The Protestant Reformation: Its Losses and Gains

By

James J. Reynolds,
Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCCN)
Bukuru Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria
jjemeyira@yahoo.com, jreynolds@tcnn.edu.ng, +2348034492902

Abstract

The 16th century Protestant Reformation is a major event that left behind both positive and negative impact on global Christianity as well as secular affairs of the world. There are gains and losses on both sides of the divide, the Catholics and the Protestants. The paper examined the various forms of reforms and discovered some of the reforms were non violent while others were violent in nature. However, both the two have one thing in common which is the desire for change and transformation. There are lessons the present church especially in Africa and its leadership can learn from the Protestant Reformation. The conclusion of the paper is that reformation should be an ongoing thing if the Church is to be relevant in all ages.

Key words: Christianity Protestant Reformation, Secular Affairs, Gains, Losses

Introduction

Reformation is a process by which individuals or groups strive to bring about a change aimed at transforming, renewal, reforming or restoring a society, organization or group to the ideals of its existence. It is a quest for better things. Some reforms are carried out in a violent way like the reforms of Nehemiah, Jehu, the radical reformers, the Roman Catholic reforms, etc, while others are non violent like the reforms of Jesus Christ, Protestant reformation, Martin Luther King Jr., etc. The Christian Church has had three major reformations namely: the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther, the English Reformation, and the Catholic Reformation. In this paper the scope is the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther, but as a background, we would like to discuss the reforms of Jesus Christ, the cry for reformation, the Protestant Reformation, the English Reformation, and the Catholic or Roman Catholic Reformation. Thereafter we will also look at the losses and gains of the Protestant Reformation and the lessons the Church in the 21st century can learn from the reformation as we conclude.

The reformation of Jesus Christ

The Christian Church was borne out of the reforms of Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world. When God promised the children of Israel that He was going to send them a messiah, they virtually thought of a political messiah liberator and reformer rather than a spiritual messiah owing to the situation they found themselves in. but when the messiah did finally come, three things occupied his attention namely; restoration of a true worship to Yahweh, the restoration of the correct understanding of God's Law (the Torah) as taught in the writings and the Prophets, and lastly the restoration of lost humanity to God by reconciling humankind back to God.

Regarding true worship, He taught his disciples the right attitude to prayer, fasting, and giving of alms as acts of devotion to God and expression of love to neighbour. He taught them that true worship emanates from love not mere show off as demonstrated by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law (Matt. 6:1-18). He also scolded the Pharisees and the Scribes for their hypocrisy (Matt. 23:1-39). The climax of his reforms in the area of worship was in the temple in Jerusalem when he drove those who bought and sold there and money changers saying, "It is written my house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a den of robbers" (Matt. 21:12-13 cf. Isai. 56:7; Jer. 7:11).

As for the correct understanding of God's word, Jesus expressly mentioned that He came to fulfill all that the Law and the Prophets have said. The right understanding of God's word is meant to elicit true devotion to God, love for neighbour and enemy instead of retribution, self denial and humility instead of arrogance and self centredness (Matt. 5:17f). The house of Israel has not been faithful to its part of the terms of the covenant between her and God just as the rest of the human race have sinned against God. Therefore, Jesus came to carry out the reforms that will eventually reconcile humanity back to God (John 3: 16). Jesus' reforms were basically carried out through three avenues: teaching and preaching, practical living out what He taught, and miracles not violently (except the episode in the temple where he drove out people). The aim of his reforms was the restoration of the ideal state of humankind's position in his relationship with God.

The cry for the reformation

Before the Protestant reformation under Martin Luther, many people seeing the decaying state of the Church (the Western Church) have been crying for a reformation to occur. Many reasons were advanced for this cry some of which were: the authority of the Pope, corruption and abuse in the ecclesiastical polity. Their concerns were mainly with the administrative structures, the legal set up and morality, not doctrine reform (Chadwick, p. 13).

The first step people took was to address it in an Ecumenical Council which worked temporarily. The other group that cried for reformation was the European kings of England, Spain, Denmark, Portugal, and Germany. These kings wanted the power of government over the Church be exerted and that means being independent from the power of the Pope in Rome. This move saw the power of the prince increasing while that of the Pope decreased as he granted some sovereign rights to the kings of Spain, England, etc (Chadwick, pp. 24-29).

