

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Commemorating the Reformation:

**We Are All Hussites: The
Authority of the Church and
*Sola Scriptura***

**Babel, the Reformation, and a
Search for God's Grace**

**Reformation Interview: 'We
Beseech God' to Heal Past
Relationships**

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Century**

Mother's Day and the End Times



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Editorial

‘Reform’ and ‘Reformation’

POLITICIAN PRESTON MANNING made “Reform” a Canadian byword a couple of decades ago. He loved the word “reform” so much that he named his political party the Reform Party of Canada. The implication of using such a term was that the Canadian Right had somehow slipped from its mandate. The intention of this reform was to improve the conservative movement by removing defects and correcting errors in the political platform.

As the movement continued it began to take on new faces and new names. At first, the Reform Party stood as an alternative to the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. And while the popularity of the Reform Party grew, the Progressive Conservatives shrank in support. Eventually the two parties formed an agreement to join forces and now called themselves the Canadian

Alliance Party. Stockwell Day replaced Preston Manning as the leading light of the party and the movement began to make some noise in Parliament.

Interestingly enough, the party continued to morph, at least in name, and became the Conservative Party of Canada. The path is humorous: from Progressive Conservative to Reform, from Reform to Alliance, from Alliance to Conservative Party of Canada. It appears that the path of political reform came full circle.

Rather than highlight the futility of this circular path, looking beneath the surface one discovers that the desire for reform led to an awakening. The names may have changed and then returned to its foundation eventually, but along the way there was a journey of reimagining core values and beliefs. It was, after all, a necessary revolution.

Martin Luther may never have used the exact term “reform,” but his intention, based on a passionate love for the Word and the Church, was an awakening. He evaluated the Church of his era and surmised that the earthly body of Christ had lost its way. The sale of indulgences and the veneration of holy relics detracted from the central focus of salvation by faith, in his opinion. So Luther spoke out, preached against papal abuses, and nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenburg Church door.

Five hundred years ago, the Church of Jesus Christ experienced what historians and theologians now call The Reformation. Some might look back on this history and declare that a great division occurred and blighted the testimony of Church unity. Certainly a great number of denominations arose out of the shattering. However, five hundred years later we are beginning to experience a blurring of the lines between denominations. And this for the better in some respects.

Even though there exist some great differences between the denominations, there are certain common

aspects that the churches celebrate. They have Christ’s work on the cross in common. They have the Word of God as the authority of church and life. They have the same Holy Spirit who makes them one family. They agree on these foundational pieces and are striving for a better understanding of each other.

Martin Luther never intended to “split” the Church. His hope was to reform the only Church that he knew. Circumstances were such that a radical separation had to take place so that the convictions of this priest could be realized. He famously said, “Here I stand, so help me God. I can do no other.” Reformation was the result; the people of God were awakened to the Church proper.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not known primarily by denominations. Jesus said, “...a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24). The Church of Jesus Christ is known by those who worship the Father, not by affiliations.

You hold in your hands the commemorative edition of *Theodidaktos*. We are remembering the courageous stand of all the Reformers who stood for truth against overwhelming odds. We commemorate specifically the figure of Martin Luther and his stand against error in the Church. To study this event in such a way is to remember from where we have come and who we are now as the Church. *Θ*

Martin Luther never intended to “split” the Church. His hope was to reform the only Church that he knew.



Dr. Darryl G.
Klassen

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Is Biblical Inerrancy Historical?



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INERRANCY OF THE BIBLE has become for many in North America a litmus test for orthodoxy. For example, the April 2017 edition of *Theodidaktos* contained an article

from Michael Zwaagstra entitled *The Importance of Biblical Inerrancy*, in which he suggests that inerrancy is a “watershed issue,”¹ and a view that is “longstanding and nearly unanimous [among] Christian

leaders”² throughout church history. Zwaagstra parallels inerrancy closely with orthodoxy,³ and assumes that a denial of inerrancy “inevitably leads to theological liberalism.”⁴

On the other hand, there are untold numbers of biblically faithful Christians from around the world who fully affirm the historic Creeds and the infallibility of the Bible; they believe the Scriptures are completely true and trustworthy, yet do *not* subscribe to inerrancy. These believers

1 Michael Zwaagstra, “The Importance of Biblical Inerrancy,” *Theodidaktos* Volume 12 Number 1 (April 2017): 21.

2 Ibid., 18.

3 Ibid., 20.

4 Ibid., 21.

would in no way suggest that the Bible is an erroneous false document.

Churches from around the world—such as the Anglicans, the Presbyterians, the Baptist World Alliance, the Fellowship of European Evangelicals, and the Mennonite World Conference⁵— all contribute faithfully to the building of God’s Kingdom without ever mentioning inerrancy or the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (hereafter the CSBI⁶) in their statements of faith.

Is this evidence of growing unfaithfulness among the global Church? Or is there a more compelling reason as to why global Christianity fails to embrace inerrancy? This paper will suggest that the diverse non-acceptance of inerrancy is largely due to its new and novel nature. What follows is an engagement with the CSBI claim that inerrancy is the historical position of church leaders throughout history.



I. Defining Inerrancy According to the CSBI

What is inerrancy? This is perhaps the most pressing question we need to answer before we adequately engage the historical data. The short definition supplied in the CSBI is as follows:

Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives.⁷

The CSBI is given context by a series

of nineteen affirmations and denials that clarify the meaning of the above statement. It is in these articles of affirmation and denial that one discovers the vocabulary of inerrancy. The CSBI commits one exclusively to “grammatico-historical exegesis” (Article XVIII), condemns a misinterpretation of a Barthian view of revelation (Article III), and states that inspiration cannot accommodate error (Article IX). Important to our task is that the CSBI makes the claim that its position has been integral to the Church’s faith through its history (Article XVI).

The most striking admission of the CSBI is that inerrancy of Scripture is

Article XII suggests that if something is written by the authors of Scripture, it is true in an empirical modernist rationalist sense.

not limited to *any* realm of knowledge. Whereas infallibility would limit the truthfulness of Scripture to religious and spiritual matters, inerrantists expand it indefinitely. As Article XII states,

We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.⁸

5 This is not an exhaustive list.

6 The complete Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI), produced in 1978, is easily found online by using its title.

7 J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, eds. *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Introduction, xii.

8 *Ibid.*, Introduction, xiii.

Article XII suggests that if something is written by the authors of Scripture, it is true in an empirical modernist rationalist sense. By mentioning “creation and the flood,” the CSBI is asserting that the proto-history of Genesis 1–11 is revealing scientific and historical knowledge, despite some of the signers of the CSBI protesting this interpretation.⁹ Vanhoozer comments that this interpretation of the CSBI is a “modernist/rationalist view [that] takes the text as history and science without error in the modern scholarly sense of error.”¹⁰ Thus inerrancy, as defined by the CSBI, commits the reader to a particular hermeneutic and *a priori* assumptions about the nature of Scripture.

II. Inerrancy Is Historical?

One of the foundational claims of CSBI is that inerrancy has been the view of the Church throughout its history. Hence Article XVI states, “We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church’s faith throughout its

history.”¹¹ Zwaagstra echoes the CSBI statement when he writes, “Throughout church history, the longstanding and nearly unanimous view of prominent Christian leaders was that the Bible was completely inerrant.”¹² If this is a truism, then it lends a prominence to the promulgation of inerrancy. Unfortunately for the veracity of the doctrine, the claim that inerrancy is the historical position of the Church is a well-established error of inerrancy.¹³ How is this so? Let us explore this in more detail.

For starters, the very word “inerrancy” has no occurrence in the Bible, the Early Church Fathers (Patristic era), or the Protestant Reformation. The Bible uses terms like “God Breathed”¹⁴ (Θεόπνευστος), “true and trustworthy,”¹⁵ “right and true”¹⁶ to speak of Scripture. If one is to make the claim that the Bible clearly teaches inerrancy, then there needs to be an admission that the very term is a theological interpretation placed upon the text and not a self-evident claim of

the text. A similar admission would need to be made regarding the writings of the Church Fathers and the Reformers.

Inerrancy is not even a word that has been around for much length in the English vernacular. As Wyatt Houtz suggests,

Etymologically, the English word “inerrancy” originated in the early 19th century (not the 1st century), and the first known use of “inerrancy” according to Webster is 1834 CE. The term “inerrancy” wasn’t widely used to describe the inspiration of the Bible until old Princeton popularized the mechanical dictation theories of inspiration of B. B. Warfield and Charles Hodge (circa 1900).¹⁷

Of course, all that this proves is that the *word* inerrancy is a modern day invention. The question that remains is: Are the concepts that give meaning to the word “inerrancy” present in history before the modern day? The answer, as we will discover, is a resounding no.

III. The Early Church Fathers

The Early Church Fathers did not and would not affirm inerrancy. It is noteworthy that *none* of the Creeds contained statements regarding the nature of Scripture. On the other hand, the various writings of the Early Church have thoroughly affirmed the Scriptures as true and trustworthy, yet, as we will discover, not to the precision and satisfaction of the CSBI. For our purposes we only have time to examine Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine.

Origen

Origen is a particularly striking example of a divergence from inerrancy. Origen readily admitted there were human errors within the text of Scripture. Fascinatingly, he believed that that even human errors in Scripture served a God-intended purpose of conveying “deep truth.”¹⁸

9 For example, J. I. Packer went on record to say after his signing of the CSBI that “it is a mistake to think that inerrancy requires us to read Genesis 1 as if it were answering the same questions as today’s scientific textbooks aim to answer.” J. I. Packer, “Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture,” in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, James Montgomery Boice, ed. (London and Glasgow: Pickering and Inglis, 1979), 78.

10 Ibid., 73.

11 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 16.

12 Michael Zwaagstra, “The Importance of Biblical Inerrancy,” *Theodidaktos* Volume 12 Number 1 (April 2017): 18.

13 For a comprehensive discussion on the historical problems of inerrancy see Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford Press, 2006); George Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds. (New York: Oxford UP, 1982), 97–126.

14 2 Timothy 3:16.

15 Revelation 21:5; 22:6.

16 Psalm 33:4.

17 Wyatt Houtz, “Biblical Inerrancy’s Myth-Making Machine, Unveiled,” <http://postbarthian.com/2017/01/26/errors-inerrancy-7-biblical-inerrancy-myth-making-machine-unveiled/> (Accessed August 12, 2017).

18 See Origen, *On First Principles*, G. W. Butterworth, trans. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 2.2.5 (277–78), 4.2.8–9 (284–87), 4.3.10 (305).

A key feature of Origen's reading of Scripture is his reliance on the spiritual and allegorical interpretations of Scripture. Origen believed that "deep truth" applied primarily to the level of spiritual interpretation, not to the grammatical-historical details of Scripture.

He was not concerned about the precision of incidental details that plague so many defenders of modern inerrancy. On the synoptic problem, Origen did not seek to harmonize the differences, but, instead, suggests to "let these four [Gospels] agree with each other concerning certain things revealed to them by the Spirit and let them disagree a little concerning other things."¹⁹

Chrysostom

John Chrysostom serves as another example that is typical of Early Church thinking that diverges from inerrancy. Chrysostom's reading of Scripture differed from that of Origen and others that practiced more allegorical interpretations. John's preaching was said to be more practical and applicable to his congregants. Yet, despite leaning towards a more straightforward reading of Scripture, Chrysostom would still hold issue with the strict empirical modernist rationalist view of inerrancy. He writes,

But if there be anything touching time or places, which they have related differently, this nothing injures the truth of what they have said ... [but

Origen was not concerned about the precision of incidental details that plague so many defenders of modern inerrancy.

those things] which constitute our life and furnish out our doctrine nowhere is any of them found to have disagreed, no not ever so little.²⁰

Chrysostom in our above quoted section makes an appeal to the trustworthiness of the doctrinal teachings of Scripture. He departs from a modernist inerrancy by allowing for flexibility on textual issues that relate to "time or places." Truth, for John, is not in the precision of every word or fact found in the Scriptures.

Augustine

Our final example of an Early Church Father who would not affirm inerrancy, as defined by CSBI, is Augustine of Hippo. Augustine, like Origen, often employed allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures that would make modern inerrantists uncomfortable. On creation, Augustine allows for much speculation and leeway in interpretation. Augustine argues that the two creation accounts of Genesis were written to suit the understanding of the people at that time.

He advises that the reader of Scripture should not quickly rush into a particular

interpretation.²¹ The Bishop of Hippo believed that all creation was created in an instant, the six days are figurative, and that God is still working creation within the world to unfold its potential. Bird summarizes the difficulties with asserting that Augustine believes in inerrancy:

It is quite a [remarkable] thing to pull inerrancy out of Augustine's Neoplatonic framework, his view that the Greek and Hebrew versions of the Old Testament (including the Apocrypha) were equally inspired, and his allegorical interpretation of the days of creation... what he did with [the Bible] might strike modern inerrantists as quite disturbing.²²

What Mattered

The claim by CSBI that inerrancy has been integral to the Church's faith throughout its history falls flat with an examination of the Early Church Fathers. As we have discovered is that there was no commitment to modern precise standards of truth, no strict grammatico-historical exegesis, and no literalizing of the creation accounts. What mattered to the Early Church Fathers was the veracity of the "deep truth" that Scripture contains. As John Franke writes:

Ancient Christian luminaries such as Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great all affirmed that Scripture was truthful and without error, but did so with philosophical, hermeneutical, and theological assumptions that allowed them to downplay and even sometimes discount the literal meaning



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19 Origen, Commentary on John. 10.4.

