

The Reformation in Light of a Christian Formation Perspective

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The commemoration of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation is a worldwide celebration. In Spain, for example, we find reformers that in their studies of the Bible, discovered the message of salvation through divine grace alone and through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Constantino Ponce de la Fuente, Antonio del Corro, Cipriano de Valera y Casiodoro de Reina, among other Spanish theologians were also pillars of the Reformation, which eventually changed the Christian panorama of the entire world.

Spiritual growth is an integral and natural element of our relationship with Christ, and the Reformation has also changed the way of conceiving and practicing Christian formation. The Reformation, among its many positive aspects, has helped to understand that this spiritual growth requires a mutual edification among believers and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Also, the access to the Scriptures to all people in their own language, and the doctrine concerning the priesthood of all believers, have contributed to a more holistic, personal, and egalitarian spiritual formation.

It is also necessary, however, to acknowledge that the Reformation bestowed negative legacies in our Christian formation, perspective and practice. Many of its valuable strengths, such as the importance of the priesthood of all believers, have become through the passing of time, one of its weaknesses that have directly impacted the practice of Christianity and Christian education. The loss of the value of tradition and the history of the Church, especially during the past century, together with the growth of independent churches, are also some of those unfortunate practical consequences of the Reformation. This article addresses with broad strokes, six positive legacies and six negative legacies from the

Reformation, legacies that have impacted the perspective and practice of Christian formation.

Positive Legacies From the Reformation

The Reformation made many positive contributions to Christian formation. Its influence on Christianity has made its way around the world, and has nurtured millions of people with the fruits of a personal and communitarian relationship with the Lord Creator of the universe. As a Christian educator, I find six positive legacies from the Reformation that have strengthened the practice of spiritual formation.

1. On account of the Reformation, the meaning of the gospel and Christian faith have acquired greater clarity.

The key themes of the Reformation may be summarized under the follow Latin phrases *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *solus Christus* (Christ alone). These phrases summarize the simplicity of the gospel of Christ, and serve also for the believers to easier understand it and make it their own. The God of the gospel is not far away or hidden in a religious labyrinth, but rather is present for all those searching and wanting to make the gospel their very own gift.

Sola gratia emphasizes that our salvation becomes possible only by God's grace without human works (Eph. 2:8-9). The grace of God is an unmerited favor that comes to us from God's initiative and is a central mark of Christianity. *Sola fide* stresses that this salvation comes only through our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Even though we all are sinners, we are justified because of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, and we are saved by faith (Rom. 5:1). *Sola Scriptura* emphasizes that the Word of God is the only source of authority in matters of faith and conduct for all believers (2. Tim. 3:16-17). The Bible, and not any church's magisterium, dictates our Christian life. *Solus Christus* emphasizes that Christ is the foundation of our lives and faith, and the only one who deserves our worship and complete surrender (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

Christian formation, therefore, focuses on the simplicity of the gospel. From the Reformation, we all know that the salvation that God offers is a gift that God himself provides by means of his own grace, and

is received through faith in Jesus Christ. The fountainhead of authority for the faith and conduct of Christians is the Bible, and Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. Christianity is not based on a series of complicated religious presuppositions but rather on the sacrifice on Christ on the cross for us sinners. The message and practice of the gospel of Christ is simple and easily transmitted from generation to generation.

2. The Reformation made it possible for the Scriptures to be easily accessible to all.

God reveals himself through many means, but specially through Christ, the incarnate Word of God, and through the Bible, God's written Word. The Bible has been called "the love letter from the Father," for it is through the Scriptures that God speaks to every person, to every culture, and to every social context.

Christian formation employs the Scriptures as the source of authority and guide for all believers. The Reformation has enabled God's message to be accessible to all and that it be not regarded as the sole possession of a few religious leaders. Consequently, it is crucial for healthy Christian formation that everyone may be able to read and study the Bible for themselves. For Christians, it has become customary to carry the Bible under the arm, for it is a faithful friend in Christian gatherings. Today is almost unimaginable to practice the Christian faith without the Bible being our means of support and guidance.

3. The Reformation emphasized that the message of Christ be accessible to all.

Through Jesus Christ, Christians enjoy a relationship with God without the need of priests or other intermediaries. Therefore, the royal priesthood of all believers signals that all believers are precious to God and that there are no second-rate Christians.

