

Reformation Themes: Commemorating the 500th Anniversary

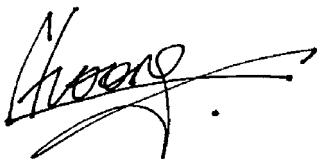
On October 31, 1517, the German monk Martin Luther wrote his 95 theses in protest of the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church. Thus began the Protestant Reformation. October 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of that pivotal event that changed the course of Western history.

The Banner is commemorating the anniversary by publishing a series of articles focusing on each of the five solas, the Reformational themes of Scripture alone, faith alone, Christ alone, grace alone, and glory to God alone. We are pleased to present all five in this second volume of the **Banner Study Series**. Find it here: thebanner.org/study-series. (The first in the series, entitled “Reformed Basics,” is also available at this same address.) In addition, we are including Dr. Karin Maag’s fine retrospective, “The Reformation: What Did We Gain? What Did We Lose?”

We have included discussion questions for each of these articles to guide you in your reflection. You can use this free resource in a variety of ways: for personal study or devotion, small group discussions, or adult education church groups.

We pray that this resource will be useful for you in reflecting on the important lessons from the Reformation.

In Christ’s Service,



Shiao Chong
Editor-in-Chief, *The Banner*

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Sola Scriptura

The Reformers recognized subordinate religious authorities.

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2017 MARKS THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY of the Protestant Reformation. Starting with this Reformed Matters column, we'll commemorate the anniversary by highlighting its five rallying themes: Scripture Alone (*Sola Scriptura*), Faith Alone (*Sola Fide*), Christ Alone (*Solo Christo*), Grace Alone (*Sola Gratia*), and Glory to God Alone (*Soli Deo Gloria*).

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION'S slogan about religious authority, *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), doesn't mean what some people think it means. In fact, the way a lot of people have taken it is something all the Reformers repudiated. *Sola scriptura* is not honored by someone sitting in an easy chair with a Bible in his lap, deciding for himself what is true—or by televangelists (or others) declaring they have "discovered something new in Scripture."

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther boldly responded to the German emperor that he could not recant what he had taught since it was based on Scripture rightly interpreted. But Luther was shaken when the Archbishop of Trier then accused him of subjectivism—of thinking that he alone, in all the history of the church, had understood Scripture rightly.

Such an allegation would hardly bother many Christians in our day. Shaped by our individualistic North American culture, a Christian might well shrug off that challenge with a "So what? I

know I'm right!" Luther recognized, though, that subjectivistic individualism was a path into darkness, not toward light. So he wrestled with the question. The answer he came to, in short, was that Reformation slogan we have all heard but many misunderstand: *sola scriptura*.

For the Reformers, "Scripture alone" did not mean "Scripture all by itself." Rather, Scripture was "alone" as the only *unquestionable* religious authority, not the only religious authority. As Luther struggled with the archbishop's challenge in the months after the Diet of Worms, he came to recognize that his understanding of Scripture was not unique: he found it in many church fathers (the common term for the respected pastors and theologians of the ancient church). He heard it proclaimed in the creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian). He saw it set forth by the ecumenical councils (Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon), which defended the apostolic proclamation of who Christ was and what he had accomplished, and of how that all related to God as Father and as Holy Spirit. These ancient worthies served as religious authorities for Luther and the other Reformers. Luther discerned that the stuff he had come to oppose was the clutter that had obscured that faithful ancient teaching over the course of centuries, down to his day.

For Luther and the other Reformers, Scripture was the ultimate religious authority. It was the norm by which other claimants to religious authority must be measured. If they

stood the test, they could be respected as lesser religious authorities—below Scripture but superior to anybody's private ideas. The Reformers recognized subordinate religious authorities—the faithful teaching of the church fathers, the creeds, and the doctrinal deliverances of the ancient ecumenical councils—since these were faithful to Scripture.

This shouldn't be surprising to us. We affirm *sola scriptura* but we also embrace what are called secondary standards: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. These three "forms of unity" are superior to any of our private opinions; they are meant to guide us into faithful understanding of Scripture. We also accept the contemporary testimony "Our World Belongs to God" and the Belhar Confession as guidance for life in the present day—superior to private judgment, normed by Scripture.

