

5 Advantages of the Protestant Reformation—And 5 Dangers

The following are my opinions related to the advantages and disadvantages of the Protestant Reformation. First, here are the disadvantages of the Protestant Reformation:

1. It weakened the influence of Christendom, which led to individual Christianity,

With much of the strength and unity of the Catholic Church broken, the church no longer had the political, cultural and economic clout to hold the ultimate power to influence every sector of society. This eventually meant the end of Christendom (the church and kingdom of God ruling the nations) and the resurgence of individual Christianity.

2. It opened the door for secular humanism to reign in culture through the Enlightenment.

With the fragmentation of the church, faith in scholars finding a “grand synthesis” from the Bible to give meaning to all truth in every realm was shattered! The autonomy that came out of the church’s weakened position, both in the religious and secular world, led to (among other things too numerous to mention in this short essay) men searching for meaning and answers via human reason and no longer only via divine revelation. (This trend actually started somewhat through the writings of Thomas Aquinas, who was influenced by Aristotelian philosophy and taught that men could learn truth apart from divine revelation.)

3. It led to a gross fragmentation, resulting in thousands of denominations.

When we have thousands of denominations and clusters of churches all proclaiming that they have the truth (although most don't proclaim they have exclusive truth) it hurts the faith of some who question whether any person can actually truthfully interpret the Bible. It also hurts the witness and power of the church in culture because we are not putting our money, time and talents together to preach the gospel.

(To be fair, there is a huge difference between denominationalism and sectarianism. Denominations are not necessarily sectarian—they merely focus on a particular set of biblical truths that distinguish them from other groups of churches; Sectarianism has to do with intentionally dividing, elevating and separating an expression of the body of Christ from the rest of the church.)

However, there is now something arising that is better than denominationalism or Roman Catholicism: the emergence of complex apostolic networks a la the first century church. I wrote about this in my article entitled "The Present Seismic Shift of the Evangelical Church."

As I once heard someone say, "In Roman Catholicism we have one pope; in Protestantism we have many popes!" I think having many is safer than having only one because, historically, whenever too much power is concentrated into the hands of one person or entity, including the church, the results have been tyrannical and detrimental to the cause of Christ.

4. It led to mainstream Protestant denominationalism, which is mostly liberal in nature

As much as I strongly disagree with the Roman Catholic system (which places human tradition above Scripture and has led to, among other things: prayers for the dead, worshipping Mary, praying to the saints, belief in purgatory, salvation and regeneration through infant baptism, and vows of poverty and celibacy among the priesthood) at least they still maintain

orthodox views regarding the deity of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, the Trinity, and other essentials of the faith, which most of the mainline Protestant denominations have jettisoned.

The Episcopal Church is only one example of a liberal Protestant denomination that now ordains homosexual bishops. Many in their ranks also now deny the physical bodily resurrection of Christ and the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

5. It had disastrous results for nations

The following is from *Theology for the Third Millennium* by Hans Kung:

The Protestant Reformation led to: the 30 Years' War of Germany which, to this day, Germans cite as the most devastating war in their history (even worse than World Wars I and II); the wars in France between the Roman Catholics and the Huguenots; for Spain, internal separation from Europe through the destruction or exile of its Erasmian humanists and Protestants; for Italy, the religious expulsion of its religious non-conformists as well as their state police and inquisitions stifling the inner life; and England distancing itself from the rest of Europe and breaking away from all others with the Anglican Church. The Reformation continued to set Western Europe against the Eastern Church, Russia, and even to some extent against its own people, the underground of the masses.

6. It gave rise to an independent, subjective Christianity and moved away from the creedal confessional expression of Christianity

Many of us come from the revivalist evangelical tradition of John Wesley, George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards, which led to the modern-day evangelical revivalism of Charles Finney, D.L. Moody, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. Although there is

much in this tradition that is very powerful and good, many of us generally jettisoned belief in the corporate confessions of the church (the Confessions of Augsburg and Westminster, to name a few. It also moved many independent evangelicals and fundamentalists away from catechizing their children (the Heidelberg Catechism being one example), which took away the responsibility of parents to disciple their children and has left our churches depending only on surface instruction found in Sunday schools and youth groups.