Minorities around the world have regularly seen real oppression and discrimination. The normal tendency for all dominant groups is to control and oppress all minorities and marginal groups. Human beings tend to make distinction among themselves along the lines of ethnicity, economic status and nationality. Nevertheless, Christ is near to all. The

gospel of Christ is for everybody regardless of any human distinction. In fact, Christ's light particularly shines on the poor and oppressed. Christian formation recognizes that we are all poor in spirit, and need Christ's light in our lives.

The family is the context where one may perceive more clearly the way that the gospel of Christ reaches all people. The Reformation fomented the practice of educating the children in the faith under parental tutelage, and the support of the extended family. Christian education finds the home the ideal place to proclaim the faith and foster spiritual growth. Latinos have understood well, that the family is the essential base for Christian formation, and that the Christian faith is not limited to Sundays. This is why the Latino church is a role model to other believers, that the gospel of Christ is to be understood and lived out organically, and that it is more than the methods and programs preferred in this endeavor among other cultures.

4. The Reformation's emphasis on the grace of God has taught us that spiritual disciplines are not a means to receive God's favor.

Grace declares that God's favor is unmerited and cannot be reached through human virtues. Grace also emphasizes that God is good and fills us with his love out of his own will, without depending on our works. Spiritual disciplines enable us to grow in our relationship with God—who has already made us his own through Christ.

Consequently, Christians are free to respond in love to God, and are not obligated to find ways on how to find his love. Christian formation is grounded in the realization that it is God who acts among us through the Holy Spirit, and not because of our own merits. The legacy entrusted to all believers, is that God's grace and divine favor are not a mere practice of traditional religions—for they are influenced in effect by works and religious practices.

5. The Reformation emphasized that the church is a caring community and above all, a true family.

The family is essential for all human beings. The church is not a place limited to individual devotion, for it also represents a family gathering where Christ is at the center.

For many Christians who, like my father, became outcasts because of their faith in Christ, the church became their true family. Brothers and sisters in Christ offer strong and profound family bonds. For believers, there is no greater joy than to have family members, blood brothers and sisters, share together their common faith as brothers and sisters in Christ. However, even if this ideal condition does not materialize, the church is always an extended family for all Christians.

The Reformation reminded believers, that the church is truly a family, and that it is through interpersonal relationships that we are able to grow in the faith and strengthen our Christian experiences. Christian formation is always communitarian and it is shaped always as such within the context of the church. Because of the Reformation, believers can understand that participating in church worship is more than listening to a sermon. It is also encouraging one another as Scripture clearly compels us to do (Hebrews 10:24-25).

6. The Reformation emphasized the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers.

The Holy Spirit is essential for Christianity and Christian formation. Only the Holy Spirit changes peoples' lives that they be pleasing to God. Consequently, Christian formation loses its meaning and purpose without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

It is through the Holy Spirit, who treats us all alike, that the God of the universe is present among all of us as followers of Christ. The Spirit sustains and guides us, in order that we may have a strong bond with the Triune God. The Reformation reminds us that God does not remain far removed or inaccessible, but rather very near to us, as he makes his dwelling in our very heart and community.

The experience of the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit is a characteristic of the Latino church. The free expression of emotions and the expectation of the power of the Holy Spirit in the church, belong to the very core of the Latino context. This may be one of the reasons why today Latinos and others, are attracted to the Pentecostal movement. Nevertheless, this legacy from the Reformation concerning the active presence of the Spirit with believers, is becoming evident also among other churches.

During the past five hundred years, the Reformation has provided a spirit of renewal to Christianity. Its legacy has been positive concerning Christian formation and the life of the church. As Christians, we celebrate that Christ is with us, and bestows his mercy to all. All who search earnestly will find him.

Negative Legacies From the Reformation

We have though, also inherited negative legacies from the Reformation in reference to Christian formation. Christianity has grown numerically in many places, but at the same time the quality and commitment have decreased. Many have taken the lesser road and cheapened the Christian faith in the pursuit of Christian formation. There are many discrepancies and short-cuts taken concerning what are the essential foundations for spiritual growth. The following are six barriers to Christian formation, that may be attributed directly or indirectly to the Reformation.