Living, thinking, and believing like this honors what the Reformers intended in their bold affirmation about religious authority, *sola scriptura*. ■



James R. Payton, Jr., is the author of *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings* (InterVarsity Press, 2010). He is professor emeritus of history, Redeemer University College, and attends Ancaster Christian Reformed Church in Ancaster, Ont.

Sola Fide



Faith must be nurtured and nourished in a community of faithful proclamation and sacramental participation.

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"YA GOTTA BELIEVE." These are the immortal words of Frank Edwin "Tug" McGraw, relief pitcher for the 1973 New York Mets. In last place on the last day in August, the Mets went on an improbable run to the pennant, past the heavily favored Cincinnati Reds and into the World Series.

It's a quintessentially American motto, praising the ability of the individual to "bootstrap" him- or herself into or out of any situation. It stands behind not only more secular entrepreneurial ventures, but also forms of Christianity that reinvent faith as a means to (or a sign of) financial success.

"Confidence in confidence alone" (to quote Rodgers and Hammerstein) presumes too much—and too little.

It presumes too much on the ability of the "rugged" individual who is able, through naked will, to succeed. All the belief in the world wouldn't have helped "the miracle Mets" had they not been able to put the bat on the ball. It also presumes too little on the importance

of background conditions. Some people face invisible barriers to participation in the grand cultural dream: barriers of race, gender, or class. Others are born into security and prosperity, the proverbial silver spoon. Some teams are just plain lucky; their rivals are having a bad season.

The dictum "faith alone" (*sola fide* in church-speak) is not "faith in faith." Faith is never truly alone. Faith must be nurtured and nourished in a community of faithful proclamation and sacramental participation.

But even more than this: faith depends on its object. If the object of faith is the ability of the sovereign individual, faith will certainly fail. Faith will become merely another "work." If the object of faith is the sovereign God, faith will unite an understanding of personal inability to God's ability. Faith will look not to itself, but to the covenant faithfulness of God made flesh and blood in Jesus. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God's Son, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20, CEB)

This was the underlying concern of the Protestant reformers. Opposing any insinuation that individual ability or social station could make one acceptable to God, they insisted that becoming right with God was dependent on an act of prior divine grace, to which faith was a response. In other words, grace was a

divine invasion into despair at failure to establish oneself, a sense that the very coherence of the world was at stake unless God acted, and had acted, in Jesus Christ.

This reliance on grace liberated the Reformers to remake their societies. They didn't always see the challenge to political power implied in *sola fide*, and their tenets would soon degenerate into the dialectic of bookish Protestant scholasticism ("the faith" as a system of beliefs) versus non-dogmatic, inward pietism (the seed of "faith in faith") the following century.

But that's to cast a shadow on the commemorations. For the genuine insight of the Reformers was that radical trust in a God on whose faithfulness the world depended was the center from which all personal and social transformation proceeded. And the faithful church, that is, the church that lives from the faithfulness of God, is always reforming, never settled. Reformation is not mere "innovation," for it has a Model. At its best, such a church constantly reforms not only itself, but its members, and indeed its world in faithful conformity with its Lord. ■



Dr. Stephen Martin is associate professor of theology at The King's University College, Edmonton, Alta.

Solo Christo



“Christ alone” challenges us to humbly examine ourselves.

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IN COURTROOMS, witnesses swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This statement recognizes that the truth can be distorted when some bits are left out or added in. Similarly, the Reformation theme “Christ alone” emphasizes that salvation is through faith in no one else but Christ, and nothing more than Christ.

We see this theme embodied in the Heidelberg Catechism: “Salvation cannot be found in anyone else; it is futile to look for any salvation elsewhere” (Q&A 29). And those seeking salvation “in saints, in themselves, or elsewhere” do not “really believe in the only Savior Jesus” even if “they boast of being his” (Q&A 30).

The Reformers were concerned that some church practices, such as venerating the saints, might distract our faith away from Christ. They were also concerned with tendencies to add good works onto faith in Jesus as conditions for salvation. We see this in Belgic Confession Article 22: “Therefore, to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as

well is a most enormous blasphemy against God—for it then would follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior.” Salvation is not faith in Christ plus something else; it is faith in Christ alone. This two-fold emphasis is still a challenge for us today.