The second group after the kings was the educated elites and the printing press which made acquisition of knowledge more easily accessible. These efforts saw the emergence of the renaissance period, an age of new learning. The other group of the intellectuals was that of the humanists. They both clamored for a reform and their efforts gave impetus to the reformers. Erasmus coming at this time used the two tools available at his disposal at that time namely new learning and the press (and his pen) to advance the cause of the reformation. He was also influenced by a group known as the Brethren of Common Life. These people showed concern and were full of zeal to reform the Church. Their target was the imitation of the life of Christ and they were able to produce a devotional titled "The Imitation of Christ" (Chadwick, p. 32).

The Protestant Reformation

At the mention of the Protestant reformation one name that quickly comes to mind is the name of Martin Luther (1483 – 1564). Martin Luther was born in 1483 and studied to become a lawyer; however, due to a drastic experience he had, he decided to become a monk in the Augustinian Monastery. Many factors contributed in creating the zest for the reformation in Luther's mind. The following are some of the factors that motivated him to pursue the cause of the reformation head on:

1. The efforts of those who cried for the reformation long before he appeared on the stage
2. The new learning (Renaissance) gave him the opportunity to be educated and exposed to knowledge, especially the Bible. Humanism on the other hand influenced his thought and action.
3. The efforts of Erasmus provided the motivation and encouragement he needed to carry on with the reforms. One commentator said, Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched, especially the critical notes he made in his Greek translation of the New Testament were not friendly to the church's position on certain issues.
4. The invention of printing press made the circulation of his ideas of reformation travel faster than he thought.

5. The secular authority (e.g. King Fredrick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony) gave him protection as they saw what he was advocating for as a fulfillment of their aspirations for independence and sovereignty.
6. His visit to Rome opened his eyes to discover the decay in the Church. What he saw in Rome was not encouraging, Luther later narrating his experience to one of his friends after he returned to Wittenberg said, "if there is hell, Rome is built over it" (Robinson, 1965, p.33).
7. Luther's discovery of the gospel truth during his lecture on Paul's Epistle to the Romans which says "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (Rom 1:17). This rediscovery became the driving force in Luther's reformation struggle as well as his theme – The Just Shall Live by Faith.

However, it should be noted that while those who cried for the reformation before Luther were concerned with issues like administrative structure, legal aspect and morality; Luther's concern was on doctrine and the gospel truth and its significance for justification and salvation. For this reason the Protestant Reformation was also referred to as the Evangelical movement because it laid much emphasis on scripture (the Gospel or Evangel).

The last stroke that broke the camel's back was when some people came to Luther with indulgence certificate they bought from Cardinal John Tetzel. Luther was greatly saddened, the following Sunday he preached against the sales of indulgences in the Wittenberg church. He said, "These papers you have paid for are worthless, you have gained nothing, you have merely parted from your money" (Robinson, 1965, p. 37).

The next thing Luther did was he nailed his 95 theses (complaints against abuses in the Church of his day) on the door of the Wittenberg Castle church on October 31st 1517 calling on his colleagues to challenge him in a debate. The theses were an invitation to the Church to come and discuss the abuses in the Church that had built up over the years. Luther's initial intention was to correct the issue of the sale of indulgences. However, it turned out that the entire structure of the Church needed an overhaul and that was what he did. In addition to the sale of indulgences, the office of the Pope and Church Councils, the spiritual decay of the Clergy, the church's position on salvation and the Bible, etc. were all addressed by Luther in his reformation. The summary of Luther's reformation teaching which is termed as Evangelical theology is referred to as the five solas (solea) of the reformation namely: *Sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus or solo Christo,* and *soli Deo Gloria.*

Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone): Basing his argument on 2 Timothy 3: 16 -17, Luther says scripture alone should be the sole authority in matters of faith and practice rather than the Pope and Councils who are humans and can err. For the Catholics, "The Bible means only what the Church says. The Pope can change the meaning of scripture any time he pleases." For instance, during his defense, Luther insisted on proof from scripture, but the Cardinal in-charge exclaimed, "Scripture! Scripture, do you not know that the Pope is above scripture?" (Robinson, 1965, p. 44). For Luther scripture alone is infallible, inerrant, inspired word of God, authoritative, sufficient, and the written word of God is our only rule of faith and practice. According to Reeves and Chester (2016) "What *sola Scriptura* does mean is that when we have to choose, there is only one choice we can make: Scripture alone is our ultimate authority" (p. 32).