1. In emphasizing personal experience, some Reformation legacies have contributed to the downplay of tradition and to the history of the church.

God has been edifying his church in the world for more than two thousand years. Christian tradition is important. It reminds us that Christianity is formed and shaped in community, and that the Holy Spirit has been guiding the faithful throughout the history of the church. The historic denominations born as a direct result of the Reformation, tend to value the history and tradition of the church. Unfortunately, the evangelical movement has neglected these essential elements. This attitude has been duplicated in many independent and emerging congregations.

The Christian faith is not limited to the present, or to a specific determined social context. Our faith and God's acts are ever present throughout history, and are relevant among all societies. Salvation is a gift that needs to be appropriated personally, but it needs to be also a community experience with historical roots. When we disregard God's work among other believers in the present and the past, we are also

vulnerable to a myopic faith that cannot perceive the fullness of the divine work in the church.

2. The abuse and lack of understanding concerning the priesthood of all believers, brought to the forefront by the Reformation, has given an opportunity for many Christians to regard their faith as a merely private affair.

Christianity, especially in the West, emphasizes a very personal and individualistic faith, which disregards the need of the community in Christian formation. The individualistic Anglo-Saxon protestant culture has influenced the practice of Christian formation.

The reading of Scripture is one example of the way we practice Christianity from a very private perspective. Since the onset of the Christian church, believers came together to listen and meditate on the Scriptures. The community of faith shared with one another, what they had heard, and how the reading of the Scriptures impacted their Christian faith. Today it is a very common practice, for Christians to just read the Scriptures in the privacy of their homes, whereas the practice to go to church to read, mediate, and share the Scriptures with one another, has taken a back seat in seeking spiritual growth.

The priesthood of all believers is essential for our Christian formation, but the abuse of this doctrinal teaching among several Christian groups, has tragically impacted the essential nature of faith, and the church as community. The church is the people of God, and as the people of God we are to care and support one another. Christian formation affords a great opportunity to understand correctly Christian community as essential to Christian life.

3. Through the democratization of the Christian faith, the Reformation legacy has indirectly, given way to a Christian faith without responsibility for each other among believers.

This state of affairs did not arise as a direct consequence of the actions of the Reformation movement, but it has very much become a part of the evangelical movement and other Protestant groups. Sadly, it is very common to find an abuse of power among pastors and lay leaders who believe that they do not have to give any accountability for their

actions within in the community of faith. The growth of independent churches without any ecclesiastical structure for accountability, creates the kind of culture where every believer, leader, pastor, or independent congregation, believes that they can do what they wish within the kingdom of God without any kind of responsibility or direction.

Christian formation within this atmosphere of total disregard for mutual responsibility, departs from the sense of order and structure practiced by the church in general. The church then becomes fertile ground, for everyone to promote only their self-interests. God acts in various ways and bestows different spiritual gifts to each believer, and our spirituality is experienced personally in unique ways, but this reality should not result in anarchy in our Christian lives and in Christian formation.

4. Even though the Reformation enabled the teaching of the gospel with clarity and simplicity, it also contributed to great divisions in reference to secondary beliefs.

The Reformation made possible a clear understanding of the essential elements of the gospel. At the same time, however, it became more complicated to distinguish between essential and secondary matters of faith, because the Reformation enabled different interpretations concerning these matters. This resulted in the formation of new denominations—some founded solely because of discrepancies concerning secondary theological matters.

Antonio del Corro, a Spanish reformer, once pointed out that sometimes secondary doctrines and practices had been elevated to the level of essential doctrines, as if they were a fifth gospel. This theological practice had to be opposed. This rejection was necessary, not because these doctrines were not good or salutary, but because they could be attributed as infallible teachings and with the same authority and importance as Scripture. Sadly, some Christians emphasize those secondary Christian teachings much more than that which is of the very essence of Christianity. An authentic Christian formation values the diversity present within the body of Christ, and the different ways in which the Holy Spirit works in the faithful.

5. The emphasis of evangelism apart from discipleship formation, has been one of the practices developed after the Reformation that has resulted in a weak practice of the Christian faith.

