

Why the Reformation is definitely not over

On 31 October this year Pope Francis (Jorge Bergoglio) will take part in an ecumenical service with the World Federation of Lutheran Churches to mark a year of celebrations to commemorate 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the castle church at Wittenberg. When commenting about this event, Pope Francis said this to reporters;

["And today Lutherans and Catholics, Protestants, all of us agree on the doctrine of justification."](#)

Based on this and other comments, it seems increasingly likely at this event that **he will declare the Reformation to be over**. Which prompts us to ask the question ...

Is the reformation really over?

Never!

THERE was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so surely established, which (in continuance of time) hath not been corruptedⁱ

So said Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in the preface to his 1549 edition of the Book of Common Prayer. The church is always reforming because the church is made up of sinful people that continue to need to be reformed by the word of God.

The capital "R" Reformation describes a period of time that began in 1517 when Martin Luther, a Augustinian monk who taught the Bible in a German University in Wittenberg, struggled with the question – **"How could someone be sure they were righteous before God?"** In Luther's day the Church taught, "do what lies within you". In other words, the church taught that righteousness was attained by co-operating with God's grace by developing godly habits, self-denial and participating in the Sacraments.

Luther recalls,

"I tortured myself with prayers, fasting, vigils, and freezing: the frost alone might have killed me" (LW 24: 24) and "I almost fasted myself to death for again and again I went for three days without taking a drop of water or a morsel of food. I was very serious about it." (LW 54:339-40).

However, despite applying these teachings vigorously he found no assurance. He describes this state as his **monstrous uncertainty** (*Luther's Works LW26:386*)

Leading up to 1517 Luther was preparing to teach the New Testament. He was preparing classes on the Books of Romans, Hebrews, Galatians and the Psalms. By doing this he discovered that he needed to place his trust on the objective promises of God, declared in the Scriptures, not in his own religious performance.

"it [he objective promises of God] snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive" (LW26: 386-7).

Faith or trust in God's promises demonstrated by Christ rather than in his own performance freed Luther from his "monstrous uncertainty" and gave him certainty for eternity.

When Pope Francis makes statements like the following;

"And today, Lutherans and Catholics, Protestants, all of us agree on the doctrine of justification. On this point, which is very important, he [Martin Luther] did not err."

We need to understand what he means by "justification" which is something quite different to what it meant to Martin Luther. For the Pope, "justification" actually includes receiving initial justification at Baptism **plus** the process sanctification throughout life. In other words, Catholics teach that a person is righteous before God on the basis of what God does **plus** what they do to become more holy (see Catechism of the Catholic Church articles 1995, 2010). In the end it **still** leaves Catholics with a monstrous uncertainty because **they still need to look to themselves to know if they are good enough for God and they are never completely sure...**

Personally, having grown up in the Catholic Church, when I started reading the Bible with my Protestant friends at University I realised that God saves people who don't deserve it, without their help. That means on a good day or on a bad day I still know with certainty where I stand with God because **being right with God depends completely on something objective – outside myself – on the sacrificial death of Jesus alone**. I was never taught this in the Catholic Church despite 1000+ religious classes at school and going to Mass every week for 20 years. However, when I realised I could be certain where I stood with God, I was able to live my life completely for Him with confidence. This has been the most important and life changing news I have ever learnt!

Despite these statements of agreement between Catholics and a small number of Protestants, which really just obscure these important differences, sadly, the issues raised at the Reformation are far from resolved.

Why not ask your Catholic friend if they are certain they are going to heaven, and if they're not, why not share with them the solution that Martin Luther discovered and I hope you have too?

Hebrews 10:14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

When it comes to the question of where we stand before God we can have certainty for eternity instead of a monstrous uncertainty!

ⁱ First words of the Preface of the Book of Common Prayer 1449 edition.