

# Allowing the Reformation to Fuel Our Deeper Commitment

The church, which is the creation of God's Word and God's Spirit, belongs to God.

It is holy, and the holiness of the church stands in contrast to individual and communal sin. Historically, sin, which runs counter to the church's nature and vocation, has disfigured the church's witness.

God the Holy Spirit enables reform and renewal in the life of the people of God, who have the vocation to serve God's mission to humankind and all of creation. Not surprisingly, reform movements have appeared in the church throughout its history.

Specific movements, especially since the 13th century, have come to be associated with the term - Reformation.

This should not blind our eyes to the fact that, again and again, in various ecclesial contexts prior to 1200 C.E., the historical church has experienced renewal in its earthly pilgrimage.

In this regard, Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, has issued a timely reminder. "The Reformation is clear proof," he maintains, "that a true reform of the church can only come from a deep encounter with the Word of God, in which the church finds its true identity."

However, he asserts, "it is inappropriate to identify reform and Reformation with one another. ...[R]eform has a wider radius than Reformation."

We should not believe that by making this claim Cardinal Koch is suggesting that no good reason exists to justify the commemoration of what has been called the Magisterial, or classical, Reformation.

This event, which I will identify as “the Reformation,” is linked to the tradition of Martin Luther’s posting of his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on Oct. 31, 1517.

This year’s Reformation Jubilee marks the quincentenary of that monumental development in church history that heralded the dawn of a new age and has reverberated around the world.

Baptists celebrate the Reformation heritage that is shared by Protestant and evangelical churches.

We are grateful for the renewed emphasis the Reformation placed on certain ideas that are foundational to our understanding of the gospel we believe, the church in which we find a place and the mission God has committed to God’s church.

Many features of the Reformation nourish the Baptist tradition. These include the emphasis on the sovereignty of God; the declaration that the Bible is a primary and fundamental source of authority in the life of the people of God; the rediscovery of the Gospel of God’s gracious favor that is offered to unworthy human beings who are justified by faith; and the affirmation of the central place in public worship of the preached Word that is grounded in the Bible – that inexhaustible witness to the Living Word.

As Baptist church historian and theologian Timothy George has asserted, “There is, to say it boldly, an ‘ex opere operato’ presence of God’s Word in the preached Word.”

Like many other Christians, Baptists joyfully embrace the commemoration of the Reformation.

Indeed, recalling the Reformation itself, German Baptist theologian Uwe Swarat recently argued that Baptist “ecclesiology would be historically inconceivable without the ecclesiology of Martin Luther and it corresponds in individual points

more closely to Luther's understanding of the Church than [even] many Baptists recognize."

Baptists join other Christian World Communions in acknowledging our indebtedness to the movements of reform arising within the church especially from the 13th to the 17th century.

The gratitude Baptists offer to God for the gifts of the Reformation is tinged with sorrow over the negative consequences of certain events associated with the Reformation.

We are not prepared to overlook the danger the church faces when it enters into alliances with purveyors of secular power to enforce submission to one understanding of the social welfare based on its interpretation alone of what is in the best interest of the people living in a community.

Furthermore, the violence, repression and persecution that accompanied the Reformation deeply trouble us. As Timothy George once noted, "the age of the Reformation produced more martyrs than all of the persecutions in the early church."

Baptists have noted, with sadness, the theological arguments put forward to justify the persecution of religious dissenters.

Thankfully, they have also witnessed, with satisfaction, the processes leading to a healing of memories made possible by churches that acknowledge what their forebears did, and then turn in repentance to God and to those belonging to traditions whose ancestors their forbears severely wronged. The response is usually a glad offer of forgiveness.

Leaders of the Reformed Church in Switzerland have expressed as their "present conviction" that the actions taken by their forebears represent "a betrayal of the Gospel" and that their "Reformed forefathers were in error" when they persecuted other Christians.

This sort of declaration has given a new ending to one phase of the story of the radical reformers and their followers. It has helped erase painful memories of those who can now abandon their former status as victims.

Nor will Baptists pretend to be ignorant of that major unintended consequence of both the Reformation and the Catholic Church's response to it - the rupture created in Christendom.

The events associated with the Reformation precipitated a regrettable schism that set in motion still more division in the body of Christ.

Baptists are a product of Reformation dissent. We are grateful for the gifts God has graciously revealed to us. We are also aware of the gifts God has given to other expressions of the church.

We are convinced that the sharing and reception of each other's gifts will nourish the church that is on pilgrimage with the Triune God. The churches need each other with both their common and their unique gifts.

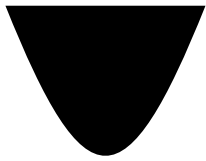
In light of the unity God has given to the church as both gift and vocation, Baptists lament the scandal of division in the body of Christ.

On account of this, when the BWA framed its Congress Message for its Centenary in 2005, it included a statement of repentance for failure in the vocation to pray and seek the manifestation of the unity of the church. BWA also committed itself to striving to overcome the failure it confessed.

As we look to the future, Baptists share the conviction so clearly identified by British Baptist theologian, Brian Haymes, who said, "There is in the end one holy catholic and apostolic church and many of us pray that it may come to expression on earth."

May this Reformation Jubilee fuel our churches' ongoing search for deeper commitment to the Gospel and a continuing quest for renewal and reform. And may our unwavering quest for visible unity remain a permanent feature of our

Christian pilgrimage.



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