20 John Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew. 1.6.

21 Augustine said, "In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture." Bishop of Hippo Saint Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 41 (New York: Newman Press, 1982).

22 J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, eds. *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 164.

of Scripture in favour of spiritual and allegorical interpretations.²³

IV. The Reformers

Did the Protestant Reformers support inerrancy as the CSBI defines it? This is not a straightforward question to answer. Those who advocate for inerrancy would say “yes.” To the credit of those who defend inerrancy, there *are* isolated statements that appear on the surface to affirm the content of inerrancy. Can we say that Luther and Calvin taught the concept of inerrancy? I suggest that neither Luther nor Calvin would give full assent to the inerrancy as defined by the CSBI.

Luther

Luther’s relationship with Scripture is complicated. Luther had a Christology that led him to believe that the various books of the Bible needed to be tested on whether they revealed Christ. As result of his views, he sought to rework the canon of the Bible and infamously ejected the book of James from his canon, labeling it “the epistle of straw.” While no inerrantist today would side with Luther’s brash act, they can certainly thank Luther for paving the way for the popularization of a grammatico-historical reading of Scripture

that is so valued by the CSBI. Medieval exegesis did not typically focus on the literal meaning of Scripture. Medieval interpreters more commonly utilized allegorical, tropological, and analogical interpretations of Scripture.²⁴ Luther prided himself on diverging from using allegory and other interpretative strategies. As he writes, “Now I have shaken off all these follies, and my best art is to deliver the Scripture in a simple sense.”²⁵

Luther had great respect for and a high view of Scripture. He believed that “the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light by far more clear than the sun itself, especially in those things which are necessary for our salvation.”²⁶ Luther, however, did not employ the modernist hermeneutical assumptions of inerrancy. Luther’s hermeneutics serve as a striking example of a divergence from inerrancy.

Luther writes, “When one often reads that great numbers of people were slain—for example, eighty thousand—I believe that hardly one thousand were actually killed.”³⁰

He echoed the Apostle Paul’s resolve to know “nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) into a key hermeneutical principle.²⁷ Luther viewed the written Word of God as *a witness* to the Word (Logos) of God incarnate and thus asserted “beyond question that all the Scriptures points to Christ alone.”²⁸ Whereas inerrancy would divinize the words of the Scripture as analogous to God’s very own speech and character, Luther would see a separation between the biblical witness and the revealed Word (Logos) of God. Thus he writes, “There are two entities: God and the Scripture of God, which are no less than two entities, creator and creature of God.”²⁹

Another notable divergence with inerrancy is Luther’s habit of challenging the accuracy of the recorded details in Scripture. In his commentary on the book(s) of Chronicles, Luther writes, “When one often reads that great numbers of people were slain—for example, eighty thousand—I *believe that hardly one thousand were actually killed.*”³⁰ Luther does not seem to be concerned about the precisionist views of truth that have become the cornerstone of inerrancy. “Luther did not draw the implication that the words of Scripture had meaning as isolated units. It was rather the saving story they told as a unified whole that mattered. And they did not speak about technical, scientific, or philosophic questions.”³¹

John Calvin

Our second reformer we will examine is French theologian John Calvin. Without a doubt, Calvin has a high view of Scripture as fully inspired and trustworthy. He writes,

Yet this, as I have said, is the difference between the apostles and their successors: the former were sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit, and their writings are therefore to be considered oracles of God; but the sole office of

23 Ibid., 297.

24 For a classic exposition of the fourfold sense of Scripture, see Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’Écriture* (2 vols., Paris: Aubier, 1959–1964).

25 Martin Luther, *Table Talk*. William Hazlitt, trans. Online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/tabletalk.html>, 237 (WA, Tischreden 5285, Bd. 5, 45) Accessed Aug. 9, 2017.

26 Ibid., 17.

27 Arthur Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther, Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1969), 172–73.

28 Ibid., 174.

29 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol 1.2 Doctrine of the Word of God (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 508.

30 *Luther’s Works Vol. 54: Table Talk*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 452 (emphasis mine).

31 Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim. *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 77.

others is to teach what is provided and sealed in the Holy Scriptures.³²

In our above quoted section, Calvin asserts that the authors of Scripture, in contrast to their successors in the Early Church, are “sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit” and the “oracles of God.” Scripture for Calvin is not solely the work of humanity’s insights and attempts to speak of God. The Scriptures are breathed out by the Holy Spirit in a symbiotic, mysterious relationship of God and man.

Does this mean for Calvin that when God inspired (breathed-out) Scripture, God did so in a way that presented modern standards of truth that amount to a literalizing of the cosmological accounts and a non-allowance for accommodation to ancient world-views? Does the truthfulness of Scripture extend beyond the redemptive themes to historical and

scientific realms? If he does believe this, then Calvin writings fail to reflect this reality. As is the case with other church leaders we have explored, a closer examination of Calvin’s works reveals his glaring inconsistencies with inerrancy.

Calvin did not believe the authors of Scripture were writing with a concern for exactness. In his commentary on Hebrews 11:21, Calvin discovered a discrepancy between what the author of Hebrews writes and the original Hebrew manuscript. The author of Hebrews is quoting from the Septuagint (LXX) the phrase “*on the top of his staff*,” whereas the original Hebrew manuscript read as “*the head of his couch*” (הַטֵּמָה שֶׁאֵר לֵעַ). Calvin explains the differences between the two authors by writing,

And we know that the Apostles *were not so scrupulous in this respect*, as not

to accommodate themselves to the unlearned, who had as yet need of milk; and in this there is no danger, provided readers are ever brought back to the pure and original text of Scripture.³³

Similarly, in speaking of the synoptic differences Calvin avoids an attempt at the harmonization of divergent details. He writes, “We know that the Evangelists were not very exact as to the order of dates, or even in detailing minutely everything that Christ did or said.”³⁴ Calvin accepts the phenomenon of Scripture as an accommodation to the ancient styles and therefore would give leeway to historical and textual divergences. This means that, for Calvin, in the process of revelation God adapts to the limited capacities of human beings in order to be made known.

Calvin also does not appear to endorse the CSBI claim that the truthfulness of Scripture extends to fields of science. Calvin had a thorough theology of accommodation in regards to many of the cosmological claims of the Bible. For example, Calvin suggests that Genesis incorrectly describes the moon as being of the same size as Saturn.³⁵ He also thinks that Matthew, in his description of the birth narrative of Jesus, is mistaking a comet for a star.³⁶

Most importantly, Calvin cautioned against utilizing the Bible as a scientific document. Calvin writes, “Moses wrote in the manner of those to whom he wrote... If one wants to learn of astronomy, one must ask the astronomers rather than Moses, since his purpose was not to deliver supernatural information about the movement of the planets.”³⁷

Perhaps the most striking example of Calvin being at odds with inerrancy is his interaction with Matthew 27:9. The Gospel of Matthew attributes a quotation to Jeremiah, when the actual text comes from Zechariah 11:13. Rather than explain away the error, Calvin writes,

Most importantly, Calvin cautioned against utilizing the Bible as a scientific document. Calvin writes, “Moses wrote in the manner of those to whom he wrote... If one wants to learn of astronomy, one must ask the astronomers rather than Moses.”



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32 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 1155.

33 John Calvin, “Commentary on Hebrews.” Christian Classics Ethereal Library. CCEL, n.d. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom44.xvii.vii.html#xvii.vii-p32> (Emphasis mine). Accessed March 8, 2017.

34 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, William Pringle, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 216.

35 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, John King, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 86.

36 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, William Pringle, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), vol. 1, 129–130.

37 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, John King, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 86.

How the name of Jeremiah crept in, I confess that I do not know nor do I give myself much trouble to inquire. The passage itself plainly shows that the name of Jeremiah has been put down by mistake, instead of Zechariah, (11:13;) for in Jeremiah we find nothing of this sort, nor any thing that even approaches to it.

Calvin has no desire to defend the error in the biblical text. He does not assert that this error would only be present in the original manuscripts. “Calvin sees the error, he identifies the error, and he’s able to determine the truthfulness of the Word of God despite the error in the Biblical text.”³⁸ This stands in contrast to modern day inerrancy apologists who commit entire books to solve such “Bible difficulties.” Calvin would not and did not join in such an enterprise.

V. The True Origin of Inerrancy

Our exploration of Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin has been in the examination of the claim that inerrancy has been integral to the Church’s faith throughout its history. We have discovered significant divergence from the *a priori* commitments of inerrancy. None of our church leaders were able to faithfully reproduce the modernist concepts that compose inerrancy. Bird aptly states,

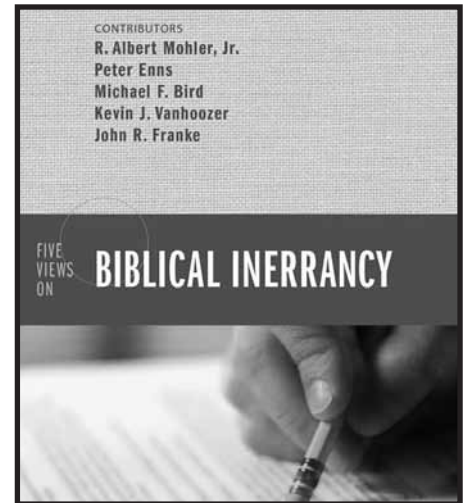
A survey of Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, and Calvin shows that they could handle the challenges of Scripture

John R. Franke: Philosophical, hermeneutical, and theological assumptions allowed the various church leaders to downplay the literal meaning of Scripture in favour of spiritual and allegorical interpretations.

rather differently from the way that modern defenders of biblical authority proceed in their task. Although none of them would consider themselves to be advocating “errancy,” I find it impossible to identify them as proto-American inerrantists.³⁹

If inerrancy is not present in the Early Church Fathers, or the Protestant Reformers, from where did this doctrine come? Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* suggests that the various concepts that developed into inerrancy first took shape in the seventeenth century. Barth suggests that the influence of the Enlightenment caused interpreters of the Bible “to go past Luther and Calvin and even Paul in order to accompany Voetius and Calov.”⁴⁰

The result, according to Barth, was a “restriction of the biblical documents



to their historico-literary givenness”⁴¹ in which the Bible was surrendered into the hands of 18th century rationalists and the historical-critical and conservative schools of the 19th century. N. T. Wright echoes Karl Barth’s assertions about the late development of inerrancy when he writes,

It is no accident that this Protestant insistence on biblical infallibility [and inerrancy] arose at the same time that Rome was insisting on papal infallibility, or that the rationalism of the Enlightenment infected even those who were battling against it.⁴²

Similarly, David Bentley Hart in his book *The Story of Christianity* suggests that inerrancy is a product of the theological shifts that occurred after the Reformation. He writes,

Scriptural inerrancy is [a] wholly novel principle. It went far beyond the traditional Christian belief in the divine inspiration and truthfulness of scripture; it meant that every single event reported in the Bible was historically factual, every word recorded therein literally true and every apparent contradiction unreal. Such a view of scripture *might* have been tacitly held by many Christians down the centuries; but, as an explicit dogma, it

38 Wyatt Houtz, “The Reformers Did Not Affirm Inerrancy,” <http://postbarthian.com/2017/03/05/the-errors-of-inerrancy-8-the-protestant-reformers-would-not-affirm-biblical-inerrancy-martin-luther-john-calvin/> (Retrieved August 14, 2017).

39 J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, eds. *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 53.

40 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol. I.2 The Doctrine of the Word of God* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 525–526.

41 Ibid, 526.


42 N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 183.

was contrary to almost all of Christian tradition: Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.⁴³

If Karl Barth, N. T. Wright, David Bentley Hart, and the numerous scholars who agree with them⁴⁴ are correct, then this presents a serious challenge to the claim of the CSBI.

VI. Conclusion

In our exploration of the historical claims of inerrancy, we have carefully and methodically examined the writings of church leaders in both the Early Church (Patristic) and Protestant Reformation eras of church history. None of our examples would affirm that “the Bible in its original autographs is never false in all it affirms, whether that relates to doctrine or ethics or to the social, physical, or life-sciences.”

Rather, we encountered philosophical, hermeneutical, and theological assumptions that allowed the various church leaders to downplay and even sometimes discount the literal meaning of Scripture in favour of spiritual and allegorical interpretations. We have also encountered a willingness to overlook incidental divergences, a theology of accommodation, and an alternative theology of revelation. Therefore the claim of the CSBI, that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to church leaders throughout history, can only be intelligible if one qualifies history as beginning at the Enlightenment. 

43 David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity: A History of 2,000 Years of the Christian Faith* (New York: Quercus, 2015), 323 (emphasis mine).

44 For example, Jack B. Rogers, Donald K. McKim, George Marsden, and Scot McKnight.

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Deacons' Ministry for the Next Century



Dr. Darryl G. Klassen

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IN THE PAST TWO ISSUES of *Theodidaktos*, we have explored the biblical and historical trends of deacons' ministry. These two resources regarding the foundation of "Mercy Ministry" or caregiving in the church through deacons' ministry are vital to understanding the future of congregational care. At the same time we need to focus on the present and the future. What role does the office of "deacon" play in the EMC church in the coming decades?

The role of deacon varies from congregation to congregation in churches across the EMC. Some churches may acknowledge that such a function existed in first century churches described in scripture, but have no present-day deacon ministry in their own local church. In contrast, other congregations may see the office of deacon as vitally important to their church culture and have a well-defined description of deacon ministry.

Survey Revelations

A survey conducted for this study revealed a common trend in EMC churches. Currently serving EMC deacons were asked: a) if they had received any training before or after being called to this ministry; b) what qualifications the church required of them; c) what, if any job description was provided; and d) whether they felt further training would be helpful to them as they ministered to their congregations.