Sola fide (Faith alone): The Bible says, "It is one who does not work but believes who is saved" (Romans 4: 5). Therefore, Luther says, "it is by faith alone that we are justified; it is by faith alone that we receive Christ's words of forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life, as it is said, "the one who is righteous by faith shall live (Rom 1:17, 3:13-4:9). "Luther emphasizes repeatedly that faith alone justifies- faith directed to God's Word, faith focused on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ crucified and risen" (Schreiner, 2015, p.52).

Sola Gratia (Grace alone): Luther says, "The principle of Sola Fide is not rightly understood until it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of Sola Gratia, for God's grace is the ultimate cause of our salvation" (Packer, pp. 41-43). Luther based his argument on Paul's words in Ephesians 2: 8 – 9 which says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast." Carl R. Trueman (2017) posits that "For Luther, grace involves placing the believer's salvation outside himself, in the action of God" (p. 1343).

Solus Christus or solo Christo (Christ alone): Luther says, "Rather than looking up to acts, believers should look to Christ alone; Christ alone is our saviour. Christ alone is our sacrifice. Christ alone is our mediator. We confess our sins to him, at death we look up to him as our only hope of eternal life, at the Lord's Super we enjoy Communion or table fellowship with Him" (Johnson, 2004, pp.7-9). "In Christ alone, we have all that we need now and forevermore; he is enough" (Wellum, 2017, p.1102).

Soli Deo Gloria (To the glory of God alone): The ultimate goal of every believer is to glorify God; therefore, all that Luther fought for and defended was not for his own self glory, rather it is to the supreme glory of God. Everything he did is to God's glory as scripture says, "For from Him, and through Him and to Him are all things to Him be the glory

forever and ever" (Romans 11: 36). The Psalmist also said something similar thus, "Not to us O LORD, not to us but to your name give glory" (Psalm 115: 1). That is why when his followers wanted to name the church or movement after him he objected saying, "Who am I, I am just a maggot that the church of God should be addressed with my name (Johnson, 2004, p.17). According to David VanDrunen (2015) "By holding forth *Soli Deo Gloria* as the lifeblood of the *solas*, we remind ourselves that the biblical religion recaptured by the Reformation is not ultimately about ourselves, but about God" (p. 1509).

Equally significant to Luther's reformation is his position on the cross of Christ. He says, "The cross heralds both human sinfulness and inability and it also stresses God's majesty and grace. That "the theology of the cross forces one to look outward away from the self, and upon seeing Christ realizes its true and desperate need" (Nichols, 2002, p.75). He then encouraged pastors to be saying, "This one thing preaches the wisdom of the cross. The cross alone is our theology. At this assault the whole Roman system came tumbling down, namely the priesthood, the mass as sacrifice and the Church as the sole dispenser of grace" (Johnson, 2004, p.9). He says "A theology that fails to acknowledge the utter human depravity diminishes the cross." Nichols says Luther's theology of the cross stands against human ability (Nichols, 2002, p.115).

Other people that struggle for the reformation after Luther were the Reformed reformers John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Luther and Calvin differed only on the following in their reform: their understanding of and celebration of the Eucharist, church government, and issues of Church and state relationship. But another group of reformers arouse who were known as the Radical Reformers. The Radical Reformers stressed on congregational church structure rather than Episcopal system of church governance. They included the Anabaptists, at Munster. The Anabaptists refused infant baptism and re-baptized themselves. They too got divided into the Hutterites who were followers of Jacob Hutter; the Mennonites, followers of Simon Menno who emphasized on pacifism and the Socinians or the Untarias. The rest are the English Separatists or independents, the Society of Friends or Quakers founded by George Fox and the Methodists. They were against certain things that Luther retained from the Catholic Church and also accused Luther of being slow in pursuing the cause of the reformation (Dowley, 1992, p.394).

The English Reformation

The English Reformation began during the reign of King Henry VIII of England; the occasion for the reform was among other things the king's divorce of Catherine of Aragon in 1533 because she could not give birth to a male child who could succeed him on the throne. The Queen was the niece of the Roman Emperor Charles V, after the divorce, the

Pope Clement VII excommunicated King Henry VIII. This action sparked off the English reformation as already they were only waiting for such an opportunity. A year later (1534), the British Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy making King Henry VIII the head of the Church of England which is properly known today as the Anglican Church (Schwarz, 2000, p.133). Commenting on this, Owen Chadwick says, "the English political revolution against the Pope was a faint reflection of the discarding of a foreign master" (p.27). Hence, we could conclude that the English Reformation was purely political rather than doctrinal or moral.

