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Heirs of the Reformation

Emilio Antonio Núñez

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In the providence of God, we are beginning our Second Latin American Congress on Evangelization on the day dedicated to commemorate the sixteenth-century religious Reformation. There is no doubt that October 31, 1517, is a date of transcendental importance in world history.

It is true that not all the groups that make up the Evangelical Church in Latin America show the same enthusiasm for the celebration of this anniversary. It would seem that we Evangelicals prefer to underline the fact that our historical roots go deep into God's written revelation, especially in the pages of the New Testament. Nevertheless, we are conscious that the Reformation came about in order to emphasize biblical truths that, in general, lie at the very foundation of our evangelistic message. In one way or another, all we Evangelical Christians are heirs of the Reformation. It would be helpful, therefore, to continue studying in our respective church groups the essence of our heritage.

The Reformation was a movement with profound cultural, social and political repercussions. In this Congress, however, our concern is to emphasize the theological foundations of the Reformation, and especially the soteriology of the Reformers. To fulfill our purpose, we will refer to the four great affirmations of the Reformation—Grace alone, Christ alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone. Without studying in depth the significance of these affirmations for the Reformers, we will simply take them as the starting point of our meditation, attempting to apply them to the Latin American situation.

GRACE ALONE

The Reformers taught that the sinner is justified by the grace of God alone, through faith in Jesus Christ. In this case, grace is that divine favour that man does not deserve, but that God in his sovereignty and goodness has wanted to bestow. Salvation is the work of God, not of man. Paul says, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast*" ([Eph. 2:8, 9](#)). "*But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace*" ([Rom. 11:6](#)).

Man is not able to give, but God makes him able to receive. Man holds out an empty hand in order to receive, not a full hand in order [p. 239](#) to give. He has nothing that he can give to pay for his salvation. Nor can he co-operate with the divine grace in order to save himself. He is dead in his trespasses and sins ([Eph. 2:1–3](#)). The only thing he can do is to receive God's favour.

The idea of *grace alone* deals a hard blow to man's pride. There is no room here for self-sufficiency, nor for the arrogance that attempts to save oneself and others through endeavours that appear noble or heroic in the eyes of society in general. The idea that man is good by nature and that he can liberate himself and raise himself to heaven by his own boot-straps crumbles in the face of the revelation of the doctrine of God's grace alone, a doctrine that brings us face to face with our own spiritual and moral bankruptcy.

The social sciences speak of *homo sapiens*, of the economic, political and social man, of the man who works and who has created a marvellous civilization by the work of his own hands. The Bible tells us that man is a sinner, in need of God's grace for his complete liberation. He is a sinner by inheritance, a sinner by nature, a sinner in thought, word and deed; a sinner as an individual, sinner as a social entity, creator of corrupt and perverse structures, placed at the service of the demonic forces that operate in this universe. Society is sick because individuals are sick, with a mortal illness. This is the sombre and depressing picture that we must keep in mind in order to grasp fully the significance of the grace of God and to preach the Gospel faithfully.

On the other hand, let us remember that grace also reveals the immense value of man in God's eyes. In the light of Scripture it is possible to speak both of the misery and of the greatness of man. Biblical anthropology does not allow itself to be influenced by the empty optimism of the humanists, nor to be seduced by the funeral dirge of the pessimists. It is a realistic anthropology. Man has his origin in God and bears the image of his Creator, although affected by sin. This gives him a special dignity. He possesses faculties that raise him far above other creatures in the world and enable him to exercise dominion over nature. He is, above all, the special object of God's incomparable love ([John 3:16](#)). He has fallen deep into sin, but, as Paul affirms, "*Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more*" ([Rom. 5:20](#)).

God is always "*the God of all grace*" ([1 Peter 5:10](#)). He manifested his grace in Old Testament times especially through his covenants ([Deut. 7:12](#); [Jer. 31:3](#), etc.). Salvation always has been, is, and will be by grace: but this grace comes in all its fullness in the person of Jesus Christ ([John 1:17](#)). Christ is God's inexpressible gift to the world ([p. 240](#) [2 Cor. 9:15](#)). Man can be saved in Christ, but not apart from Christ. Thus we come to another distinctive theme of the religious Reformation of the sixteenth century.

CHRIST ALONE

The Reformers' message was Christological and Christocentric. Ours should be likewise. Jesus said, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me*" ([John 14:6](#)). And according to the Apostle Peter, "*... there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" ([Acts 4:12](#)).

It is incumbent upon us to listen again to these declarations that are so radically opposed to every attempt at syncretism or universalism. Whether we like it or not, the New Testament Gospel is inclusive and exclusive. It includes all those who accept Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and man; it excludes all those who reject the grace of God. We have no right to include what God has not included, nor to exclude what God has not excluded. *Christ alone saves*.

But, which Christ? We definitely are not speaking here of the Christ of man-made dogmas, nor of the Christ of ancient or modern statuary, nor of the Christ of Latin American folklore, nor of the Jesus Christ super-star of the wealthy societies of the North Atlantic, nor of the Christ of the powerful economic and social interests on our continent, nor of the Christ of the modern ideologies; we are speaking of the Christ who is revealed

in Scripture, the Christ rediscovered by many pious souls in the darkest days of the Middle Ages and in the brightest times of the Protestant Reformation, the Christ who has found us and whom, by the grace of God, thousands and millions of us Latin Americans have found.

