

# A Reforming Catholic Confession: A "Mere Protestant" Statement of Faith to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation (2017)<sup>1</sup>

## PART I. THE REFORMING CATHOLIC CONFESSION

### WHAT WE, PROTESTANTS OF DIVERSE CHURCHES AND THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS, SAY TOGETHER

"We believe..."

#### Triune God

That there is one God, infinitely great and good, the creator and sustainer of all things visible and invisible, the one true source of light and life, who has life in himself and lives eternally in glorious light and sovereign love in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14) – co-equal in nature, majesty, and glory. Everything God does in creating, sustaining, judging, and redeeming the world reflects who God is, the one whose perfections, including love, holiness, knowledge, wisdom, power, and righteousness, have been revealed in the history of salvation. God has freely purposed from before the foundation of the world to elect and form a people for himself to be his treasured possession (Deut. 7:6), to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14).

#### Holy Scripture

That God has spoken and continues to speak in and through Scripture, the only infallible and sufficiently clear rule and authority for Christian faith, thought, and life (*sola scriptura*). Scripture is God's inspired and illuminating Word in the words of his servants (Psa. 119:105), the prophets and apostles, a gracious self-communication of God's own light and

life, a means of grace for growing in knowledge and holiness. The Bible is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it commands, trusted in all that it promises, and revered in all that it reveals (2 Tim 3:16).

#### Human Beings

That God communicates his goodness to all creatures, but in particular to human beings, whom he has made in his own image, both male and female (Gen. 1:26-27), and accordingly that all men, women, and children have been graciously bestowed with inherent dignity (rights) and creaturely vocation (responsibilities).

#### Fallenness

That the original goodness of creation and the human creature has been corrupted by sin, namely, the self-defeating choice of the first human beings to deny the Creator and the created order by going their own way, breaking God's law for life (Rom. 3:23). Through disobedience to the law-giver, Adam and Eve incurred disorder instead of order (Rom. 8:20-21), divine condemnation instead of approval, and death instead of life for themselves and their descendants (Psa. 51:5; Rom. 5:12-20).

## Jesus Christ

That Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God become human for us and our salvation (John 3:17), the only Mediator (*solus Christus*) between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5), born of the virgin Mary, the Son of David and servant of the house of Israel (Rom. 1:3; 15:8), one person with two natures, truly God and truly man. He lived a fully human life, having entered into the disorder and brokenness of fallen existence, yet without sin, and in his words, deeds, attitude, and suffering embodied the free and loving communication of God's own light (truth) and life (salvation).

## The Atoning Work of Christ

That God who is rich in mercy towards the undeserving has made gracious provision for human wrongdoing, corruption, and guilt, provisionally and typologically through Israel's Temple and sin offerings, then definitively and gloriously in the gift of Jesus' once-for-all sufficient and perfect sacrificial death on the cross (Rom. 6:10; 1 Pet. 3:18) in the temple of his human flesh (Heb. 10:11-12). By his death in our stead, he revealed God's love and upheld God's justice, removing our guilt, vanquishing the powers that held us captive, and reconciling us to God (Isa. 53:4-6; 2 Cor. 5:21; Col. 2:14-15). It is wholly by grace (*sola gratia*), not our own works or merits, that we have been forgiven; it is wholly by Jesus' shed blood, not by our own sweat and tears, that we have been cleansed.

## The Gospel

That the gospel is the good news that the triune God has poured out his grace in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that through his work we might have peace

with God (Rom. 5:1). Jesus lived in perfect obedience yet suffered everything sinners deserved so that sinners would not have to pursue a righteousness of their own, relying on their own works, but rather through trust in him as the fulfillment of God's promises could be justified by faith alone (*sola fide*) in order to become fellow heirs with him. Christ died in the place of sinners, absorbing the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23), so that those who entrust themselves to him also die with him to the power, penalty, and (eventually) practice of sin. Christ was raised the first-born of a renewed and restored creation, so that those whom the Spirit unites to him in faith are raised up and created a new humanity in him (Eph. 2:15). Renewed in God's image, they are thereby enabled to live out his life in them. One with Christ and made alive in him who is the only ground of salvation, sinners are reconciled with God – justified, adopted, sanctified, and eventually glorified children of the promise.

