

**CELEBRATING  
THE 500<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE REFORMATION 1517–2017**



**A pamphlet for  
discussion groups**

*This year Protestants all over the world will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Reformation in October 1517. This pamphlet in its original form was written for the United Reformed Church (UK) to use in the celebration by Dr Alan Spence, a UPCSA minister now working in England. The UPCSA Assembly in 2016 mandated its Task Team on Confessions to revise it to the same end in the UPCSA. With permission, the first part has been added, and the rest considerably rewritten and rearranged. The pamphlet now relates articles in the UPCSA Confession of Faith to early statements of Luther, mainly in his revolutionary tracts of 1520. It suggests some possible questions for reflection and discussion, and a Glossary at the end explains terms that may be unfamiliar.*

## Martin Luther: the Story

Martin Luther was born in 1483. After school he enrolled as a law student at the famous German university at Erfurt. At the age of 21 was on his way back from vacation when a fearsome storm struck. A bolt of lightning knocked him off his horse. Struggling to get up, he cried out, "St Anne, save me, and I will become a monk!" (Luther's father had been a miner, and St Anne, the legendary mother of the Virgin Mary, was the patron saint of miners.) Luther wrestled with the question whether his cry was binding, but eventually entered the Black Cloister, an Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.

In the monastery Luther became an extremely diligent monk. But because he took God's majesty and utter holiness so seriously, the more devout he became and the more he prayed, fasted, attended vigils, spent hours at confession, did acts of penance, carried out good "works", or deeds, and even whipped his body, the more convicted he became of his own sinfulness before God and the threat of hell hanging over him.

In 1512 Luther graduated as a doctor of theology and was called to lecture at the new University of Wittenberg. There Dr Johann von Staupitz, his superior, spiritual adviser and special friend let Luther take over his own chair teaching the Bible, hoping that this might help him spiritually. Luther decided to begin with the Psalms and went on to Romans and Galatians.

In the course of this, working with a Latin Bible, Luther wrestled with the text "In Thy *justitia* [Latin for "justice" or "righteousness"] deliver me" (Ps. 31:1). What could these words mean? How could one hope in the very *justice* of God that judges, condemns and punishes sinners? Eventually he found an answer in Rom. 1:16f.: "the gospel...is the power of salvation to everyone who has faith..., for in it the *justitia* of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'the righteous shall live by faith'". The *justitia* of God here means not God's justice or God's own virtue of righteousness, but a *status of righteousness from God*, which God, in free grace, imparts to sinners, making them righteous in God's eyes. This is a gift that they receive through *faith* (alone). Luther also read Augustine: "The righteousness of God is that righteousness which he imparts in

order to make people righteous.”<sup>1</sup> Suddenly all the dead weight of Luther’s guilt and despair was lifted; he felt as if he had entered Paradise. God took on a new face, and Luther was born anew, a liberated person.

Meanwhile Pope Leo X wished to finish building the great Basilica of St Peter in Rome. This needed a huge sum of money, so in 1515 he authorized a special “indulgence” to raise funds. (See the Glossary.) When the Dominican monk Johann Tetzel came to towns near Wittenberg hawking the indulgences (including for dead loved ones), many people went to buy, but Luther was incensed. In October 2017 he sent 95 theses against indulgences, for scholastic debate, to his archbishop. (The tradition is that he also nailed them to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, but this may be a legend.)

The indulgence was financially benefiting Luther’s archbishop too; so he merely checked the theses for heresy and sent them on to the Pope. But a printed sermon setting out Luther’s views spread like wildfire and led to a fierce debate across Europe. The Pope’s eventual decision to excommunicate him and Luther’s statements and tracts in defence of his views in the end tore the Church apart. Catholics lit bonfires to burn Protestant martyrs alive, and Protestants persecuted and put to death Catholic martyrs. The split in the Church also contributed to terrible wars that for decades devastated much of Europe, until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

