

Children of the Reformation: Orphans or heirs?

John 14:15-31 ([NIV](#))

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Let us pray:

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.¹

Let me start with three well-known facts about the reformation:

First, at the time of the Reformation, the Scriptures had become a strange book, unable to be read and thus unable to be understood by the vast majority of people who called themselves Christians. But, God did not leave His church orphaned. He raised up reformers who saw the need to make the Word of God available to God's people. They, and their supporters, undertook translations in the language of the people. And they insisted on faithful translations. One even wrote of those who substitute false interpretations for the actual meanings of Scripture: they belong "to the synagogue of the Antichrist".

Second well-known fact: At the time of the Reformation, as empire fell apart, new nations, kings, and peoples arose. The church, which had become too comfortable with its imperial position, was unprepared for these changes. But God did not leave His people orphaned: He raised up leaders to give the church vision to see His way through the deep waters and to view the new nations and peoples as a new opportunity for the Gospel.

Third well-known fact. At the time of the Reformation, the vast majority of the clergy were unable to lead because they had become dissolute morally, vacuous spiritually, and dull intellectually. Priests had begun asking for and receiving money for what should have been normal spiritual activity. Nobles were even able to buy the power to become clergy. Clergy were found living with multiple wives or in other sinful relationships. Learning had fallen to its lowest levels in hundreds of years. But God did not leave His people orphans: He raised up reformers who swept through the dissolute ranks of the clergy like a fire through a dry brush. In doing so, they stimulated a renaissance of Christian learning that hadn't been seen for centuries.

There is much that we could say about the reformation. But I believe that you would all agree with me that, while there is much more that could be said about the reformation, the three things that I have listed are not only true, but also fundamental to what we know as the reformation.

But, here is an interesting question for you: Do you know which reformation have I just been talking about?

You look at me puzzled. You may say: "Well, obviously, the reformation, the one that we celebrate today, the one that you have in fact been invited to speak about!"

Are you sure? What if I were to tell you that there were other reformations throughout the history of God's church? And what if I were to tell you that all of the descriptions that I have just been giving, including the quotes, are from reformations other than the one that you are thinking about tonight?

Let me tell you which reformation, or better said, which reformations, I was just speaking about.

¹ Collect for All Saints Day, Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

First, providing the Scriptures in the language of the people. I was speaking about the work of the reformers of the fourth century, of men like St. Jerome,² who realized that the Greek Scriptures were no longer sufficient for communicating the truth of the Gospel to people. Jerome and others also realized that the Greek Scriptures, especially of the Old Testament, were not always faithful to the revealed text of God's Word. So they began and completed a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Latin, the language of the people. In fact, it was Jerome who wrote of how those who substitute false interpretations for the actual meanings of Scripture belong "to the synagogue of the Antichrist".³ Martin Luther and William Tyndale clearly echoed what Jerome had said and done 11 centuries earlier.

Second, when I spoke about a Church that had become so closely tied to Empire and of new nations that were arising, I was referring to the reformation of the church under St. Benedict in the 6th century. Benedict lived at a time when the Roman Empire, which had become Christian 3 centuries earlier, was collapsing. Benedict, along with other reformers of his day, sought to find a way to help the church, which had grown very comfortable with secular rule, to recover essential elements of what made it a church. To do so, he encouraged priests to look to God, not to the Emperor. To do so he founded monasteries and to orient these monasteries, he wrote a Rule -- the Rule of Saint Benedict.⁴ Over half of the chapters in Benedict's Rule deal with how to be a humble Christian, one who is obedient first of all to God. These monasteries successfully spread the Word of God into the new lands of northern Europe. The same situation that faced Luther and Calvin and Cranmer was first faced by Benedict and other reformers 9 centuries earlier.

Third, which reformation deal with clergy who were failing to lead the people of God in the way of God? Of course the reformation of the 16th century did, but so, too, did the reformation of the 11th century under Pope Gregory VII. This profound reformation at the turn of the millennium is in fact considered to have been the first European Revolution. Gregory, like St. Benedict, also sought to rein in the church's continual failing of always becoming too comfortable with secular power. But Gregory also sought to reign in the abuses of the church's own leaders: bishops and priests and even leaders of monasteries. Gregory went so far as to dispense the people from obedience to bishops and priests who violated their vows. In order to deal with the profound sexual dysfunction among the clergy, one that was beginning to trickle down to the laity, Gregory declared priestly celibacy as requisite of all clergy. In doing so, Gregory, and his successors after him, stimulated perhaps the most significant renaissance of Christian learning ever. It became known as "the renaissance of the 12th century".⁵ The amazing intellectual advances of that renaissance produced men like Anselm of Canterbury, Albert the Great, and his student, Thomas Aquinas. (Just to give you a hint of how profound this intellectual reformation was, Albert the Great produced volumes of work not only on philosophy and theology but also on meteorology, mineralogy, and dentistry, as well as other fields!)

