



How should we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation?
These are reflections by Revd Dr David Cornick, General Secretary of Churches Together in England, re a statement made by the Presidents of Churches Together in England on 29th February 2016.

The Presidents' Statement and these Reflections are on the web page:
www.cte.org.uk/reformation

Reflections on the Presidents' statement about the 500th anniversary of the Reformation

Let me begin with the [Presidents' five 'R's](#) as a way of entering in to the whole question of how we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

First, and most importantly, we need to rejoice because of the joy in the gospel which we share.

Rejoice

We look back at the sixteenth century and its reformations from an interesting vantage point. We belong to the first generations that have ever been able to see the planet from outer space, and that gives us a sense of the Earth's unity, that fragile web of interconnectedness that allows this tiny speck of the vast Universe to be (so far as we know) the only theatre for the wonder of life. We have a global perspective, so as we look back at the reformation we appreciate that the reformation was about Europe, indeed, about Western Europe. The churches of the East remained and remain untouched by the reformation. But our global perspective also allows us to understand that Western Europe exported its culture and its faith to the rest of the world through the process of colonialism which really got underway in the sixteenth century with the silver age as Spain and Portugal plundered their way through South America. They exported Catholicism. Their northern neighbours eventually exported Protestantism in its many and diverse hues across Africa and Asia. But most significantly, in the early seventeenth century radical Protestant experiments were exported to what is now the United States, and it is impossible to understand America without understanding Protestantism. The particular course which Protestantism has taken in America, via evangelical revivalism and the holiness movement eventually provided the seedbed for part of the early twentieth century explosion of Pentecostalism.

Our first reason for rejoicing is that we can see how the heritage of the sixteenth century has affected the history of the world. That perspective is important. The second reason to rejoice is that we look back through the lens of a century and more of ecumenical activity. The reformation was grounded in a passion for reform, to conform more precisely to the mind of Christ. That was the impetus behind Luther's re-discovery of the Pauline concept of justification by faith, and also of the work of the Catholic Council of Trent which met from 1545-63. That sense of reform, of putting right what was wrong, of striving for the mind of Christ, drove both those who created the Ecumenical movement, and Pope John XXIII and the fathers of Vatican II. That perspective is perhaps best illustrated by the Joint Declaration of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Foundation on Justification by Faith which states that this doctrine, which was the root of the reformation crisis, is no longer to be regarded as church dividing. We look back from a vantage point of increased understanding, of recognition of each other as fellow disciples of Jesus Christ, of being engaged daily in a process of reconciliation. We of all generations feel on our pulses the wonder of God's patience with our folly and division

Remember

If we rejoice, we also remember. In 1500 there was one church in Western Europe. By 1600 there were scores. We're not too good at history in the church, but it's important to remember and to understand because what we are now was shaped in large part by what happened then. I sometimes think that the more historians study these years, the less easy it is to understand what was going on. The history of the sixteenth century used to be written as if the rise and triumph of Protestantism was inexorable, that the late medieval church was incapable of meeting the spiritual needs of the people, and in need of reform, which Luther then supplied. Now we know that isn't true. So far as we can see, the church on the eve of the reformation did indeed meet the spiritual needs of most people, and the rise of Protestantism was far from inevitable. Indeed, taking England as an example, there was widespread relief and rejoicing when Mary Tudor succeeded her half-brother Edward VI in 1553, and the Catholic vestments and statues which he had banished were brought out of hiding with alacrity. Had Mary not succumbed to cancer in 1558 England would have remained a Catholic country with a singularly different history to the one it subsequently enjoyed.

If the church was at least serviceable for the majority of the people, attention needs to switch back to the ideas of reformers, and the reasons why they took hold so quickly and tenaciously in some parts of Europe. The reformers didn't erupt out of nothing. Ever since the disastrous years of the Great Schism in the late fourteenth century when there were two popes, one based in Rome, the other in Avignon, there had been a tradition of those who sought serious reform within the church, passing by way of such significant thinkers as Nicholas of Cusa, the fiery preacher Savonarola and the great scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam. Luther was their heir, and the reformation is inseparable from his agonised spiritual journey.