This notion challenges popular religious sensibilities. In today’s multi-religious world, the exclusive claim of “Christ alone” is often, at best, an embarrassment. I frequently hear the objection, “Don’t all religions ultimately teach the same truths?”

Having grown up Buddhist in a Muslim country, and having served for 15 years as a Christian campus minister engaging various other faiths, I don’t think all religions teach the same truths. There are some truths that overlap, but there are fundamental and essential differences. In fact, they don’t even agree on what “salvation” is.

I believe salvation is not gained through enlightenment, obeying certain rules, or believing in certain truths. As we learned from the Reformation theme “faith alone,” salvation is through faith in Christ. It is a personal, holistic trust, not simply an intellectual assent to spiritual truths (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 21). And it’s faith in Christ alone. I can learn and benefit from what’s true in other religions, as I do from science, philosophy, and the arts. But I confess that none of those other truths can save me. They might make us better

human beings, but they cannot reconcile us to the one true God.

“Christ alone” also challenges us to humbly examine ourselves. Have we inadvertently, in theory or in practice, elevated something good to be equally important alongside Christ? Do we unwittingly shape people to place their faith in Jesus plus something else? Perhaps Jesus plus a particular form of piety, or plus a particular Reformed philosophy, or Jesus plus social activism or social conservatism, or Jesus plus. . . . Have we fallen into this trap when we judge some as the “wrong kind” of Christians? Have we put too much trust in our own unofficial “saints”: Abraham Kuyper, John Calvin, John Piper, or Jim Wallis?

Though not always easy to untangle or discern, it is utterly important to examine our hearts in these matters. Because, ultimately, these “additions” to Christ only lead us to trust in ourselves, in human abilities, ingenuity, or tradition, and to make salvation more about what we know or what we do and less about God’s grace to us. Rather, as the Reformation reminds us, salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone, by God’s grace alone. ■



Shiao Chong is editor-in-chief of *The Banner*. He attends Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Toronto, Ont.



Sola Gratia

Who is this
Abraham guy,
anyway?

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OUR FAMILY HAS QUITE THE COLLECTION of Bible storybooks, gifts from loved ones who pray for our son's faith formation. Most of the storybooks are very good, and we enjoy working our way through the stack at bedtime. At times, though, I find myself rephrasing a line or two as I read the book aloud. I judge that some important detail has been lost trying to craft the story for children.

I struggle to find the right words, and perhaps these books do too since the Bible itself does not always read like a children's book. Take Genesis 12 for example: the chapter starts with God speaking to Abra(ha)m. It feels like we are jumping into the middle of a conversation, like we accidentally skipped a page in the storybook. God commands Abraham to leave everything and go to the land God will show him. Then God bestows on him an extravagant blessing that extends to all peoples on earth (Gen 12:1-3). But who is this Abraham guy, anyway? Why has God chosen him? He seems to be just another name in

chapter 11. What makes Abraham so special that he should be the one through whom all nations will be blessed? It seems like some important detail was left out and we need to supply it.

Some storybooks do just that with Genesis 12. Before God says anything, the narrator introduces us to Abraham. We might get details like: Abraham is a good man, or Abraham believes in God. Sounds harmless, right? This may be a nice way to set up the story, but when we read Genesis 12 like this we are in danger of missing what is so profound: Scripture never says why God chooses Abraham. There is no lost detail.

Genesis 12 helps us reflect on the principle of *sola gratia*, grace alone. Abraham receives undeserved favor. We are not told what distinguishes him from others members of his family. We know nothing about his character or belief. The story of Abraham does not begin with Abraham; it begins with God. God speaks first. God reveals his overwhelming desire to bless. To supply extra details would make the story less wonderful.

Sola gratia focuses our attention on what God does instead of what we do—God's big story and not our details. In particular, *sola gratia* refers to the Reformation emphasis on the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ; no one is able to earn or merit salvation. Not even Abraham deserved God's favor, even though

it is tempting to justify Abraham's election as we read the story of his life.

Maybe, like me, you have caught yourself misreading your own story, living as if you can supply your own lost details of faithfulness and righteousness. For us, confessing *sola gratia* means facing the hard truth that these details do not save us. In his new book, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, Kevin Vanhoozer says, "Grace contradicts every system of religion precisely because God's free mercy cannot be predicted, calculated, or manipulated. Grace is especially troublesome for control freaks—sinners curved in on themselves, bent on securing their own existence and status" (p. 40).