## The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit

That the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the unseen yet active personal presence of God in the world, who unites believers to Christ, regenerating and making them new creatures (Tit. 3:5) with hearts oriented to the light and life of the kingdom of God and to peace and justice on earth. The Spirit indwells those whom he makes alive with Christ, through faith incorporates them into the body of Christ, and conforms them to the image of Christ so that they may glorify him as they grow in knowledge, wisdom, and love into mature sainthood, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). The Spirit is the light of truth and fire of love who continues to sanctify

the people of God, prompting them to repentance and faith, diversifying their gifts, directing their witness, and empowering their discipleship.

### **The Church**

That the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is God's new society, the first fruit of the new creation, the whole company of the redeemed through the ages, of which Christ is Lord and head. The truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, is the church's firm foundation (Matt. 16:16-18; 1 Cor. 3:11). The local church is both embassy and parable of the kingdom of heaven, an earthly place where his will is done and he is now present, existing visibly everywhere two or three gather in his name to proclaim and spread the gospel in word and works of love, and by obeying the Lord's command to baptize disciples (Matt. 28:19) and celebrate the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19).

### **Baptism and Lord's Supper**

That these two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which some among us call "sacraments," are bound to the Word by the Spirit as visible words proclaiming the promise of the gospel, and thus become places where recipients encounter the Word again. Baptism and the Lord's Supper communicate life in Christ to the faithful, confirming them in their assurance that Christ, the gift of God for the people of God, is indeed "for us and our salvation" and nurturing them in their faith. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are physical focal points for key Reformation insights: the gifts of God (*sola gratia*) and the faith that grasps their promise (*sola fide*). They are tangible expressions of the gospel insofar as they vividly depict our dying, rising, and incorporation into

Jesus' body ("one bread ... one body" – 1 Cor. 10:16-17), truly presenting Christ and the reconciliation he achieved on the cross. Baptism and the Lord's Supper strengthen the faithful by visibly recalling, proclaiming, and sealing the gracious promise of forgiveness of sins and communion with God and one another through the peace-making blood of Christ (1 Cor. 11:26; Col. 1:20).

### **Holy Living**

That through participating in baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as prayer, the ministry of the Word, and other forms of corporate worship, we grow into our new reality as God's people, a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9, 10), called to put on Christ through his indwelling Spirit. It is through the Spirit's enlivening power that we live in imitation of Christ as his disciples, individually and corporately, a royal priesthood that proclaims his excellent deeds and offers our bodies as spiritual sacrifices in right worship of God and sacrificial service to the world through works of love, compassion for the poor, and justice for the oppressed, always, everywhere and to everyone bearing wise witness to the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ.

### **Last Things**

That in God's own time and way, the bodily risen and ascended Christ will visibly return to consummate God's purpose for the whole cosmos through his victory over death and the devil (1 Cor. 15:26). He will judge the world, consigning any who persist in unbelief to an everlasting fate apart from him, where his life and light are no more. Yet he will prepare his people as a bride for the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9), giving rest to restless hearts and life to glorified

bodies (1 Cor. 15:42-44; Phil. 3:21) as they exult in joyful fellowship with their Lord and delight in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1-2). There they shall reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev.

22:5) and see him face to face (1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 22:4), forever rapt in wonder, love, and praise.

**Soli Deo Gloria!**

## PART II: THE EXPLANATION

### EXPLANATION: A HISTORICAL & THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### WHY WE SAY WHAT WE SAY

**Introduction: a reformation to laud, lament, or long for?**

1. The Protestant Reformers believed they were contending for “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) and recovering the gospel that some were “so quickly deserting” (Gal. 1:6). They therefore believed their efforts to be both *catholic* and *evangelical*, that is, on behalf of the whole church and for the sake of the integrity of the gospel, particularly the singularity and sufficiency of Christ’s person and saving work (*solus Christus*). On the eve of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, however, the narrative that prevails in some quarters focuses on its supposed negative consequences, including secularization, radical individualism, skepticism and, most notably, schism. According to this telling of the story, Protestants necessarily prove to be dividers, not uniters.
2. That the world is divided – by race, class, age, gender, nation, politics, and religion – is as obvious as it is tragic. That Protestants are divided is equally obvious and, given our Lord’s prayer for unity (“that they may be one” – John 17:11), even more grievous. While we regret the divisions that have

followed in its wake, we acknowledge the need for the sixteenth-century Reformation, even as we recognize the hopeful possibilities of the present twenty-first century moment. Not every denominational or doctrinal difference is a division, certainly not an insurmountable one. We dare hope that the unity to which the Reformers aspired may be increasingly realized as today’s “mere” Protestants, like Richard Baxter’s and C. S. Lewis’s “mere Christians,” joyfully join together to bear united witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to its length, depth, breadth, and width – in a word, its catholicity. We therefore aim to celebrate the catholic impulse that lies at the heart of the earlier Reformation even as we hope and pray for ever greater displays of our substantial unity in years to come.

