

The word “Protestant” is based on the root word “protest.” Luther protested Catholic practice, as a result of widespread abuses by the Catholic Church during the dark ages, and others joined in to likewise protest against Rome. Between the New Testament era and the 1500s Roman Catholicism established a monopoly on Christianity in Western Europe. In the medieval age they abused their position. The celebration of Mass was performed in a language church members did not understand. The text of the Bible was unknown to parishioners. Many governments were subject to the Pope. The Catholic Church was selling indulgences, which was a payment to the church that purchased an exemption from punishment for some types of sins. Most of the land was owned by the Catholic Church. Bishops lived with aristocratic privileges while peasants supported the church under a feudal system that exploited their labor. Clergy were not displaying Godly character in lifestyle. Critics were tortured and executed. Many of the practices they used seem shocking today, even to Catholics.

For many of the common “Christians,” it was the traditions, icons, sculptures, tapestries, and paintings that defined “Christianity” instead of the words of Holy Scripture, and salvation came through good works. Today many Catholics and Protestants would regard the Catholic religion of the 1500s as completely alien to what now is regarded as “Christianity.”

The Roman Catholic Church was changed by the Protestant Reformation. They responded, beginning in 1545, with the Counter-Reformation, that continues. They began to address some of the issues raised by Luther and other Protestant voices.

This article is not meant to be a complete treatise of the Reformation. However, I hope it provides a general overview. The English Reformation was a bit different than the Continental Reformation. As Anglicans we embraced many of Luther’s Reformation teachings and we retained historic Celtic and Catholic traditions. Unfortunately, some Reformers “threw the baby out with the bath water.” We chose to keep the good of the first 1500 years of the church, but even more particularly, the good of the early church.

Fred Sanders, who teaches in the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University, wrote an article called *Why the Reformation Should Make You More catholic*. He said,

It would be bad enough if our Reformation celebration looked like an excuse to mark the boundary between the Protestant us and the Roman Catholic them. But even worse would be a Reformation celebration that looked like an excuse to mark the boundary between 1517 and all that went before it. There is such a thing as chronological clannishness that divides Christian history into fourths and then celebrates the final quarter alone.

Protestants ought to say that this kind of centuries-segregating sectarianism is uncatholic: It fails to be universal in its intent, and it ignores the completeness of the entire Christian tradition. Universal, complete, and entire are of course the proper meanings of the word *catholic*. So although it may sound odd to our conventional connotations, it’s actually not contradictory at all to say that the Reformation ought to make us catholic.

[John Calvin had a letter exchange in 1539 with the Roman Catholic cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto.]

Sadoleto’s charge was: ‘*You are novel; you have rejected the ancient church.*’ Calvin’s response was: ‘*No, we are Protestant specifically so we can have the ancient church, and you are in our way.*’

That is why Anglicans are known as Reformed Catholics. We are not “fence riders,” but we fully embrace the good of both the Reformed and Catholic Church. When the scripture is clear, that settles it! When it is not clear, we look to tradition and reason. The 39 Articles of Religion are fully

influenced by the Reformation. However, to be properly interpreted, we need to understand the context of the abuses of the medieval church.

It is no overstatement to say that another Reformation has already begun. While “progressive” Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and other denominational bodies abuse their authority, misrepresenting God’s word, the Anglican Church in North America and the Anglican Churches in the Southern Cone and Global South, which represents the vast majority of Anglicans, are standing firm on the historic teachings of the faith as they have been passed down by the apostles. We are unapologetic about our Orthodox faith.

So, we celebrate the Reformation on its 500 year anniversary, and continue to celebrate the good of the first 1500 years of the church, particularly the early church. As proudly Reformed Catholics, let me exhort you to always acknowledge and repent of wrongs, and celebrate and practice what is right in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

On mission, and loving it,  
Fr. Scott