Instead of getting lost in self-examination, God invites us to look up and see our place in the one grand story revealed in Scripture. This is ultimately a story not about us, but about God and God's gracious initiative—a grace displayed most clearly in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The stories of our lives do not need details like "he was a good person" or "she believed in God"; the main theme is always God's amazing grace. ■

[STUDY QUESTIONS ONLINE](#)



Sarah Schreiber is assistant professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary and an associate pastor at Grace CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Soli Deo Gloria

Home isn't home
unless there's
someone at the
door to meet you.

PHOTO BY BRENNAN EHRHARDT/UNSPLASH

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I SANG WITH ELDER CLINTON TAYLOR in the gospel choir at Lawndale Christian Reformed Church in Chicago, Ill., as a fledgling leader. He had a pithy saying he'd repeat to anyone who asked how he was doing. In his deep baritone voice, Elder Taylor would reply, "Well, I never had it so good." Like many African Americans who came from the South to northern industrial cities after World War II, Elder Taylor and his wife, Emma, came to Chicago to find a better way of life for their family. Lawndale was his home church, a church that joined him to fight for their covenant children to attend Timothy Christian School in the 1960s. Taylor believed that Christian discipleship meant giving God alone the glory, from the cradle to the grave.

Elder Taylor kept a full head of hair, along with a full salt-and-pepper beard. His hands were huge, with a couple of fingers bent by working hard at his job. However, his voice filled the gym that functioned as the sanctu-

ary and found sweet communion in singing on Sundays.

Elder Mamie Bryant played the piano faithfully and always in the same key, no matter the song. With some coaxing from Bryant, Taylor had to sing "Coming Home." His voice grew louder and his arms lifted a bit toward heaven. Standing next to him, I heard Taylor sing, "Coming home, coming home, nevermore to roam; open now thine arms of love; Lord, I'm coming home." Taylor sang and believed his entire life was going somewhere, to someplace, to someone.

All roads of the Christian life lead toward home with God. Home isn't home unless there's someone at the door to meet you. The holy Word reminds Christians that life broke down in a garden, but the garden isn't our future home (Sola Scriptura). The gift of faith is like a pair of miracle glasses that enable the sinner to see that Christ paid it all (Sola Fide). Master Jesus revealed our pitiful efforts to make something out of ourselves by ourselves (Solo Christo). Grace is the compass that keeps pointing us back to home in the world (Sola Gratia). Coming home is the twisting, bumpy road of mistakes, disappointments, deaths, scars, and ordinary epiphanies which signal that we were meant for so much more than this place. All the while, Jesus keeps calling us to give him

the glory along the road toward our eternal home (Soli Deo Gloria).

The Reformation was the business of going back to dealing with the triune God as the exclusive object of our worship, living, and witness. The Heidelberg Catechism instructs us that our Lord requires our exclusive worship and that we are to "avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, superstitious rites or prayers to saints or other creatures" (Q&A 94).

The men and women of the Reformation risked their lives to go back to God alone. In his book *My Only Comfort*, the late Fred Klooster, my former theology professor, remarked that the Word alone "express(es) the wholeness and exclusiveness of the gospel." In other words, the gospel reveals God's glorifying presence in our work, our worship, our praying, and serving. It's coming to understand that we never had it so good! Soli Deo Gloria. ■

[STUDY QUESTIONS ONLINE](#)



Reginald Smith is director of race relations and social justice for the Christian Reformed Church. He attends Madison Square Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

BY KARIN MAAG



THE REFORMATION: WHAT DID WE GAIN? WHAT DID WE LOSE?

IN 2017, Christians are marking the Reformation's 500th anniversary. Historians and theologians have been racing to publish biographies of Luther and analyses of his impact. Various museums are hosting major exhibits on Luther and his world. Pastors and church leaders are retelling the story of Martin Luther's posting of 95 theses against the sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church on October 31, 1517. Congregations will join in singing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Meanwhile, tour companies are marketing trips to Reformation sites in Europe, and providers of memorabilia are selling everything from Luther socks to beer steins and bobbleheads.