## **Luther’s Significance**

The Church had perverted the gospel into a semi-pagan theology and become spiritually and morally corrupt. In the previous century figures like John Wycliffe in England and Jan Hus in Bohemia had already protested and advanced ideas Luther was to stand for. And later the Reformer John Calvin was to give those ideas greater systematic coherence (with more emphasis on the Holy Spirit and on ethics.) But Luther retains his great significance for his rediscovery of the gospel and for

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther: *Lectures on Romans*, p.18. Cf. Rom. 3:21-24, 10:3, Phil. 3:9 and p.117: “The righteousness of God is that righteousness by which he makes us righteous, just as the wisdom of God is that by which he makes us wise.”

kick-starting the Reformation, with all its consequences.

The Catholic Church itself, at various Councils, including Trent (1545–1563) and Vatican II (1962–1965), amended many of the abuses that Luther opposed. Thus the Catholic Church itself owes a great deal to Luther, whether it acknowledges it or not. To commemorate the publication of the 95 Theses is therefore to celebrate not only the birth of the Protestant movement but the reforming of all Western Christianity.

The individual spiritual life of Christians too is deeply indebted to Luther. John Bunyan expressed his experience this way:

...one day, a book of Martin Luther, ... his comment on the Galatians, ... had fallen into my hands, the which, when I had but a little way perused, I found my condition, in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart.... I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy Bible, before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, we should deplore the negative results of the Reformation. Luther wanted the whole Church to reform; instead it split apart and in time fragmented, leaving Christians unable all to meet at the same Lord's Table. Europe was devastated by war, and, in the wake of this, disillusionment with Christianity led to secularism and, for some, to atheism.

We should therefore pray and work for the reunion of all Christians. The continuing advance of secularism and the spread of Islam make this all the more critical. Already in 1541 Catholics and Protestants met at Ratisbon (Regensburg) to try to bridge their differences, but remained divided over the doctrine of Holy Communion and whether regular confession should be obligatory. Little progress was made until after Vatican II. In 1965, however, Lutheran and Catholic theologians in the USA began a series of meetings to discuss their differences on key doctrines, including justification (how we are made right with God). In 1985 they published a joint statement that declared:

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<sup>2</sup> John Bunyan: *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*.

our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus...: we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ. This excludes ultimate reliance on our faith, virtues or merits.<sup>3</sup>

This went some way in recognizing what Luther rediscovered—truth he so bravely championed and we can never abandon. The present pamphlet, then, looks at a few key theological and spiritual elements in his earliest writings that have shaped our Protestant DNA.

*Suggested questions for reflection:*

- *What is your own "God story"? How did you personally come to faith in Christ?*
- *What in your own faith do you owe to Martin Luther?*

## **1. The Priority of Grace and Faith**

The Christian Church has always recognized, at least in theory, that we are saved by God's grace and respond to grace with faith. In the late Middle Ages, however, many theologians and lay people thought of grace as a sort of supernatural medicine that the sacraments (including penance) "infused" into people, enabling them to keep the commandments, or do good works, and so acquire the merit necessary to earn salvation. And they thought of faith as belief in right doctrine.

Luther's study of Paul's epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians led him to see that the teaching of Paul and of Jesus was radically different to this. He came to see that sinful human beings are unable to keep God's commandments. Grace is the very antithesis of merit; for it is God's wholly free, unmerited mercy towards the sinner. Faith in turn is a trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour that God alone can awaken in us; it receives the promise of forgiveness, cleaves us to Christ, and so puts us right with God in the new covenant. For in a "wonderful exchange" Christ has taken upon himself all our debts and guilt before God and died on the cross in our place.

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<sup>3</sup> H.G. Anderson and others (eds): *Justification by Faith* (Augsburg, 1995), p.16.

