

Three Reasons I Love October 31st

By PAUL J. SCHARF

October 31st is one of my favorite days of the year! The reason I take joy in it is not because I love visiting haunted houses, corn mazes or costume parties.

When I see a reference to the evil and horror that our culture celebrates on that day, I have to admit—it does draw me in. But not for the reasons one might expect. I do not relish the “fear of death,” or the “bondage” that accompanies it (Heb. 2:15).

Rather, such sights of horror serve to remind me that the significance of October 31st was transformed more than 500 years ago, in 1517, in a little eastern German city called Wittenberg. Monk, professor and priest Dr. Martin Luther did not post his 95 theses for the masses, but for those elite who would be visiting the Castle Church on All Saints’ Day, Nov. 1, to view Elector Frederick’s relic collection. Soon enough, the theses were translated into German, and Luther had a new career—of which he had never dreamt—as a Reformer. His posting changed his own life—and the date of October 31st—forever, and gave rise to the evangelical movement which continues down to our time.

There is certainly lots to learn about October 31st! But why, specifically, do I love it? Here are three reasons that I would list.

- **October 31st ties me to my personal heritage.**

Many who follow my writings probably know that I was raised in confessional Lutheranism. Now, of course, I left that system, and that church, a long time ago. But that does not mean that I do not appreciate much about the foundation that I was given there, or that I have rejected everything that I was taught in it.

When it comes to the Reformation, my knowledge has expanded at least a hundredfold compared to what I was given in my Lutheran upbringing. And my appreciation for the Reformation is far greater today than it ever was then.

I now understand that we need to look at the whole Reformation, in its historical context, for what it really was. When we do, we will find some good things, some bad things, and some really ugly things. You see, the Reformation is a lot like the rest of history—and a lot like each of our lives.

Certainly, Luther made mistakes—even some of historic proportions. Frankly, he got a lot of things wrong. But the amazing thing to me is not how much he got wrong, but how far he progressed in his short lifetime! If we’re going to criticize him, I think we owe it to ourselves to also ask some hard questions. For one, how far could we have reasonably expected Luther to go? And—a much more intensely personal and profound question—do we think that we could have done better if we had been placed in his shoes?

I am no longer Lutheran. Yet I do not feel that I have betrayed my personal heritage with regard to the Reformation. Rather, I consider myself to have built upon this foundation.

- **October 31st grounds me in church history.**

“We don’t celebrate the Reformation,” someone quipped. “We don’t trace our heritage to that movement. Our church goes back to the apostles!”

That is an amazing claim, and would provide tremendous spiritual credentials—if only there were some historical evidence for it.

But this kind of special pleading is based on scant evidence, at best. I have heard some claim the Waldenses as their spiritual ancestors—even though they would not be able to tell you the first thing about Peter Waldo, even if their life depended upon it! Others appeal to the anabaptists for their pedigree, but with precious little knowledge of the actual history of this widely divergent group—who, it should be noted, also built upon the foundation of the Reformation, even though they often suffered unjustly at the hands of Protestant leaders.

I want to deal with *real* church history, as it *actually* happened—not as I *wish* it might have happened, or as I can *imagine* it happening. I want to properly “honor” (Rom. 13:7) these heroes of history, learn from their mistakes (see 1 Cor. 10:6-11), and understand how we got where we are now. And I do consider *all* of us as evangelicals to be here today because of the Reformation.

- **October 31st reminds me of the power of the gospel.**

For all that they did wrong or left undone, I truly believe that the Reformers—beginning with Luther—transformed the western world, first and foremost by fundamentally getting the gospel right, and then by translating the Scriptures for the masses to read them.

Luther discovered the free imputation of “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:17) to the one who believes by *faith alone*, and it became the basis for half a millennium of evangelical witness in the world—and the hope of every person who trusts in *Christ alone* for eternal salvation.

As we observe another October 31st, that’s truly something to scream about!

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