The answer to the first question did not reveal any surprises. More than 80 per cent of deacons did not receive any training before or after entering into deacons' ministry. It was encouraging to note that some deacons did receive some sort of training, but what that consisted of did not reveal itself in the surveys.

When churches choose men and women to be deacons in their churches, almost universally congregations based their choices on the biblical qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3. In a perfect context one could imagine a congregation poring over the qualifications in their minute details and

When churches choose men and women to be deacons in their churches, almost universally congregations based their choices on the biblical qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3.

praying over each candidate or potential candidate. However, experience has shown that the reference to 1 Timothy 3 does not inspire congregations so much as it comforts them. Comfort in this situation is not positive.

Few of us have contemplated the depths of what the Apostle Paul outlines as qualifications for ministry. One would almost wonder if Paul were warning people not to enter into this ministry lightly. Yet that is what happens in our hustle-and-bustle culture—we want quick answers and ready solutions. To take time to ponder this candidacy requires patience and prayerful meditation over the prospective candidates. So the answer to the second question does not satisfy even if it is universal.

When the List Grows

If congregations took seriously the above requirements for choosing their deacons, they would also have no conflict in providing a job description. Many deacons are told to simply “meet the needs of the church.” Oftentimes those jobs that no one else wants or feel unqualified for are dumped on the deacons’ “plate” because they are more “spiritual.” This becomes problematic when the list grows beyond anyone’s capability.

Some job descriptions for deacons have included promoting church harmony, preparing Christmas hampers, preparing baptism candidates, planning special services, overseeing small groups, overseeing pastoral elections, setting church budgets, acting as building and maintenance trustees, leading a Bible study, showing hospitality, discipleship, and collecting the offerings after the ushers have received them.

With this kind of a list one cannot help but wonder who counts themselves able and willing to meet such a mountain of tasks. Preaching was mentioned only slightly in survey responses, but let us not add this to the mountain lest it fall and crush the poor deacons.

Training

Finally, training—do the deacons we elect desire training? The majority of respondents replied that training would

be helpful in equipping them for the task. What training would consist of was open to further speculation. Some believed that low-level counseling would be a useful skill in ministering to the needs of their congregation.

However, as one professor of counseling submitted, a miniscule amount of training in counseling could lead to enormous problems when the counselee leads the faux-counselor into an issue of immense emotional complication. You will wish you never started down that path. Still, training in the field of deacons’ ministry itself would be helpful. That training would essentially involve focusing on what deacons really are supposed to do.

Why Do We Need Deacons Today?

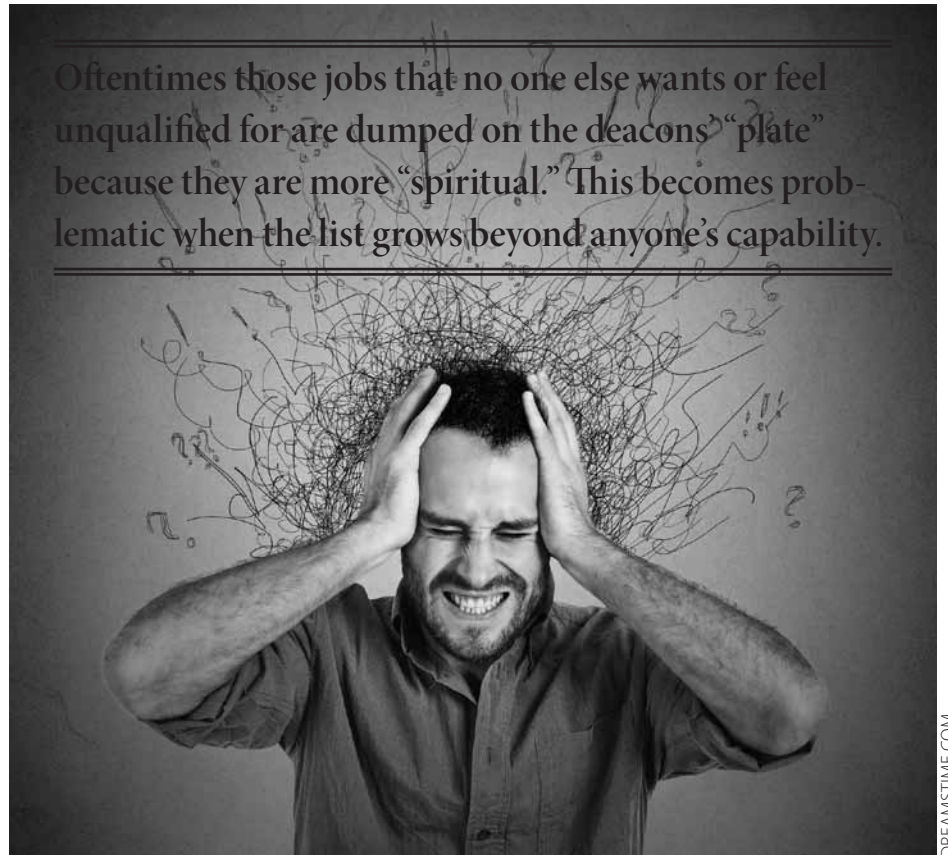
To explore this further, consider the following questions and contemplations of the subject. Why do EMC churches

need deacons as we head further into the 21st century? From the Scriptures and historical snapshots we have studied in the recent issues of *Theodidaktos*, we can see three trends that are vitally important for the church.

1) **Deacons are the primary caregivers for widows and orphans.** Hit the “refresh” on the biblical foundation of Deuteronomy 15 and its relationship to Acts 2 to 6: ministers of mercy were established to care for the least in society. The least in society may be labeled “widows and orphans.” First Baptist Church in Orlando tells its deacons that if you want to be removed from deacons’ ministry, ignore your widows.

We can take this in the literal sense (we should!) and look after widows (especially the elderly) and care for their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. We can also take this metaphorically and ask ourselves, “Who

Oftentimes those jobs that no one else wants or feel unqualified for are dumped on the deacons’ “plate” because they are more “spiritual.” This becomes problematic when the list grows beyond anyone’s capability.



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are the disenfranchised in the church community?” That is, who are the people without the family ties that most of us have?

Singles, divorcees, and foster children may be alienated simply because of their social status. Are there others who have trouble fitting into the church community? Are there some whose financial difficulties keep them from attending or belonging to a church? How do our affluent churches reach out to the less financially capable?

2) Deacons support the unity of the body. They are called to suppress negativism, develop harmony and oneness, and encourage peace and reconciliation between members. If you are a deacon, you are a bridge-builder; you are a peacemaker; you are a minister of reconciliation. Praying for the church and praying with individual members is a tremendous ministry and privilege of the deacon. Deacons may provide an important link for the disgruntled and the fringe attendee who experience a disconnect. Harmony will be achieved in the church as a whole when those on the outside are made to feel connected and heard.

3) Deacons support the pastors and elders. How they do this may vary from church to church. But one thing we all know, pastors do not have all the gifts necessary for effective ministry. Attending to the material care and prayer ministry of the congregation will assist the pastor greatly when his schedule is already overwhelming. Congregants need to accept that when a deacon calls and comes to pray, they have been cared for, even if the pastor did not come himself. The bottom line: pastors cannot do

everything. A plural ministry of pastors and deacons are more effective than one pastor alone.

Current Issues Facing Deacons’ Ministry

While deacons play a vital part in the overall ministry of the church, my research has shown that EMC churches struggle with recruiting, training, and keeping deacons. There are a variety of reasons for this, but I will share four major ones:

Lack of training—Despite the enormous amount of literature on deacons’ ministry in the libraries and bookstores, our deacons are elected but not trained. Yes, this was mentioned above, but it bears repeating. A lack of training leads to discouragement as deacons perpetually wonder if they are good enough for the task they have been commissioned for by the church.

Job Descriptions—Coinciding with a lack of training, it is not surprising that most churches do not have a defined job description for their deacons. A vision for deacons’ ministry may be cast one year and everyone agrees with it, but five years later the role has morphed into something else. As the church grows, needs change, and so must the deacon role. On the one hand, job descriptions are needed; on the other hand, they need to be reviewed biannually.

History of Abuse—Some churches reported that they dropped the deacon role altogether because of abuses of power. Deacons have often perceived that they are leaders over and above being servants (re: Nicaea). Some have allowed themselves to believe that they run the church. This contradicts the model of

Jesus who “came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

Burnout—When there is no clear job description, anything can be assigned to the deacon. When that happens, the list grows beyond the reasonable limits of a volunteer minister. They lose the joy of serving and have to get out and resign.

Deacons’ Ministry Models

When a church chooses to elect and affirm deacons, what model will they use? There are a variety of models, but you must choose the one that fits your church best. Here are three common models:

Mutual Care—The principle feature of mutual care puts the responsibility for caregiving on each member of the congregation. Everyone is called to be a deacon to their brother or sister without the official title. When a crisis occurs, members will respond to the need as they are able. This model may work somewhat efficiently in small churches of 50 to 100 attendees.

Drawbacks: No one takes the lead or initiative. Without adequate communication, each will assume that others are visiting/caring/ addressing the need at hand. The onus rests on the pastor to communicate with members to respond thus adding to his workload.

Care Group/Cell Group—Deacons are each assigned a group of church families for which they are responsible. The advantage of this model comes from the “jurisdiction principle.” A deacon/deacon couple would not be responsible for the whole church, only the group they have been given. Deaths, hospitalizations, and other issues within the care group would be addressed by the deacon in charge. A deacon couple may have as many as ten families in their care.

Drawbacks: Care groups may morph into social groups that expect fellowship

activities throughout the year. Care groups may also be an opportunity for Bible Study. The problem arises when deacons are not gifted at social convening or leading a Bible study. We have noticed a competition/envy problem arising from this model.

Gifts-based—Based on a personal assessment of giftedness and natural ability, the gifts-based model allows deacons to minister in areas in which they feel comfortable. The three trends mentioned (caring, supporting the congregation, and supporting the pastors) are still a priority, but within the framework of giftedness. Deacons may choose to be involved in ministry areas such as the following:

Fellowship—Promoting fellowship events in the church (potlucks, thanksgiving suppers, etc.) where the congregants can interact. They do not necessarily lead or facilitate these events, but delegate, recruit, and encourage individuals to make sure these events happen.

Bible Study—Deacons will recruit leaders and establish Bible study groups as needed. Discipleship triads may be encouraged and facilitated by these deacons. Bible study groups ought to be led by congregants, not deacons, so that others can see that one does not need a title to lead. “How to lead a Bible study” sessions may be arranged by deacons.

Newcomers—These deacons will watch for newcomers on Sunday morning, interact with them, and possibly contact them the following week to offer information on programs and opportunities. Studies have shown that newcomers need to be contacted personally (or at least by phone) within the first week, if we expect them to attend again.

Crisis Care—Deacons who are gifted in helps will respond to deaths, illness, divorce, and unemployment and so on by attending to or motivating others to those

in this loss situation. Immediate response requires having deacons who know that it is their responsibility to respond without much prompting.

Prayer—We are all called to prayer, but these deacons may promote prayer meetings and will be called on to pray for the sick and the hurting in special cases.

Drawbacks: Some individuals are not sure what their gifts are and may be at a loss to find a perfect fit. Or they may feel that they want to be involved in all the ministry areas, not being “pigeon-holed” into one category.

Further Recommendations

Deacons’ Ministry

Manual—A conference-based manual would help pastors and churches in recruitment and training of deacons. It is my understanding that one is being considered specifically for our conference.

Deacons Orientation Evenings—The deacons who have been elected by their churches have typically been examined or interviewed by a sub-committee of the Board of Leadership and Outreach. They are “grilled” on their theology, practice, and understanding of EMC traditions. My suggestion is to “scrap” the interview/examination and hold deacon orientation evenings where this material presented today could be shared with the new deacons. They are already chosen and affirmed by their congregations, so our time would be best used in orienting deacons to the conference practice of deacons’ ministry.

Ministerial Meetings Specifically

for Deacons—The current model of ministerial meetings held twice a year at a local EMC church in conjunction with Conference Council needs to continue. However, when the invitation to this

ministerial or leadership day seeks to broadly include pastors, deacons, former ministers, missionaries, church board leaders and elders, the subject matter shared by the main presenter may be so general that the overall impact of these meetings will be only an inch deep. On the other hand, if there were general sessions available to all followed by workshops in the afternoon for special interest groups, our leaders would be

Deacons have a significant role to play in the overall life of the church as they model the servant-heart of our Lord Jesus Christ who came not to be served, but to serve.

better equipped and encouraged to attend these meetings and return home with greater vigour.

Conclusion

Deacons need encouragement to stay the course to which they have been called. The Bible portrays the deacon as a servant in the church who assists the pastors in caring for the congregation in tangible ways that communicate love and care. Pastors and deacons together lead the church to understand and grow in the love of God. Deacons have a significant role to play in the overall life of the church as they model the servant-heart of our Lord Jesus Christ who came not to be served, but to serve.

Pastors, even in small churches, cannot bear the burden of ministry alone. Churches that cannot afford associate pastors, youth pastors, worship pastors, and the like, but have one pastor only, can provide a deacon or two who can shoulder some of the caring ministry that is the hallmark of the church. ☪

We Are All Hussites: The Authority of the Church and *Sola Scriptura*



PUC

Dr. Patricia Janzen Loewen

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INDEED THE HISTORY OF God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...