The Roman Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was initially under rated by the Catholic Church, but when it was spreading like wild fire, the Church decided to come to terms with reality and embarked on in house checking of itself. The Church summoned the Council of Trent which convened around 1545 – 1563. This Council was one of the three decisive councils of the Roman Catholic Church. The Council reaffirmed the following Catholic doctrines challenged by the Protestants: that the Church is the official interpreter of the scripture, added some Deutero-canonical books to the Catholic Canon. Increased the authority of the Pope over the Church, condemned and abolished certain abuses in the Church including the sale of indulgences (Schwarz, 2000, p.134).

Losses of the Protestant Reformation

The reformation has come and gone but the memories still linger in the minds of the church men, theologians, sacred and secular historians. Different people have their opinions about it depending on how they see it and what their focus is. It will not be out of place therefore to say reformation that it also has some bad sides directly or indirectly. It would like to high light a few of these before considering the good sides.

The reformation created enmity and unhealthy rivalry among Christian brothers and sisters instead of living in harmony preaching the gospel. Hassan Musa (2020) posits that "The new people of faith live differently: they live sacrificially and in harmony with one another because of their unity in Christ" (p.31). Some people went to the extent of killing in the name of reforming and defending their position. Even now some are still busy killing one another in the name of Christ the prince of peace. For instance, the case of the Catholic and Protestants in Northern Ireland and many other places in different forms and ways are a sad reflection of the after math of the reformation.

As the Catholic was busy pursuing the Protestants the Turks and Mohammedans penetrated and captured areas once populated by Christians some of which up to now are

no longer Christian. It also brought about decline in ecclesiastical authority giving rise to state churches which made Christianity state religion the result of which is decline in spirituality as experienced currently in the West. As a result instead of people seeing Christianity as a personal encounter with God, they see it as a cultural and traditional thing, with little or no commitment to it.

Since the secular authority provided protection to their various nationals involved in the reformation, it eventually became a nationalistic thing rather than religious or ecclesiastical. Rather than defending the truth of the gospel and right teaching of the Church people turned to defend nationalistic interests; this eventually gave birth to denominationalism.

Gains of the Protestant Reformation

The reformation also has positive results on the growth and development of the Church. The gains of the reformation are many and in varied forms, some of which include the following:

The recovery of Christ centred, Bible centred and faith centred Christianity instead of man centred, council centred and tradition centred and works centred Christianity. This made the Church more Evangelical and its theology a more Biblical theology.

It also led to the deep appreciation of Christ's atoning sacrifice for the sins of humankind and the recognition of man's inability to save himself without faith in God's saving grace. Socially, the reformation broke down the dividing wall between the sacred and the secular (the clergy and the laity) with its emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Also in the area of marriage and family life in keeping with nature and God's word which says, "It is not good for a man to be **alone …" (Genesis 2: 18).**

Politically, it brought about equality among all people, human rights and creation of representative forms of government.

Economically, it promoted free market economics and gave workers a new sense of dignity in their labour as the reformers taught that every good vocation should be seen as an avenue to serve God and humanity.

Educationally, it gave impetus to universal literacy as the common people learned to read the Bible for themselves rather than having to depend on what the priest say the Bible says. People had access to the Bible through the translations of Erasmus and Luther's German

translation of the Bible. Another thing associated to education is Luther's Catechisms (Small and Large Catechisms) which served and still serves as instructional material for Baptism and Confirmation candidates as well as material for families and the clergy alike. On the whole the gains of the Protestant reformation are more compared to the losses.

Lessons from the Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation has come and gone but it has left an indelible mark on the face of history both secular and sacred. There are lessons we can learn in order to improve on our current situation as well as those we can learn to help us avoid the mistake of the past. The following are some of the many lessons we can learn from the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century:

