

The Reformation: its legacy and future

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts of the Apostles, 2.1-4)

We have come together to remember the Reformation, to give thanks for its many blessings, and to pray for healing from its many wounds.

When I hear the words “Reformation” and “Reform” I think of making things better. I think of correcting things that have gone wrong. In my country of Nigeria, and in other countries around the world, people speak of political and economic reforms. There is also something moral about the words “Reformation” and “Reform”. Who would want to be “unreformed”?

And yet, the roots of the word “Reformation” in English is the Latin word *Reformatio*, from “re”, meaning “again”, and “*formatio*” meaning “formation” or “foundation”. So, “reformation” means to be formed or founded again. Reformation is a renewal.

This means that “Reformation” in the Church is quite different than in politics or economics, although we can always try to make things better. The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. The founding or forming of the Church is the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of the Risen Lord came upon the community. When they left that building, they did so as the Church, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. That is our foundation. It is the gift of God and the action of the Holy Spirit. The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God’s work of healing a broken world.

And so a “reformation” in the Church is to be re-formed, re-founded, drawn back into the apostolic Church that was formed on the day of Pentecost. Reform in the Church is inseparable from Renewal, which means to be made new again. We are not the ones who do the renewing and reforming, but the Holy Spirit.

Since the first day of Pentecost until now, and until the Lord returns, the Church has always been a community that stands in need of Reform and Renewal. To use the Latin expression of Reformers in the sixteenth century, *ecclesia semper reformanda* or *ecclesia semper renovanda*: “the Church is always being reformed”, “always being renewed”. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

In our very long history, some moments of Reform and Renewal stand out more than others.

- I think of the formation of the Creeds in the fourth century -that was a renewal or reformation of Biblical faith.
- I think of movements for reform and renewal in the medieval church associated with St Francis of Assisi, and his call to apostolic poverty and simplicity of life, and to a fresh proclamation of the Gospel by preaching it in word and deed.
- I think of the Evangelical renewal that began in the Great Awakening of the 18th century, which swept through the Church of England in the early 19th century.
- I think of the Charismatic movement that has swept through so many of the churches from the early 20th century, and has renewed and reformed the churches far beyond the Pentecostal churches. I stand before you today as an Anglican deeply shaped by the Charismatic renewal.
- I think of the Anglo-catholic renewal within Anglicanism, also from the nineteenth century which reminded us that our formation as a Church was not with Henry VIII, but on the day of Pentecost, and that our roots are not British, but apostolic. This movement renewed our ways of worship, and gave us a sense of the beauty of holiness.
- I think of ecumenism as a movement of Reform and Renewal, as it calls us to nothing less than the unity of all Christians, in full communion with one and each other in one church, one baptism, under one Lord.

But there is something of particular historic significance about the Reformation that we have been celebrating this year. October 31 next week will mark the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant(Evangelical) Reformation, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses calling for Reform and Renewal, and began a movement that would change Christianity forever.

Against the view that suggests that salvation is something we deserve, or earn, or can buy or sell as a commodity, *Martin Luther's teaching continues to remind, renew and reform us all in the Biblical understanding that salvation is not something we do, that salvation is not something that we can earn, that salvation is not something we can buy.* Martin Luther, going back to St Paul, reminds us that salvation is a gift, a sheer, unmerited and costly gift that God freely bestows on each of us by the life, death, Resurrection and Ascension of his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. God's restoration of Communion with humanity found its irreversible achievement in the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. We are liberated by God's grace.

The Reformation was a renewal of Biblical faith, recovering the Bible as the basis of our faith, [translated into the languages of all who hear and read it. Aided by the printing press,

the Bible could be in every home. And this meant that everyone ought to be able to read, not just scholars and clergy. This emphasis on the Bible led to the rise of literacy and learning for everyone.]

And this meant a renewal in faith and understanding of the Gospel.

Everything in the sixteenth century flowed from this Doctrine of Justification:

- Worship, and the services of the Church were renewed and made accessible so that all could worship God in spirit and in truth.
- Everybody could hear and read the Bible in their own languages.
- Everybody could receive Holy Communion.
- The dignity of baptism, not ordination, was what made person a Christian.
- All Christians received the same Holy Spirit.

In these and many other ways, the sixteenth century Reformation, just like the movements of reform and renewal that came before, and those that came afterwards, took us to our living roots in the apostolic church, formed and founded on the day of Pentecost by the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the early Christian community, making it the Spirit-filled Body of Christ in the world. For this, we give thanks and praise: **Alleluia!**

But there is another side to the sixteenth century that makes it profoundly different from all the other movements of Reform and Renewal. It left the Church divided against itself, as if Christians have never read what St Paul said about the Church as the Body of Christ

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Corinthians 12.21).