The son of an upwardly mobile farmer who had done well out of the mining industry, Luther was intended for the law, but young Martin went his own way and became an Augustinian monk. His order quickly saw his potential and shoved him into the academic fast stream and he ended up as professor of theology in the new University of Wittenberg, of which the local ruler, the Elector Friedrich the Wise, was inordinately proud. However hard Luther tried to satisfy God, he felt himself a complete failure and the object of God's wrath. He says that he came to hate God, but as he studied and wrestled with Paul's letter to the Romans, he came to understand anew God's mercy and grace, and to appreciate how God had set aside his wrath. Charles Wesley (so often an acute translator of Lutheran ideas) captured Luther's experience:

My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

As Luther was working out the radical simplicity of a theology of justification by faith, he got embroiled in a completely unrelated set of events in Rome. Building had begun on St Peter's Basilica in Rome in the 1450s but it was taking a long, long time, and Pope Leo X decided to hurry things along by raising money through the sale of indulgences. That was perfectly normal – most of the medieval hospitals of England were funded like that – but the preaching of this indulgence in Wittenberg was singularly unfortunate and marked by corruption. For a start the profits were being shared between the Pope's re-building scheme and the 23 year old Prince Albrecht of Brandenburg, Archbishop of Magdeburg, who had recently also brought the Archbishopric of Mainz and was using his share of the profits to pay off the bribes and loans he'd taken out to finance that. And then the chief publicist was a Dominican preacher, Johannes Tetzel who had an ear for a good sales pitch and came up with the ditty

Place your penny on the drum,
The pearly gates open and in strolls Mum.¹

The Augustinians didn't care too much for the Dominicans. Luther, whose spiritual journey and theological studies had led him to question the whole concept of indulgences, fired off a series

¹ Eamon Duffy *Saints and sinners: a history of the Popes* (London, Yale UP 1997) p 153

of 95 theses – the traditional way of starting an academic debate. What he hadn't expected was the speed with which the issue became a cause celebre, mainly as a result of the printing press revolution. Within months the Church had condemned him, and Luther had moved from attacking indulgences to questioning a range of Catholic doctrines.

It was like taking the stopper out of a bottle of fizz, and reform spread like wildfire, particularly across the city states of Germany and Switzerland. They weren't then the nations we know now, but an enormous patchwork quilt of small states some of which were rich cities, some of which were as small as an Archbishop's garden. All kinds of reforming ideas appeared. Luther was to prove a relative conservative, especially in his attitude to liturgy and the sacraments. Elsewhere more radical ideas flourished as what we now know as 'Protestantism' came into being in all its variety. Once the idea of primacy and episcopacy had been discarded, a whole series of questions about church government came to the fore. Should the church be ruled by the prince? Should it be ruled by the clergy? Should it be governed locally by the people? Once the traditional liturgy of the Latin mass had been laid aside, the ways in which worship should be conducted was central. Should it be in the vernacular or Latin? Should it include anything which was not explicitly permitted by Scripture? What was the relationship between the reading and exposition of the Word and the eucharist? Once the magisterium was laid aside, and Scripture was read alongside tradition, questions arose about baptism – should babies be baptised, or only those old enough to make a confession of faith? And once that question is asked, what constitutes a Christian? Are you a Christian simply because you are a citizen (and remember in the middle of the sixteenth century non-belief was as rare as hen's teeth), or do you need to make a specific commitment to the Lord following conversion? Where does authority lie? Is it in tradition, or Scripture, or experience of the guidance of the Spirit in the soul?

All those questions and many more exploded across Europe in the wake of Luther's spiritual journey. The answers to them were the product of the inevitable interplay of ideas, individuals and government policy. By the 1560s, the explosion has settled into three main Protestant groupings – first the Lutherans, second what is known as the 'magisterial reformation', that is the reformation imposed by rulers – for example Calvinism in Geneva and in Scotland, the unique English compromise of the Church of England, and then the radical reformation, sometimes known as 'Anabaptism' – the title was originally an insult – those who baptised again: in other words those who believed in adult baptism – we think of the Mennonites and the Baptists. And to the far left were those who believed in the guidance of the Spirit within, eventually in England the Friends.