**The challenge to be protestant: from reformation to “reforming catholic”**

**The “catholic” Reformation**

3. The Reformation itself was the culmination of a centuries-long process of reform. More pointedly: the Reformation was quintessentially catholic precisely because of its concern for the triune God of the gospel. The Refor-

mation was as much about catholicity in the *formal* sense of the term (i.e., universal scope, related to the principle of the priesthood of all believers), as canonicity (the supreme authority of Scripture). The Reformers also affirmed the *material* sense of catholicity (i.e., historical consensus; continuity in doctrinal substance) in retrieving the great tradition of the church fathers, insofar as it was in accordance with the Scriptures. In sum: the Reformers directed their protest against the Roman Catholic Church not at the concept of catholicity but towards those unwarranted dogmas based on an appeal to human tradition rather than Scripture. What protests the Reformers made were ultimately lodged on behalf of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

4. The Reformers were persons of one book – and one church. Accordingly, they had a healthy respect for tradition and councils alike. Tradition at its best is the biblically sanctioned practice of handing on the good news of Jesus Christ received from the apostles (see 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Th. 2:15, 3:6). Having set apart certain written witnesses to the gospel to form the New Testament documents, the Spirit proceeded to guide (and continues to guide) the church into a right understanding of these foundational texts (John 15:26; 16:13). While we repudiate the “traditions of men” (Mark 7:8) – teachings that conflict with or have no clear basis in Scripture – we affirm tradition insofar as it refers to the church’s continuous attention to and deepening understanding of the apostolic teaching through time and across space. Such tradition is a vital means by
- which the Spirit ministers the truth of Scripture and causes it to pass into the consciousness and life of the global church. This consensual understanding was first formulated in the Rule of Faith, itself a summary of and orientation to the storyline and subject matter of Scripture. Tradition plays the role of (fallible) stream from Scripture’s (infallible) source, a moon to Scripture’s sun: what light it offers ultimately reflects the divine revelation in Scripture, which is materially sufficient (*semper reformanda* – “always reforming”).
5. The Reformers acknowledged that church councils stand under the authority of Scripture, and can sometimes err. A conciliar decree is authoritative only insofar as it is true to Scripture. Yet, given the weight of orthodox judgment and catholic consensus, individuals and churches do well to follow the example of the Reformers and accept as faithful interpretations and entailments of Scripture the decisions of the councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) concerning the nature of the Triune God and Jesus Christ.
6. The Reformers earnestly affirmed, expounded, and elaborated what is implicit in these early creeds: that the Trinity is vital to the gospel and that the gospel presupposes the Trinity. The Reformers saw that the doctrine of the Trinity was theological shorthand for the whole economy of redemption: through faith alone (*sola fide*) in God’s Son alone (*solus Christus*), the Spirit of adoption enlarges the family of God, enabling those who have faith to become children of God (John 1:12),