Recently, a beloved Biblical Studies colleague comforted me when I was bemoaning the lack of Church history knowledge among my students: “Don’t worry—it is not a salvation issue.” As an evangelical Anabaptist who both grew up with and agrees with *sola Scriptura* I had little option but to nod. However, I resented nodding. I determined to think through whether further response could be given.

Sola Scriptura is one of the phrases intimately linked to Martin Luther. The influential biography by Roland Bainton takes as its title the scene that epitomizes Luther’s position. Hauled in to stand before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, and asked to recant his writings, Luther gives a grocery list of reasons why he will not, ending with his affirmation of the privileged authority of Scripture: *Here I Stand*. The year was 1521.

Heated Debate

While it may have been the first time Charles V heard Luther’s position, it was not the first time Luther had articulated it. In 1519 Luther was part of a group of friends and colleagues who were in a

indict himself as a heretic.

And it worked! Luther thought through the position of Jan Hus and later stated his agreement thus: “We are all Hussites.” Luther had joined the heretical camp. And then it went sideways. In

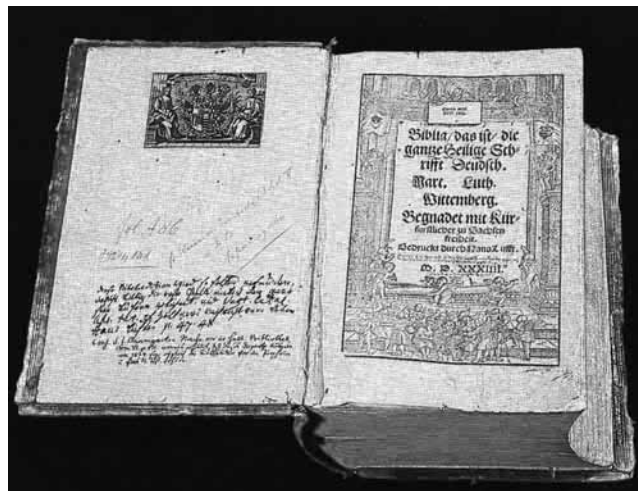
affirming the ideas of Hus, Luther was armed with the evidence he needed to demonstrate the principal of *sola Scriptura*. Popes, Councils, and clergy could err. The highest authority was Scripture.

How was this proved? Wait for it...by Church history (to a significant extent). Perhaps further thought on the relationship of salvation and history is warranted. The 1519 debate between Luther and Eck and the importance of Hus are fruitful grounds for thinking through the authority of Church history both in the start of the Reformation and in our own

present time.

Luther as a Historian

Luther was endowed with numerous academic skills. His philosophical acumen, rhetorical flourish, and clear logic were acknowledged by his peers who gave him the nickname “the Philosopher” while he was a student at Erfurt.¹ Luther would later add theological and language



Martin Luther's 1534 Bible

heated debate with Johannes Eck, who both knew his Church history and was determined to use it to defeat Luther. The plan was beautiful in its simplicity—get Luther to agree with an acknowledged heretic, Jan Hus, and *voila* Luther will

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1 James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 45.

training to his already prodigious skill set. Luther was a gifted writer and formidable in oral, public, academic debate.

These qualities seemingly came naturally to Luther as they were perceived when he was a young scholar and certainly so by 1519. Both his knowledge of Church history and his ability to engage in insightful historical analysis were perhaps, I gently suggest, more middling than great. Of course he was not entirely without knowledge or ability. Furthermore, to his credit when he comes to understand the need to learn more about Church history, as the events of 1519 will reveal, he does his homework and learns about the past.

Without his foray into Church history, however, it is unlikely that Luther would have come to his theological position, *sola Scriptura*. In what follows I will sketch Luther's historical sensibilities prior to 1519 and the importance of Church history, culminating in his historical research on Jan Hus, in the relationship of the past with his affirmation of Scripture alone.

Luther's Historical Analysis of Pope Julius II

Luther is not to be chided out of context. Today the discipline of history dates its beginnings to the middle of the nineteenth century. Luther should not be expected to have mastered university disciplines that began 300 years after his death. Theology, philosophy, and rhetoric were the *foci* of academic training and scholarly production. Neither was Luther without knowledge of Church history.

At key points in his evolving theological understanding his ideas are buttressed or even dependent upon historical knowledge. Some examples



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that trace this relationship are of interest. His historical analysis began with the very recent past. Luther lectured on the book of Romans from 1513–16. In the marginalia of his text on Romans, Luther “lashed out repeatedly against the luxury, avarice, ignorance, and greed of the clergy and upbraided explicitly the chicanery of that warrior-pope Julius II.² Julius II had died early in 1513, as Luther began his lectures, and had been the Pope when Luther went to Rome in 1510–11 (although Luther did not meet him).

Julius II was a skilled political head and even a military leader. In Luther's estimation at least, the “papa” and shepherd of the Church should act accordingly. Roland Bainton notes that while Luther made these critiques, he likely did so only privately because none of his students' notes on his lectures include such sentiments.³ Julius II was an example of the weaknesses, yea the errors, of a pope whose deeds were very much in living memory. Criticism of a pope, however, hardly made Luther unusual or new or even necessitated leaving the Church.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, who remained within the Catholic Church, authored *Julius Exclusus*, an imaginatively satirical

Julius II was an example of the weaknesses, yea the errors, of a pope whose deeds were very much in living memory.

account of Julius' afterlife in which Julius is not allowed to enter Heaven on account of his actions during his lifetime. In many ways, the “problem” of papal bad behaviour was practically moot; it was known and bemoaned and mostly left at that. But then Luther wrote his 95 *Theses* and the hierarchy of the Church responded not with overtures of reform, but with assertions of the power and authority of the Pope, Councils, and the Church.

Luther's Historical Analysis of the Primacy of Rome

Although Scripture and Theology are Luther's principal tools for most of his thinking and writing, in questioning the authority of popes historical examples can be useful. Luther knew that the primacy of the Roman Church and thereby the Pope as its head was a historical development. He knew that prior to Pope Gregory I the Roman Church had less authority than the Greek Church.⁴

Whether or not Luther has correctly identified the timeframe where this transition takes place is not important here. Rather observe that in Luther's analysis the primacy of the Roman Pope was neither Scriptural nor part of the Early Church, and, therefore, Roman primacy was humanly rather than divinely instituted. As such, Popes could be criticized. Popes could be in error. Thus, when in response to Luther's perceived attack on indulgences papal

2 Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin Books, 1950), 68.

3 Ibid.

4 Bainton, 88.

authority is put forward as a defence and response, Luther can point to not only the recent past of Julius II, but the much more distant Pope Boniface VIII—whom Luther accuses of tyranny and abomination.⁵

Luther's Historical Analysis of Pope Boniface VIII

Luther's choice to single out Boniface VIII for censure is worth exploring further. Boniface VIII, who reigned from 1294–1303, was responsible for a declaration of papal authority known as *Unam Sanctam*, meaning the One Holy [Church]. The last lines of the Bull state that each person's salvation is dependent upon their personal submission to the Pope.

Besides leaving the question of the salvation of the entire Eastern Church in some doubt, the document has more than a little relevance to Luther's growing critique of the Pope. Luther specifically references Boniface VIII and pointedly asks what abominable deeds "will you not have to regard as the deeds of the Church" if you wish to maintain that the popes cannot err.⁶

Rome Responds With Authoritative Claims

One of the first Church-authorized responses to Luther's *95 Theses* was commissioned from Sylvester Prierias, a Dominican and Master of the Sacred Palace at Rome. He argued that "[j]ust as the universal Church cannot err on faith and morals, nor can a true council,

neither can the Roman Church nor the pope when speaking in his official capacity."⁷ It is an important list of authorities. While the authority of the pope may have been questioned and dismissed with relative ease by Luther, the Councils of the Church were not.

Cardinal Cajetan

Subsequently, another and more able defender of the Church was commissioned to engage Luther: Cardinal Cajetan. In October 1518 Luther was summoned to Augsburg to meet with Cardinal Cajetan. That Luther went is indicative of his obedience, bravery, and loyalty, as he believed that the end of this meeting was likely to be his own death. During his discussions with the Cardinal the authority and history of the Pope again came to the fore. Cajetan wanted Luther to acknowledge the authority of a papal bull, *Unigenitus*, by Pope Clement

agreement with *Unigenitus*. Finally, Luther asked to be able to submit his response in writing. Here Luther's words are more definitive: "I am not so audacious that for the sake of a single obscure and ambiguous decretal of a human pope I would recede from so many and such clear testimonies of divine Scripture. For, as one of the canon lawyers has said, 'in a matter of faith not only is a council above a pope but anyone of the faithful if armed with better authority and reason.'"⁹

Cajetan replied that Scripture must be interpreted and that the Pope was the interpreter. The Pope, claimed Cajetan, was "above a Council, above Scripture, above everything in the Church."¹⁰ Luther's response: "I deny that he is above Scripture."¹¹ Luther was ordered to leave the meetings with Cajetan and not come back unless he was ready to recant. Believing that he could be killed if he stayed in Augsburg, Luther fled in secrecy.

Two pertinent points in the meetings between Cajetan and Luther can be observed. Luther denied the authority of the Pope, but not of Councils. Luther also understood that history has shown that popes can err and their documents do not have authority over Scripture.

Second, if Cajetan is wrong that the Pope is the most authoritative interpreter of Scripture, he is not wrong that Scripture needs to be interpreted. Luther still holds to the authority of the Church as found in Councils for this task.

When Luther returned to Wittenberg he wrote up an account of his meetings with Cajetan. Luther was no longer trying to hide his rejection of *Unigenitus* and he goes even further than in Augsburg. He writes: "I deny that you cannot be a Christian without being subject to the decrees of the Roman pontiff."¹² By this point, for Luther at least, the matter has already moved far beyond merits and

The Pope, claimed Cajetan, was "above a Council, above Scripture, above everything in the Church."¹⁰ Luther's response: "I deny that he is above Scripture."

VI, 1343, which stated that the merits of Christ are a treasure of indulgences.⁸

Luther, aware of his precarious position, will neither confirm nor deny

5 Bainton, 90.

6 Bainton, 90.

7 Bainton, 89.

8 Bainton, 94.

9 Bainton, 95–96. This important scene is also given in Kittleson, 123–24.

10 Bainton, 96.

11 Ibid.

12 Bainton, 98.

indulgences and a decree by Clement VI. Luther is denying Boniface VIII's *Unam Sanctam* and the institution of the papacy.

Luther Prepares for the Leipzig Debate

Until November 1518 Luther was able to wiggle out of charges of heresy on a technicality: no papal dogma on the *definition* of indulgences had been produced (even while proclamation of indulgences had been given for centuries). Now that loophole was closed with *Cum Postquam*.¹³ In important ways this document, which redressed the worst of indulgence abuses that Luther had protested, was the proverbial too little too late. Luther's fight had moved beyond the presenting issue of indulgences to the basis of authority for Christian faith *in toto*. The fault for this was largely the Church's own response to Luther. Even so, early in 1519 Luther promised to drop the debate if his opponents did the same. They did not.

Johannes Eck wrote twelve theses defending the treasury of merits and indulgences at the end of 1518. When Luther finally saw the document he responded to the challenge. In preparation for the public debate, which Eck arranged for, Luther studied papal decrees and privately wrote to his friend and ally, George Spalatin, that doing so made him think of the Pope as an antichrist.¹⁴ As Bainton points out, the association of the Pope with the antichrist was not new. At least two significant movements of the late medieval period

made the same connection: the Wycliffites and the Hussites.¹⁵

Luther was following the pattern of Hus without knowing it. The debate was set for July 1519 at the University of Leipzig. Luther's colleague and supporter, Andreas Carlstadt, was to be the primary disputant, but as the debate progressed and Luther was increasingly baited, he could not stay out of the fray.

The Leipzig Debate

While not the only issue in the Leipzig debate, the matter of Church history was one of importance. Luther's opponents contended that the primacy of Rome

Despite the intensity and conviction of this statement Luther used the break in the debate (which lasted weeks, not hours) to read the documents from the Council of Constance, which had condemned Jan Hus as a heretic and executed him. In doing so Luther discovered that the Council had repudiated a number of theological positions that enjoyed significant scriptural support.

When the session reconvened Eck got all that he was hoping for. Luther reported to the assembly that he had found many of Hus's articles to be "plainly Christian and evangelical."¹⁸ This was followed by

Luther was following the pattern of Hus without knowing it.

began with the successor of Peter. Luther rejected this and accused the documents that made this claim as being false.¹⁶ Reference to Church history was also made about much later periods. Eck, perhaps knowing his history better than Luther, accused Luther of following the teachings of John Wycliffe and Jan Hus. Bainton depicts Luther as responding thus:

"I repulse the charge of Bohemianism," roared Luther. "I have never approved of their schism. Even though they have divine right on their side, they ought not to have withdrawn from the Church, because the highest divine right is unity and charity."¹⁷

an assertion that Scripture and revelation are the highest authorities on matters of belief. He was still not ready to reject a Council and so he suggested that perhaps the documents regarding the Council were in error rather than the Council.

Eck responded that even the Hussites did not contest their accuracy. Luther's further attempts to find some way to excuse the Council were all thwarted by Eck. Finally Eck pushed Luther far enough and Luther made a public statement of his position: "I assert that a council has sometimes erred and may sometimes err. Nor has a council authority to establish new articles of faith. A council cannot make divine right out of that which by nature is not divine right... A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it."¹⁹ Eck correctly identified Luther's position as Bohemian.