I could go on to cite dozens of other Reformations, church-wide or local. I could go on to cite dozens of other reformers, like Saint Augustine, Saint Boniface, and so on.

But, I'll leave the list here, because I think that you get my point. And if you haven't, let me tell you what it is, because it is important that you not leave here tonight without knowing what it is. My point is that at no time in the history of Christ's Holy Catholic Church has God left His church orphaned: the Spirit of Truth has always been moving in and through the Church, raising up prophets to challenge and reform the one church when it has strayed. To deny that or even to overlook that God has always been doing this, to suggest, for example, that there has only ever been one reformation that matters in the 2000 years of the church, is simple ignorance of history and of the care and goodness of God for His Church. For, my friends, the simple truth is that God has never left His church orphaned. Ever.

The Protestant reformation of the 16th century is no less an example of that. And here I think of not only John Calvin and John Knox, but also of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli and Archbishop Cranmer, along with a host of others. No, the reformation of the 16th century clearly is no less an example of reformation than the ones that I began with tonight. In fact, in the Reformation of the 16th century, many of the things that motivated earlier reformations all came together. Thus, we might say that the Reformation of the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation, was in some sense a kind of snapshot of the three things that all Reformations of God's Holy Catholic Church have been and always will be about: (1) keeping God's Word as the direction for the Church, (2) always being God's Church in the world but never of the world, and (3) fostering the holiness of the Body of Christ, which is, and always has been, one.

²J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

³ St. Jerome, *The Dialogue against the Luciferians*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church : St. Jerome: Letters and select works*, 1893. Second Series By Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, p. 334.

⁴Benedict and Justin McCann, *The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and English* (trans. Justin McCann; ed. Justin McCann; London: Burns Oates, 1952).

⁵Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1957).

But, my point tonight is that it is important that you also know that the reformation of the 16th century is no more of an example of reformation than the others. Those who are constantly looking back to the 16th century as a “Golden Age”, when the battle-lines were laid down and acting as if those are still the battles to be fought today, ignore the rest of the examples of God’s faithfulness in reforming His church, including examples before the 16th century and after.

Those who look at the reformation of the 16th century as the only reformation between the ascension of our Lord and Martin Luther ignore God’s faithful acts for 1500 years. Those who look back to the 16th century as the last moment of reformation act as if the enemy of that day were still the enemy today, as if 15th century popular Catholic superstitions, late medieval religious piety, and Anabaptist anarchy were still haunting the land. They ignore the fact that the 16th century reformation, like all other reformations of Christ’s holy Catholic Church, was successful in its day, but that other reformations have been and always will be needed to keep Christ’s one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church on track. That was true in the first century, the 16th century, and today.

No, there was much good that came of the 16th century reformation.

But, there was also something that came of the 16th century reformation that itself now stands of need of having reformed. For, after the 16th century, something happened that did not happen in earlier reformations. What was that? In no reformation did the heirs go off and create their own church, severing themselves from the larger body of the family and thus making themselves orphans.

Let us remember what a reformation is. Every reformation is a prophetic movement of God, aimed at bringing the people of God of a particular time in history back to God. This is true of the reformation of the 16th century. And it is true of all those earlier reformations of the Church that I mentioned earlier. But it is also true of all great reformations even before the incarnation of our Lord, that is, the various reformations of Israel brought about by the great prophets of Israel.

The followers of Saint Jerome and Pope Gregory sought the reformation of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church, not the creation of a new church. The followers of Saint Jerome did not become Jeromists, any more than the followers of Pope Gregory become Gregorians. True, the followers of Benedict did create a Benedictine order, but it was within the church, not over against the church.

Even in the Old Testament, the prophets sought the reformation of Israel, not the creation of a purer entity alongside Israel. The followers of Jeremiah did not found the Jeremiahist Church; they remained part of Israel. The followers of Elijah did not found the Elijahist Assembly; they remained part of Israel, the one tree onto which you and I as Gentile believers were grafted, again according to the apostle Paul (Romans 11).

But the heirs of the 16th century reformation, for a variety of reasons, separated themselves and created first one and then another and then another church. And once they had done that, creations of other churches came even easier: once there was one split, a multitude of splits followed. First it was over Episcopal or Presbyterian government, then among Presbyterians it was over a variety of issues. How many different kinds of Presbyterian churches are there today? How many different reformed churches are there today?

