

## **Why Promote Reformation Theology?**

by Don Matzat

Since the time of the Reformation, Christians have been divided into two primary, groups: Catholics and Protestants. Considering the present state of affairs within the Christian Church, I believe it is time that we begin to identify three primary groups:

- Roman Catholics;
- Reformation Protestants; and
- Evangelical Protestants.

While the three groups do have a great deal in common such as the Doctrine of the Trinity a proper understanding of the person of Jesus Christ, and belief in the basic historic events which provide the substance for the Christian faith, there is also great diversity. You may find this hard to believe, but when you compare the three groups, Reformation Protestants today are as distinct from Evangelical Protestants as they are from Roman Catholics.

The Protestant Reformation corrected the errors of Rome. For the Reformers, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, including the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the sinner was the focus of attention. But the Protestant movement was not static. As the years past, further developments gradually eroded some of the basic truths emphasized in the Reformation.

For example:

- the Methodist revival in England introduced decision theology;
- the First Great Awakening produced a new type of revival gathering;
- the Second Great Awakening introduced the "new measures" of Charles Finney. Justification was rejected and conversion was a human decision produced by persuasive techniques;
- Fundamentalism changed the focus from the Gospel to the Bible;
- premillennial dispensationalism introduced a distorted view of the end of the world;
- Pentecostalism arose in 1900, providing the roots for the modern Charismatic Movement;
- the establishment of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition focused the attention of Evangelicals upon social and political issues.

Protestant Evangelicalism, as we know it, took shape in the 40's and 50's. Yet, the movements of the past have left an indelible mark. Many of the Reformation distinctives have been lost or distorted.

Consider the following table, comparing Roman Catholics, Protestant Evangelicals and Reformation Protestants:

**Table 1**

Why Promote Reformation Theology?	ROMAN CATHOLICS	REFORMATION PROTESTANTS	EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS
History	While claiming a continuous line of history back to the first century, many of the clear teachings of the Apostles have been lost or discarded.	Initiated in sixteenth century Germany as a result of Luther's rediscovery of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Churches of the Reformation are primarily Lutheran and Calvinist (Reformed).	Modern Evangelicalism arose in the 40's and 50's as an effort to return to the basic things of the gospel, to confront liberalism, and to counter the negativism of Fundamentalists. Four developments that have shaped Modern Evangelicalism: <i>National Association of Evangelicals</i> formed in 1942; the rise of the <i>Billy Graham Evangelistic Association</i> ; Fuller Theological Seminary organized in 1947; and the production of the journal <i>Christianity Today</i> to counter the more liberal <i>Christian Century</i> . Popularized modern "born again" Christianity promoted via Christian bookstores, radio, and television. Fuller Seminary led the way in promoting modern psychology, introducing both the Church Growth and "signs and wonders" movements.
Basis of Authority	The Church establishes the authority of Scripture and traditions.	Scripture Alone!	The issue is not <i>Scripture Alone</i> but rather retaining either a "high view" (conservative Evangelicals) or "low view" (liberal Evangelicals) of Scripture. Heavy emphasis upon the role of experience undermines biblical authority.
Doctrinal Standards	As demonstrated in the new catechism, the official position of Rome on key doctrines remains unchanged. There is a wide diversity of beliefs permitted.	Creedal statements and confessional documents clearly state what is believed. Reformation churches are "confessional" churches.	Agreement on basic essentials: bible is the Word of God, creation, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and second coming. Disdain for creeds and confessions opens the door for wide diversity. Evangelicals generally have an unclear definition of the Gospel and make no distinction between Law and Gospel. Major Reformation distinctives have been lost or forgotten.
Doctrine of Sin (What is man's part in salvation?)	Human nature has been wounded by original sin. Man, empowered by the Holy Spirit, cooperates in his salvation by doing good works. (synergism)	Man is dead in his trespasses and sin.  Both Lutherans and Calvinists believe that God, who acts upon the human heart through the hearing of the Gospel, is solely responsible for salvation.  Grace alone! (monergism)	Many Evangelicals are Arminian. Influenced by the eighteenth century Methodist revival, the nineteenth century "new measures" of Charles Finney, and the twentieth century work of Billy Graham, conversion is seen as an act of the human will. Arminians, reacting against Calvinism, taught that God's grace extends to all, and man must be persuaded to make a decision to accept that grace.(synergism)  Lutherans, contrary to Calvinists, accept universal grace, but believe that man is capable of rejecting grace. Contrary to Arminians, Lutherans believe that man is incapable of accepting grace.

