“Saving the Reformation”

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Lawrence Park Community Church, Toronto.

A picture containing person, building, man, clothing

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This is Reformation Sunday. It’s called that because on October 31st, in 1517,[[1]](#endnote-1) Martin Luther walked up to a church in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed a document to the door. It contained his 95 theses – a searing indictment of what he saw as the sins of the Catholic church.[[2]](#endnote-2) He expected only fellow academics like himself to notice. Instead, his critique of the Pope and the Roman Catholic faith sparked a movement that revolutionized Christianity.

Luther called out the Catholic church on a long list of problems. He objected to the obviously immoral acts of the recent Popes, many of whom had children and mistresses, despite their claim to celibacy. He provided a searing critique of the church’s fundraising system, called indulgences. Catholics were told that if they paid the church for projects like renovating St Peter’s in basilica in Rome, they could be put through the express line in the afterlife, skip purgatory, and enter straight into heaven.[[3]](#endnote-3) Luther railed against the church’s emphasis on good works being the royal road to God’s favour. Instead, he famously argued that only faith in Christ could save one’s soul, for no one could ever do enough good works to make up for all the mistakes and sins we commit in this life. God does the saving, we simply open ourselves to it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Luther’s followers protested against church authorities, earning us the name, Protestants.[[5]](#endnote-5) If Luther were to visit a protestant church today, he would see many practices that started in his time. Our services are no longer delivered in Latin, but in languages regular people can understand. We no longer celebrate communion every week, but just a few times a year – that started in Luther’s time, too.[[6]](#endnote-6) And when we hear scripture, we can understand it, because it is from a Bible written in English, not Latin.

But Luther would find one aspect of our services quite troubling. When Luther condemned the Popes, he argued that the only authority Christians could trust was scripture.[[7]](#endnote-7) The Bible is where we can find Christ, where we can know what God offers to us, and what God expects of us. Luther felt each Christian needed direct access to scripture. So, he translated the Latin Bible into German,[[8]](#endnote-8) and his followers made sure the Bible was translated into every other major language. Sunday schools taught children their ABCs so they could read the Bible themselves.[[9]](#endnote-9) The public school system in Canada, the United States and Britain evolved out of the Sunday School literacy classes.[[10]](#endnote-10) Luther wanted everyone in church to already know the Bible when they sat down in church pews. The preacher’s job was to deepen the congregation’s knowledge of bible passages they already knew.

But that system has broken down. Surveys show that just 5 percent of Canadians read the Bible daily, and just 14% at least once a month. [[11]](#endnote-11) Church goers were among those who rarely or never read the Bible on their own. That means that most of the time when Protestants and Catholics hear scripture in church, the minister is probably the only person who recognizes the passage. This would terrify Luther. He saw first-hand that when priests and Popes are the only ones who have read the Bible, they can distort its message, and no one will notice.[[12]](#endnote-12) If Luther were here today, he might conclude that the revolution he started is over, simply because congregations no longer read the Bible on their own. We have all gone back to being Catholics.

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But, before we declare the Reformation a failure, I would like, on this Reformation Sunday, to make a modest proposal. In Luther’s honour, I would like to suggest the 95 reasons why reading the Bible is still a good idea. Just kidding. Sermons were longer in Luther’s day,[[13]](#endnote-13) so I will present just the top 5 reasons for why reading the Bible is worthwhile.

To do this, I have asked some members of the choir to help me out. I would like you to imagine that these seven people represent the Bible.

( each person holds up a prop I have given them beforehand to represent their section of the Bible)

They stand for myth ( apple), history ( sword), poetry ( flower), prophecy ( binoculars), wisdom (glasses), gospel ( a bible) and theology ( a feather) – all sections found in the Bible.

Together, these 7 sections make up the Christian Bible. Please have a seat. Now that we have the Bible where we can see it, let me present 5 reasons why it is still a good idea to read the Bible.

**The Top 5 Reasons Why it is Still a Good idea to Read the Bible:**

**# 5 : Reading the Bible Creates a Flexible mind.**

Today, Christians who cite the Bible have a reputation for being inflexible, black and white thinkers. However, studies show that even among Evangelicals, few people actually read the Bible, and they tend to flunk basic tests on Biblical knowledge. So, when they say that the Bible says this or that, they are often speaking about a Bible they have not read.

We are all familiar with the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt through the desert to the Promised Land. Famous story. What is less well known is that it is told not once, but many times in the Bible. The story is told in the book of Exodus ( (myth) person stands up), it is told again in Deuteronomy ( (history)person stands), a number of times in the Psalms ( poetry person stands), and again in the Book of Acts by Stephen ( Gospels person stands).

