with just three simple observations about this charge that is considered by some a knock-down blow against the Reformation.

The first is that truth matters and error is dangerous. That is true generally, it is all the more true when we are talking about truth and error with regard to God and the way he saves people. Division is almost always painful but sometimes it is necessary. When human lives and futures are at stake it is more cruel to turn a blind eye than to confront the error even if that means division. Of course we ought not to pursue division. We have no business being pugnacious — always spoiling for a fight. But to pretend that division is not tragically necessary on occasion is not only unrealistic but cruel.

The second thing to say is that this division was never sought by the reformers. Luther never believed in setting up a new church. He saw himself as a faithful member of the church that stretched back to the apostles. He was calling to the church he loved to be true to its heart, true to its Lord. He sought the welfare of the church and not its demise. And that was so across the board, with the possible exception of some of the extremists, from whom Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and Cranmer would have all distanced themselves as well. Luther spoke of being abandoned by Rome when he was trying to do it good. He spoke of his threefold excommunication: when released from his vow of obedience by his Father Confessor, when excommunicated by the Pope in Rome, when condemned by the Emperor at the Diet of Worms.<sup>16</sup> He didn't leave the Roman church, the Roman church left him and proved itself, in his eyes, to no longer be the church. But the point is, the Reformation was never initiated as an attempt to break away from Rome.

Thirdly, and finally, while we grieve at the way it played out in the century or so after Luther—it was surely never right to harm or persecute or murder each other—the array of denominations that eventually resulted is actually a good thing. It has made room for freedom of conscience on matters about which Scripture says little and has allowed for genuine fellowship in the midst of disagreement. Many of us will have experienced the reality of fellowship with people of other denominations – Anglicans with Presbyterians, Baptists with Lutherans, even Protestants with believers who remain for various reasons within the Roman church. We do not have to agree on everything to have genuine fellowship and we can extend

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<sup>16</sup> Oberman, 186.

a generous freedom of conscience to others who differ with us on such things as when people should be baptized and with how much water, how church government should be organised, whether to sing only psalms or other more contemporary songs of praise as well. As long as the gospel is believed, as long as the supreme and unchallengeable authority of Scripture is maintained both in teaching and in practice, unity can exist alongside and across institutional distinctives. In that sense, 'division', if you want to call it that, can have a positive edge as well.

500 years on, the Reformation continues to impact us all. Our world is to some measure still shaped by it. And Christian men and women are able to rejoice at what God did through very ordinary, frail and fallible people, who were given the good work to do of standing up for the gospel when all looked dark around them. The slogan of the reformation in Geneva was 'After darkness, light'. In what sometimes looks like encircling darkness in our own time, there is even more cause to thank God for what he did in the sixteenth century and plead with him to do it again, for the sake of his beloved Son.