WAS THE REFORMATION NECESSARY?

AN ECUMENICAL DISCUSSION WITH CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS
During the 16th century, John Calvin engaged in a fascinating exchange with Jacopo (James) Cardinal Sadoleto, the Roman Catholic Church’s Bishop of Carpentras. Cardinal Sadoleto wrote an open letter to the people of Geneva, Switzerland, in 1539, calling them to follow the path to salvation laid out by the Catholic Church, which had been leading people to salvation for 1,500 years, rather than the “innovations” introduced during the previous 25 years by the Reformers. Calvin responded to Sadoleto’s letter with an open letter of his own, arguing that the Reformers were restoring the teachings of the early church—teachings that had been distorted by the “Roman Pontiff and his faction.” The debate between Sadoleto and Calvin touches on justification by faith, the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper), the nature of the church, and other key topics in the 16th century. The exchange between Sadoleto and Calvin summarizes the main issues that have separated Roman Catholic and Reformed Christians for nearly 500 years. Only in recent decades have both communions engaged one another in dialogue that tries to identify and understand some of the main points of difference, as well as to come to agreement where that is possible. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), with its heartening call to ecumenism, sparked this renewed engagement and dialogue some 400 years after the Reformation era. Soon afterward, the Roman Catholic Church opened dialogues with various churches around the world. In 2003, the Christian Reformed Church joined the Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue in the United States as that dialogue entered its seventh round, which has focused on baptism and the Eucharist.

In view of this ecumenical dialogue, and on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth, it seems appropriate to ask some basic questions about the 16th-century Reformation, its effects, remaining differences between the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches, and prospects for our reconciliation.

1. Were the reforms advocated by Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16th century needed? Could the 16th-century schism in the Western church have been avoided? If so, how?

Richard J. Mouw: “I believe the reforms were necessary, but I do need to nuance that assessment by pointing out that there were important continuities—more than often acknowledged when we celebrate the Reformation—between the thought of Calvin and Luther and their not-so-distant predecessors. At the very least, what needed reforming was an array of practices that had become prominent in popular Catholicism—ones that distracted attention from the important biblical themes of salvation by grace alone, and a trust in the once-for-all sacrifice that occurred at Calvary.”

Joyce Ann Zimmerman: “By the 16th century . . . reform was definitely needed. . . . [Many] of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II were precisely some of those called for by Luther and Calvin: [worship in the] vernacular, greater participation by the laity in liturgy, more hymns, communion under both species [bread and wine], for example. “Whether the Protestant Reformation could have been avoided is a difficult
question to answer because the issues are far more complex than they appear. An easy answer would be that the Roman Catholic hierarchy would have heard the cries for reform, implemented them, and all would have been well. However, the foment at the time goes much deeper than that, in my opinion, and, interestingly enough, [similar issues] still challenge the church today . . . : the relationship of clergy and laity, authority and its exercise . . ., how the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* [regarding the relationship between worship and belief] is received and applied (indeed, even whether it is accepted as a working principle), to name some other deeper issues.

**Ralph Del Colle:** “Most likely, without the Protestant reformers and their challenge, Trent [the reforming council on the Catholic side] might not even have happened. But . . . many of the practical reforms could have taken place sooner. Pastoral abuses and such were always in the purview of the possibility of reform and were being called for some time before Luther. . . . Trent’s doctrinal clarifications were essential to the program of pastoral reform and were met in turn by the vast spiritual renewal that accompanied magisterial efforts. . . . So, were the reforms necessary as advocated by Luther and Calvin? Yes, some of the pastoral reforms were, but as I have suggested those were carried out on Catholic terms by Trent.

“Additionally, I don’t believe schism is in the will of God. Yet I must believe by virtue of divine providence that the new forms of Christian witness that arose out of the Reformation manifest the gospel in new ways and therefore enrich the Church.”

**Dennis Tamburello:** “There is no question in my mind that reform was needed in the church at the beginning of the 16th century. I do not think a schism was needed—but given the mentalities that were prevalent at this time in history, it was probably inevitable. One aspect of that mentality was that truth has to be univocal. There seemed to be little awareness by any of the Reformation players that truth could be multifaceted, or that various viewpoints could complement and correct each other, rather than having to contradict each other. I often tell my students that ‘tolerance was not a hallmark of the Reformation’ (including the Catholic Reformation!). This, to me, is one of the great tragedies of the Reformation era, but that’s the way it was.

“I believe that many of the reforms advocated by Luther and Calvin were needed. They were reacting to some definite corruptions that had crept into church teaching and practice. At the same time, this sometimes led to overreaction, which, in my view, manifested itself in a shift from a both/and to more of an either/or mentality. Thus we ended up with fights over Scripture versus tradition and faith versus works. I think the Protestant Reformation sometimes ended up driving too much of a wedge between things that belonged together.