And so what started as a prophetic reformation of the body of Christ in the world ended up as the creation of multiple churches, all claiming to be the true church. In the United States today, a country whose essential identity reflects much of the aftermath of the 16th century reformation, there are over 30,000 different Christian denominations claiming to be the way God intended things to be!⁶ Even in my own home town of 200 people in the United States, a man set up his own denomination, meeting as a church in his house, with about 8 people in his congregation and denomination, claiming to be the true church.

My friends, this is not biblical. According to Paul “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:4-5)

As a result of this kind of separation, all of God’s people -- reformed, Catholic, orthodox, and all the rest -- are poorer. Those who cut themselves from other Christians may be heirs of particular prophetic reform movements, but in doing so they also

⁶Craig D. Atwood, Frank S. Mead, and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).

make themselves orphans in flagrant opposition to the Lord's promise never to leave His people orphaned. As orphans, they impoverish themselves -- becoming unable to draw on the full benefits and gifts found only in the fullness of the body of Christ -- and they impoverish their brothers and sisters from whom they are cut off -- depriving them of needed gifts that the "orphans" alone can provide. I know that this is true when I try to get a hearing for reformed theology in contexts of catholic and orthodox brethren.

But, if this is so, how can those who know themselves to be children of God, even those who are heirs of the 16th century reformation but now, even contrary to the hopes of the Reformers themselves, cut off from the rest of the body, how can they restore their birth-right as children of God, and cease to be orphans, wandering separate from the rest of the body of Christ? How can reformed Christians once again be prophetic for the whole body of Christ rather than just talking among themselves?

First of all let me say that I am not going to propose that you need to become Anglicans to do so. Don't worry. Anglicans have their own problems and need your prophetic voice at this time, as must as you need to hear some of the things that Anglicans might have to tell you.

No, that is not the way, but I think that I can propose at least 3 things that the heirs of the reformation of the 16th century can do not only to rejoice as heirs of the reformation but also as true and full heirs of Christ in the full salvation that He is bringing about and to be prophetic as God has called us to be prophetic.

First, reformed Christians must begin to discern our other brothers and sisters in the body of Christ and be in fellowship with them. We need to speak to them and hear what they are saying to us. This will be difficult for many who still see Roman Catholics, or Anabaptists, or even Eastern Orthodox as "the enemy".

Recently at St. George's where I am priest, we held a series on the Nicene Creed. I arranged to have Anglican, United, Christian Reformed, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Ukrainian Catholic, and Orthodox speakers address every article of the creed. All of them were orthodox, brothers in Christ. The people of St. George's were overwhelmed by the common voice with which they spoke. And, yes, many were challenged by seeing things from another perspective, but one which they realized was biblical and faithful. (You can find all of their presentations on [my web site](#).)

Tonight you are doing something similar, and bold, by having me speak to you as a brother in Christ, that is, as someone whom you know to be both washed by the blood of the Lamb and tested in the academic fire to see whether I would uphold the faith. I assume that pulpit exchanges and other kinds of activities will result in the same kind of recovery of our inheritance and our ability to contribute our gifts for the benefit of the whole church.⁷

Second, we reformed Christians need to become the church in the world without being of the world. We need to continue to find the best ways to reflect in the world that loveliness and wonder of God that we proclaim in word. This is an aesthetic challenge to all of us. Many find reformed worship dry and lifeless. The challenge is to make worship full and rich without it becoming idolatrous. How can we mirror to the world, and to anyone who might step in to any of our assemblies, the wonder of God.

I know that this is a challenge to those who see the sacraments as something so holy that they need to be safeguarded at all costs. But the full understanding of the sacraments in the Christian church is that they are the visible manifestation of the inward grace operative in individuals and in the church. What we want to do is find the best way to manifest outwardly what is happening inwardly, what God is doing in giving Himself to the world, in the lives of believers, in the lives of churches, in the lives of nations and peoples. Music, the Eucharist, the arts, physical expression.... all of these have attendant dangers that the reformers of the 16th century wanted to guard against because of the abuses of their period. But, brought under the lordship of Christ, the sacraments are a way in which God is made manifest in all 5 senses, not just the two privileged by the reformation -- oral and aural. The sacraments have been the way that the liturgy has always spoken to the full woman and to the full man. As even Calvin acknowledged, if we were angels, God would not have given us bread and wine to feed on, but we are not, and so He has!

⁷ This same suggestion is made by the late Presbyterian theologian, Donald G. Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity Amid Diversity* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983).

While I could go on with other ways to regain our full inheritance in Christ,⁸ I want to mention just one third and final challenge to those of us who are heirs of the 16th century reformation, and one that will be addressed by God in a reformation in our day or in the day of our children.