1. The Church embarked on the sale of certificates of indulgences because it was undertaking an intensive capital project, the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome but the money for the project was no available. They had to devise ways of generating the funds needed to execute the project. To achieve its goal it has to come up with some convincing explanations which eventually went contrary to the teaching of the Bible including the sale of certificates of indulgences. Our leaders should have the spiritual wellbeing of their members as a top priority above every other project especially capital projects. We need money to run the system but that should not be to the detriment of humanity. We should learn not to pursue money to the neglect of shepherding the flock God has entrusted into our care.
2. The Church became so side tracked to the extent that it neglected its duty of teaching correct biblical truth or as Paul would put it 'rightly dividing the word of truth' of the gospel. As a result both clergy and laity became ignorant of the word of God; there was poverty of the word of God among people. Today the situation is not quite different despite the availability of good instructional materials that will help build faith and access to the bible. Most of our members are partially informed; hence, they are left at the mercy of peddlers of another gospel, those who are eager to teach but they themselves are ill informed. Instead of getting educated, they end up being confused the more. At the end some move from one church to the other or one ministry to the other. Church leaders should take Paul's advice to heart that we should do our best to present ourselves to God as workmen who need be ashamed and who correctly handle the word of truth (2 Timothy 2: 15).
3. We should learn to trade the path of dialogue whenever there is a crisis situation rather than suppression and confrontation which always does no good but breeds hatred, rivalry, and enmity. We should learn to see ourselves as partners in God's

vineyard not rivals. We are in the master's business, the work belongs to Him we are but labourers and stewards, there is plenty work for all of us to do.

4. Leaders should be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves in their relationship with people of the world (the secular rulers and the rich) who may want to take advantage of any situation for their own selfish interests. Leaders should not compromise their Christian virtues as they relate with them but remember to be light and salt of the world always.
5. Many have a wrong understanding of the concept of God's grace; we should educate them and learn to strike a balance between God's grace to us in giving us faith, righteousness and salvation on one hand; and our human responsibility on the other hand.
6. Christians should seek to know their real identity in Christ rather than in denominations, geographical locations, and tribal affiliation or being nationalistic rather than being Christian.
7. As believers in Christ we should learn to practice the principles of spiritual formation such as prayer, study of the word of God, and fellowship with God and fellow believers which will lead to Christ being increased in us daily while we (the old man) decreases daily.
8. The Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of the Church and its members that we may all be one just as He and the Father are one. We should work towards Christian unity not uniformity and see the blessings of God in our various Christian traditions.
9. Christians worship the Prince of Peace which means they are to be peace makers just as our Lord and master loves and gives peace. He says, "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called children of God". This means that whenever we are busy fighting each other; Satan has gained control over us. One cannot be a peace maker except they are clothed with humility, only then they can tell the truth to others in love not arrogantly.
10. The church should always be reforming itself inwardly as it grows outwardly. The saying "*Ecclesia reformata simper reformanda* – [the Church that has been reformed is always being reformed]" should always occupy our mind and thought. Not only that we should also deliberately march words with action to make a reality.

The Lord has graciously lavished his love upon us after reconciling us to himself and has enlisted us to carry on with the gospel of reconciliation. How then can we reconcile others if we are not ourselves reconciled? Let us honour him by being true ambassadors of reconciliation. Whatever God has given you should be employed to reforming people's lives so that God's name will be honoured and glorified, not to exploit them. Let us say

with Luther, "we can spare everything except the word." May the good LORD, the owner of the Church help us by giving us the grace and humility to genuinely accept correction in good faith in order to be reforming always. May he also guide us as we live to please Him alone in all we say and do. Amen.

Refernces

Chadwick, Owen. *The Reformation: The Pelican History of the Church 3*.

Dowley, Tim ed. (1992). *The History of Christianity*. Oxford: Lion Publishing.

Johnson, Terry L (2004). *The Case for Traditional Protestantism.* Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust.

Keeley Robin ed. (1985). *The Quiet Revolution*. Oxford: Lion Publishing.

Musa, Hassan (2020). "The Bible and Public Theology" in *African Public Theology*. Sunday Bobai Agang Gen. Ed. Bukuru: ACTS.

Nichols, Stephen J (2002). *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of his life and thought*. Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing.

Packer, James J. *Historical and Theological Introduction in Luther the Bondage of the Will*.

Pelikan, Jaroslav ed. (1985). *The Christian Tradition 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300 – 1700).* Chicago: The Chicago University Press.

Reeves, Michael and Chester, Tim (2016). *Why Reformation Still Matters*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway.

Robinson, Vigil (1965). *Luther the Leader*. Accra: Advent Press.

Schreiner, Thomas (2015). *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

Schwarz, John (2000). *The Compact Guide to the Christian Faith.* Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers.

Trueman, Carl R. (2017). *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

VanDrunen, David (2015). *God's Glory Alone: The Majestic Heart of Christian Faith and Life*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

Wellum, Stephen (2017). *Christ Alone: The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.