



# The Legacy of the Reformation

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The month of October commemorates the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The 31st of October, in particular, is the birthday for evangelical churches. On that day, in 1517, Martin Luther took a bold and courageous stance, when he nailed his “95 Theses” on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, and protested against the unbiblical teachings and practices that were prevalent in his day. He called for the return of an obstinate church to the essential truth of the gospel, that sinners are justified by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), on the Word alone (*sola Scriptura*), because of Christ alone (*solus Christus*), to the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*).

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## Erasmus

Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466 - 1536) is often considered the intellectual father of the Protestant Reformation, even though he eventually disapproved of Luther and the Reformers. Erasmus labored to make internal reforms within the medieval Roman Catholic Church (the same as the initial motivation of the Reformers). His unique experiences influenced him to abandon the scholastic method and to study Scripture thoroughly (in addition to the ancient classics that enamored him). As a devoted scholar of Greek and Latin, he was certainly a forerunner of the Reformation. His contemporaries proclaimed, "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."

In 1516 (a year prior to the Protestant Reformation), he published his Greek edition of the New Testament. Even though it was obviously not the best text, Erasmus' Greek New Testament was the standard text for nearly four hundred years, and was circulated extensively and popularly as a consequence of it being published first, and the fact that it had the advantage of being a cheaper, more portable work. In the preface to the *Novum Testamentum*, he wrote, "I wish that the Scriptures might be translated into all languages, so that not only the Scots and the Irish, but also the Turk and the Saracen [Muslims] might read and understand them. I long that the farm-labourer might sing them as he follows his plough, the weaver hum them to the tune of his shuttle, the traveller beguile the weariness of his journey with their stories." Erasmus' sentiment was repeated by Tyndale, who also remarked, "If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a

boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou [the Pope] dost."

## Martin Luther

In 1510, Luther's superior, Johann von Staupitz commissioned him to visit Rome on behalf of several Augustinian monasteries. When he did, Luther was appalled by the corruption of the papacy that he encountered there. Luther was incensed that the Roman Catholic clergy were selling indulgences (either a partial or complete remission of temporal punishment for sin, which could be obtained for either someone living who confesses and receives absolution, or for one deceased and believed to be in purgatory), hence his "95 Theses." Luther's opposition to many of the teachings of Roman Catholicism culminated in a 1519 debate in Leipzig with the renowned theologian John Eck. On 3 January 1521, when he refused to recant his position, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther from the Roman Catholic Church. Four months later (April 1521), Luther was summoned to appear at the Diet of Worms before Emperor Charles V, where he stated, "I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's Word. I cannot and will not recant anything. For to act against our conscience is neither safe for us nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." Three beliefs characterized Luther's teachings: (1) the supreme authority of God's Word; (2) salvation is received by grace alone, as a free and unmerited gift of Christ; and, (3) all believers

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are priests, thus there is one status before God: “the priesthood of all believers.”

### John Calvin

Although the Protestant Reformation began officially on 31 October 1517, Calvin was the systematic theologian of the Reformation. Calvinism is a theological system of thought developed from the work of John Calvin (1509-64). Calvin’s thought was articulated most clearly in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), which was dedicated to his king, Francis I (his *Institutes* formed the basis of the historical development of Calvinism).

Arminianism is a theological system of thought developed from the work of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Arminianism was primarily a response to Lutheranism and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Calvinists and Lutherans taught that predestination was God’s eternal decree before the creation of the world, to elect unconditionally some individuals to salvation; and, this action was solely by the grace of God and according to His sovereign good pleasure. Arminius argued in a contrary manner that predestination was based upon God’s foreknowledge in seeing (through the corridors of time) those individuals who would either accept or reject the free offer of salvation in Christ Jesus, which was possible because the imputation (transfer) of sin was regarded as affecting humanity only partially (as opposed to entirely as Calvinism affirmed).