Faith “unites the soul to Christ, as the wife to the husband ...[and thereby] Christ and the soul are made one flesh.” Their possessions are shared. “Christ is full of grace, life and salvation; the soul is full of sin, death and condemnation. Let faith step in, and then sin, death and hell will belong to Christ, and grace, life and salvation to the soul.”<sup>4</sup>

Compare what the UPCSA Confession says of grace and faith:

**15.1** God justifies us as ungodly sinners, that is, declares us righteous and sets us right with God, purely out of grace. Grace is not a power given to us in order that we may achieve our own righteousness and so merit salvation; it is God’s free love and mercy that we utterly fail to deserve. For before God no one can boast of any goodness or merit. All our own righteousness fails; all our efforts leave us worthy only of death. But when we despair of ourselves, then we find comfort in God. In our failure and need God’s sovereign, free grace comes to us.

**15.2** The Spirit strips us of all our self-deception and supposed righteousness and convicts us of the enormity of our own sin. The Spirit brings home to us how God has dealt with that sin in Christ and unites us to Christ by moving us to repent, surrender to him as Lord and trust in him as Saviour.

**15.3** Through our union with Christ God freely acquits us of all our guilt and accounts us righteous on the sole ground of Christ’s perfect human obedience and atonement. Thus God imputes to us a righteousness that is not our own but Christ’s. This frees us from all condemnation, and the Spirit assures us of the forgiveness of all our sins. For no sin or guilt is so great that Christ’s atonement does not cover it.

**15.5** We receive grace through faith alone. Faith comes through hearing the good news and is confirmed by the sacraments. Much more than belief in right doctrine, it is accepting the living Christ as Lord and trusting in him alone as the Saviour who fulfils all God’s promises of

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther: *Concerning Christian Liberty*. This was the third of the tracts that Luther published in 1520.

mercy and grace. Faith is our acceptance, in humility and gratitude, of God's surprising acceptance of us.

**15.7** As our response to the good news of Jesus Christ, faith involves a human decision.... Yet...faith is not a human achievement but the effect of grace, the work of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts, God's gift to us....

15.8 Nor does faith itself merit, effect or appropriate salvation. Faith is but the means that the Spirit uses to unite us to Christ; it is an empty hand that receives redemption as a gift and then clings to Christ and God's promises in him. For Christ, not faith, is our righteousness and our sanctification. All the glory for salvation belongs to God alone.

*For reflection:*

- *What do you think of the idea of salvation by grace through faith alone? How then do good deeds fit in?*
- *How do you think the joint Catholic-Lutheran statement quoted on p.5 could be improved and/or expanded?*

## **2. Not by Works**

Papal indulgences, masses for the dead, acts of penance, the veneration of relics and merit-earning pilgrimages are not generally on Protestant "to do" lists. Why not? Because we know that God's favour cannot be merited, or earned, by what we do, not even by our noblest deeds; instead it is freely given. This conviction is the fruit of the revolution in thinking that Martin Luther brought about in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. He was the one who drew attention to the New Testament insistence that all of our good works are unable to earn salvation and that we need to come to God in the spirit of the old hymn: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling...."

Thus a Christian, being consecrated by his faith, does good works; but he is not by these works made...more of a Christian. That is the effect of faith alone; nay, unless he be previously a believer and a Christian, none of his works would have any value at all...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther: *Concerning Christian Liberty*.

We see then that the rejection of good works as saving goes far deeper than rejecting certain superstitions and rituals. Luther considered all the good we do, our acts of love, kindness, compassion, justice and fair business dealings all aspects of our "active" righteousness. They are essential to faithful Christian living, but have no *saving* value at all. Our salvation is to be found instead in what Luther calls "passive", "foreign" or "imputed" righteousness, because we do not accomplish it: instead it comes to us from outside of ourselves, from God, who in grace imparts it to us freely, in Christ. The life of faith therefore puts no confidence at all in our own virtuous deeds or good works. Our only comfort or assurance is in God's grace and gift of imputed righteousness.