Each time the story is retold, it mentions different details, puts a different spin on the same story. Each of these versions is different from the previous one. People who read the Bible get used to the idea that the same event can have different meanings, not just one.

We see this again within the New Testament which provides not just one biography of Jesus, but four. Here’s a song children used to be taught to remember them: ( four of the Bible choir come forward:)

*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John went to bed with their britches on.*

*John got up in the middle of the night*

*and said his britches were too tight*

*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*

Anyone who reads the New testament’s four gospels very quickly encounters the fact that there are four very different versions of Jesus’ life. There are similarities, but there are also contradictions between them. In three of the gospels, Jesus only goes to Jerusalem at the end of his ministry, where he is killed. In the gospel of John, Jesus goes back and forth to Jerusalem several times. If God wants us to see the world from one single point of view, there would only be one gospel. Instead, there are four. This is hard to see if we only hear the gospel in church each week, a few paragraphs at a time, but it is obvious if one reads it. The Bible doesn’t exist to tell us just *what* to think, but even more importantly, *how* to think. People who read the Bible are encouraged to see life from multiple points of view, a key ability for leading a compassionate life with others.

(drum roll please:)

**Why it’s still a good idea to read the Bible Reason #4:**

**Reading the Bible Helps Make Sense of World Politics.**

Whether we like it or not, much of world politics is driven by ideas that come from the Bible. The Civil Rights movement in the United States,[[14]](#endnote-14) the first wave of feminism, the fight against slavery[[15]](#endnote-15) – all were rooted in debates about the Bible.

Today, Middle Eastern politics is defined by ideas that have their roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. The far right in Israel dreams of reclaiming all the traditional lands of the Israelites, the ones held by the 12 tribes. This is why they refuse to hand over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians.

In the United States, you may have wondered why so many evangelical Christians are pro-Israel, and why they were delighted when President Trump moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. This is based on an evangelical reading of the book of Revelation, where it is a said that the end of time cannot begin until Israel is back in Jewish hands[[16]](#endnote-16), and the temple is rebuilt by the Jews in Jerusalem.[[17]](#endnote-17) For this reason, some evangelicals in the U.S. are keen for the Israeli government to regain complete control over Jerusalem, especially the area where the temple used to be.

Finally, it is simply impossible to understand Muslim politics and their attitude towards Christians and Jews without knowing that the Koran contains stories about Jesus and Mary, Abraham and Jacob, and Adam. “Our” Biblical characters are in the Muslim scripture, and are interpreted in different ways. If we want to build bridges with other faiths, like Islam, we need to at least understand what we have in common, which includes our own Biblical stories.

(drum roll, please)

**Why it’s still a good idea to read the Bible Reason #3:**

**Reading the Bible Improves Your Education**

The Bible is the key to understanding Western culture. The Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye called it the Great Code. If you know the Bible, then you will be able to decode most of Western literature and history. The vast majority of our major authors assume a knowledge of the Bible. Milton, Chaucer, Dante, Dickens, Toni Morrison – they were all steeped in the Bible, and it is reflected in their writing. The problem for us now is that as biblical illiteracy climbs, we are in danger of finding our own literature and poems incomprehensible.

How much does biblical literacy matter? Let me give you one example. I’d like to ask you to listen to short readings. The first is from Psalm 8, and the second is from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, which is taught every year to high school students. . See if you can see a relationship between the two readings.

Here’s the excerpt from the 8th psalm:

Psalm 8: ( speak slowly)

*what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?* *You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor; You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under theirfeet:**all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,*

And now, a famous speech from Hamlet, who is brooding over his place in the world:

Hamlet: ( speak slowly, dramatically)

*What a piece of work is man, How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god, The beauty of the world, The paragon of animals.*

Shakespeare is clearly drawing on this Psalm for Hamlet’s speech, and he expects his audience to get the reference. Although today we think of Shakespeare as a safe author who can be taught to the religious and non-religious alike, in fact, scholars have found over 1000 references to the Bible in his plays alone, and entire plot lines make reference to Bible stories.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Studies have found that students who read the Bible do better in school. [[19]](#endnote-19) They arrive at school with better reading habits, and are already aware of multiple genres – history, poetry, myth and philosophy. Adults who understand the Bible can see themes and motifs in western literature which are invisible to others. And this is not just a question of reading the classics: Margaret Atwood is at the top of her career with a science fiction trilogy based on the Bible, and with the handmaid’s tale and her new sequel called *Testament* *.* Testament!