“For example, I don’t think that the New Testament really distinguishes faith and works to the extent that Luther was claiming. (Frankly, I think Krister Stendahl was right that Luther was reading Paul through the lens of Augustine and taking ‘works’ to mean ‘personal good works’ rather than ‘the works of the Mosaic Law.’) I hasten to add that I think Calvin had a more balanced view of this issue, in his teaching on the twofold grace of Christ—justification and sanctification as distinct yet inseparable.”

2. **What good effects has the Protestant Reformation (or the Reformed tradition) had? What bad effects? Has the good outweighed the bad?**

**Richard J. Mouw:** “The Reformers introduced solid, biblically-based preaching into a situation where that was seriously lacking. And the lack continued for a long time in Catholicism. The bad effects, though, were many. Quite often the Reformers’ claims about ‘sound theology’ masked motives—political, self-promotion, and the like—that were a travesty on the gospel. Worst of all, the Reformation unleashed a lot of violence—including the terrible things that we Calvinists did to Anabaptists, such as drowning them as a way of mocking their insistence on baptism by immersion.”

**Joyce Ann Zimmerman:** “From my point of view, the good effects are that it has heightened [Catholic] sensitivity to the role of the Holy Spirit, our attention to and appreciation of sacred Scripture, and our understanding of worship as being celebrated by the whole church, not just the clergy for the laity.

“As for bad effects, the multiple splintering of Protestantism since the 16th century has brought on a denomination-ism that is hard to address when seeking unity. With some of the denominations, there seems to be no central authority whatsoever, so local congregations shape their own theology and liturgy. No fixed [liturgical] texts or no authority attached to ‘recommended’ texts tends to bring into doubt many basic liturgical principles, especially as they might be gleaned from the patristic period. Across the board I don’t see any sense of celebrating the ‘one’ liturgy that makes present the mystery of Christ.

“I think the ‘goods’ are more weighty in some respects than the splintering, because they are the principles that need to inform theology and will eventually overcome differences (as we have seen happening in many ecumenical discussions).”

**Ralph Del Colle:** “Overall, the bad has outweighed the good simply in terms of the continued fracturing of the Church, simply within Protestantism itself. And it has not stopped! However, the development of Christian and ecclesial life on the Protestant (and Reformed) side has led to many laudable forms of Christian witness. Clearly, preaching and the pursuit of Christian vocation in the secular realm..."
would be high on my list. What I do see providentially in the Reformation is the promotion of the gospel, the evangel. At its best the clear articulation in proclamation and teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ delivers the power of God unto salvation. I also associate this with the best of the pietistic traditions in Protestantism wherein doctrine and life are held together in existential depth and transformation (despite some pietist protests against sterile scholastic orthodoxies)."

Dennis Tamburello: “I think the Reformed tradition has had many good effects. . . . I would agree with my colleagues who point to an increased attention to the importance and centrality of sacred Scripture as a good effect of the Reformation. While I don’t think that the Catholic Church had lost this to the extent that the Reformers claimed, a lot of church teaching and practice had become more rooted in canon law than in Scripture.

“There certainly were some bad effects. As Richard pointed out in his response, the persecution and violence that were perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestants were shameful—especially for a religion that spoke so much about forgiveness and loving one’s enemies. In some ways, the churches themselves were to blame for the (not-very-enlightening) Enlightenment’s rejection of traditional religion as provincial and intolerant and thus contrary to reason.

“One bad effect of the Reformation was to open the door to a more individualistic or even subjective reading of the Scripture. I do not believe Luther or Calvin ever intended that the Scripture be read in this isolationist way . . . , but it was an inevitable result of removing an official ‘referee’ from the hermeneutical process . . . .

“Has the good outweighed the bad? I don’t know. It is not a good thing that the church was and is so fragmented. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit has moved in so many ways in our respective communities. If only we could find the right formula to have ‘unity in diversity.’”

3. Are the main differences between Reformed Christians and Roman Catholics the same today as they were in the 16th century? Which differences or disagreements have decreased since the 16th century? What are the most important differences remaining today?

Richard J. Mouw: “Things are very different today. Our shared differences with those today who oppose the gospel as such are much more important than our own differing ways of emphasizing this or that element of the gospel. Many of us are also seeing that we sin when we ignore the great liturgical and spiritual-practices traditions of Catholicism. And only the most fanatical and mean-spirited Protestants today will deny that Vatican II was one of the great spiritual and theological renewal events in the history of the universal church.”

Joyce Ann Zimmerman: “I think the differences are different because we’ve had a half-millennium to grow and change… In the mainline (more liturgical) Protestant churches, the order of service is very similar to [the] Roman Catholic; both have studied more thoroughly the patristic sources and regained much that was lost over the centuries. Some of the theological issues (e.g., sacrifice, faith and works, use of Scripture) have already brought an amazing amount of ecumenical convergence.