Luther Identifies with Hus

The debate ended and Luther went back to Wittenberg. Hussites sought Luther out for they too recognized him as an ally. To both friend and foe Luther was a Saxon Hus. The Hussites sent Luther one of their

¹³ Bainton, 102.

¹⁴ Kittleson, 138.

¹⁵ Bainton, 111.

¹⁶ Bainton, 114–15.

¹⁷ Bainton 115.

¹⁸ Bainton, 116.

¹⁹ Bainton, 116–17.



Luther posting his 95 Theses in 1517. Painting by Ferdinand Pauwels (1830–1904).

books, *Concerning the Church*. When Luther had time to read and further reflect on Hus and the Council of Constance he said, “We are all Hussites without knowing it.”²⁰ Luther had come to his position on Scripture, *sola Scriptura*. Interestingly, his journey to this point was not done and possibly could not have been done without ongoing learning about and dialogue with the history of the Church.

What is the Meaning of All of This?

In 1949 Jaroslav Pelikan endorsed a twofold task for contemporary Reformation scholarship: “to discover what the Reformation meant and to discover what it means.”²¹ The wisdom of his words remain. What did Luther’s insight mean for the Reformation and what can we learn from it in application to today?

Reformation Meaning

In his identification with Hus, Luther discovered he was not alone; rather, he had found unexpected allies. He had historical examples for companionship as well as the possibility of relationship with Hus’s spiritual descendants. In two essays Pelikan discusses Luther’s conversation and relationship with those whom he had initially disavowed.²² The process was mutual. As Luther’s theological position became known, various Hussite movements sought him out as well. When Luther got to know them, he discovered that he had both agreement and disagreement. However, he remained in dialogue with and supportive of the Bohemian Brethren to the extent that he endorsed their *Confessio Bohemica* in 1535.

To call Luther an ecumenist would be too much, as he had a genuinely fractious effect on some aspects of the reform

movement. Luther’s famous exchange with Ulrich Zwingli at the Colloquy of Marburg, 1529, is one example. Here, despite agreement on every other point, their differing theologies of the Eucharist was enough for Luther to withdraw his support for the reform movement under Zwingli. Luther’s relationship with the Bohemian Brethren softens, if slightly, the divisive characterization of Luther.

The journey whereby Luther came to identify with Hus also demonstrates Luther has become a Renaissance thinker. In his biography Bainton notes that Luther was able to cast suspicion on the Isidorian decretals, later regarded as forgeries, without the help of Lorenzo Valla.²³ Maybe so. David Whitford has helpfully linked Valla’s influence on Luther with particular regard to Luther’s association of the antichrist with the pope. In 1440 Valla wrote his now famous *Discourse on the Forgery of the Alleged Donation of Constantine*. In this text he demonstrated how a document used by the papacy to support its claims of power was a forgery by showing historical errors that would only be in a fake, rather than the genuine article.

Discourse was not published until 1519 (until then it existed only as a manuscript). Luther began to read Valla’s *Discourse* in early 1520.²⁴ Whitford’s point is that Valla’s text emboldened Luther to confidently associate the pope with the antichrist, whereas prior to this he had done so only with some trepidation. More helpful for our discussion is the observation that with Valla’s text Luther has found a source that further distances him from medieval forms of scholarship and offers him instead a Renaissance model of historical criticism with which to support his evolving theology of Scripture.

Present Meaning

An examination of the relationship of Church history and *sola Scriptura* can help us develop a sophisticated

²⁰ Kittleson, 142.

²¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, Jr., “Luther’s Endorsement of the Confessio Bohemica,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (November 1949): 829.

²² Jaroslav Pelikan, Jr., “Luther’s Negotiations with the Hussites” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (July 1949): 496–517.

²³ Bainton, 115.

²⁴ David M. Whitford, “The Papal Antichrist: Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 61 (Spring 2008): 28, 40.

understanding of one of his credos. Many Protestants hold to four sources of authority in their faith: the Protestant Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Many still hold that Scripture holds more authority than the other three. It is not my intention to debunk this. Rather, my examination

birth, life, death and resurrection of the incarnate Christ. To put it plainly, to endorse *sola Scriptura* without having the Scriptures in relationship with history is a salvation issue.

The problem with Luther's engagement with Church history is that he mostly focused on "the bad" of the

on the bad is to misrepresent the body of Christ—as is a focus that excludes the sins.

Luther is guilty of this misrepresentation—he did so in order to support his argument on the authority of Scripture. While perhaps necessary for his own purposes, Luther's example cannot be followed. The history of the Church provides us with a great source of wisdom, inspiration, and friendship. Furthermore, it is the body of Christ on earth. If I could encourage the Church today, it would be to explore its past.

The good and the bad need equally serious engagement for we can learn from both. Furthermore, if we hold that God is present to us now, we also know that God was present to those who happened to live before us. To contemplate the past is to engage God's involvement with His world in a period that happens to have occurred before our time. There is wisdom, insight, allies, examples, and lessons to be found. Seek and you will find. *☪*

The problem with Luther's engagement with Church history is that he mostly focused on "the bad" of the past. He only turned to "the good" when forced to by his opponents, but he did not do so expecting to find "the good."

of Luther's wrestling with Scripture and Tradition tells me something of how hard fought an insight Luther gifted the Church with.

I want to honour and appreciate this struggle as well as endorse its end result, *sola Scriptura*. I fear, however, that sometimes the degree to which Luther engaged with the history of the Church in this process is either unknown or considered irrelevant.

Didn't his insight, after all, reject the authority of the past? It's called *sola Scriptura* for a reason! Yes, I worry that this is the negative and naïve heritage of *sola Scriptura*. That the process of Luther's great insight depended on his engagement with the history of the Church is instructive rather than irrelevant.

Just as Luther could not escape dialogue with Church history, so too Scripture is in dialogue (relationship) with the past—and present for that matter. And this is to be expected if we believe in an incarnational theology. Our relationship with God and the Church always occurs in our bodies that are located in time and space.

To take the Scriptures out of conversation with body, time, and space (in other words—history) is to deny the incarnational core of Christianity—the

past. He only turned to "the good," as for example with Hus, when forced to by his opponents, but he did not do so expecting to find "the good." Fortunately, there is a lot of good in the history of the Church. Of course there is a lot which needs to be acknowledged as wrong. But to focus only

The graphic features the Steinbach Bible College logo (a cross in a shield) and the website SBCollege.ca. Below this, a dark banner contains the text: "Discover God's Word", "Belong in Community", "Engage Discipleship", and "Experience Mission". The bottom section is a collage of four images: a smiling young woman, a young woman in a basketball jersey with the number 6, a young man playing an acoustic guitar, and a group of young people sitting outdoors. In the bottom left corner of the collage, it says "YOUR MISSION Starts Here". In the bottom right corner, there are social media icons for Facebook and Twitter.

Babel, the Reformation, and a Search for God's Grace



Kevin Wiebe

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CHURCH SPLITS ARE excruciatingly painful. It seems logical to assume that no healthy pastor wakes up in the morning thinking, “Today I am going to start creating disunity to fracture our church family.” Even church splits that happen as the result of rightly correcting gross injustice can cause a lot of hurt for folks on all sides of the conflict.

This year we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. For many this commemoration marks the beginnings of their particular stream of faith. The history of a great many traditions is that they diverged from the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation; thus for anyone in those streams of faith, there can be a sense of indebtedness to the Reformers.

The language, however, that is used surrounding this anniversary is often careful and precise. We are not *celebrating* it as if a major schism in Christianity is a good thing. Rather, we *commemorate* it.¹ Those in the Roman Catholic tradition look back on history and see that it was the time of the Reformation where they experienced great losses—communities were fractured, power was drastically redistributed, and relationships were broken.

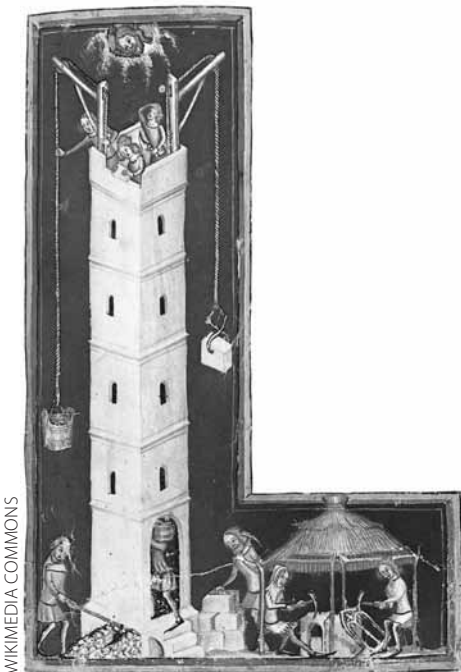
As we remember the Reformation this year, how do we once again mentally process those historic events in a healthy and faith-building way? As I have been personally seeking to better understand those events this year, I found the stories of the Reformation reminiscent of other events recorded in the pages of Scripture—particularly the story of the tower of Babel. In both stories there

was a form of centralized and united power. Both peoples did things that were contrary to God's revealed will for humanity, and both stories result in a massive splintering of social, economic and political order.

Through a comparative analysis between the incident at Babel and the story of the Reformation, we can look upon both incidents with a fresh perspective in order to discover God's grace in the midst of events so strongly marked by pride and sinfulness of heart. While a church split may not be something to celebrate, the grace of God even in the midst of such events surely is!

What Happened at Babel?

The story of Babel is a familiar one to most. The people of earth only spoke one language. People gathered together to build a city rather than filling the earth and they decided to build a tower. For some reason God is displeased with them and confused their languages as punishment. The people were divided by a language barrier, and since there was no translation app for their smartphones in those days, they parted ways. Over time each language group developed their own culture, and the earth became filled with many different groups of people. As we know from later in Genesis, God selected one man from one of these groups, whose descendants became God's very own people.



German Late Medieval (c. 1370s) depiction of the construction of the tower of Babel.

¹ Mark Yenson and Carolyn Chau, interviewed by author, London, Ont., Canada, December 7, 2016.

What then was the sin of Babel? There are skyscrapers all over the world today that are much larger than the one they could have built at that time in history. Their transgression may not be immediately apparent. On a surface level reading of the passage, we can see that there was a consolidation of power and resources that ran contrary to God's command to fill the earth. John MacArthur writes that while there was unity, there was a dark side to unity that concentrated evil and gave sin a united front. Thus, according to MacArthur, the division of language became a way to keep evil from being so united.²

A Dark Unity

This dark unity caused an entire society to depart from God's plan for them. One writer puts it this way, "The construction of the tower and city is described as an act of self-glorification by the builders. People seek for their own security in community life and culture, independent of God. This is human initiative apart from God. As such, the activity is evil and sinful."³

For Karl Barth, the sin of humanity at Babel was the "...arrogance of thinking that man himself can and must take himself as he takes the brick and mortar, and make himself the lord of his history, constituting the work of providence of

The sin at Babel had less to do with their outward actions, but much to do with the purpose of their actions and their pride and outright rebellion against the God who created them.

his own work."⁴ Birch writes, "Building a tower and making a name become problematic, namely as an attempt to secure their future isolated from the rest of the world. This constitutes a challenge to the divine command to fill the earth and fulfill the charge to have dominion; human concern for self-preservation places the rest of the creation at risk."⁵

The sin at Babel had less to do with their outward actions, but much to do with the purpose of their actions⁶ and their pride and outright rebellion against

the God who created them. As Alister McGrath writes, the incident at Babel "... is basically about human attempts at self-assertion in the face of God."⁷

More Than Pride

In addition to this, there is good reason to believe that the incident at Babel was more than just about pride, but about an attempt to secure eternal life for themselves apart from God. Making a name for themselves was not just a simple desire for fame or fortune. According to pagan religions and cultures of the time, one's existence in the afterlife was dependent on the living remembering them. John H. Walton describes this aspect of Babel by saying, "The building of monuments could also contribute to the desirable end result, as could achievements and adventures of various sorts... The more people who remembered one's name, the more secure is one's existence in the afterlife."⁸ The pride at Babel went beyond simply a life without the need for God: they also tried to secure their own eternity apart from the Almighty.

A Summary

To summarize, the people of Babel were not obedient in the command to fill the earth, there was a rebellious consolidation of power, and they sought to find both earthly and eternal security apart from God. There was pride, arrogance, rebellion, and ultimately a rejection of the God who created them. The path they took was destructive and, as God implied in the Babel narrative, it had serious implications for their future.

Punishment for Babel

God "came down" in Genesis 11, an obvious jab at the feeble efforts on the people of Babel.⁹ The punishment for their rebellion, as Genesis tells us, was that God came to "...confuse their language so they will not understand

2 John MacArthur, "Judgment of the Rebellion at Babel, Part 1" (sermon, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, August 26, 2001), accessed January 11, 2017, <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-267/judgment-of-the-rebellion-at-babel-part-1#top>.

3 Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), s.v. "Babel, Tower Of."

4 Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics III.4*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 314.

5 Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 58.

6 Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, eds., *The Moody Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary On the Whole Bible by the Faculty of Moody Bible Institute* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 66–67.

7 Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 73.

8 John H. Walton, "Genesis," In *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), s.v. "Genesis: Tower of Babel (11:1–9)," 63–64.

9 Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), s.v. "Babel, Tower Of."