For many, evangelism has become the one and only purpose for the church. This situation has given way to the erroneous teaching, that the only purpose of the gospel is for the Christian to receive admission to heaven, but that it has nothing to do with our daily lives. Consequently, many believe that to be a Christian is simply dependent on a salvation-prayer, without an holistic understanding of the Christian life, and that it simply optional to submit our lives to Christ's lordship. This overly simplistic way of understanding Christianity, has resulted in seeing Christian formation and discipleship, as secondary tasks for the church, instead of being a central focus for all believers.

Consequently, an unconscious division has been established between the Lord of salvation and the Lord of creation, without recognizing that the same Lord reigns over all. This division keeps apart the "secular" from the "sacred," in spite of the truth that Christ, as Creator and Sovereign of all, compels us to recognize everything under his reign and rule, as "sacred." A Christian faith not committed to all aspects of life, and not wishing to engage in all areas of life, becomes a faith based in "cheap grace," as defined by the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

6. The expansion of Christianity after the Reformation among free market economies, has given way to a crass commercialization of the faith.

On the one hand, many Christian materials and resources have been made easily available around the world. There are a number of diverse Christian publishing houses that serve the various and distinct communities of faith. On the other hand, however, in many instances, economic profit has become one of the main reasons if not the only reason, for the production of those resources. The Christian faith has been commercialized at the same time that it has spread around the world. The Church, especially in the United States, has fallen prey to an over-commercializing of the faith.

For the purpose of Christian formation, this commercialization has resulted in the merchandising of countless resources that intend to provide the proper means for spiritual growth. These resources however, often describe a simplistic understanding of the Christian faith. This, together with the vast proliferation of resources, has made it difficult for pastors and leaders to find among such diversity of offerings, adequate materials for their churches. Christian formation is more than completing ten lessons from courses, though they be beautifully illustrated and printed. Christian education requires in-depth studies, that are published for those very needed reasons, rather than because market analysis indicates that certain products offer a better chance of increased sales and profits.

Finally, the “prosperity gospel” presents the same distorted message that originated in the Reformation. Luther protested the flawed perspective, that believers can earn God’s favor through our monetary offerings. For in Luther’s day, the Roman Catholic Church was promoting the distribution of Indulgences, as a way to limit the time a person had to spend in Purgatory. In our day, many so called “Christian leaders” proclaim that God’s blessings come to believers, only if they “have faith” in him as manifested in their economic offerings. The basic principle behind Indulgence sales, and the present economic blessings message, is that money can buy God’s favor upon believers. Sadly, this distorted teaching distorts and drifts from the important contribution the Reformation made to Christianity.

We have inherited, therefore, various problems from our Reformation heritage that have created barriers to Christian formation. An exaggerated individualism and a simplistic understanding of the Christian faith, have created constant division in the body of Christ, rather than promoting the unity that should characterize and identify our common discipleship as followers of Christ. As such, we should always reflect on how God’s voice is not something exclusive for our very own enjoyment, but that God is present within the body of believers as a whole, for us to listen to and follow.

12 Theses for Christian Formation

With a clear understanding that the Lord is the one who works in all believers to will and to work for his good pleasure, and that the Church’s

desire is grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, I propose the following theses as foundational principles for Christian formation:

1. Salvation in Christ is for everybody regardless of age, culture or any other circumstance.
2. God speaks and understands all languages, and therefore, the Bible needs to be available for all as the Word of God that leads and sustains us.
3. The God of the universe is close to the poor and marginalized, and his light shines in all who recognize their desperate need of him.
4. God's love and favor is for all, and his grace frees us from secondary religious bindings imposed by our society and culture.
5. The Church is a family and a community that provides the essential support for Christian formation.
6. The presence and work of the Holy Spirit makes possible spiritual growth in all believers, and allows us to worship the Lord freely.
7. The history and tradition of the Church are important, and remind us that the Christian faith is communal, and that we need to learn from each other as followers of Christ.
8. An extreme individualism fails to represent Christ's desire for his Church, and distorts our communal Christian formation.
9. All believers are responsible for mutual accountability, and are to acknowledge that no church or Christian group is superior to others.
10. Differences on secondary doctrinal beliefs do not provide a justification for breaking communion with other believers, because we affirm the unity of the body of Christ.
11. Christian formation and evangelism should always be united, and together they represent a faith in which Christ is Lord of all.
12. Christian formation resources should be available for all believers, regardless of their economic situation, and we acknowledge that God's favor comes freely to all believers only because of God's grace.