And of course, there was Catholicism itself. As the convulsions of religious revolution swept across northern Europe, the Catholic church responded by calling a great reforming council, the Council of Trent, which met spasmodically from 1545 to 1563 in Trent and Bologna in north Italy. There were 25 sessions under three Popes. During the history of the Council there were moments when reconciliation with Protestants was mooted, but in truth events had spun too far out of control for that to be possible. What Trent did achieve was reform within the church, the removal of abuses (including indulgences after the Lutheran horse had bolted) and the codification of Catholic doctrine and tradition. It re-affirmed traditional doctrine – the seven sacraments, the sacrificial nature of the mass, transubstantiation, the universality of the mass, and therefore the need for Latin and so on. Trent defined the shape of Catholicism for the next three centuries.

By 1600 then, the lines between Protestantism and Catholicism seemed clear and stark, and it was not until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the two traditions began to re-examine their understandings of doctrine, to reach back beyond the scars of the 1500s and discover how much they actually shared.

Reforming

The Presidents remind us that we all need to reform ourselves continually to grow closer to Christ. And the extraordinary thing about the reformations of the sixteenth century was that, in

their own ways, they were all about achieving that. Let's meet some people and see. First, meet Carlo Borromeo. He was an Italian aristocrat, nephew of Pope Paul IV, appointed as his Cardinal Secretary (Cardinals at this period do not have to be priests), a brilliant administrator who held together the Council of Trent. Tragedy struck his family in 1562 when his elder brother died, and Carlo was expected to take on responsibility as head of the family and marry, even by his uncle the Pope. Like Luther he defied the Pope and refused because he felt the call of Christ to the priesthood and he sought to follow. He was eventually consecrated as Archbishop of Milan. Many higher clergy held their appointments simply as cash cows and departed for the good life in Rome. Not Carlo. He became the first resident Archbishop in Milan for 80 years, heroically ministered in the city during an outbreak of plague, organised the clergy, founded seminaries, insisted on them preaching every Sunday and feast day – even insisting that they practised their preaching in front of him, laid stress on confession and introduced the confessional box to enable privacy, introduced 740 schools into the city with 3,000 teachers and turned the life of Milan inside out. He was not an easy man, but there was no doubting his passion for the gospel and his commitment to Jesus Christ.²

Now I want to introduce you to someone completely different, Thomas Platter from Zurich in Switzerland. We only know about him because he wrote his autobiography from memory when he was 65. He was from a very poor background – his father died when he was a baby, and he found himself passed from one member of the family to another during his childhood – including an abusive uncle who was a priest who used to beat him. He managed to survive doing odd jobs and studying when he could and he felt called to priesthood. He arrived in Zurich in the early 1520s when the reformation there was in full swing. These were incredibly difficult years to live through as old certainties crumbled, and Thomas diligently pursued his path towards the priesthood, recording his spiritual advances and setbacks in a journal until in one Sunday he heard a powerful sermon by Zwingli on 'I am the good shepherd, and he felt he said as if 'I had been yanked up by my hair'. He put aside thoughts of priesthood, buried himself in Biblical studies and began to learn more of the new evangelical religion. He experienced real poverty, then eventually he got employment as a courier, then became a rope maker, and then a printer. Eventually he married Anna, and became a distinguished schoolmaster in Basle for 31 years. As we read his autobiography we can see a simple, ordinary man, - he was no theologian, no Borromeo – looking back over his life and seeing the hand of God guiding him – 'How is it that I still live, stand and walk? He asks, 'it is because God has protected me through his angels.'³

There is a phrase that I grew up with in my tradition – *ecclesia semper reformanda* – the church must be always reforming, always growing into Christ. When I look at the lives of those who were caught up in the storms of sixteenth century church life, I recognise that, and when I hear my Catholic friends talk of ecumenism as a 'spiritual journey' and as 'conversion' I recognise that same impulse, the need to become more Christ-like.

Repenting

We need to repent of the immense harm and sorrow that we have caused each other. Let me introduce you to three English lives cut short in the sixteenth century. I'll take them in chronological order. The first was one of the outstanding figures of the century, an obscure Cambridge academic who became Archbishop of Canterbury by dint of his service to Henry VIII in his divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Thomas Cranmer. He was the great architect of English Protestantism, especially during Edward VI's reign, and in his creation of the early versions of the Book of Common Prayer, which did more than any other book to shape English spirituality.

