

Wittenberg 2017 – Our Historical Conclusions

In 2010 we published a set of five key principles to guide the work of Wittenberg 2017. We are now publishing five core conclusions which we have reached during the meetings of the past five years. The leadership of Wittenberg 2017 has found these conclusions helpful in providing a framework for understanding the events of the past 500 years and responding in the way of reconciliation. We also believe these conclusions will be helpful in preparing for our final meeting in Wittenberg, Nov. 2017.

These conclusions are shared by the leadership of Wittenberg 2017, a group of clergy and laity composed of Catholics, Protestants and Messianic Jews. We believe these conclusions to be both scripturally and historically sound. In humility we also confess that do not see history with the fullness of God's perspective. These conclusions are, of course, subject to further refinement under the counsel of the Holy Spirit and the light of new facts we may discover.

1. We honor Martin Luther as a prophet sent by God to Luther's own church, the Roman Catholic Church.

- a. We honor the Roman Catholic Church for her historic role in spreading and preserving Christianity in the Western World. We also recognize the grace, life and gifts that continue to flow from the Catholic Church.
- b. During the time of Luther, the Roman Catholic Church was in great need of reform. Though lip service was paid to love of God, most church leaders seemed far more focused on worldly affairs. Consequently, the church was filled with moral failings, political power struggles, and manipulations for financial gain.
- c. Beginning more than a century before Luther, God sent prophets calling for reform. Sadly, church authorities killed or attempted to silence these men by other means. These prophetic voices included the Waldensians, Wycliffe, Hus, Savonarola ... and then Martin Luther.
- d. In 1517, Martin Luther was an obedient Augustinian monk, a teacher in the Wittenberg University, and a loyal Catholic. He was not a rebel trying to start a new church separate from the Roman Catholic Church.
- e. Luther's 95 Theses were his initial prophetic message.
- f. It is historically proven that Martin Luther sent the 95 Theses to his Archbishop, Albrecht of Mainz. This is in accord with the New Testament model of prophets submitting prophetic messages for testing by apostolic authority. Luther expected to initiate an internal church discussion, as well as an academic debate regarding the validity of the points raised in the 95 Theses.
- g. There is no direct historical evidence that Luther posted his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In his extensive notations Luther never mentions taking this action. Ferdinand Pauwels' well-known picture of Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the church door comes from a time in the 19th century where Germany was proud of people who

rebelled against the Roman Catholic Church. Our initiative believes that the posting of the Theses is an unhelpful legend, because it reinforces a wrong picture of Luther in 1517. He was not a rebel at that time but a pious monk obeying his bishop and sending him the 95 Theses for further discussion — not knowing that the pope and the archbishop of Mainz were deeply involved in the trade of indulgences.

2. We lament that Luther's prophetic message was not correctly considered or responded to by his apostolic authorities.

- a. Archbishop Albrecht's ability to respond correctly to the 95 Theses was compromised. He had purchased his bishopric with the goal of financial gain, and thus his first concern was neither the will of God, nor the truth, nor the pastoring of the flock entrusted to him. Further, half of the proceeds of the indulgences he sold were being used to pay off his debt to the Fugger bank, which had loaned him the money to purchase his bishoprics. To receive the prophetic word from Luther would have been to undermine his own financial position – which is rightly what he would have done, of course, but not what he did do. Rather than replying to Luther at all, he forwarded the prophetic message along to Rome.
- b. Pope Leo X was in a similarly compromised position when he received Luther's prophetic word from Albrecht. He was the one who had authorized the indulgences in Germany, in the expectation of receiving half the revenue. This money was being used for his announced renovation of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican at Rome. To receive the prophetic word from a lowly monk in Germany would have been to face the loss of funding for his ambitious building project. Instead, he first tried to silence Luther through channels of church authority, and eventually issued a papal bull for Luther's excommunication.
- c. What if the apostolic and prophetic giftings had worked together, as God intended, for the equipping of the body of Christ for works of service? What if either Archbishop Albrecht or Pope Leo X had truly sought God regarding the 95 Theses, and engaged Martin Luther in sincere dialogue concerning what he was hearing from God? How might church history have been changed for the better?

3. We grieve the subsequent shared history of hostility – and ask the Holy Spirit to embolden us to identify with our forefathers, repent for their attitudes and actions that were not godly, forgive, and where appropriate make restitution.

- a. The Roman Catholic Church excommunicated Martin Luther.
- b. Martin Luther called the pope “Anti-Christ,” spoke about killing Bishops and clergy as equivalent to killing enemies in a war, and consistently employed harsh and hostile invectives against those who spoke or wrote counter to his views.
- c. The Protestant/Catholic split led directly to the 30 Years' War, which eventually killed around one-third of the population of Europe.
- d. Violence between Protestants and Catholics has continued to our day, with recent examples in Mexico and Northern Ireland.