This is a righteousness...which the world doth not know, yea, Christians themselves do not thoroughly understand it, and can hardly take hold of it in their temptations. Therefore it must be diligently taught and continually practised.... For there is no comfort of conscience so firm and so sure, as this passive righteousness... [T]he afflicted and troubled conscience hath no remedy against desperation and eternal death, unless it take hold of this promise of grace freely offered in Christ, that is to say, this passive righteousness of faith.<sup>6</sup>

The Holy Spirit makes this gift of righteousness effective through faith, through which we receive the forgiveness of sins, newness of life as children of God and strength to go out and do God's will in the world. In his passion and pastoral concern Luther expressed this boldly, in brazen paradoxes, in order to make what he wanted to say as plain as possible:

Thus a Christian is both righteous and a sinner, holy and profane, an enemy of God and yet a child of God. These contraries no sophisters will admit, for they know not the true manner of justification.<sup>7</sup>

*For reflection:*

- *Do you recognize the idea that your good deeds put you right with God as false and indeed a temptation?*

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther: *Commentary on Galatians*, 1535. ET 1953, p.22f.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther: *Commentary on Galatians*, 3:6, p.226.

- *If righteous actions do not make Christians right with God, what then motivates them to such actions?*

### **3. The Priority of the Word**

Luther came to his convictions on the basis of his close study of the Bible and particularly St Paul. This led him to emphasize the authority of Scripture as expressing the Word of God. Until then tradition in the form of the decisions of the councils of the Church, papal pronouncements, the opinions of great theologians and the common practice of the Church were all regarded as authorities standing alongside the Bible. But Luther wanted to be liberated, and to liberate others, from everything in the Church and in religion that stood in the way of listening to and hearing God's word in the Bible.

In 1519 a public debate between Luther and the Catholic theologian Johann Eck took place in Leipzig. Until then Luther had believed that the Councils of the Church as well as Scripture supported his views. But Eck cleverly pushed Luther into stating that many of Jan Hus's beliefs were evangelical, that Matt. 16:18 did not give the Pope an exclusive right to interpret Scripture and that popes and Church councils were fallible. (The Council of Constance in 1415 had condemned Hus to be burned as a heretic.) Eck then branded Luther a new Hus. For Luther, however, this was a decisive step forward. He now recognised that Scripture alone had final authority in matters of faith: all Church decisions and formulations needed to be tested, and if necessary reformed, in the light of Scripture.

Luther later made his position on the authority of Scripture clear in famous words before the Holy Roman Emperor at the imperial assembly called the *Diet of Worms* in 1521:

Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the Pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract

anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.... May God help me. Amen.

Luther also made clear, however, that Scripture needed to be properly understood, and that this involved seeing Christ as its central point and "inner meaning", around which everything else in it revolves. "The whole of Scripture, if one contemplates it inwardly, everywhere deals with Christ.... [I]n other words: every word in the Bible points to Christ."<sup>8</sup>

In line with all this the UPCA Confession of Faith declares:

**6.4** The same Spirit who spoke through the prophets and Jesus and the apostles inspired the writing of the Scriptures. They record the revelation of God's grace, will and purpose for the world in the call of Abraham, the liberation and history of Israel, the birth, ministry, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is thus the sufficient and uniquely authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. In that sense it is the Word of God written and the final rule of faith and life.

**6.12** Scripture needs to be interpreted from within the community of faith and its tradition, of which Scripture itself is a part. The Holy Spirit has also guided the great councils of the Church and the formulation of its great creeds, whose authority we recognize. Yet, important as church tradition is in guiding us how to interpret Scripture, Scripture itself is the uniquely normative part of all tradition. The Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture is the standard by which all tradition, councils, creeds, confessions and other pronouncements, all religious experience and human reasoning and all preaching and personal witness are to be tested.