² For Borromeo see Diarmaid MacCulloch *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London, Penguin 2003) pp.410-13

³ Stephen Ozment *Protestants: the birth of a revolution* (London, Harper Collins 1993) pp. 172-81 provides details of Platter's life; the quotation is from p. 181

In 1553 when Mary Tudor came to the throne and Catholicism was officially restored, Cranmer was arrested, and imprisoned. Mary, who was the daughter of Henry's first wife, Katherine of Aragon, understood Cranmer to be the author of her misfortunes for his role in the divorce and she was determined to execute him for heresy rather than treason – treason would have been the easy option because he had supported the claims to the throne of Lady Jane Grey when Edward died. During the three years of his imprisonment he broke down under the pressure of guilt and confusion, and recanted his Protestantism completely. The authorities thought they had a PR coup. Cranmer was to be permitted one last public recantation before his execution and on a rainy Saturday in March 1556 he entered a pulpit in the University Church in Oxford to preach from a prepared script. He did, until the very end, when he withdrew all his recantations and dramatically announced that the hand that had signed them would burn first. And so the 67 year old former Archbishop was bundled from the pulpit to the stake and there he died in the flames, holding his right hand out, screaming while he was able, 'my unworthy right hand.'

Let us move from Oxford to York, from the reign of Mary to that of her half-sister Elizabeth who restored the Protestantism Mary had banished. Margaret Clitherow was born a Protestant and eventually married John a butcher in York. They had three children. She converted to Catholicism in 1574 and he supported her decision although he did not convert. Their son trained as a priest and Margaret used her house in the Shambles as a regular venue for mass. She was inevitably arrested for recusancy in 1586, but she refused to plead so that her children would not be forced to give evidence against her. Her refusal to plead meant that she could be tortured. The authorities laid her on the ground with a small sharp stone under her back, placed her front door on top of her and laid weights and rocks on it so that her back would be broken. She was crushed to death within 15 minutes.

Let us move south and east now, twenty years later in Elizabeth's reign, and arrive in Norwich. There we meet Henry Barrow, a Cambridge educated man of means of radical Protestant views. Henry is separatist. He does not believe that the true church is to be found anywhere other than in the local gathered community of saints. Perhaps 1% of the English population at this time followed this way of thinking, perhaps fewer. However, he and his colleagues fell foul of the Bishop of Norwich and Henry re-located to London where he joined another Separatist gathering. It was whilst he was visiting one of them, John Greenwood, in the Clink prison that he was himself arrested and kept in the Fleet prison for six years. There he was subject to continual examination, but he budged not an inch. When confronted by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, Sir Christopher Hatton pointed to John Whitgift, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and asked Barrow what he was, 'He is a monster', Barrow replied, 'a miserable compound. I know now what to make of him; he is neither ecclesiastical nor civil, even that second Beast spoken of in Revelation.' His years in the Fleet were without intermission, with the open sewer of the river flowing by his window. That great Anglican bishop Launcelot Andrewes, once visited him and declared his life 'blessed, a perpetual sabbatical' and said it was the life he would choose. It was one of Andrewes's rare lapses. Barrow quietly told him he spoke philosophically not Christianly. In 1593 Barrow and Greenwood were both executed by hanging.⁴

Theological ideas were as important to societies in the sixteenth century as economic ones in ours. They were so important that state building and national security depended on them and were threatened by them. To belong to the wrong side was to be a traitor. As the heady brew of religion, nationalism and politics came to the boil, it caused the most dreadful violence on soft, vulnerable and beautiful human bodies. And of all of that we need to repent. Pope Francis has spoken eloquently of the ecumenism of martyrdom. Speaking of the new martyrs of the Middle East, he said that they died as Christians, no one asked whether they were Orthodox or Catholic first. The sixteenth century martyrs were, conversely, martyred precisely for being Catholics or Anglicans or Radicals rather than simply Christians, and yet Francis is right, for us they are above all martyrs for their faithfulness to Christ, and therefore they belong to us all. That is why repentance is a precondition of reconciliation.