You and I need to work together with other brothers and sisters in the body of Christ to proclaim the gospel in the world. Missionaries around the world have found that, while at home they might be divided from fellow missionaries by denominational divisions, on the mission field, they are always working together. They know that martyrdom will not come to the Anglicans as Anglicans, or the Roman Catholics as Roman Catholics, or the Presbyterians as Presbyterians but to all of them as Christians.

From the beginning the church has been called to mission. But the Church has often reached a point where it says “we’ve done enough try to reach others”. Or, the Church looks beyond its national borders and sees a bunch of barbarians out there who are not worthy of the gospel -- many of those barbarians spoke foreign languages, like Frisian, or Gaelic, or even Arabic. It is then that God will prophetically raise up missionaries like St Boniface and St Patrick and St Raymond Lull and others to risk their lives by bringing the good news to them.

Thanks be to God that, in the West, missionaries did go to the “barbarians” at the gate, when they went north to the farthest reaches of Vikingdom, West to the edges of the “new world”, and East to the Russian steppes.

But, God will also let the people of God see what happens if they do not bring God’s love to the barbarian. This is what happened in the 6th century when Byzantine Christians were so busy fighting among themselves about fine points of doctrine and Christian practice -- like who should be baptized -- that they didn’t care about what was happening to the south of them, with the Arab tribes on their doorstep. These “filthy barbarians” as they saw the Arabs were deemed unworthy of the gospel, which had in fact already spread as far as Egypt and Ethiopia. So God allowed Mohamed to arise in Arabia and create a religion that did care about Arabs.⁹ The heirs of 6th century Christians soon reaped the consequences of their predecessors’ failure to bring the gospel to all nations. The peoples of reformation -- and counter-reformation! -- Europe were still reaping the consequences centuries later. And lo and behold, we are, in fact, still reaping the consequences today. The failure of mission has indeed very long lasting consequences!

We are also reaping the consequences of the failure of the children of the 16th century reformation who spent more time fighting among themselves for power and wealth and honour for most of the past 5 centuries rather than bringing the gospel into all the world that was even under their control. This includes most pertinently for me the failure to make the university a place where God is fully honoured and where God’s world is delighted in. As a result we are reaping the consequences of what happens when Christians stopped being missionaries to the learned of their own lands and handed over learning and science to atheists and those who hate those who are different from them. The battlegrounds of the 20th century bear more testimony to our willingness to be orphans than to the power of God to work through the whole body of Christ for the salvation of the world.¹⁰

Let me conclude:

It is the need for yet another reformation of the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church today that is leading the various separated bodies of faithful Christians to come together. This is not union for the sake of union or for the institution. This is the coming-together of the brothers and sisters of our Lord.

What is bringing us together? The same things that strikingly brought reform-minded Christians together in previous reformations:

- an awareness of a common faith in God’s Word,
- the realization that the church we believe in is not the world,

⁸ I invite those who are interested to explore this more to get a copy of Bloesch’s book and to explore the several ways that he identified for the believing sons and daughters of our Lord to come together.

⁹ Read the full story in the excellent work by Albert Habib Hourani, *History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ For an eloquent call to mission to this forgotten mission-field, see the works of Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (with a postscript by S. Wesley Ariarajah; The Risk Book Series.18; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983); Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks the Gospel and Western Culture* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986).

- a demand for holiness,

as well as those legacies of the 16th century that now must themselves be reformed:

- the scandal of denominational splits and divisions among Christians,
- the unloveliness of our liturgies and churches and lives that cause many to wonder what kind of a dreary and uninteresting and ultimately boring God it is that we delight in, and
- the failure of the 16th century reformation to call the church to mission.

All of these factors, and others, are leading reformed Christians -- especially young reformed Christians -- to seek common cause with other Evangelicals, as well as with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters to find ways to work together as brothers and sisters in the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

I think that it is very likely that when the heirs of today's reformation look back on their inheritance, they will see the overcoming of our division and the union of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ as perhaps the greatest highlight of this reformation. When they do, they will see that we are echoing earlier reformations in which great divisions among the people of God have been overcome as the church in the world shows that it is the one body of Christ. And they will rejoice that God awoke us out of our backward looking slumber to recognize that as He did not leave His church orphaned in the 16th century, so He never has, not even in the 21st century, but raised up a mighty salvation for us, even as He did for His people Israel.

And so, it is for that reason that I happily conclude, as I began, with a collect from the very reformed Anglican Book of Common Prayer:

“O gracious Father, we humbly beseech thee for thy holy Catholic church; that thou wouldst be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and rose again, and ever liveth to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord.”

Amen