*For reflection:*

- *How important a role does the Bible play in your life?*
- *How much time do you spend reading and studying it?*
- *Do you read all the whole Bible as focusing on Christ?*

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther: *Lectures on Romans*, 10:6, p.288. Tr. very slightly altered

## 4. The Significance of the Sacraments

Luther applied grace, faith and the Word as central also to the understanding of the sacraments. In a time when the sacraments were unlinked from the Word and interpreted superstitiously, he explained the power of the Lord's Supper ("the Mass", as he still called it) in terms of the Word and of faith:

The Mass, according to its substance, is therefore, nothing else than the words of Christ mentioned above—"Take and eat." It is as if he [Christ] said: "Behold, condemned, sinful man, in the pure and unmerited love with which I love you, and by the will of the Father of all mercies, I promise you in these words, even though you do not desire or deserve them, the forgiveness of all your sins and life everlasting. And, so that you may be most certainly assured of this my irrevocable promise, I give my body and shed my blood, thus by my very death confirming this promise and leaving my body and blood to you as a sign and memorial of this same promise. As often, therefore, as you partake of them, remember me, and praise, magnify, and give thanks for my love and bounty for you.

From this you will see that nothing else is needed to have a worthy Mass than a faith that confidently relies on this promise, believes that these words of Christ are true, and does not doubt that these infinite blessings have been bestowed upon it.<sup>9</sup>

As he put it later:

*What is the sacrament of the altar?* It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ...given and poured out for... the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation....

Certainly, it is not the eating and drinking that does it, but the words that stand there: "Given and poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins" [Matt. 26:28]. These words, together with the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the Sacrament; and whoever believes

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther: *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. This was the second of Luther's famous three tracts published in 1520. It challenged the Catholic Church's understanding of the sacraments

these words has what they say and what they mean, namely the forgiveness of sins.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise the UPCS A Confession of Faith declares:

**7.2** The same Word of God that addresses us verbally through Scripture, preaching and personal witness comes to us visibly and tangibly through the sacraments. For God in Christ comes to us not face to face but clothed in human words and in the earthly elements of the sacraments. The sacraments are not just symbols of the Word or visual aids to it but visible, material forms of the Word itself that apply, confirm and seal the gospel's promises to the individual. They are the Word in palpable form, God's palpable Word to us.

**7.3** The spoken Word, in preaching and in the liturgy, constitutes these rites as sacraments. It does so by explaining what they signify and so articulating their promise and offer of grace. Only by trusting in God's promise signified by the sacraments and articulated in the accompanying words do we receive their power.<sup>11</sup>

*For reflection:*

- *How important are the sacraments to you?*
- *How would you explain what the sacraments of baptism and Communion actually do for the believer?*

## **5. Simplicity of Worship**

Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman are integral to our understanding of worship: "God is Spirit and those who worship must worship in Spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:24). Yet for centuries the Church instead emphasized the minute details of ritual and ceremony that tradition and ecclesial authority laid down. In his tract *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther challenged this with spiritual insight and great courage:

...in order to grasp safely and fortunately a true and unbiased knowledge of this sacrament [Holy Communion], we must above all else be careful to put aside whatever has

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<sup>10</sup> M. Luther: *Small Catechism*, section 5.1,3.

<sup>11</sup> UPCS A Confession of Faith, Art. 7.2-3.

been added by the zeal and devotion of people to the original, simple institution of this sacrament—such things as vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles, and the whole pageantry of outward things. We must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and to this alone, and put nothing before us but the very word of Christ by which he instituted this sacrament, made it perfect, and committed it to us. For in that word and in that word alone reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the Mass.<sup>12</sup>

Luther recognized that worship needed proper liturgical forms, not formlessness, and retained many old forms. But he cut out the 'canon' of the Mass, because it interpreted the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice, and restored Communion in both kinds. The chief thing in worship, he stressed, was not liturgical minutiae, ceremonies, vestments or outward pomp and show that glorified the clergy, but the fear and praise of God. "For God hath not promised that he will save and justify people for ...observances [and] ceremonies devised by men."<sup>13</sup> He pointed to primitive Christianity's simple worship in word and sacrament. Against the traditional detailed liturgical rules he emphasized that Christ set us free from the Mosaic law, particularly its ceremonial aspect (Gal. 3-5). We thus have the right to revise and adapt liturgical forms. Nor does the unity of the Church depend on liturgical uniformity. His most important reform in worship was to restore the sermon to central place from a minor place beside the Mass. "When we willingly and gladly hear the Word preached concerning Christ the Son of God, who for us was made man...that he might redeem us: then God assuredly sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts."<sup>14</sup>