⁴ For Barrow see 'Henry Barrow' *ODNB* (Patrick Collinson)

As we prepare to commemorate the reformation we need to stand back and remember not just our martyrs, but also the ways in which reformation unleashed war. Listen to the words of Dairmaid MacCulloch, ‘..the Reformation took only six years from its outbreak in 1517 to become a major trigger of violence in the Peasants’ Wars of the German lands. Very soon it was the single greatest motive of the killing, as the Lutheran-inspired Schmalkaldic Wars unfolding from 1547 were succeeded by the Reformed-inspired wars of religion between the 1560s and 1590s, and then by the horrors of the Thirty Years’ War...’⁵. The Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) was the kickback of the Catholic Hapsburg monarchs to regain the lands they had lost, quickly metamorphosing into the rivalry between the Hapsburgs and France for supremacy in Europe. Neil MacGregor reminds us in his fine study of Germany of the effects on Germany as the armies criss-crossed its territory, spreading terror and plague and brutalising the population. It was never forgotten. Its economic consequences could still be felt three centuries later, and when hostilities between Germany and the allies ceased in 1945, Albert Speer explained the capitulation – ‘The destruction that has been inflicted on Germany can only be compared to the Thirty Years’ War. The decimation of our people through hunger and deprivation must not be allowed to reach the scale of that epoch.’⁶

Repentance is not just about us, it is about the ways in which human things have a propensity to come out wrong, for the beautiful to be subverted by ugliness and the things of faith to become the vessels of violence and hatred. We have a shorthand word for that in all our traditions. It is sin, and we repent of it, daily.

Reconciliation

Repentance, the Presidents suggested, should include repentance of the prejudiced views we have of each other, of those caricatures which we build up and unconsciously deploy. That leads automatically to an understanding of reconciliation. If one of the unwitting products of reformation was war, another was toleration. The pre-Reformation Christian church had an abysmal record of toleration – the Eastern churches were generally better than the Latin West, but they were mainly under the control of the Ottoman Empire and had much less chance of power, although they knew a thing or two about the incipient violence of the Latin Church because the memory of the sack of Constantinople by Western forces in the fourth crusade of 1204 was long. Latin Christianity mostly put up with Jews, apart from the odd pogrom, but feared and hated Islam and did its best to defeat it wherever it could. Indeed, its record of toleration by the side of medieval Islam is dire. And its attitude to Greek Christianity was ‘...at best condescending, at worst contemptuous’. It began burning people it regarded as heretics in France in 1022 and followed that up with a whole paraphernalia of Inquisitions, the most infamous of which was the Spanish.⁷

The reformations changed that. Once there was more than one church, more than one philosophy, more than one theology, dealing with issues of plurality was no longer something that could be kept in the abstract. What is now Germany led the way. The weakness of the imperial power, the Holy Roman Empire, and the strength of local princedoms meant that in 1526 at the Diet of Speyer it was agreed that every prince should regulate religious affairs in his own territory (*cuius region, eius religio*), and then after Charles V had failed to impose Catholicism by force, that was confirmed in the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 which recognised Catholicism and Lutheranism as legitimate expressions of Christianity, to which the Peace of Westphalia, at the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648 added Calvinism.

Toleration was helped along the way when plurality was experienced within an individual nation state. And so in 1598 Catholic France passed the Edict of Nantes to grant citizenship rights to Calvinists, and in the 1580s the Dutch Reformed Church had to cope with a variety of competitors, and even the vengeful gentry of Restoration England allowed a marginal existence to dissenters and Roman Catholics in 1662. Slowly but surely killing people for religious

⁵ MacCulloch *op cit* p.671

⁶ Neil MacGregor *Germany: memories of a nation* (London, Allen Lane 2014) p.xxxiv

⁷ MacCulloch *op cit* p. 676.

reasons became unacceptable in a civilised society. But, just as surely, as the sense grew that it was possible to believe different things about God and the church, there came a point when people demanded the right to believe nothing, and in this sense the reformation was the progenitor of secularism.

Ironically that long historical sweep and the emergence of secularism has helped divided Christians begin to discover again their long lost unity. That is why it is such a privilege to be living at the end of the ecumenical century, for we have begun to see the miracle of the broken apart coming back together, the start of a process of reconciliation which our theology tells us is but the first part of God gathering the whole of creation into one under the headship of Christ.

I know of no better exposition of that vocation to ecumenism and reconciliation than that of Chiara Lubich, the remarkable founder of the Focolare Movement, 'One thing was clear in our hearts: what God wanted for us was unity. We live with the sole aim of being one with him, one with each other, and one with everyone. This marvellous vocation linked us to heaven and immersed us in the one human family. What purpose in life could be greater?'⁸

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March 2016

⁸ Chiara Lubich *Essential Writings: spirituality, dialogue, culture* (London, New City 2007) p. 17