- able to approach God as Jesus did, crying “Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15).
7. The catholicity of the Protestant Reformation is understood both in terms of its appropriation of creedal orthodoxy and its renewed appreciation for the centrality of God’s grace, uniqueness of Christ, and forgiveness of sins. The Nicene emphasis on the *homoousios* of the Son with the Father preserved the integrity of the gospel by clarifying the nature of its central character, answering Jesus’ own question, “Who do you say that I am?” by identifying him as “very God of very God” (the God of the gospel), healer of humanity and entryway into the divine life – the salvation of God (Luke 3:6). Whereas Nicaea and Chalcedon focus on the integrity of the Son’s divinity and humanity for the sake of soteriology, the Protestant Reformers focus on God’s saving acts themselves, thus plumbing even greater depths of the good news that the triune God graciously communicates his own light and life in love with his “two hands,” Son and Spirit.
  8. The Reformers’ robust emphasis on the gospel as the saving activity of the triune God also led them to view the church as called forth by the gospel, a community of believers vitally united to Christ, and to one another, by the Spirit, through faith. In Christ, the church comprises a new humanity, the harbinger of the new creation. This conception of the church as an organic fellowship under the lordship of Christ, ruled by Scripture as his sufficient word and illumined by the Spirit, led the Reformers to correct certain misunderstandings and problematic practices of the church’s leadership, ministry, and sacraments.
  9. In sum, the Reformation was an appropriation and further development of the seminal patristic convictions presupposed by the Rule of Faith, the Apostles’ and Niceno-Constantinopolitan creeds, and the Chalcedonian definition, particularly as these clarified the doctrine of the Trinity and Incarnation, essential conditions for the integrity of the gospel. The *solas* (grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone) enabled a deeper insight into the logic and substance of the gospel as well as the unique significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ and, as such, stand in continuity with the whole (catholic) church, even as they represent a genuine elaboration of faith’s understanding.
- The present problem**
10. Critical voices describe *sola scriptura* as the “sin” of the Reformation, and the priesthood of all believers as Christianity’s dangerous idea. That individual interpreters can read the supreme authority of faith and life for themselves unleashed interpretive anarchy on the world, it is claimed. The historical record is irrefutable: Protestants disagreed amongst themselves and begat not one but many church families and traditions. We acknowledge that Protestants have not always handled doctrinal and interpretive differences in a spirit of charity and humility, but in making common confession, as we here do, we challenge the idea that every difference or denominational distinction necessarily leads to division.
  11. It is a fallacy to argue that the divisions that followed from the Reformation were its inevitable consequences. The accidental truths of European

history should never become necessary conclusions about the spirit of Protestantism. Nevertheless, it is particularly to be regretted that the early Protestant Reformers were unable to achieve an altogether common mind, in particular as concerns the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. We believe these divisive doctrinal disagreements stemmed not from the fundamental principles of the Reformation, but from their imperfect application due to human finitude, fallibility, and the vagaries of historical and political circumstance. Nor can we deny that they sometimes succumbed to the ever-present temptations of pride, prejudice, and impatience.

**Our “reforming catholic”  
 (“mere Protestant”) aim**

12. “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13). Various sixteenth-century Protestant groups – including Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and some Anabaptists – produced confessions that not only demarcated their respective identities but also, and more crucially, established their catholic *bona fides*. In view of their catholic credentials, the common notion that Protestants are theological innovators who are hopelessly divided over doctrine because of a lack of centralized authority is an unwarranted caricature. On the contrary: as mere Protestants, we all acknowledge the Triune God of the gospel and the gospel of the triune God, including the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ and the biblical testimony about him. While we continue to disagree about the particular form and content of certain doctrines, we together affirm God's Word as the singular and ultimate authority to which we must all submit our respective interpretations

for judgment. Our interpretive disagreements must therefore be viewed in the context of our even greater agreements about Scripture. It is in this spirit, with hope and prayer, that we together confess our common faith.

13. To confess the supreme authority of Scripture and the oneness of the church as the people of God becomes a moot point, however, if Protestant churches cannot muster enough doctrinal agreement to declare their unity in concrete ways. While it is tempting to focus on and exaggerate the differences, we want here to strengthen the Protestant cause by focusing on the doctrinal beliefs we have in common, not least for the sake of our common witness to the truth and power of the gospel. Protestants today need to recover the promise of the Reformation and repudiate its pathologies. This is our primary aim.
14. We do not intend the present statement to replace the confessional statements of the various confessional traditions and churches here represented but rather to express our shared theological identity as mere Protestants through our common testimony to the triune God of the gospel (we are catholic) and the gospel of the triune God (we are still reforming – constantly praying and working to ensure that our faith conforms to the Word of God). This Christ-centered consensus is a concrete gesture of the unity we already enjoy as members of Christ's one church.
15. What we offer is not a harmony of Protestant confessions, or an attempt to discover our lowest common doctrinal denominator, much less a charter for a new denominational entity or