10 Genesis 11:7, NIV.

each other.”¹⁰ This one act splintered their entire society. People could no longer understand each other. The large undertaking they attempted required cooperation, which was no longer possible. One source puts it this way, “God turns the plan of humans to achieve semidivine status into a disaster of ‘confusion.’”¹¹ As McGrath put it, “This desire for human control contained within itself the seeds of its own negation. When we take charge, we seem to mess things up.”¹²

The confusion of languages led to drastic changes in almost every level of society. People were geographically scattered, political structures were destabilized, new cultures and nations were created. The dream of the people was turned into their nightmare. Instead of being united together in their rebellion against God and instead of building a name for themselves, they were divided and scattered. In the words of William MacDonald, “The Lord judged the people by confounding their language...Babel means *confusion*, the inevitable result of any union that leaves God out or is not according to God.”¹³

The Reformation: Sin, Mistakes, and Consequence

After looking at what happened at Babel, it is time to examine the events of the Reformation. In the years building up to what is now known as the Reformation, there was increasing tension in the Church. The Roman Church wielded large amounts of power, and it did not use its power solely for good.

While the efforts of previous generations to correct these errors in the church should not be forgotten or ignored, Martin Luther is often credited as the proverbial spark that began the raging fire that was the Reformation. McGrath writes that Luther “...sought to reestablish the centrality of the Bible to the teaching and structures of the church. Luther was especially concerned by the sale of indulgences—pieces of paper which promised the bearer forgiveness of sins,¹⁴ as a result of payments to the church. For Luther, this was completely unacceptable.”¹⁵

McGrath further observed that at that time, studying the Bible in the original languages was becoming increasingly popular, and it led to the discovery of many significant translation errors.

As people like Luther studied further, they came to discover that much of the church’s practice was based not on the Bible, but on the Vulgate. Thus upon closer examination of the Scriptures in their original languages, it was discovered that current practices actually ran contrary to what was found in the Bible, and so they were justifiably concerned.

Grievances

To begin let us examine some of the grievances that the Reformers had against the Catholic Church. To start, there was a great deal of discontent with the Church and the corruption that such widespread power produced therein. Brad S. Gregory writes, “The *more* the church lengthened its bureaucratic reach and influence, the *less* did it look like the kingdom.”¹⁶ The Reformers and much of society were not satisfied with how the power structures of the Church functioned in their society. There was also widespread avarice among the clergy. Gregory writes, “By the eve of the Reformation, the greediness of the clergy and religious high and low was the most common, long-standing complaint made against them.”¹⁷

Into this tumultuous climate came Luther and the other Reformers, one of their chief complaints being the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were a process by which people could pay the church in order to improve the state of their afterlife. McGrath writes, “[Luther] believed that the church of his day had lost sight of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. Only by recovering this doctrine could the church legitimately claim to call itself ‘Christian.’”¹⁸ In essence, the Church of the time was offering an improved eternity apart from the work of God, though not apart from the Church.

When it came to the action of the Reformers themselves, and particularly Luther, it is widely understood that Luther “Did not seek to establish a ‘different’ church.”¹⁹ Luther sought to reform the existing church, and even Pope

11 Gordon D. Fee and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., eds., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 87.

12 Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 136.

13 William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Art Farstad (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 47.

14 Though there isn’t room in this paper for much more discussion around the intricacies of indulgences, there is a disparity between their popular understanding, how they were used, and what they were originally intended to be. While many write of them as a type of “get out of hell free” card, they should be more accurately understood as a shortening of purgatory. This nuance, however, is not of great significance for the purposes of this paper.

15 Alister E. McGrath and James I. Packer, eds., *Zondervan Handbook of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 17.

16 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: First Harvard University Press, 2015), 139.

17 *Ibid.*, 253–254.

18 Alister E. McGrath and James I. Packer, eds., *Zondervan Handbook of Christian Belief*, 17.

19 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 145.

20 Sylvia Poggioli, “The Pope Commemorates the Reformation That Split Western

Francis seems to think that the church of the day was in need of reforming.²⁰ One is left wondering, however, if Luther fully grasped the magnitude of his influence and the long-term consequences that would follow.

In a Church that struggled so much with greed and corruption arose the sale of indulgences, which exchanged a promise of eternal security for money. Luther represented a movement within the Church that stood against this—a movement that desired to recommit themselves to the teaching of the Bible and bring church practice into closer alignment with the Bible’s teachings. Since the Church resisted Luther’s attempts at internal reform, he broke away from the Catholic Church, starting his own church, and countless others followed suit. Thus, “Against the intentions of anti-Roman reformers but as a result of their actions, the church became the churches.”²¹ Since the church had so much power and influence, the splintering of the church also resulted in massive changes in political power, social structures, and society as a whole.

The Nature of Grace

Grace is a word that often misunderstood. One reference defines it as “The

supernatural assistance of God bestowed upon a rational being with a view to his sanctification.”²² Too often grace is viewed as simply being allowed to get away with whatever one wants. It is misconstrued as only a lack of consequences.

Of course, salvation through Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the statement in Psalm 103:12, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” While there is some truth in such ideas, there is much more to grace than simply not having to pay the ultimate penalty for one’s sin.

Grace is also about what is good or best for someone. It is intertwined with one’s sanctification. Thus, anything that helps one move closer to God’s plan becomes an act of grace. Discipline that sanctifies is then inseparable from God’s grace. Thomas Brooks puts it this way, “Grace and glory differ very little; the one is the seed, the other is the flower; grace is glory militant, and glory is grace triumphant; and a man may as well plead for equal degrees of grace in this world, as he may plead for equal degrees of glory in the other world.”²³

Since the church had so much power and influence, the splintering of the church also resulted in massive changes in political power, social structures, and society as a whole.

Grace is God at work in our lives to bring about greater glory. Thus to examine God’s grace at work (in Babel or in the Reformation), one must look to the God-honouring results. To borrow biblical imagery,²⁴ we can see God’s grace by examining the good fruit that comes from his work.

Babel and Grace?

When one reads the account of Babel in Genesis, it is fairly easy to see that the people erred and that God punished them. Barth writes, “Even in the terrible decree of v. 7 we must not miss His grace.”²⁵ If the specific sin of Babel was not immediately apparent, the grace in this story is even less so—though it is of great importance. John Piper writes that, “God is more concerned about the dangers of human uniformity than he is about human diversity. We humans are far too evil to be allowed to unite in one language or one government.”²⁶ For Piper, while the confusion of languages was a punishment, it was also an act of grace preventing humanity from continuing in united rebellion against him.

Barth writes that Babel is not the end of the matter, but rather “...only a penultimate word, and that the curves of the separated ways are so ordered in advance that they will finally come together again.”²⁷ According to Barth, the confusion of Babel is only temporary. MacDonald writes that, “Pentecost was the reverse of Babel in the sense that every man heard the wonderful works of God in his own language.”²⁸ Another reference notes that God “graciously prevented

Christianity” (NPR Online), October 28, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/10/28/499587801/pope-francis-reaches-out-to-honor-the-man-who-splintered-christianity>.

21 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 369.

22 F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 700.

23 Thomas Brooks, *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks, Volume 1*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 212.

24 Matthew 7:15–20.

25 Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics III.4.*, 316.

26 John Piper, “The Pride of Babel and the Praise of Christ” (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, September 2, 2007), accessed January 11, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-pride-of-babel-and-the-praise-of-christ>.

27 Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics III.4.*, 317.

28 William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 47.

29 Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, eds., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 67.

humanity from expressing their collective rejection of Him by ‘confusing’ their language and causing them to scatter, so He will graciously enable them to one day express their collective worship of Him by ‘restoring’ to them a clarified speech to serve Him in one accord.”²⁹

Barth notes, “The miracle of Pentecost tells us how the decision is taken to look and break out from the nations to the one people of God, how the divine disposition of Genesis 10 and 11 is rightly understood as a teleological divine purpose, and how it is recognized in the form of the corresponding orientation from the near to the distant, the narrower sphere to the wider.”³⁰ Even through the events of Babel and the corresponding punishment, God had a gracious purpose in how he dealt with humanity.

God’s Grace in the Reformation

In any church split, it is typically not difficult to spot the consequences for human pride and rebellion. It can be much more difficult to see the grace of God at work in the midst of such events. Likewise, while it can be easy cast blame on who did what and who hurt who, God’s grace was also at work even in the midst of the consequences of the Reformation.

So many years after those fateful events, it is easier to see that the Roman Catholic Church was in need of some major changes. While the Church did not heed Luther’s warnings initially, the Protestant Reformation was enough of a wake up call

for them to start making some of those changes. McGrath writes that while the Roman Catholic Church did not listen immediately, eventually they made many changes in a period known as the ‘Catholic Reformation.’³¹ While this was not enough to heal the schism, the Reformation was undoubtedly a catalyst for people of all sides of the conflict to re-examine what the Scriptures actually taught.

Splintering

What began as an attempt to reform the already existent church ended in a massive splintering of one faith group into many.³² While these divides are typically thought of as a negative thing, Paul Lederach speculates that, “Perhaps it is in the wisdom of God that there are many theological streams, so that in the end the totality of His truth will be comprehended in ways no one stream could communicate alone.”³³

While the Reformation did cause a splintering effect for the church leading to many different theological streams, it is a distinct possibility that God’s grace is at work even in the differences of each theological stream to bring glory to himself. Lederach continues by noting, “The confluence of these streams will result in new learnings, new commitments, and new forms of obedience for these times. And the truth of God in its varicolored splendor will be seen and known in the world.”³⁴ If Lederach is correct, then God in his matchless grace used even the splintering

of the Reformation to further make himself known both to the global church and in the world.

Key Similarities and Differences

There are a number of similarities between the events at Babel and the Reformation. First of all there was the context in which the events took place: a consolidation of power and a strong unity that led to unchecked corruption. Secondly, both stories reveal groups of people who sought to obtain salvation apart from the grace of God—in Babel through making a name for themselves that successive generations may remember them and in the Reformation through the sale of indulgences. Thirdly, both stories culminated in a splintering of society that was thorough and pervasive throughout all levels of their civilization. Fourthly, both situations appear to be strongly marked by the consequences for sin, but upon closer inspection reveal God’s grace for humanity, actively working for the ultimate good of humanity, even as people acted in sinful ways.

God’s Perspective

One key difference between the story at Babel and the Reformation is that the writer of Genesis gives us God’s perspective on the story of Babel. The Reformation happened well after the canon of the Bible was established, thus any perspective offered about the Reformation does not carry with it the same authority as the perspective we see in the pages of Scripture about Babel.

In addition, where the events of Babel clearly resulted in the splintering of society, in the Reformation, “There were sociological divides already splintering society—rich vs. poor; educated vs. uneducated; class distinctions; racial partisanship.”³⁵ Thus the Reformation may have proverbially lit the fuse on a pre-existing bomb rather than being the bomb itself.³⁶

30 Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 323.

31 Alister E. McGrath and James I. Packer, eds., *Zondervan Handbook of Christian Belief*, 17.

32 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 91.

33 Paul M. Lederach, *A Third Way* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 14–15.

34 *Ibid.*


35 Darryl Klassen, e-mail correspondence with author, May 24, 2017.

36 *Ibid.*

Celebrating God's Grace as We Commemorate the Past

Through an examination of both the Babel narrative and the Reformation we can see that God's grace was at work even as humanity faltered. It may be helpful to view the Reformation in the same way.

One might view Babel as a sobering warning of the consequences for human sinfulness, as well as a reminder that God will sustain his people and his church even as God's people tend towards self-destructive behaviour. Just as Pentecost was a glimpse of a reversal of what happened at Babel through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are also left with hope that by the power of the Spirit we will eventually overcome the denominational divisions in Christianity today.

Perhaps the wonderful ecumenical work being done today is a small foretaste of what is to come. By examining the Reformation in light of Babel, we are given hope that just as there will one day be people praising God together from "... every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9), so there is hope that one day all denominations will once again be unified even in our diversity as we worship the Lamb of God in glory. Through comparing these two stories we can see examples of what Thomas Boston points to when he writes, "Surely corruption is ingrained in our hearts, interwoven with our very natures, has sunk deep into our souls, and will never be cured but by a miracle of grace."³⁷ 

³⁷ Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston, Volume 8: Human Nature in Its Fourfold State and a View of the Covenant of Grace*. S. M'Millan, ed., (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1850), 28.

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Reformation Interview: ‘We Beseech God’ to Heal Past Relationships



Kevin Wiebe, Dr. Carolyn A. Chau, and Dr. Mark L. Yenson

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Carolyn Chau, PhD, is the Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, and the Associate Director of the Centre for Advanced Research in Catholic Thought at King's University College at Western University in London, Ont. She sits as a representative of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Canadian Roman Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue.



Mark L. Yenson, PhD, is the Associate Professor of Religious Studies at King's University College at Western University in London, Ont. He sits as a representative of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Canadian Roman Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue.

Introduction by Kevin: As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it seemed fitting to sit down and talk across the table to people from the Roman Catholic Church about those fateful events. On December 7, 2016, I had the privilege of interviewing two professors who teach at Kings University College at Western University in London, Ont. Dr. Carolyn A. Chau teaches moral and systematic theology and Dr. Mark L. Yenson teaches systematic and historical theology. Both Dr. Chau and Dr. Yenson sit as representatives of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Canadian Roman Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue.

Interviews in text-only format are somewhat limiting because they do not allow the reader to hear tone of voice, see body language, or get a general sense of one's disposition. Therefore I wanted to give my impressions of the interview itself before we look at their specific responses

I think that the Roman Catholic perspective on the Reformation today is much more positive than it has been in the past.

– Carolyn Chau

a lot of positivity, and sometimes even pride, as it was the beginning of our particular stream of faith. How do Roman Catholics today typically view the Reformation?

to my questions. Their answers were consistently marked very strongly by an air of humility and respect. I found the discussion to be very positive in nature, and my hope is that you, like me, will be able learn and grow from reading their thoughtful answers to these questions. Also a special thanks to Layton Friesen for his help in formulating some of the questions.