The divisions of the sixteenth century were not only expressed in theological disagreement, but in violence. The emerging, severed churches expressed their division not just by refusing to be in communion with one another, but by torturing and killing one another in religious wars, all in the name of the Gospel, all in the name of the same Lord Jesus who said :

“love one another... it is by your love for one another that people will know that you are my disciples”.

Minority churches of the radical Reformation like the Mennonites, a pacifist Anabaptist community since the sixteenth-century, suffered dreadful persecutions at the hands of so many newly divided majority churches.

The story of the formation of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles is the antithesis of a much earlier Biblical story, the account of the Tower of Babel, where sinful humanity is punished by speaking in a variety of languages that no one can understand; people are divided from one another. The day of Pentecost represents the healing of the sins of Babel, past and present. The new humanity, restored, renewed and re-formed by the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ is once again united. Every one hears the same Gospel in their

own language. Here, the Church is the sign and servant of God's design "to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Christ" (cf. Ephesians 1:10). The Church, as a reflection of the communion of the Triune God, is meant to serve this goal and is called to manifest God's mercy to human beings, helping them to achieve the purpose for which they were created and in which their joy ultimately is found"¹.

This is quite the opposite of what happened in the sixteenth century and beyond. With tragic irony, it was precisely when European *Christianity* found itself in this distorted and abnormal state of division, that European *nations* began to explore other parts of the world, and colonise it. It was this divided Christianity that they exported to places like Nigeria and the rest of Africa, to India, Asia, North and South America, to Chile. This abnormal state of Christianity became the new normal. European missionaries were in active competition with one another. Our peoples became separated along European lines of state and religion.

Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer, Menno Simons, and all the other Reformers never intended or expected this. **For them, the Reformation was intended to be a movement of renewal and reform for the whole Church, not for its fracturing.**

As we give thanks for all the blessings of the Reformation, I believe that we are also called to repentance for the divisions of the past, and the divisions that we maintain or that we create today: ***Kyrie Eleison: Lord have mercy.***

The future calls all of us to do something that deals with the legacy of division of the Reformation. The Anglican Communion as a whole is engaged in this project with Roman Catholics, the Orthodox Churches, the Lutherans, Presbyterians and Reformed, Methodists. We need to expand our conversations to include Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. I believe we must seek reconciliation with Anglican churches that have left our Communion.

And, I believe that today Anglicans must be true stewards of the gift of Communion that God has given to us; let us not leave a fresh legacy of division in our own day. I believe that we bear witness to his gift of Communion most powerfully not when we agree on everything, not when we like each other; this is easy, human made communion. It is when in the face of deep disagreement we make the decision to remain in communion with one another. Why? Because we believe that Communion is God's costly gift in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, and not because of our easy achievement in being able to get along with one another.

If Martin Luther's insight into Justification by Faith is the deepest common legacy of the Reformation, this common failure in receiving God's gift of communion is a/the legacy that propels us to become true ministers and ambassadors of reconciliation.

One of the things that Christians do when we talk to one another is that we learn that we have far more in common than the things that once divided us.

¹ WCC,

Another thing we do is to learn from one another, in order to be more than we are. And as we draw closer to Christ, we inevitably are drawn closer to one another.

Another thing that Christians do when we talk to one another is to engage together in mission and evang

This has been our experience, for instance, with Roman Catholics, where pairs of bishops around the world engage each other and their churches in common mission, and in common witness to justice and peace. This is our hope for a renewed relationship with Lutherans and Methodists.

We see such cooperation between Anglicans and other Christians in the work of the Anglican Alliance, which cooperates with other churches in relief, development, and advocacy. There is the work of our department of Theological Education in the Anglican Communion, where so much theological formation is done together with other Christians. Our Department for Mission works with ecumenical missionary organisations, such as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism at the World Council of Churches. Our representative to the United Nations organisation works ecumenically; his desk is actually provided by the Lutheran World Federation. The department for Women in Church and Society works closely with other churches; women are often the first ecumenists.

These are all signs of the new movements of reform and renewal in the Church. It is what it means to be a Communion of Churches that seeks to grow in Communion with other churches. For, "Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing".²

Even today, when our churches are in the abnormal state of division, divided Christians express mutual accountability

"when they pray for one another, share resources, assist one another in times of need, make decisions together, work together for justice, reconciliation, and peace, hold one another accountable to the discipleship inherent in baptism, and maintain dialogue in the face of differences, refusing to say 'I have no need of you'. Apart from one another we are impoverished."³

² WCC,

³ WCC,