(drum roll, please)

**Why it’s still a good idea to read the Bible Reason #2:**

**Because the Bible Defends The Oppressed.**

Polls in the United States have found that the most widely quoted Bible verse is:

“God helps those who help themselves”[[20]](#endnote-20)

And that line comes from this part of the Bible – ( I gesture to the seven choir members. No one stands up).

That’s right. It isn’t in the Bible. In fact, that idea is diametrically opposed to what the Bible says. God is consistently on the side of those who have been left behind, stolen from, ignored and oppressed. The Bible does not champion winners, but defends the rights of those who are considered losers.

(One reader comes forward to say these words. This would be a good time for the rest of the choir to hum):

*Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.*

*— Psalm 146:5-9*

There will always be people in power who wish to line their pockets, celebrate the famous and the rich, and ignore the poor. They will have the money and power to control the press, buy ads on the Internet, promote the idea that the wealthiest deserve everything. But that’s not what the Bible says. It wasn’t written by us. It stands as an outside voice that insists that the universe wants every last person to be treated fairly, and to thrive. Its message can only be distorted when no one knows what it says.

**Why it’s still a good idea to read the Bible Reason #1:**

Because of its Spiritual Power

The Bible is designed to change the people who read it. When given a choice between fact and inspiration, it consistently sides with inspiration. This makes it unreliable as literal history, true. However, billions of people over the last two thousand years have found in it spiritual consolation that has saved them from despair and misery. The Bible seeks to build a bridge between you and the power that animates the entire universe. This can only be done in person, by you, no one else can do it for you. There are no personal shoppers when it comes to spirituality. Reading the Bible will surprise you, challenge you, anger you and console you. All of this and more. Like physical exercise, its greatest effects will be felt in the rest of your day. It will shape how you see and experience the world. It is the royal road to a deeper experience of what it means to be human because as a Bible reader you are part of a story that stretches from the beginning of time to its end. And in each part of that story, you are a participant, and you matter. This is no mere novel or collection of fables. It has a unique power, which can only be understood by reading it.

So on this Reformation Sunday, I encourage you to crack open the Bible. You don’t have to start at the beginning. Christians have traditionally read a few psalms each day, and a bit of a gospel. That’s a great start. Let the scriptures seep into you, even if you don’t see why it should make any difference. I promise you, this book can change your life for the better.

Amen.

1. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, The Reformation to the Present Day*. Volume II (Harper One, 2010), 28 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Justo L. Gonzalez, 26-7 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Justo L. Gonzalez, 27 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, (Penguin Books, 2011), 606-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Diarmaid MacCulloch, 621. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The practice of celebrating communion just four times a year began in Switzerland among Zwingli’s followers, in the 1520s. Justo L. Gonzalez, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Justo L. Gonzalez, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Justo L. Gonzalez, ,37 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For Colonial America: Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy*,( Harper One, New York:2007),75-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. British context for the evolution of public school system: Timothy T. Larsen, ” Literacy And Biblical Knowledge: The Victorian Age And Our Own, “ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52/3 (September 2009) 519-35 . For the Ontario case: William David Edison Matthews, *History of the Religious Factor in Ontario Elementary Education*, thesis, 1950, University of Toronto, p.59-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. https://everydayfaith.ca/?p=3663 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*,

    Ed. S.l. Greenslade, ( Cambridge, 1963), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Sermons were up to 2 hours long: Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy*,( Harper One, New York:2007),83 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Stephen Prothero, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Stephen Prothero,75. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Philip Bump, “Half of evangelicals support Israel because they believe it is important for fulfilling end-times prophecy” *The Washington Post,* May 14, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/05/14/half-of-evangelicals-support-israel-because-they-believe-it-is-important-for-fulfilling-end-times-prophecy/ [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Diana Butler Bass, “For many evangelicals, Jerusalem is about prophecy, not politics”, CNN May 14 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/08/opinions/jerusalem-israel-evangelicals-end-times-butler-bass-opinion/index.html [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Emily Gray, *The Bard and The Word: the influence of the Bible on the writings of William Shakespeare* *,*p.4. https://scholar.utc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1140&context=honors-theses [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jeynes, William H. , “The relationship between **biblical** **literacy**, academic achievement, and school behavior among Christian- and public-school students”, [JRCE](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','mdb~~rfh%7C%7Cjdb~~rfhjnh%7C%7Css~~JN%20%22JRCE%22%7C%7Csl~~jh','');) 18 no 1 Ja-Ap 2009, p 36-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy*,( Harper One, New York:2007),11. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)