Kevin: *As the pastor of a church in the Anabaptist tradition, and the assistant editor of an Anabaptist theological journal, we typically view the Reformation with*

Carolyn: I think that the Roman Catholic perspective on the Reformation today is much more positive than it has been in the past. There is a recognition that the Catholic Church had something to learn from the Reformation and that, in fact, gifts have flowed into the Catholic confession from the Reformation. As an example, from the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s—perhaps the most significant event in the life of the Roman Catholic Church in modernity—language that Luther reappropriated from the tradition and invigorated, “the priesthood of

all believers” has become an idea that Catholics now receive as part of the tradition and is communicated to the church universal. In addition to the positivity and an appreciation for what has been learned, there is also a humility. Today, the Catholic Church acknowledges that there were reasons for what Luther did, that he was not aiming to cause schism, but was trying to reform the Church. The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages was corrupt; there were issues of power that gave cause for people to have grave concerns, especially genuinely committed spiritual people, and the Church was in need of reform.

Mark: I think it’s notable the care and the language around the commemoration of the reformation, and the joint commemoration with the Catholic Church. At official levels, and even in our Evangelical/Catholic dialogue,

At official levels, and even in our Evangelical/Catholic dialogue, people were very clear that this was not a celebration; it was a commemoration.

– Mark Yenson

people were very clear that this was not a celebration; it was a commemoration. So there are elements that we celebrate. There is a common faith that we are coming to see in one another’s communities that we celebrate and desire to be strengthened; and we also ask for forgiveness, we also look for healing in terms of the rifts, divisions, misunderstandings, prejudice, and violence of historical past. Some

of the language has also been around the purification of memories and the need for healing and forgiveness among the different communities. So the Reformation, I think, for the Catholic Church is a theme of introspection and self-reflection in the ways in which the institution itself has contributed to or exacerbated those divisions.

Kevin: *Pope Francis recently took part in an event in Sweden that was commemorating the Protestant Reformation. One journalist is quoted as saying the Pope’s participation in these events is, “A recognition, perhaps, that both sides missed something at the time of the Protestant Reformation... The Catholic Church missed ways of reforming itself. Luther and those around him pressed in a way that just couldn’t be taken on board, so, in a way, both sides misspoke.” What do you think of this statement? Is he correct that both sides missed something in that conflict, and if so, what do you think they missed?*

Mark: Looking back at history pre-Reformation, we see a bit of a mixed bag, and perhaps some more apologetical Protestant scholarship hasn’t caught

the idea that there were other reform movements going on from the Middle Ages. There was the Gregorian Reform of the 12th century, there were movements in Northern Europe, there were the Franciscans and the Dominicans; so there are always these impulses at reform from the papacy down to other levels. There were councils, like the Council of Constance, but it got to a breaking point with Luther.

I think historical studies on various sides can see this, that it was a kind of convergence of factors. It was the rise of the nation state and the principalities that were pushing back against centralized power, so authority was an issue. It was a time of upheaval around salvation; after the late Middle Ages and the Black Death there was a sense that the regular conduits of sacred power, in some ways, were not functioning. So there is a much stronger sense that you see in Luther and Calvin of divine authority, divine sovereignty, divine freedom. So there are some theological issues that were missed. On the Catholic side that was the case; there was missed opportunity for reform as Luther’s career proceeded... Luther didn’t intend in 1517 to create a new community.

Kevin: *In talking about Martin Luther and the Reformation, Pope Francis said, “The church was not a role model, there was corruption, there was worldliness, there was greed, and lust for power. He [Luther] protested against this. And he was an intelligent man.”¹ After centuries of conflict, why is it that in recent decades there seems to be a greater spirit of openness, cooperation, dialogue and understanding between Catholics and the various Protestant groups?*

Carolyn: In a word, I think, from the Catholic side, it would be Vatican II. The Catholic Church seemed to realize at this point that the work of building unity among Christians was not optional to the life and mission of the Church. Disunity is a form of scandal and so there is responsibility to heal division between Christian brothers and sisters. Among the documents that the Church has on ecumenism, the document most focused on this issue from the Second Vatican Council is *Unitatis Redintegratio* [By Common Consent]. But the ecumenical imperative is there also in *Lumen Gentium* [The Light], another document on the Church from the same council

1 Sylvia Poggioli, “The Pope Commemorates the Reformation That Split Western Christianity” (NPR Online), October 28, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/10/28/499587801/pope-francis-reaches-out-to-honor-the-man-who-splintered-christianity>.

which emphasizes that the Church, the body of Christ, subsists in the Catholic Church, but that the truth and holiness of the members of the body exist beyond the borders of the visible Catholic Church as well. With Vatican II there was recognition of a need to heal the rift, to participate dialogically with Christian brothers and sisters, and a naming of the fact that we share one common baptism; and these all helped bring about the shift in perspective towards Reformation churches that you mention.

Mark: I think the ecumenical movement has been pushed forward a bit by new social situation or societal situation of churches and communities where Christians find themselves more of a minority so there is a need to build bonds together, where they recognize the scandal of being divided, where they sometimes come together—this is true of Evangelical and Catholics in Canada—around social issues. So, for instance, in pro-life issues or social justice issues they are in the same room, and they realize that they have more in common than just one cause that they are campaigning for together in front of parliament or a parliamentary committee.

Kevin: *You both sit on a council called the Canadian Roman Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue. What do you think Evangelicals and Anabaptists can gain by having more dialogue with Roman Catholic believers? What do you think Roman Catholic believers have to gain by further dialogue with Evangelicals and Anabaptists?*

Carolyn: Speaking personally, I have been deeply formed by Anabaptist theologians. From what I understand of the Anabaptist tradition, I am most grateful for the tradition's emphasis on fellowship and community. These are traceable to those Reformation principles, I think, of a direct, personal, and mutual accountability to one another as Christian brothers and sisters.

Speaking personally, I have been deeply formed by Anabaptist theologians. From what I understand of the Anabaptist tradition, I am most grateful for the tradition's emphasis on fellowship and community.

– Carolyn Chau

In contrast, Roman Catholic parishes have developed in such a way that local churches can be incredibly large now; and, especially with patterns of urbanization and mobility, it can often be the case in many Catholic parishes that people don't actually know each other. That sense of community is not as vital or as tangible, which is not to say that community doesn't exist or that there aren't some very vibrant parishes in the Catholic Church; but these are emphases of Evangelicals and Anabaptists from which I think Catholics could learn. On the other hand, what I've seen in and through my friendships with Anabaptist brothers and sisters is that there can be struggles with questions of authority. There can be the question of "Who do we go to for definitive answers on church teaching, at the end of the day?" That's not to say that the Catholic Church has authority figured out [laughter], but it's clearer.

Mark: I think that sense of fellowship and community and even the very explicit language of a personal relationship with Jesus is something that doesn't come naturally to Roman Catholics, and something that I think is meaningful, as well as being attractive, and we can learn from that. The love of Scripture is something that is there in the Catholic tradition; it's not absent, but is sometimes neglected, and I think there are lots of people that are hungry for that. So from the other side, what can Evangelicals learn? I will only speaking from my experience in the dialogue, because I wouldn't want to presume to say, "Here's what you need to

learn from me!" But what they [Evangelicals] will say to us is the prayer life, and the liturgical life of the Catholic Church (something we do together is we offer prayer from our different traditions), and they very much appreciate that. And I think that their experience has been, far from finding it confining, they have found ways in which it can be freeing and liberating. The form allows you certain liberty.

Kevin: *What would you most like your Evangelical friends to understand about the Roman Catholic Church? What misconceptions about the Roman church do you frequently encounter among Evangelicals or Anabaptists?*

Mark: One of the basic misconceptions that has frequently come up in our dialogue is this idea that Catholics are not really Christians. To resolve those misconceptions I think it takes an encounter with Catholics. Of course you're going to find lackadaisical Catholics and you're going to find cultural Catholics and ex-Catholics; but see that within these communities there really is a strong desire for that personal acceptance of Jesus Christ and that sense of living in the Spirit. That is part of parish programs; that is part of what we talk about now as the new evangelization; that's something that the Catholic community desires.

Carolyn: I think there is also a misunderstanding of how the Catholic community views both Scripture and tradition. So to clarify, it's *not* tradition that's over and against Scripture, but

rather that tradition flows from Scripture, is informed by Scripture, is in service of Scripture. So I think that a more nuanced understanding of how Catholics understand tradition would be helpful.

Kevin: *What do you see as some of the symptoms, collateral damage, side-effects of the division between Protestants and Catholics? How has this division diminished the work of the Church, both in your church, in ours and in the witness of the Church more generally?*

Carolyn: I think one form of collateral damage is we can get used to disunity in the Body of Christ. We can get used to it to the point where, at worst, there are Catholics who don't feel the need to engage their Protestant brothers and sisters, and really don't see beyond the purview of the Roman Catholic Church. It's not out of malice, but, rather, out of a lack of information, I think.

While theological dialogues sponsored by the churches can, as Mark has shown, go some way toward beginning to build bridges between communions, division has affected whole churches such that at the level of ordinary piety, it's not clear to many Catholics, and perhaps to some Protestants, that all Christians actually have a responsibility to bring about Christian unity. In addition to a lack of knowledge of responsibility, there may also be a sense of futility about the whole endeavour that prevents the work of unity from moving forward, and this negatively affects the witness of the Church.

Kevin: *On January 30, 2010, I interviewed a Roman Catholic musician named Matt Maher for a Christian Radio station, and we talked about the schism between*

Catholics and Protestants and the work he did to try and bring about more unity. He talked about an experience where he felt God tell him, "I want you to be a bridge. But if you're going to be a bridge you have to lay down and let people walk all over you."² Why can denominational/confessional reconciliation be so volatile?

Mark: I think at a basic psychological level it's this tendency to identify ourselves over and against others. For example, "I'm not a Leafs fan; I'm a Habs fan." There's a certain drive towards tribalism, I think. I wonder if

Despite great theological work being done on ecumenism, it can only go so far; reconciliation requires people to encounter one another, to know one another, and to have an openness to the other take root in people's hearts. This is something that Pope Francis has encouraged; he has talked about the church being dirty in the streets and mission as requiring personal encounter. But encounter can be volatile because of caricatures and stereotypes of the other that are hard to break free from. From my conversations with Protestant friends, it is my understanding that there

I wonder if underlying that tribalism in terms of faith communities is an idea that it's an either-or scenario. Either you have the fullness of the truth in a way that is superior to other communities, or we lapse into a kind of indifferentism or relativism.

– Mark Yenson

underlying that tribalism in terms of faith communities is an idea that it's an either-or scenario. Either you have the fullness of the truth in a way that is superior to other communities, or we lapse into a kind of indifferentism or relativism in which case none of those identities matter. And people are nervous about that kind of choice. And so trying to educate, for instance, the Catholic community, to see that that's not necessarily the choice (between relativism or holding onto your own identity). Rather there is, to take an example, a Catholic identity that is in dialogue with other forms of Christian living. That's a difficult kind of third option to push in there for Catholics.

Carolyn: It's also that there aren't a lot of places for meeting one another.

can also be something very deep in the Protestant psyche that says, "As much as I see a great deal of beauty in the Catholic Church, there was something right about the Reformation that is hard to let go of." There is this tension... Unity is hard.

Kevin: *While a lot of work has been done to try and create greater unity between Protestants and Catholics, there is still more work to do. What do you see as some of the major challenges in healing this schism? What are the differences that humanly seem insurmountable?*

Carolyn: I think one area of work that remains is on the question of intercommunion. The inability to worship together is a real challenge, especially for families that are Catholic and Protestant. To the extent that worship life isn't fully shared, we have a real hurdle to overcome in achieving Christian unity. In terms of differences that seem insurmountable

² Matt Maher, interviewed by Kevin Wiebe, January 30, 2010, The Trio, CIAM Media & Radio Broadcasting, Fort Vermilion, Canada.

from a human perspective, it goes back to what Mark had said a moment ago: part of human nature involves a struggle with the temptation to rest more on being right or, also, to rest more on being hurt than on understanding the other, forgiveness of wrongs, reconciliation, and the healing of memories. As long as the operative choice in our communities is, “Lest we forget that these people hurt us, that this community hurt us, that this tradition hurt us, we should remain apart,” unity will be a challenge.

Mark: I think questions of authority and ministry will continue to be particular questions that are difficult for communities. We can get basic understanding on things like justification, even if we have different languages for it. We can affirm a great deal of commonality, this is part of our common faith—certainly on Christology, or that God is triune. But when it comes down to how that is embodied in the community, how teaching authority works, whether an ordained ministry, an episcopal ministry belongs to that and in what way, those will continue to be challenging points for many of the dialogues going on.

Kevin: *Pope Francis has said, “While theologians iron out their differences, the two churches can work together on social issues like caring for the poor, migrants and refugees, and combating persecution of Christians.” How important is it that we overcome our differences to be the hands and feet of Christ together to the world, even while we may disagree on various theological points?*

Mark: One of the Pontifical Councils a few years ago put out a document called “Dialogue and Proclamation” and that

was really more to do with dialogue of Christians with members of other religious traditions, non-Christians. But it talked about different ways in which one is in dialogue and one proclaims. And it said that the most important was a dialogue of life, and that really the last step was theological dialogue. So I think we can apply that to the work of ecumenism.