Arminian teaching also asserted that salvation freely accepted could be freely lost, which was contrary to Calvinist and Lutheran teachings. The followers of Arminius outlined their perspective in 1610, which was issued as five doctrinal articles collectively called the “Remonstrance.” In-

tense controversy arose among the churches in the Netherlands. The Synod of Dort (Dordrecht) convened in 1618-19 to resolve the controversy, and formulated the standard summary of the essential elements of Calvinism. Arminianism (i.e. the Remonstrants) was condemned point-by-point in a fivefold set of decrees (canons). Theological students have used the acronym *TULIP* as a mnemonic device for the doctrines of Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited (particular) atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. *Midnight Call* readers should recognize that (soteriologically) one of the genuine threats to the gospel message is semi-pelagianism (and pelagianism, of course, was condemned in 418 by the Council of Carthage as heresy, for teaching that sin is not imputed to all humanity, and thus salvation through human effort and merit was possible without the grace of God), which affirms that the imputation of sin has only weakened humanity; and hyper-Calvinism, which declares that God’s sovereignty negates the need for the evangelization of the lost (in addition to teaching that God is the Author of sin and evil, and that God’s grace can be a license to sin, because those who have once sincerely professed belief are saved regardless of subsequent lifestyles).

Western civilization has enjoyed the greatest of freedoms, productivity, and prosperity ever known throughout history. In addition to the standards of creativity and justice, the liberty enjoyed in Western civilization is a direct result of the Protestant Reformation. For instance, Calvinism was the doctrinal foundation for Western civil liberties and rights. The deeply respected Harvard historian George Bancroft esteemed Calvin as one of

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the foremost republican pioneers. “He that will not honor the memory, and respect the influence of Calvin, knows but little of the origin of American liberty.” The profound German historian Leopold von Ranke asserted boldly: “John Calvin was the virtual founder of America.” The second president of the United States, John Adams, even esteemed Geneva as the “first Puritan state.” At the time of the American Revolution, Adams exhorted, “Let not Geneva be forgotten or despised. Religious liberty owes it most respect.” Whether one approves of its doctrines or not, Calvinism indeed was the social and political ethic for the early American colonies.

When German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1905, he articulated the Protestant ethic as a moral standard emphasizing asceticism, hard work, and serving God as the logical organization of one’s life. Weber demonstrated free enterprise as an historical development in Protestant countries, because they instilled virtues within the people that ultimately encouraged it. Both colonial virtues and belief in predestination contributed to the end of serfdom and the establishment of a free economy and politic. The Protestant revival of biblical theology and virtues in the sixteenth century was highly regarded as a major factor in the development and growth of Western civilization, even though it was not the intent of the Reformers, who strived only to preach justification before God in Jesus Christ alone.

## **Celebrating the Reformation**

As for my family and me, we will not be celebrating Halloween this month. Not because we believe the Bible condemns its observance; rather, we will be much too active and excited celebrating a day of far more significance. We will, however, as with every day, regard the demonic realm seriously, for it opposes the glory of God. The Bible does not

condemn the observance of Halloween *per se*, but Scripture does condemn occult practices as rebellion against God. Necromancy and witchcraft were crimes punishable by death in the Old Testament; and in the New Testament, such practices are identified as works of the flesh of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Revelation 9:21 refers to the morally decadent who, among other things, will not repent of sorcery (occult power by means of magic, secret knowledge, or spells). The demonic realm is nothing trite; it is rather deadly serious, and no Christian should be given to flirtation with practices that God condemns. With the pounding of Luther’s hammer, All Hallows’ Eve (a day dedicated to fear, myths, spirits, and superstition) now reminds Bible-believing Christians that God’s grace is received by faith in Christ alone, on the basis of Scripture alone, and to the glory of God.

Our family will not be celebrating a harvest (fall) festival or encouraging our children to dress as Bible heroes, which may be a worse choice, as we would only be mimicking the senselessness of the world, as much of American “churchianity” already does throughout the year. Halloween is nothing but a celebration of the dead and demonic. In celebrating the Protestant Reformation, believers rejoice in eternal life. We will be celebrating instead a genuine time of revival that is not some “baptized” alternative of Halloween. We will be praising God for the historical event of the recovery of the gospel of grace through faith in the finished work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We have far too much to celebrate during the Reformation season, for the recovery of Scripture alone as the supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice, than to waste on Christianized alternatives. Praise God for those faithful to the proclamation of the true gospel, and who declare it joyfully and boldly, as witness to a world wandering in darkness and displaying its wicked defiance of the God we love and worship in all things. (889)