Later in 17<sup>th</sup> century England the Nonconformists reacted to the excessive ornamentation of churches and over-elaboration of worship by building plain meeting houses and chapels for simpler worship. In spurning all art, colour, responsive liturgy and ceremony they went beyond Luther. But what they *did* learn from Luther was that God is a hidden God who in every

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther: *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520..

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther: *Commentary on Galatians*, 4:8f., p.381.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther: *Commentary on Galatians*, 4:6, p.362.

age makes known God's saving love, will and purpose through the Word and the sacraments. For this reason they gave the pulpit central place and arranged the pews so that all might hear the word of promise, as the source of faith.

*For reflection:*

- *How important is it to worship every Sunday as part of the Christian community?*
- *What makes worship true worship and what does not?*
- *Should we try to reform our worship to be richer or more interesting and attractive, and if so how?*
- *How should our churches be built and decorated?*

## **6. The Priesthood of all Believers**

The Protestant Church affirms that God calls the *whole* people of God to service, or ministry, in the world and equips them for it. As the UPCS A Confession of Faith puts it:

**23.1** By baptism [Jesus Christ] consecrates all Christians to be members of the royal priesthood. As priests they have immediate access to God through him, and are called to offer themselves as a living sacrifice to God, to make known the glorious acts of the One who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light, to bring God to people and people to God, to intercede for and minister to others, and to forgive sins in Christ's name.

**23.2** Christ entrusts his mission and ministry to his whole Body. Thus the Church's ministry is exercised corporately and through its individual members. The Spirit distributes abundant and complementary gifts to believers for building up the Body of Christ and witnessing to, and working for, him in the world.

Where did such "egalitarian" notions of Christian ministry come from? It is not easy for us to think back to five centuries ago, when the priesthood and the "religious" (monks and nuns) dominated society as "the spiritual estate" (surer of salvation and called to live a higher ethic) in contrast to lay people as "the secular estate". It was Luther who appealed to I Pet. 2:5,9 and Rev. 1:6, 5:10 against this view of things. In his revolutionary tract, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, he stated:

Nor are we only kings and the freest of all people but also priests for ever, a dignity far higher than kingship, because by that priesthood we are worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another mutually the things which are of God.... Here you will ask, "If all who are in the Church are priests, by what character are those whom we now call priests to be distinguished from the laity?" I reply, By the use of these words, "priest," "clergy," "spiritual person," and "ecclesiastic" an injustice has been done, because they have been transferred from the remaining body of Christians to those few who are now, by hurtful custom, called ecclesiastics. For Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, except that those who are now boastfully called popes, bishops and lords, it calls ministers, servants and stewards, who are to serve the rest in the ministry of the word, for teaching the faith of Christ and the liberty of believers.<sup>15</sup>

This eliminated the difference in spiritual status between priests, monks and nuns on the one hand and lay people on the other. All Christians together by their baptism and faith belonged to the spiritual estate, a peasant as much as a bishop. All were called to serve in the Church and in the world and equipped with spiritual gifts to do so. Ordained clergy were merely those among them who were trained and set apart as servants ("ministers") for a specific task among them.

This challenge to its power structure deeply dismayed the hierarchical establishment of the Church—as did the abandonment of many monasteries and convents by monks and nuns who in its wake took up normal employment.

"The priesthood of all believers" has for us become a truism, however. Some Protestants have even misused it as an excuse for an anticlerical sectarianism. But all Protestants agree that the Lord Jesus Christ continues his mission and ministry in the world in and through the whole people of God. He calls, commits and equips them all to serve him in worship, prayer, proclaiming the gospel, praying for others, hearing their confessions, assuring them of God's grace and exercising compassion.

