

With this essay the Institute resumes a series of posts it initiated last fall, with contributions from members of the Company of Teachers designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce these pieces and cite them as you see fit.

What We Lost in the Protestant Reformation

By Matthew D. Taylor

The past few years that I've spent earning a Ph.D. and teaching theology and religious studies at a Catholic and Jesuit university have led me to a surprising realization: I am Protestant largely by accident. I didn't stumble into it; I was born into it. I was raised in a veritable Evangelical enclave with all of my relatives, all of my friends, and even the private Christian elementary and secondary schools I attended existing safely within the Evangelical fold. Yes, I had my "born again" moment of praying for Jesus to come into my heart, but I was 5-years-old at the time, and I have no memory of it. As much as Protestantism is supposed to be about deciding for yourself, I can safely (but uncomfortably) say that I was born Protestant.

What I was taught as a child by my sincere Evangelical teachers was that Catholics lived in a different theological universe: worshiping the Virgin Mary, following the teachings of the Catholic Church rather than the Bible, trying to earn their salvation by "works" rather than our Protestant virtue of "faith alone." These caricatures of Catholicism persist in the minds of many Protestants, scar tissue from the schism of the Protestant Reformation, our continued protests.

What I've discovered by studying under and alongside Catholic theologians and priests and colleagues is that I could easily imagine myself in a parallel universe—coming of age in a Catholic enclave where the rituals, the aesthetics, and the idioms of American Catholicism were my bread and butter. Everyone has what philosopher Richard Rorty calls a "[final vocabulary](#)," the words "in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives." And my "final vocabulary" is unmistakably Protestant. I love the fire-in-the-belly conviction of a good biblical sermon, and abbreviated Catholic homilies always leave me wanting. My heart swells to some of the old swashbuckling Protestant hymns. I come alive in intensive Bible study with my fellow lay people—no priest or sanctioned theologians needed, just us and the Bible. But I could easily picture myself on a different path, under different circumstances.

This past month, in my classes with first-year college students, we read and studied Martin Luther, warts and all. I was reminded of what a singular figure Luther was: a punchy, brilliant theologian, righteous and self-righteous. Luther's original complaints about indulgences, corruption, and distortions in the late-medieval Catholic church were widely acknowledged as problems by all his

honest contemporaries. But Luther's style was also profoundly provocative, at times seeming to intentionally misread or misunderstand his Catholic and other interlocutors. He was pushed by the imperious reactions of first his local archbishops and then by the pope himself into taking more and more extreme positions. But Luther was also pulled—pulled by the force of his own disruptive personality and his need to be right. Maybe Martin (as one of my students insisted on calling him in our class discussions) was an accidental Protestant too.

By the end of his life, Luther's mind was still sharp, but his voice was shrill. He wrote vitriolic and disillusioned diatribes against the Catholics, yet he also wrote despicable, unconscionable things about the Jews, the Muslims, and some of his fellow Protestants. This year, as we commemorate the 500th anniversary of Luther's auspicious beginning as a heroic, rebel theologian, we his Protestant heirs also have to grapple with the dark and bitter man he became. He started out seeking to reform the Catholic Church, to bring it back to the teachings of Christ, and he ended his life very much in need of reforming his own heart.

The truth is, we Protestants lost a lot in the Protestant Reformation. We not only severed—or *were severed from*, if the passive is to be preferred—our connection to Holy Mother Church, we also lost some of the great insights and joys that were attached to that flawed but beautiful institution. We lost our ability to outwardly belong under the theological umbrella of the official church teaching while also happily and nonchalantly subverting those very teachings where they fail to resonate with our spirits (see: [Julian of Norwich](#)). We became so serious that we lost our theological irony.

We protested the Catholic Church's claim to own and articulate the Christian Tradition, the deep currents of centuries of Christian theology and reflection. We claimed the Bible for ourselves, putting it in the hands of everywoman and everyman, but we soon spun off into endless eddies of intra-Protestant debate and disputation about what the Bible means. We developed a chip on our shoulder about tradition and the comfort of continuity. As Protestantism fractured into a thousand pieces—denominations, one-off churches, homeless believers—we lost the meta-narrative and gave up our ability to tie our individual stories to something bigger, something less universal than God and more universal than ourselves. We exist now in our segmented and variegated communities (*my church*, not *the church*), and for all our ecumenical efforts to bridge our divides, we are still smarting from that original breach. We gave up even the hopeful illusion of unanimity.

Of course, as Protestantism was splitting and segmenting for the past 500 years, Catholicism was not inert and frozen in time. Beginning at the Council of Trent, which started during Luther's lifetime, and culminating at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Church has undergone a series of internal reforms and changes that have addressed, in subtle and overt ways, many of the underlying issues Luther and his cohort were denouncing. This year, at a joint Catholic-Lutheran commemoration event for the 500th anniversary of Luther's "95 Theses," I heard a Catholic archbishop jokingly tell an anecdote about Vatican II. The, almost certainly apocryphal, story goes that as the cardinals and archbishops were walking into the initial meetings of the council in the Vatican, they walked past a picture someone had posted of Martin Luther with the caption, "You

know I'm right." Everyone at the commemoration event, Lutheran, Catholic, and Other was able to laugh at this now. Theological irony.

Through these types of dialogues, Protestants and Catholics alike have become more aware of the personal and historical forces that shaped the 16th-century's provocations and counter-provocations. We have come to acknowledge that sometimes two people can be saying different words, using different vocabularies, but meaning roughly the same thing. In 1999, there was even a [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#), which is a fancy, theological way of saying: Lutherans and Catholics found common ground on one of the central bones of contention that kicked off the Reformation. Our own Reformed/Presbyterian branch of Protestantism [endorsed](#) the same Declaration this year. Lutherans, Reformed churches, and the Roman Catholic Church all seeing eye-to-eye on justification! Who'd have thought it even a hundred years ago?

The lesson I take from all of this is that none of our "final vocabularies" are ultimate and universal. The ineffable realities and experiences we try to wrap and dress up in our limited human language are never fully covered. Our institutions and theologians and statements of faith are imperfect vehicles. And we are all susceptible to the vagaries of history, all inevitably shaped by formative experiences beyond our control.

I remain a Protestant. I go to my church and sing our robust hymns and listen to our spirited sermons and participate in our hot-blooded Bible studies. A Protestant I remain, and perhaps it's built into my nature to protest even my own church, but I have found a deep respect for my Catholic sisters and brothers and even some nostalgia for Holy Mother Church.