- ecumenical organization. Rather, our statement aims at displaying an interdenominational unity in the essentials of the faith and agreement that the Word of God alone has final jurisdiction – hence “mere” (focused on the essentials) “Protestant” (founded on the Bible).
16. This statement challenges the trend in church and society alike toward increasing polarization. We seek to recover the evangelical and confessional “unitive Protestantism” expressed by the *solas* that was the original driving force behind the Reformation. We believe that what unites us is far greater than what divides us.
  17. “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). The Protestant Reformers were not indifferent to this appeal. Several attempts were made to reconcile differences over interpretations of Scripture, for instance regarding baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In response to the Pauline injunction, and in the spirit of the Protestant Reformers at their best, then, we humbly set forth our reforming catholic confession: reforming, because we do not pretend to have captured all biblical truth; catholic, because we stand in continuity with the consensus tradition of the ancient and medieval church even as we contribute to it; and humbly, because we know that apart from the light, life, and love of God’s Word, and the grace of God’s Spirit, we will divide Christ even further.
  18. We primarily see ourselves not as Protestants defining themselves against others but rather as mere Protestant Christians who affirm the common spiritual tradition to which creedal Christianity bears eloquent witness. Some of us have been further “denominated” into particular Protestant family traditions and others not. Yet we all value the Reformation *solas*, not simply because they distinguish us from Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Christians, but rather because they are salient reminders to the whole church that God alone saves in Christ alone through faith alone.
  19. We reiterate that the afore-mentioned Christian creeds ought to be gratefully received and affirmed as faithfully representing the being and activity of the one God in three persons that is the subject of the biblical witness: the God of the gospel and the gospel of God. Our reforming catholic confession sets forth the catholic substance of the faith (the consensual tradition worked out over the first few centuries of church history about the triune God) according to the Protestant principles of the faith (*sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*).
  20. We set forth our confession as those who stand on the shoulders of our Reformation forbears and their Catholic and Orthodox ancestors (i.e., patristic and medieval theologians), and ultimately on the only enduring foundation of the faith: the written Word of God that attests the good news of the living Word of God made flesh, who dwelt among us (John 1:14), died for us, and lives in us.



**To be continued: a reforming catholic way forward**

21. We are under no illusion that the statement of our mere Protestant faith will suddenly usher in a millennial age of church unity. We continue to appreciate the distinctive emphases of our respective churches, denominations, and confessional traditions. We wish to discuss our remaining differences in a spirit not of divisiveness but discipleship: like the two men who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, our hearts continue to burn as we discuss the meaning of the things that happened to Jesus in Jerusalem.
22. We recall and commend John Wesley's plea that Protestants display a catholic spirit, a call for right-hearted believers to give up their prideful insistence on their right opinions in order to establish right relations with others whose hearts and minds are set on following Jesus according to the Scriptures. We resolve to rededicate ourselves to dialogue in, with, and for the communion of saints, and not to settle for thinking and doing things separately that we can in good conscience think and do together, for the sake of our common witness to the one church of Jesus Christ.
23. The Protestant, reforming catholic way forward is that of dialogical, "table-talk" unity based on a fundamental agreement on matters integral to the biblical gospel and on a willingness to keep conversing about the doctrinal differences that remain, with Scripture as our common judge. We acknowledge that our own churches are not the only ones who are in communion with the living Lord, and that we are not the only ones to seek to read Scripture faithfully. We therefore seek continuing reformation by the God of the gospel and the gospel of God.
24. Like the sixteenth-century Reformers who met at the Marburg Colloquy, the *congrégations* who met weekly in Geneva and Zwingli's *Prophezei* in Zurich or the Anabaptist practice of *lex sedentium*, we confess, in the words of the *Harmony of Confessions of Faith*, taken from Ambrose of Milan, "There ought to be no strife, but conference, among the servants of Christ." We commit ourselves to the study of God's word with one another, with the Reformers and the early church: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor. 14:26).
25. We recognize that the kind of table-talk that produces consensus takes time and requires continual effort, prayer, and vigilance, and we are grateful to God for the gift of time he has given the church, not least the past five hundred years, during which we have all come to a deeper understanding of the gospel, especially by reading Scripture in the communion of the saints and conversing in Protestant conference. We therefore resolve, with God's help, to recognize and honor our distinctions even as we resist schism, seeking to achieve greater unity as we continue the discussion, humbly listening to one another as we together hearken to God's word.

1. [Editorial note] <http://reformingcatholicconfession.com/>. For a presentation of this statement, see also the following feature report in the September 2017 issue of *Christianity Today*; Caleb Lindgren "Protestants: The Most 'Catholic' of Christians. New confession by high-profile theologians gives post-Reformation unity a URL" ([www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/protestants-most-catholic-christians-reformation-500.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/protestants-most-catholic-christians-reformation-500.html)).