Many independent (revivalistic and pietistic) evangelicals also moved away from putting value in and knowing the historic creeds of the church such as the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian creeds. (However, Luther and Calvin quoted from the church fathers and were rooted in church history and the creeds. Also, Wesley, Whitfield, Edwards and the like never espoused a move away from the historic creeds of the first six centuries; it was de-emphasized and or forgotten by many who followed in their steps in subsequent generations.) This has led to interpreting Scripture without regard for the writings and work of the church fathers of the first six centuries, which sometimes leads to subjective interpretations of the word and heretical doctrines in the way of Carlton Pearson and Rob Bell (who espouse a form of universalism known as ultimate reconciliation that promotes a view that all people, irrespective of their faith and religion, will eventually go to heaven.)

The Advantages of the Protestant Reformation:

1. It brought back the primacy of the Scriptures for faith and practice.

To this day, the Roman Catholic Church still does not have a clear view on which is more important: church tradition or Scripture. If we do not go by the tradition brought by those the Lord Himself chose to pass along His word (the writers of the New Testament), we are open to the subjective traditions

of men, which Jesus said nullify the word of God (Mark 7:15).

To me, the most important accomplishment of the Protestant Reformation has been that the Bible is now in the language and possession of the common people instead of those paid to interpret the Word based on their job security and politics (for example, the professional priests of the Roman Catholic Church before the Guttenberg Press printed thousands of Bibles made available to the masses).

2. It brought more clarity to salvation by faith and not by works.

Before Martin Luther's epiphany regarding justification by faith alone, based on reading the book of Romans and that "the righteous shall live by faith," the church was caught up in a mish-mash of salvation by works and the giving of money to the church in the way of indulgences. Underground counter-movements led by Peter Waldo, Peter Lombard and John Hus made some headway regarding going back to the Scriptures and justification by faith but never broke through to the mainstream of the church.

3. It demonstrated how God's glory and honor are more important than religious unity in the face of apostasy.

God does not share His glory with others (Isa. 42:8) and will not even allow His church to misrepresent His name to the world if it falls away from His truth! Jesus said more than once to the seven churches in Revelation that He would remove their lampstands and judge them if they did not repent of false doctrine and practice (Rev. 2-3).

The Protestant Reformation shows (like the division of the kingdom of Israel in 1 Kings) the lengths God will go to purify the faith and for the true knowledge of God to be revealed in the world (Hos. 3:4-6).

4. It gave rise to a move towards the simplicity of the first

century church and the apostolic movement.

As I wrote in my article "The Present Seismic Shift of the Evangelical Church," there is presently an historic move of God (as seen in the global South and East as well as parts of Latin and North America) that is bringing a huge shift back toward the establishment of complex apostolic networks as in the first century church. These apostolic networks are led by apostolic leaders with clusters of denominational and non-denominational churches that voluntarily come together in a region for the cause of Christ.

This shows us the reformation of the church is still ongoing as we are getting closer to the ideals of the church as found in the Book of Acts and the first 200 years of church history.

My hope is that we will combine the best of the pre-Constantine and post-Constantine church, because I also believe God has called the church to become institutionalized in every sector of society so that the ethics of the Word of God are brought back into the public square. However, the influence of Christianity should not be based on political influence alone, but the church's love, service and Holy Spirit power should manifest through creativity in all of culture for the benefit of all society.

5. It took away the power of the pope and brought about checks and balances in the church.

As much as we would all like to have only one leader for stability and to harness our influence in culture, because of sinful human nature, we have found that too much power in the hands of one person is usually not a good thing. We have seen this not only in secular political rulers like Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot but also through some of the corrupt popes who ruled medieval Europe and established the Inquisition.

Furthermore, God warned Israel in 1 Samuel 8 against having a

religious king over them because, ultimately, He is our only King (1 Sam. 8).

In conclusion, although I wish Erasmus won the day and averted the further fragmentation of the ecclesial structure of the church, resulting in the Protestant Reformation, I also would rather have Protestantism with all its flaws than go back to one church under Roman rule because of its propensity to elevate human tradition over Scripture. God shares His glory with no man (Isa. 42:8).