But beyond the books, articles, and exhibits, the commemorative worship services around October 31 and the nifty gift ideas for the Reformation fan on your list, it is worth pausing to reflect on what

the Reformation means exactly for Christians around the world in 2017. Five hundred years after the Reformation, what should Christians be commemorating, especially in the increasingly diverse and globalized church? Does the Reformation have any relevance to Christians in South Korea or Nigeria or Argentina, not to mention in North America or in Europe? Does the Reformation still speak in any substantive way to 21st-century Christians?

These questions are hard to answer. First, many churches focus on the present and the future, largely ignoring their own history. If we don't know what the Reformation was really about, how can we commemorate it? Then there's the challenge of figuring out what aspects of the Reformation have enduring significance and what parts are rooted in the early modern world. As the heirs of Reformation divisions over doctrine, liturgy, and church government, how do we discern between bedrock issues and matters of preference that have become the norm over centuries?

One way to move forward is to consider what changed because of the Reformation. What has the Christian church worldwide gained or lost as a result?

For starters, here are three important guideposts:

- The Reformation is a general label used to refer to a wide range of calls for wholesale changes in the theology and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, primarily in the 1500s. "Reformations" may well be a more accurate descriptor. (The earlier split with the Eastern Orthodox Church is also important, but falls outside the parameters of this article).
- These calls for reform came from insiders, not from folks who were disgruntled out their church. The leading reformers Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin were all either priests or priests-in-training in the Roman Catholic Church prior to their advocacy of Reformation. They did not call

THE REFORMATION WAS ABOUT FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN COMMITMENT TO ONE'S FAITH AND RECOGNITION THAT OTHERS . . . WHO HOLD DIFFERENT BELIEFS ARE STILL BROTHERS AND SISTERS MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD.

for change because they hated their church but because they cared deeply about it and wanted it to follow Christ's teachings faithfully.

- The Roman Catholic Church also engaged in the process of reformation in the 16th century. It worked to clean up abuses in church practice while reaffirming traditional Catholic doctrines. To try to understand the Reformation's impact while leaving aside the story of the Catholic Church's reforms is to have only a partial picture of how the calls for change reshaped all of Western Christendom.

There is no doubt that the Reformation dramatically transformed the religious life of early modern Christians. To make it easier to assess the Reformation's longer-term impact, let's consider different aspects of church life in turn.

Theology

Although each of those who worked for fundamental religious changes developed their own unique visions for reform, some key theological features surfaced again and again. These included turning to Scripture as the key authority in doctrine and worship, emphasizing God's justifying grace through Christ rather than human efforts, concentrating on preaching, and committing to teaching the next generation the foundations of Christianity. A return to these fundamentals was definitely a gain, both in the short and long term.

Across the board, the Reformers sought to restore what they understood as the key teachings of the faith. These core doctrines can be summarized in various ways—as in the five *solas*: Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and to God's glory alone (for more on each of these, see *Banner* articles from March 2017 onward).

Yet these slogans provide only a partial look at the complex history of Reformation theology. The problem was that people disagreed about what Scripture meant and how to interpret it. For instance, the Ana-

baptists' support for adult or believers' baptism as most faithful to the New Testament record attracted opposition from everyone else who stood firmly for infant baptism. Jesus' words at the Last Supper proved equally divisive. Reformers disagreed, for instance, about the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. Luther and the Swiss Reformed famously fought over this issue at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529. For their part, the Dutch Reformed split in the early 17th century over conflicting understandings of the doctrine of predestination. These doctrinal divisions led to hostility and mutual attacks on each other's doctrine, which was a loss in terms of inter-church relations (see more below).

Today, doctrinal differences continue to divide Christians, although church leaders have worked hard over the past decades to find points of agreement. So, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation have issued a "Joint Declaration on Justification" in 1999. The core section of the text is worth quoting: "on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." This declaration is a major step forward, though not all Lutheran churches have signed on to this document.

In 1975, five of Canada's largest denominations, including Anglicans, Presbyterians, the United Church of Canada, and the Roman Catholic Church, agreed to accept each other's baptisms as fully valid. In 2007, five major denominations in Brazil, including Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Catholics, did the same thing. In the United States in 2013, four denominations including the Christian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church USA formally signed a common agreement with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, mutually rec-

ognizing the validity of each other's baptisms. So although we are still divided doctrinally, many Christians seek some common ground, especially in areas that reflect the heart of faith and worship.

