

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.

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION AT 500:

An Anniversary of a Different Sort

We are now in the final quarter of 2017, the year of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Over the course of the past nine months there have been events in many different places designed to commemorate this anniversary, and some of them (such as the one in Sweden attended by Pope Francis) even occurred last year in anticipation of the anniversary. Predictably, the pace of these events has picked up this fall (the season when Luther posted his famous theses), and it won't end with Reformation Sunday. Before the year is out, there will be still other such events--such as the conference we in the Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington are planning to hold in November.

The commemoration has not been confined just to churches, either. In some places, at least, the anniversary has been treated, as it should be, as a cultural event of wider importance. In part because the German government has actively supported cultural events designed to honor the achievements of Luther, those who were interested in that part of the story have been able to avail themselves of elaborate museum exhibitions on the Protestant Reformation curated by people who truly know what they are doing. Many publishers have done something similar but on a broader range of topics, providing us with a flood of new books--many written by top-flight scholars--designed to remind us of what happened in 1517 and provide us with fresh takes on a whole series of different parts of the Reformation story. Media outlets such as PBS have also done their part, providing us with well crafted dramatic renditions of the Reformation story designed to bring it alive for current audiences and make clear just how much of a difference it made in world history.

I do not know how widespread the commemoration of this anniversary has been in the churches themselves, but I have the impression that the attention paid to it has varied widely, in part because Protestant communions differ greatly in the extent to which they trace their roots back to the events of the 16th century. But I have a sense that in the metropolitan Washington area at least, a good many congregations--especially Lutheran and Reformed ones--have made a serious effort to honor this anniversary appropriately, and in some of them, at least, the event has turned out to be a valuable educational opportunity. It has been an occasion for serious reflection on fundamental issues by laity and clergy alike.

The mood of this particular anniversary appears to be different, however, from the one that prevailed in the past. This is hardly the first occasion, it should be noted, that Protestants have had to mark a centennial anniversary of 1517, and they have often done so quite elaborately in the past. This has been happening ever since 1617, and the story of those commemorations is by now an interesting (and quite revealing) tale in its own right. But the previous ones have had certain qualities that appear now to be missing. I am thinking in particular of the attitudes about Roman Catholicism they have reflected. For more often than not the commemoration of the anniversaries of the Protestant Reformation have been used in the past by Protestants as occasions to express their continuing opposition--and even antipathy--to Roman Catholicism, and the expression of sentiments of that kind has often been accompanied by claims of Protestant superiority as well. But I see little evidence of that now; and it seems for the most part to be a thing of the past.

Those who believe toleration has become the privileged ideal in our societies will not be surprised by this development, and some will undoubtedly say that value these societies now place on toleration suffices as an explanation of the change to which I am calling attention. But I do not think that is the case. I do not doubt that it is a contributing factor, but at least equally important, I believe, is the fact that Catholicism has changed significantly in the last century, and in ways that make it considerably easier than it once was for Protestants to regard Catholics as kindred spirits. And at the same time we Protestants have become more appreciative of certain Catholic practices while also becoming more self critical than we used to be. So on both sides there is reason to believe the issues raised by the "great schism" can be approached differently than has been the case in the past.

This does not mean those issues no longer matter. We do remain divided, after all, and for reasons that are not trivial. But we are in a different place now, and it is one that presents the possibility of constructive interaction (and perhaps even mutual learning) on issues on which we are still divided--such as the authority of Scripture--that are fundamental to the faith we profess. If our commemoration of the current anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (and perhaps the Catholic Reformation as well) does nothing more than rekindle our interest in those issues and make us aware of the value of revisiting them in a fresh way it will have served its purpose well.

R. Bruce Douglass, Director
(and member of the Company of Teachers)

Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington

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