<p>Justification</p> <p>(How does man become righteous before God?)</p>	<p>Man becomes righteous as a result of the infused grace of the Sacraments. Righteousness is actual.</p> <p>Perfection is required for eternal life. While Purgatory has lost favor, it remains a necessary part of the system.</p>	<p>Justification is the defining truth of the Reformation.</p> <p>The perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is, by the grace of God, imputed to the sinner. The righteousness that saves is an alien righteousness received by faith.</p> <p>For Lutherans, justification is the "cardinal doctrine" by which the church either rises or falls.</p>	<p>The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of Evangelical Revivalism. In the Second Great Awakening, Charles Finney rejected the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ to the sinner because the doctrine, in his mind, hindered moral reform. While Modern Evangelicals might not be as heretical as Finney, the doctrine of justification has all but been forgotten!</p> <p>The primary issues for Evangelicals are: "getting saved", "being born-again", and living moral lives.</p>
<p>Trends</p>	<p>Renewed ecumenical fervor.</p> <p>Protestants are separated brethren and should be encouraged to return to the fold.</p> <p>Possibility of eternal life extended to the sincere followers of other world religions.</p>	<p>There is a dangerous flirting with Modern Evangelicalism via the Church Growth Movement and the Promise Keepers.</p> <p>Some have chosen to adopt Evangelical style while seeking to retain Reformation substance.</p>	<p>There are a number of interesting trends in Modern Evangelicalism. The document <i>Catholics and Evangelicals Together</i> indicated how far many Evangelical leaders had strayed from the Reformation.</p> <p>A number of leading Evangelicals have returned to the historic confessions of either Eastern Orthodoxy or the Reformation. An <i>Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals</i> has formed. Their goal is to call Evangelicals back to the truths of the Reformation.</p>

### Why promote Reformation theology, today?

It is a necessary emphasis for three reasons: First, to hold the line against the errors of Catholicism. Rome's removal of its condemnation of Protestants does not mean that those Protestants who are committed to the sixteenth century Reformation must reciprocate. Second, to encourage Lutherans and Calvinists to remain true to their heritage and not to get caught up in the glitz of modern evangelicalism. And third, to call Protestant Evangelicals who have strayed from their roots back to a commitment to the biblical truths of the Reformation.

The necessity for a renewed focus upon the distinctive truths of the Reformation became very obvious when in March of 1994, the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* was released. Drafted by Evangelical Charles Colson and former Lutheran minister turned Roman Catholic priest Richard John Neuhaus, the document stated that Roman Catholics and evangelicals agreed together over the doctrine of justification by grace through faith because of Christ. Strange missing from the statement was the key word "alone." Also, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* indicates that Rome's definitions of the words "justification," "grace," and "faith" are not the same as the biblical definitions taught by the Reformers. Even with such evident distortions, the document was endorsed by many noted Protestant Evangelicals including Richard Land, Os Guinness, Bill Bright, Pat Robertson, and Richard Mouw.

Why were these Evangelical Protestant leaders willing to sign the statement? Were they ignorant of the doctrine of justification? Did they no longer consider justification to be a key Christian doctrine?

Reaction came from all over the Protestant world. Michael Horton pointed out that the lack of the word "alone" made the statement incomplete. Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul stated that the document exposed a serious rift within evangelicalism. Several of the signers were censured by the organizations they represented. At first, the editorial position of *Christianity Today* was positive toward ECT, but as time passed they too voiced their concerns.

While the ECT document focused the attention of Protestant Evangelicals upon the truths that emerged in the sixteenth century, Reformation, it also indicated how far many of their leaders had strayed from their Reformation heritage.

Has the time come to make a distinction between Reformation Protestants and Evangelical Protestants? I believe so! Drawing lines in the sand is not done for the purpose of promoting sectarian elitism, but rather for the purpose of preserving truth for future generations. There is a great deal at stake. The sixteenth century Reformation restored to the Church vital truths taught in Scripture. To stray from the Reformation is to stray from the truth of God's Word.

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