Worship

The Reformation led to many significant changes in worship. First, Protestant worship largely moved from Latin to the vernacular, the language of the people. Second, most Protestant churches only retained two sacraments—baptism and communion—compared to the Catholics' seven. Third, for all Protestants, communion involved partaking in both the bread and the wine, as compared with lay Catholics' practice of only receiving the bread. Beyond these fundamental changes, there was little unanimity among Protestants as to the most biblically faithful way to worship. Lutherans and Anglicans retained many aspects of traditional Roman Catholic liturgy, whereas the Reformed and the Anabaptists adopted a much plainer worship style. This difference led at least one Catholic observer of early Protestant worship in Geneva to remark that he felt he was in school rather than in church. The Reformed and the Anabaptists also rejected any religious images in their places of worship, leading to the destruction of religious art in several locations.

Today, worship-related differences between denominations are shrinking. Indeed, there are sometimes greater differences in worship styles within a given denomination than between two different confessional groups. In church music in particular, denominations borrow freely from each other. Here, the Reformation's strong encouragement to church members to sing in worship has led to a rich tradition of hymn

denominational divides. CRC churches sing pieces by Catholic composers (think of Marty Haugen's "Shepherd Me, O God" or David Haas's very popular "You Are Mine," for instance). Meanwhile, contemporary Catholic hymnals include »

famous Protestant hymns including “Be Still, My Soul” and “Amazing Grace.” Hymns and praise songs from the global South and East are growing in popularity regardless of denomination.

Church Leadership

In many Protestant groups, especially among the Reformed and the Anabaptists, lay church leaders grew in number and in power. Among the Reformed, elders and deacons provided crucial leadership, especially for congregations facing religious persecution. Even without a pastor, these congregations could continue to gather for worship and remain active as a church body at the local level.

Giving lay people a greater role and a greater voice in church leadership has been one of the most important—yet often forgotten—longer-term gains of the Reformation. Churches around the world have benefited from male and female lay leaders from all walks of life who contribute their time and talents to bring forth God’s kingdom and help their local faith community thrive. Lay leaders, particularly in the global South and East, have served as highly effective evangelists, teachers, and pastoral care providers in their home communities, helping to bridge the gap between large numbers of church members and the small number of pastors.

Inter-church Relations

In 1500, the vast majority of Western Europeans were Roman Catholic Christians. By 1600, rival confessional groups had taken root across Europe: Lutherans, Anabaptists, Anglicans, and Reformed competed with Catholics for people’s allegiance. Each of these Protestant groups split further, either at the time or afterward, often into more hard-line or more moderate factions.

So the Reformation led to profound and continuing splits within Western Christendom. This separation among Christians can definitely be understood as a loss.

Worldwide, Christians still live with this legacy of division. When European and North American missionaries went to other continents in the centuries following the Reformation, they did not

simply bring people to Christ. Instead, they brought the new converts to faith within a particular religious tradition. So there are strong Catholic, Episcopalian, and Reformed communities in sub-Saharan Africa, multiple branches and forms of Presbyterians, along with Methodists, Baptists, and smaller Catholic communities in South Korea, and vibrant Catholic communities alongside smaller communities of Protestants of all kinds in the Philippines. While working diligently to spread the gospel message, missionaries also imported the seeds of denominational division.

In the 16th century, tensions between rival Christian groups led to executions, religious riots, and massacres. Today in much of the world, active violence between Christian groups has largely abated. However, tensions still remain. Some denominations or groups within denominations still will not collaborate with other Christians on joint projects, viewing each other as heterodox rivals rather than potential partners. At times, we still let our preconceived notions about other Christian groups’ beliefs or practices dictate our attitude toward them. The continuing fragmentation of the church (Christ’s body) calls for deep reflection and genuine dialogue. As a Reformed colleague of mine, Dr. Epiembong from Cameroon, remarked, “We Reformed Christians in Cameroon only know those in our own group—we do not know what other Christians in our country are doing to address the same problems we face.”

Yet the experience of confessional diversity within Christianity from the Reformation onward can also be seen as a gain, even though this gain (religious co-existence) was slow in coming. Here’s why: by the late 1500s, individual Christians had to confront the reality that people living across the street or in the next town or over the border held to different beliefs and practices of the faith. While governments and church leaders at the time tended to preach separation and exclusivism, ordinary Christians on the ground had to figure out how to manage family and work life in spite of these divisions.