- e. In addition to actual physical violence, these two streams of the body of Christ have been engaged in what might be called a “Cold War” – suspicion, accusation, contempt, anger, mutual anathemas, and lack of cooperation throughout the centuries.
- f. Protestants and Catholics have both persecuted proponents of the Radical Reformation – Anabaptists, Pietists, Quakers, and other movements that advocated separating the church from the power structures of states and nations.
- g. Another area of “unity in hostility” has been anti-Semitism. Luther inherited the anti-Jewish views of Augustine and the Catholic Church, repeating and adding to them in his writings to such an extent that Adolf Hitler could quote Luther as justification for persecuting Jews in Nazi Germany. A remarkable symbol of this joint Catholic/Protestant hatred of the Jewish people still exists on Luther’s home church, the Stadtkirche in Wittenberg – in the form of a Judensau (Jew-Pig) sculpture which was erected originally by Catholics, praised and pamphletized by Martin Luther, and subsequently embellished by Lutherans with a blasphemous inscription.
- h. The Protestant legacy has been one of further and further splintering. Accepting the very name “Protestant” is to accept a core identity of being *against* something – a protester. Any disciple of Luther’s who then came to disagree with some aspect of his theology or practice, would naturally be tempted to follow Luther’s example and establish a new church to correct the perceived error. This pattern has been repeated through decades and centuries of church and denominational splits. While the exact number changes too fast to be definitively known, it is currently estimated that there are more than 40,000 distinct Protestant denominations, many believing that in fact they are the only true Christians. Protestant hostility against other Protestants has grown to rival Protestant hostility against Catholics.
- i. Jesus said that the world would know He was truly from God by the unity and love of His followers. This means that the divisions and publicly-expressed hostility of His people against one another give unbelievers a solid reason to deny that Jesus was from God. The eternal consequences are sobering to consider. Our attitudes and actions should be an avenue to the new life offered by God for those who are lost and desperately in need of hope; instead, they are often a barrier.

4. We believe that Catholics & Protestants can and should jointly commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

- a. The Holy Spirit was at work in the Reformation. We recognize two clear treasures deposited by the Holy Spirit through Luther.
 - i. Luther’s cry of pain and indignation against the excesses and sins of the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, and the failure to make any effective reforms.
 - ii. Luther’s criteria for reform:
 - 1. The absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ

2. The absolute uniqueness of trusting faith in reception of God's saving Word
 3. The absolute uniqueness of the Scriptures as the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the importance of putting the Scriptures into the hands of all of the people of God, not just the clergy
- b. These treasures have given birth to a wide range of expressions¹ in what are now the Protestant churches worldwide. The Reformation has truly impacted every corner of the earth and touched the lives of over a billion people.
 - c. These treasures have now also been affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church, resulting in renewal. This process began as early as the Council of Trent, but these convictions were made official Catholic teaching at the Second Vatican Council and in the Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith (1999)..
 - d. Roman Catholics can thus express gratitude to God for the benefits that have come to them from the work of the Holy Spirit through Martin Luther, rather than either giving grudging acceptance or persevering in willful ignorance of the source of these benefits.
 - e. Similarly, Protestants can rejoice with their Roman Catholic brothers and sisters at the continuing work of the Spirit in their midst. There are ancient spiritual treasures carried in unique ways by the Catholic and Orthodox traditions which can instruct and enrich their Protestant friends. For example, the Catholic and Orthodox witness to historic orthodoxy could help Protestants to resist tendencies to weaken their doctrinal affirmations.
 - f. To hold these attitudes will help Protestants and Catholics stand side by side at the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, jointly giving thanks to God for His good gifts deposited in His body through the Reformation.
 - g. As we together marvel that the Holy Spirit was able to use such a humble instrument as Martin Luther 500 years ago, we should be eager to recognize and receive the more recent and ongoing surprises of the Holy Spirit in the last 100+ years – which are not limited to but are well represented by the following:
 - i. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements
 - ii. The ecumenical movement for the reconciliation of separated Christian churches/communities
 - iii. The re-establishing of the nation of Israel
 - iv. Vatican II
 - v. The re-emergence of an authentic Messianic Jewish stream of the body of Christ
 - vi. The modern worship music movement

¹ This is perhaps the “felix culpa” of the splintering Protestant Church, by which God can take splintered glass fragments and form them into a beautiful stained glass image.

- vii. The 1999 signing in Augsburg of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church
- viii. The retirement of Pope Benedict and subsequent election of Pope Francis.

5. We propose that Catholics & Protestants seize the opportunity to pray John 17 with Jesus on the occasion of this historic anniversary.

- a. During His last night on earth, Jesus prays specifically for the Church in our day, “for all who will believe.” The one thing Jesus requests of His Father is that we would be one as He and the Father are one. (John 17:20-24). Has He stopped praying this as He sits at the right hand of the Father? Certainly not! Will the Father answer “No” to His beloved Son’s earnest prayer? Certainly not! We therefore can and rightly should join with Jesus in His prayer, with great hope and assurance that we will with our own eyes see God answer it.
- b. While we pray in hope with Jesus for unity, it would be overreaching to predict what God’s answer will look like. Observing the Holy Spirit hovering over the chaotic “face of the deep” in Genesis 1, surely no one could not have predicted the outburst of creative actions which followed. Similarly, as the Holy Spirit hovers over chaotic state of the divided Body of Christ, we should expect what only God can speak into being, without trying to manufacture it ourselves.
- c. That being said, it can fuel our prayers to survey the current church landscape and see in our day the remarkable work of God in re-connecting the divided body of Christ. He is at work at the highest levels of church leadership, and also among the laity – forging new friendships, removing long-held contempt, resolving theological differences, and inviting creative partnerships for the sake of missions and evangelism.
- d. Praying John 17 with Jesus stirs up hope that unity not only *can* but *must* exist in the midst of diversity. This is the mystery of the unity of the Trinity – three persons with unique identities, unique roles united in one God. Viewed in this light, the lamentable divisions of the body of Christ do not lead us to despair, but to the hope for the emergence of a reconciled diversity.