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther: *Concerning Christian Liberty*.

That this is now widely accepted is mainly due to Luther.

*For reflection:*

- *Do you understand Christ to have called you to serve him in the world? In what way?*
- *Is the UPCSA still a clergy-dominated church, locally and nationally? If so, how should we change this and involve the laity more in the Church's mission?*
- *How can we replace the individualism of so much Protestant worship with a greater sense of corporateness?*

## **7. The Spirituality of our Secular Calling**

It is common today to refer to certain types of secular employment as a "calling". A doctor or nurse or teacher is often still thought of as being "called" to their profession. This loose understanding of "calling" is all that appears to remain of a very robust Lutheran idea. Luther argued that the profession or daily work of every Christian, however mean or lowly, is a calling that possesses the same dignity as the calling to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments.

We see then that just as those that we call spiritual, or priests, bishops or popes, do not differ from other Christians in any other or higher degree, but in that they are to be concerned with the word of God and the sacraments—that being their work and office—in the same way that the temporal authorities hold the sword and the rod in their hands to punish the wicked and to protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant, every man has the office and function of his calling, and yet all alike are consecrated priests and bishops, and every man in his office must be useful and beneficial to the rest, that so many kinds of work may all be united into one community: just as the members of the body all serve one another.<sup>16</sup>

With such arguments Luther laid the foundation for the high view of secular employment that was to permeate

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther: *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520. This was the first tract Luther published in 1520. It set out his doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers". It also introduced the doctrine of "the two kingdoms", which played such a problematic role in German political thought.

Protestant society and led to what came to be called the Protestant work ethic. Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology, argued persuasively in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) that this simple idea of the spiritual dignity of secular employment was a major force in the development of industry and capitalism in northern Europe and England and so in the economic and political transformation of Western society.

We have said that the Lord Jesus Christ continues his mission and ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God, all of whose members he calls to his service and equips for it. This service involves not only worship, prayer and proclaiming the gospel but also caring for those in need, obedient discipleship in our ordinary daily lives in the world, taking responsibility for public life, caring for our environment and striving for justice in society, each according to the gifts and opportunities we are given. As the UPCS A Confession puts it:

**19.1** We should each seek our true vocation according to the abilities given to us. Work may be for wages or profit but should also serve God and people, no matter how humbly. We should promote mutual respect in the workplace and oppose exploitation and unfair working conditions.

**19.2** In a world of appalling poverty alongside excessive wealth we need to heed the call to strive for a just and more equal society. Our money is not our own. God calls us to live as though everyone's poverty were our own and our resources were everyone's. We are to live simply and be faithful stewards of our abilities, time and money and other material resources to be a community of mutual sharing, to support the Church in its mission, and to do all we can for the poor as well as our own families. God's economy provides enough for all.<sup>17</sup>

**25.7** The Church is to take a lead in standing for justice and opposing all that is wrong in society. It must oppose all discrimination in civil law and policy, censure all cor-

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<sup>17</sup> UPCS A Confession of Faith, Art. 19.1–2.

ruption and unmask all harmful ideologies and false propaganda.

*For reflection:*

- *To what extent do you see your profession or work as the way you serve God in the world?*
- *Does the Church speak out in the right way against injustice and corruption in society—or is it itself still complicit in racial/cultural division or dominance?*

## **8. A luta continua: the Reformation Continues**

Jodocus van Lodenstein, a Reformed theologian in Holland first wrote, in 1674, that *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (“the reformed Church should always be reforming itself”)—more fully stated as *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundum verbum Dei* (“the reformed Church should always be reforming itself in accordance with the Word of God”). The Reformed Churches took this over as a motto, to express the Church’s continuing need to re-examine its doctrines, life and structures and seek to conform them more closely to the Bible.

