

Voices: 500 years later — The cost of Reformation and hope for cooperation

October 31, 2017

I am not a church historian. I do not know all of the details of what happened 500 years ago on October 31, 1517, and during the aftermath which followed the events of that day.

What I have heard and learned is that October 31, 1517, is marked as the moment when wide-ranging sentiments of resistance to the injustices of the Roman Catholic Church found a voice in the form of 95 grievances, or theses, nailed to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany by Martin Luther.

Each year, October 31 is celebrated as Reformation Day to commemorate the seismic shift that happened to separate Roman Catholics and Protestants. This year we celebrate the 500th anniversary of this momentous event.

I am immensely grateful for many of the renovations which took place as a result of the Protestant Reformation, such as understanding justification to come by grace through faith, being able to read and interpret Scripture for myself and not having to pay indulgences for the sins I commit.

But I also can't help but wonder about the consequences of this kind of divorce within the church.

Loss and splitting

Undoubtedly, the most profound consequence was loss.

People lost their families, homes, jobs and even their lives as a result of this needed reform. Even though Christ modeled to us that there are things in this world worth sacrifice, still the cost cannot be negated.

But another consequence which has begun to trouble me is the phenomenon of “splitting” in response to disagreement.

Indeed, splitting may be necessary in some cases of intense theological dispute. The Protestant Reformation was not even the first split in church history. However, it most certainly is not the last either, as the proliferation of different Christian denominations is staggering.

Baptist splits

According to a [report](#) that Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary published in a 2014 issue of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, there were 45,000 denominations worldwide in mid-2014. The report indicates the majority of these denominations began in the 20th century, and it projects continued aggressive growth so that by 2025 there will be 55,000 worldwide denominations.

Indeed, as Baptists we have seen this to be true in the last 30 years with the creation and growth of new Baptist “denominations.” We have split over matters related to biblical interpretation, creedalism, the role of women in the church, how to understand the autonomy of the local church and full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church.

Once again, we see a “split” playing out just this past week in the [Tennessee Baptist Convention as their Credentials Committee has chosen](#)

[not to seat messengers from a church which recently called a woman to be their senior pastor.](#)

And this week, as well as over the past 30 years, we have seen the consequence of loss play out as a result of these Baptist splits as churches are “excommunicated” from partnering with their Baptist families, and some are even treated as if they are not true Christians.

So, on this 500th anniversary of Reformation Day, I would like to suggest a few ideas we might ponder.

Can we agree to stop disagreeing?

First, what issues are worth sacrifice and loss? Are there really 45,000 issues among Christ-followers worth this kind of division? Or are there 45,000 more issues worth dividing and sacrificing over?

Second, what issues might we choose to exist in disagreement over in order that we might continue to partner with other Christ-followers? In my Baptist heritage class, I remember learning the foundational Baptist principle that we cooperate because we can do more together than we can do on our own.

The next great church ‘rummage sale’ draws nigh

Third, (take a minute to imagine with me on this one), what would it look like if the next great reformation of the church was for cooperation instead of another major division?

In her book, “[The Great Emergence](#),” Phyllis Tickle described how every 500 years or so the church has a “rummage sale” which results in a

reshaping of how Christianity is defined.

The first happened as a result of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and reforms of Gregory the Great in the sixth century after the “Oriental” church was excommunicated.

The second was the separation of the east (Eastern Orthodox Church) and west (Roman Catholic Church) in the Great Schism of 1054.

The third was the Protestant Reformation, which is identified with Martin Luther’s actions in 1517 which we are celebrating this week.

So, if Tickle is right, then on this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, Christianity is due for a reshaping, a rummage sale of sorts. And, personally, the thing I would love for the church to decide to get rid of is the loss, sacrifice and contention of perpetual division.

How much more could cooperating Christ-followers do together if we respect and love each other enough to accept our disagreements?

Redeeming God, make us one in the bonds of love.

Meredith Stone is director of ministry guidance and instructor of Christian ministry and Scripture at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon School of Theology. She is a member of the Baptist Standard Publishing board of directors.