“I suspect the two main remaining differences are questions of authority, hierarchy, and the papacy, on the one hand, and the understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, on the other. Both of these issues are ‘identity’ ones, so they are not easily resolved.”

Ralph Del Colle: “There are still outstanding differences, especially in the area of ecclesiology… Liturgical renewal (as Joyce mentioned) is extremely important. Ecumenical dialogues have demonstrated how far we can go (or not! Some Reformed folk will not sign the Joint Declaration [on Justification]). I think both Catholics and Reformed are quite willing to recognize that we share a common faith and baptism. Yet we need to still work at the particulars of that faith and press for what is not church-dividing in our diversity. This latter requires more work and definition.”

Dennis Tamburello: “I think some of the differences are the same; for example, there is much to be done in the areas of ecclesiology and church authority, as some others have pointed out. At the same time, I think we have come to see that we have much more in common in these areas than we had thought.

“Generally, disagreements about the issue of justification have decreased considerably since the 16th century. Now that we are really listening to each other and trying to understand—rather than hurling anathemas—we realize that there is much agreement on the basics here. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, while not accepted by all, is a good example of the convergence that has taken place on this doctrine on an official level.

“For a long time, I have thought that one of the most important—and not sufficiently talked about—differences between Reformed and Catholic Christianity, both in the 16th century and today, is in the area of anthropology. How much damage did sin do to human nature? I see Catholicism as having a more optimistic anthropology—human nature was damaged but not totally destroyed by sin. Protestantism, as I understand it, holds that human nature was virtually devastated by sin.”
(Calvin, of course, says that the *sensus divinitatis* [awareness of God] and *conscientia* [conscience] were the sole things not wiped out by sin.) This may explain, in part, why Catholicism has not separated justification and sanctification to the extent that Protestants have.

“Both Catholicism and Protestantism take sin very seriously, and I’m not sure how much practical significance this anthropological difference has for Catholics and Protestants today. But I’d like to see more discussion in this area, so that together we can more adequately address one of our culture’s biggest problems: its denial of sin. I have often found it both amusing and frightening that many American Christians can readily identify evil in the world, but don’t see any in themselves!”

**4. Will we ever be able to reconcile the differences between us? If so, how might that be accomplished? What would a reconciled Western church look like?**

**Richard J. Mouw:** “I think we have seen signs of hope in this regard at many moments in our own dialogue. This happens especially when we are willing to take an honest look at our own preconceptions in the spirit of Psalm 139’s ‘Search me and know me’ prayer. The important thing is to begin to want to reconcile, so much so that we are willing to take on the hard work of getting at issues that seem impossible to tackle successfully. And an absolute requirement for moving forward is to accept the fact that a ‘reconciled Western church’ will not look like anything we can now describe. . . . There are some things about which we must say—in order to move forward effectively—‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be.’”

**Joyce Ann Zimmerman:** “I don’t think it will be possible to reconcile all the differences between the Roman Catholic Church and all branches of Protestantism. However, I do think down the line there will be reconciliation between the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches. Whether that brings the kind of unity we think we had in the early church period is another issue. . . . In the early church there were schisms, so this is nothing new. In the early church liturgical practices were very diverse and very localized (with an amazing amount of commonality in the essentials).

“I think reconciliation is already happening, especially witnessed to by the ecumenical movement. . . . Now in most towns or cities there are regularly scheduled ecumenical prayer opportunities, pulpit exchanges, clergy of more than one denomination participating at weddings and funerals, and so on. These are all good signs of mutual respect and how much we really do have in common.

“A reconciled Western church might look something like the Eastern and Western churches: different laws, liturgies, disciplines, ways of exercising authority. But nonetheless one church with common essentials.”

**Ralph Del Colle:** “I envision a ‘full communion’ model as is already operative among various Protestant communions (for example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America entering into such agreements with Episcopalians, then with Reformed, Moravians, and—it looks like—United Methodists). But this would be altered slightly to reflect how our Eastern Catholic Churches are in full communion with the Holy See. So, yes, I still see the Petrine office as the site of unity. How Reformed churches might enter into full communion I am not sure. The issues of ecclesiality still loom large, and not just for Catholics.”

**Dennis Tamburello:** “I frankly was more optimistic earlier than I am today that we’ll be able to reconcile our differences on an institutional level. I am . . . fearful that my own church is retrenching on ecumenical and interfaith issues. Reconciliation would definitely involve coming to agreement on ecclesiological issues, which I think right now are generally the bigger obstacles than the theological ones.

“It is hard to know what a reconciled Western church would look like. I think people’s experience of the church would probably be at the same time more intimate and more liturgical, drawing from the strengths of both Protestant and Catholic traditions. For some Protestants, it would be more organized than what they are used to (in that organization will go beyond the individual congregation). For some Catholics, there might be more of a sense of community than they are used to. But I’m just fantasizing here!”

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