Now we have theological dialogues that have achieved a great deal and are ongoing. Those are important; we don’t give up on those. But emphasizing that dialogue of life and dialogue of mission, meaning sometimes okay, maybe we don’t have to figure out the authority issue right now, but we can work together on the refugee crisis. It means that we are a church on mission together and we are also learning to be disciples together and friends. Then that begins the kind of path of friendship that will facilitate dialogue. And a dialogue among friends becomes much happier than a dialogue among strangers.


Carolyn: Yes, I think the dialogue of life and the dialogue of action are absolutely critical, because there is a way in which just being together and working together builds unity. In being together and coming to know one another through shared mission, there is an achievement of unity that perhaps can’t be expressed quite yet in a theologically well-articulated doctrinal affirmation. But that experience of working together for a common cause—to bring about the Kingdom, to work for justice—is itself

an affirmation of unity that goes very, very deep. It helps us to have a real sense of unity even if we can’t hash out all the theological details of what that means.... We know we are one because we have encountered our fellow Christians and

In being together and coming to know one another through shared mission, there is an achievement of unity that perhaps can’t be expressed quite yet in a theologically well-articulated doctrinal affirmation.

– Carolyn Chau

we realize that we are fellow Christians. “Walking ecumenism” means journeying together as Christians in a committed way even amidst our theological differences.

Conclusion by Kevin: From 1998 to 2003 there was a dialogue between Mennonite World Conference and the Catholic Church, and they released a report of their dialogue, which is available on the Vatican website. I want to close this interview by reading the conclusion of that report, “We, Catholic and Mennonite members of this dialogue, want to testify together that our mutual love for Christ has united us and accompanied us in our discussions. Our dialogue has fortified the common conviction that it is possible to experience reconciliation and the healing of memories. Therefore we beseech God to bestow divine grace upon us for the healing of past relationships between Mennonites and Catholics, and we thank God for present commitments to reconciliation within the body of Christ. Together we pray that God may bless this new relationship between our two families of faith, and that the Holy Spirit may enlighten and enliven us in our common journey on the path forward.”³ I want to echo that sentiment, and thank you for taking part in this interview. 

3 *Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference 1998 - 2003* (Vatican City: The Roman Curia, 2003), accessed December 1, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/mennonite-conference-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20110324_mennonite_en.html.

Feature Sermon

Mother's Day and the End Times



Dwight Plett

Dwight Plett serves as part of the ministerial team at the Mennville EMC in Manitoba's Interlake region. He holds a Bachelor of Biblical Studies from Peace River Bible Institute. He is married to Lorna. He is a bi-vocational minister, having served as a farmer and a baker.

This sermon, shortened here, was preached on May 14, 2017, Mother's Day. It ended an eight-month look at the story of the Bible.

YOU'VE BEEN WAITING all week for me to explain Revelation. I hope you didn't get your hopes up. I'll tell you up front that I'm going to disappoint you. When it comes to the plagues, the beasts, and the mysterious numbers of Revelation, I make no claim to special insight into end time prophecies.

As a teenager I heard Archie Penner describe himself as a "pan-millennialist." He believed everything would pan out in the end. I liked that explanation then, and I like it now. That's pretty much where I

stand. I listen to various positions and find them intriguing, but haven't come down solidly on any particular side.

When Lorna and I were interviewed by the EMC Examining Committee one question had to do with eschatology. I thought they were asking if I was a pre-millennialist or a pre-trib, or post-trib or whatever, so I told them I didn't know. After all, the experts got it so wrong the first time Jesus came that I wasn't about to predict how it was going to happen in the end.

"But you do believe that Jesus is coming back, don't you?" they asked.

"Oh, yes!" I answered.

"I believe he's coming back. I'm just not all that clear about some of the details."

How do you feel when you read Revelation? Excited? Does it whet your appetite? Do you try to figure out those creatures and symbols? Or do you avoid Revelation as much as possible?

No End to Information

These days there's no end to the information available about biblical prophecy. There are people who are sure they know how it's going to go down. Lots of people have tried to peg the date and so far they've always been wrong. It's embarrassing for them and us who believe Jesus is coming back.

Mind you, it's not just wild-eyed Christian prophets in this game. Remember the fuss about Y2K and the Mayan Calendar. Doomsday prophecies have been around forever. Humankind



Lots of people have tried to peg the date and so far they've always been wrong. It's embarrassing for them and us who believe Jesus is coming back.

has an intuition that things are not going to end well.

Some people love the book of Revelation. Some people are even borderline obsessed with prophecy. It's not a bad thing to be into prophecy unless people are getting dogmatic, setting dates, forgetting what we're actually here for.

Other people shy away from all those symbols, calamities, wars and rumours of wars. It's easier to ignore it. I lean in that direction. But John wrote that the book was to be a blessing: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (1:3). And again at the end: "Behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of prophecy in this book." (Rev. 22:7). We miss out on a blessing if we avoid Revelation.

Beware of Shortcuts

However, it's advisable to proceed with caution because it's easy to jump to potentially faulty conclusions. We're prone to take shortcuts in reading the Bible. We read something and think it applies directly to us and our situation. We're missing at least one important step: to consider the context in which these words were written. We need to figure out what the words meant to the people for whom they were originally intended.

Frankly, the book of Revelation wasn't written to us. God knew that we would read it and intended for us to benefit from it, but John wrote it for the seven churches of the late first century: "John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia..." (1:4). We even know which churches he meant. "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea" (1:11).

First Through Their Eyes

Everything John wrote down and sent to those churches meant something back then—and not necessarily what we might



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Everything John wrote down and sent to those churches meant something back then—and not necessarily what we might take it to mean today. We're obliged to interpret first through their eyes.

take it to mean today. We're obliged to interpret first through their eyes. When John writes about a woman sitting on seven hills (Rev. 17), the original readers thought of Rome, famous for having been built on seven hills.

We have to be careful not to assume that John wrote something only we in the 21st century could understand. Of course, the prophecy may mean something beyond what the original readers understood. But it's not fair to jump to our interpretation without considering the people to whom this book was addressed. Whatever Rome symbolizes to us today, back then Rome was the empire under which the Christians of the seven churches lived and suffered.

Apocalyptic Literature

That's important because it has a lot to

do with why John wrote the book. You see, most of Revelation is what scholars call apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is defined as "a type of Jewish and early Christian literature, the bulk of which stems from the years 200 BC – AD 100, containing visions or revelations... from God concerning the imminent coming of the end of the present evil age and the final advent of God's kingdom" (*Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 27). "It is essentially a literature of the oppressed who saw no hope for the nation simply in terms of politics or on the plane of human history" (D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 17).

You see, John was writing to a suffering church with no hope on the political horizon. I listened to Tim Keller talk about this period in church history. He talked about crucifixions, people

being impaled, soaked with oil, and lit on fire while alive. He talked about people having holes drilled in their skulls and molten lead poured in. He talked about the lucky ones who just got fed to lions. These people desperately needed hope—to know that God is still in charge and would prevail and make all things right. And that's what John wrote in a style they would have recognized—poetic, cryptic, full of symbolic language.

Apocalyptic literature could be compared to an abstract painting. We prefer straightforward language—newspaper articles and photographs. Apocalyptic literature is more like a Picasso painting. And that's why we sometimes have a hard time with Revelation. We want to investigate every detail and explain every symbolic number. When we encounter the obscure pictures of John's visions, we try to imagine what he was actually seeing. We end up with a monstrosity instead of whatever message he was trying to communicate.

So, first, be aware it was written to people at the end of the first century who knew about this literature, understood the symbols in their historical context, and desperately needed a message of hope: the promise of a conquering saviour, a victorious church, and a happy ending.

Visions Don't Tell Us When

The second thing is that while we're given general descriptions of things that will characterize the beginning of the end, the prophecies and visions were not given so that we would predict exactly when it was all going to happen. Jesus himself said he didn't know the day or the hour: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert. You do not know when that time will come" (Mark 13:32–33).

When Jesus or one of the New Testament writers talks about the end times they're often talking in general terms about things that will characterize the time between Jesus' first and second coming. Many descriptions aren't exclusive to the end times.

We make a mistake when we assume that the wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes, and the false prophets that Jesus predicted were only to happen just

were thinking the end was near. I clearly remember how we could do the math to prove that Henry Kissinger was the Antichrist. And remember when barcodes started at grocery checkouts we worried it was the Mark of the Beast? We heard rumours about the super computer in Belgium called the Beast collecting information about everybody. And then there were those concentration camps to imprison people who didn't take the mark.

I'm not making fun of anybody. Jesus told us to be on guard. We just don't want to become paranoid victims of every rumour and conspiracy theory.

Don't Become Complacent

On the other hand, we also don't want to overcompensate and become cynical like the servants in Jesus' parable: "...suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of" (Matt. 24:48–50).

Jesus warned his disciples against not being ready for his return. They listened. Even first-generation Christians expected Jesus to come back in their lifetime. Many signs Jesus had given them happened within forty years of his crucifixion when Jerusalem was ransacked and the temple was destroyed.

Apparently, believers in Thessalonica were selling their possessions and waiting for Jesus to come back; that's how convinced they were that it was about to happen. Though Paul told them they should lead productive lives while waiting, they were right to expect Jesus at any time. We should live that way too.

In fact, that's why we were given all that prophecy. We're supposed to be ready



As far back as I can remember people were thinking the end was near. Remember when barcodes started at grocery checkouts we worried it was the Mark of the Beast?

before Jesus comes back. These things have been part of life for a couple of thousand years, every generation since the Church was born. God intended for the Church always to be on the lookout for the imminent return of Jesus. We're not the first ones to think that we're living in the end times.

Barcodes

As far back as I can remember people

for the Second Coming of Jesus and living in a way that corresponds with it. “And do this, understanding the occasion. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day has drawn near. So let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom. 13:11–12). “The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and sober, so you can pray. Above all, love one another deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:7).

So, the book of Revelation, along with all the End Times prophecies, serves two main purposes then and today: To prepare us so that we can be ready when it does happen and to give us the hope we need to persevere through whatever happens.

How Jesus Describes Himself

Notice how John introduces himself in the prologue: as their brother and companion in suffering...” (1:9). Suffering was normal in the Early Church. They needed extraordinary hope to get through it. So he passes on the message Jesus had given him.

And look at the way Jesus describes himself to John: “Him who is, and who was, and who is to come. Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead. The Alpha and Omega who is and who was and who is to come.”

Jesus wanted his people to have reason to hope. He was the firstborn from the dead. He had suffered just like they would and he rose from the dead just like they would too.

When he calls himself the Alpha and Omega, he’s telling them that he is the very first and the very last. That is a message of hope. He was in control at the beginning; he’ll be in control at the end and all the time in between. He was there at creation when everything was perfect and he’ll be there at judgment day when he makes everything perfect again.

My mother didn’t go away very often, but every once in a while she would leave her kids at home by themselves. And she would give us jobs to do while she was gone.



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Two Illustrations

Today is Mothers’ Day.

My mother didn’t go away very often, but every once in a while she would leave her kids at home by themselves. And she would give us jobs to do while she was gone. You know how it is: when the cat’s away, the mice will play. We would spend the first number of hours doing pretty much whatever we wanted but then suddenly it would occur to us that Mom would soon be home.

We’d work like fury to try to get it all done and we wouldn’t always succeed. The worst part was seeing the disappointment in Mom’s face when we had to admit that we’d been fooling around when we should have been working. Do you see how this might have something to do with the message of revelation?

Maybe that’s not the best illustration. I think I have a better one. Yesterday Lorna was gone most of the day. The boys were home and we had a plan. We worked on projects as a surprise for her for Mother’s Day. We managed to get everything done. Of course, she was happy and that made us happy, and that’s how it should be, right?

We weren’t trying to earn her love by doing these things; we were trying to show her how much we love her. That is how it should be for us when we work for Jesus. We should eagerly look forward to his return because we’ve been working for him.

The End: A Message of Hope

When we have lived our lives for Jesus and when we see his face we will know that

it was worth it a thousand times over. That hope kept the Early Church going through their sufferings. That same hope can sustain us through whatever dark times lie ahead.

That’s how God chose to end his story: With a final message of hope. “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 1:12–13).

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen” (Rev. 22:17, 20–21). *Θ*

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The GSTM is a special place that helped me—by its faculty who care and think, students from different traditions, and subject matter that stretched the soul—to serve in the Church. The bursary for EMC students helped a lot, too.

David Kruse MA (Theological Studies), 2011 grad

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The Final Word

In The Church There Are Really No Non-theologians.

Karl Barth (1886–1968) put it this way in a lecture delivered to the Free Protestant Theological Faculty in Paris in 1934:

THEOLOGY IS NOT A PRIVATE SUBJECT FOR theologians only. Nor is it a private subject for professors. Fortunately, there have always been pastors who have understood more about theology than most professors.

NOR IS THEOLOGY A PRIVATE SUBJECT OF STUDY FOR pastors. Fortunately, there have repeatedly been congregation members, and often whole congregations, who have pursued theology energetically while their pastors were theological infants or barbarians.

THEOLOGY IS A MATTER FOR THE CHURCH.... BUT THE problem of theology...is set before the whole Church. The concept “layman” is one of the worst concepts in religious terminology, a concept that should be eliminated from the Christian vocabulary. So, the non-professors and the non-pastors are co-responsible to see to it that the theology of the professors and pastors be a good one and not a bad one.

Karl Barth, *God in Action*, trans. E. G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (T. & T. Clark, 1936), 56–57. Note: The quote is adjusted to read non-professors and non-pastors from *pseudo*-professors and *pseudo*-pastors (emphasis added), which better fits the affirming context.

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