Here are some real-life examples from the 16th century to consider. Would a French Huguenot family still attend their cousin’s Catholic wedding? Would a Protestant baker sell his wares at a Catholic festival? Would a Protestant printer publish a Catholic prayer-book? Would a Catholic father send his son to the academically excellent (but Protestant) school? Would Lutheran parents accept a Reformed baptism for their child if no Lutheran baptism was available? Would young people from different confessional groups marry and successfully navigate the pitfalls of an inter-confessional marriage? Although inter-communal religious violence persisted, already by the mid-1500s, many individuals and communities were quietly coming to terms with religious difference. They found ways to emphasize workplace, neighbor, and kinship bonds that endured beyond confessional divisions.

Many of these situations from the Reformation era still resonate among present-day Christians. For instance, cross-confessional marriages have continued to pose challenges, especially if both sides of the prospective family are active in their respective churches. Yet the experience of ordinary Christians in the Reformation era offers ways forward toward coexistence, even in situations where people are divided by different faith commitments.

Does the Reformation still speak to 21st-century Christians worldwide? Yes, because it provides examples of men and women putting their faith commitments at the center of their lives, willing to go into exile for religious reasons, and coming to terms with increased religious diversity. Ultimately, the longer-term outworking of the Reformation was about finding the balance between profound commitment to one’s faith and recognition that others within the Christian family who hold different beliefs are still brothers and sisters made in the image of God. ■



Karin Maag is director of the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin College and a member of Woodlawn CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Questions for Discussion

Sola Scriptura

1. What was your impression when you first heard the phrase “Scripture alone”? What do you think it means?
2. Do you think North American culture has over-emphasized subjective individualism? Why or why not?
3. The author suggests that confessions, creeds, and respected theologians can be “lesser religious authorities” subordinate to Scripture. How do you think having these secondary authorities help us in our Christian lives and communities?
4. On the other hand, how do we prevent these helpful secondary authorities from becoming equal authorities to Scripture in our lives and communities?

Sola Fide

1. In what setting have you come across the idea of “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps”? How does this fit (or not fit) within the context of Christian faith?
2. How would you define faith? What are some of the various shades of meaning it might have?
3. If faith must be nourished in a faithful community, how should that make us understand the role of the church and our involvement in church?
4. How does radical trust (faith) in God’s faithfulness and grace motivate our own personal transformations as well as social transformation?

Solo Christo

1. How have you personally experienced hope and salvation in “Christ alone”?
2. What are some common false “saviors” the world has faith in?
3. For Christians, what may be some tempting “additions” for us to place our faith in alongside Jesus?
4. How can we guard our hearts from turning our faith in Christ alone for our salvation into faith in Christ plus something else for salvation? Without turning to a mystical faith in faith itself, i.e. “you just have to believe”?

Sola Gratia

1. What are your impressions of Abraham in the Bible? Or some other “saint” in Scripture? Did you feel they in any way deserved their divine appointments?
2. Can you identify ways in which the church, perhaps inadvertently, tried to predict, calculate, or manipulate God’s free grace?
3. In what ways have we misread our own individual stories in the shadow of deservingness rather than in the light of God’s amazing grace?
4. How should recognizing God’s grace to us affect our personal lives and the way we relate to others?

Soli Deo Gloria

1. What images and ideas are evoked when you hear the word “home”?
2. What do you think it means to find ourselves “at home” with God? What might part of that experience be for us here and now?
3. How do the Reformation’s themes of Scripture alone, Faith alone, Christ alone, Grace alone, and Glory to God alone help us in this spiritual journey toward home with God?
4. In what ways might we inadvertently take glory away from God?

The Reformation: What Did We Gain? What Did We Lose?

1. What have you known, heard, or read about the Reformation? What do you appreciate the most about it?
2. Doctrinal differences have divided the church from the Reformation until today. How do you feel about this disunity? How can Christians work together more closely?
3. Have you experienced worship in a different Christian tradition? What was different from, or similar to, your home church? What did you learn from that experience?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your church’s leadership structure? How has it been shaped by the Reformation?
5. How do you navigate relationships with Christians from other denominations, especially those who are very different? Where could you improve?