Hence the UPCSAs “Declaration of Standards” states:

The Uniting Church affirms its right to formulate, adopt, modify and interpret its doctrinal statements, always subject to the Word of God, under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit and in accord with the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

By the grace of God, then, may the reformation of the Church continue in the present and the future. For one thing that reformation is incomplete while the scandal of its division on important matters of faith and church order remains and Christians are unable all to be at Lord’s Table together. But the Church needs to reform itself in other important ways as well.

*For reflection:*

- *To what extent do Luther’s insights find regular expression in your own congregation and its life?*
  - *In what ways do you think the Church today needs to reform?*
  - *What practical steps can be taken towards such reform?*
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## Glossary

*95 Theses*: a document with 95 points of argument with which Martin Luther challenged the theological validity of papal indulgences and their public sale for cash and so initiated the Protestant Reformation.

*Penance*: John the Baptist and Jesus called on people to repent, or turn from their sin. The Latin Bible mistranslated this as "do penance". A priest assigned acts of penance to show repentance after a person confessed his/her sins. These might be particular prayers or, for serious sin, going on a pilgrimage. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century an alternative option was to give money to the Church. Such acts were taken to contribute to salvation by adding to one's treasury of merits.

*Calvin, John*: a Frenchman, trained in law and theology, who was deeply affected by Luther's writings and led the Reformed church in Geneva, Switzerland. He influenced John Knox, who in turn led the Reformation in Scotland.

*Councils of the Church*: formal meetings of the bishops of the Church to decide important theological questions of the day.

*Diet of Worms*: a formal assembly of the *Holy Roman Empire* in the German town of Worms in 1521, which the emperor Charles V summoned to give Luther a hearing and presided over. The Diet condemned Luther as a heretic, but he escaped.

*Dissenters*: English Christians including the Puritans who did not conform to the Act of Uniformity 1559 (which made the *Book of Common Prayer* compulsory in worship).

*Holy Roman Empire*: a network of territories in [central Europe](#) that was formed during the [early Middle Ages](#) in succession to the Roman Empire and broken up by Napoleon in 1806.

*Independents*: Christian communities, including Baptists and Congregationalists, who were independent of the state Church. See "*Dissenters*" above and "*Nonconformists*" below.

*Indulgences*: Medieval people believed that the sacraments and the last rites would secure them from hell. But they feared Purgatory, where every sin not paid for by sufferings in this life and acts of penance would be punished. In 1063 Pope Urban II declared such punishment totally remitted for all who would

join the Crusade against Islam. Later popes then promulgated “indulgences” for cash paid to the Church. In 1476 Pope Sixtus IV promulgated an indulgence for the dead.

*Masses for the dead:* services of Holy Communion offering special prayers for the dead to shorten their time in purgatory.

*Nonconformists:* Protestant Christians who refused to conform to the Act of Uniformity (1662), which sought to establish the Church of England and its practices, and were therefore expelled from that Church (in the Great Ejectment).

*Protestant work ethic:* a term coined by the sociologist Max Weber in arguing that Protestant, and especially Reformed, theology encouraged hard work and frugality.

*Puritans:* English Protestants (mainly Calvinists) in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries who advocated purity of doctrine and morality, simplicity of worship and personal and group piety.

*Reformed Church:* The Protestant Churches identified with the theology of John Calvin (and that of Huldreich Zwingli, another leading Reformer in Switzerland).

*Secular:* an adjective applied to life, or the aspects of it, regarded as independent of religion.

*Veneration of relics:* the use in devotion or worship of purported surviving parts of the bodies of saints.

### **Further reading in Luther’s writings**

If you would like to read more of Luther, the following are suggested. The first three can be found on the internet. All of them are available on Kindle.

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| Martin Luther           | <i>Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, 1520.</i> |
| Martin Luther           | <i>On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520.</i>              |
| Martin Luther           | <i>Concerning Christian Liberty, 1520</i>                            |
| John Dillenberger (ed.) | <i>Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings.</i>                  |
| Martin Luther           | <i>Galatians: Selections from Martin Luther’s Commentary, 1535.</i>  |