Christ our God! He is the eternal Logos, a member of the trinitarian council, eternally associated with the Father and with the Spirit; Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth; Lord of life and history; King, now and forever; Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, whose origin is from old, from ancient days; Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the one who is and who was and who is to come, the all-powerful Lord.

The historic Christ! Revealed in time and space, at a precise date in God's calendar, in the course of human history, in the context of a certain geographical location, a certain people, a certain culture, a certain society. [p. 241](#)

The human Christ! Conceived by the Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, sharing the life of flesh and blood, "*made man*", completely identified with mankind. Christ the total man, the man for others, who lives among man "*full of grace and truth*" ([John 1:14](#)).

The poor Christ! Born in a stable, residing in a village, known as "the carpenter", son of a carpenter. The proletarian Christ, the one with the hands calloused by hard work, the one with his forehead sweaty with the day's labour! He was born, he lived and died in abject poverty, like the other poor of his people. Nevertheless, he never capitalized on the social resentment of his contemporaries to deepen the gulf between man and man, between class and class, or between nation and nation. He never asked his followers to raise the flag of hate and vengeance. Instead he spoke of forgiveness and of brotherhood. He gave himself up in sacrifice to abolish in his cross the enmities and to break down the dividing wall that separated one human being from another. Furthermore, his presence is inevitably a sign of contradiction for those who oppress the poor and turn their backs on human misery.

Christ the prophet! Herald of God the Father, interpreter of the Deity, revealer of the divine will for his people and for all humanity! His word, aflame with fire from heaven, is the consolation and the hope of those who are humble in heart, and the warning of unavoidable judgment for those who work iniquity.

Christ the Lamb of God! He who takes away the sin of the world; the one who makes the ultimate self-sacrifice on Calvary for our redemption; the one whose precious blood cleanses us from all sin.

Christ the living one! Through his death he destroys the one who held the power of death, and triumphs over the grave on the glorious day of his resurrection.

Christ the priest! The one who is seated on the right hand of the Majesty on high and "*is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them*" ([Heb. 7:25](#)).

Christ the coming King! The Glorifier of his Church. The Judge of the living and the dead "*by his appearing and his kingdom*" ([2 Tim. 4:1](#)). The Messiah awaited for the blessing of all nations. The King of kings and the Lord of lords. Christ, the one who affects total renovation.

Who are those who are saved by the Christ thus revealed in the Scripture? The answer to this great question leads us to another affirmation of the Reformation—the sinner is saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone. [p. 242](#)

FAITH ALONE

Saint Paul affirms *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe"* ([Rom. 3:21–22](#)). Faith is reckoned for righteousness to the sinner who trusts in Jesus Christ ([Rom. 4:5](#)) and God declares him righteous, giving him peace ([Rom. 5:1](#)). Martin Luther's great discovery in the Scriptures was that *"the just shall live by faith"* ([Rom. 1:17](#)). This Biblical truth came to be the battle cry of the Reformation.

Someone has said that faith is the hand that receives the gift of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, for St. John the Evangelist, to receive Christ seems to be the equivalent to believing in Him ([John 1:12](#)). Through faith we make ours the benefits given by the crucified and risen Christ. It is in these benefits that our eternal assurance of salvation rests.

But the faith through which we are justified is not blind, nor is it mere credulity. Jesus declares *"And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent"* ([John 17:3](#)). And the Apostle Peter says to his Master, *"And we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God"* ([John 6:69](#)). Believing and knowing go hand in hand when it comes to salvation. *"But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?"* ([Rom. 10:14](#)).

Faith is never a simple agreement with revealed truth. It is much more than a mere intellectual exercise. To have faith is *to trust*, to cast oneself completely into the arms of Jesus Christ, recognizing the enormity of our guilt and our complete inability to free ourselves from sin by our own resources. It is to admit that human merits are useless to procure justification; it is to lay hold of the infinite value of the person and the work of the Son of God. To have faith in Jesus Christ is to allow oneself to be saved by Him.

Faith also implies obedience. In Acts we read that *"a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith"* ([6:7](#)). Paul, for his part, points out that not all those who hear the Gospel obey it ([Rom. 10:16](#)), and that the Lord will return to give the deserved payment to the disobedient ([2 Thess. 1:8](#)). When a man believes that the Gospel is the truth, he is under the obligation to obey it.

Furthermore, the person who believes what the Scripture says in regard to the punishment for sin and the pardon offered in Jesus p. 243 Christ repents and is converted to God. The Lord Jesus called the men of his day to repent ([Mt. 3:2](#)) and instructed his disciples to announce repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations ([Luke 24:47](#)). In obedience to the master's command, Jews and Gentiles have been called to repent, believing in the Gospel ([Acts 2:38; 17:30–31](#)). Repentance is an internal change that is manifested in some way in the conduct of the believer in Christ. John the Baptist spoke of *"fruits that befit repentance"* and pointed out concrete changes that should take place in the lives of those who accept the message of the Kingdom ([Luke 3:8–20](#)). It is God who grants *"repentance unto life"* ([Acts 11:18](#)). The repentant sinner returns or is converted to God ([Acts 3:19; 26:20](#)).

According to Reformation doctrine, the sinner is justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies does not remain alone. It is not a sterile faith, and much less a dead faith. James' teaching ([2:14–26](#)) is in complete accordance with that of Paul, who affirms that we are not saved *by* good works, but that we are saved *for* good works which God has prepared for us ([Eph. 2:8–10](#)). These good works are the fruit of salvation, not the cause. They are not simply works that are liturgical in nature; they are closely related to our personal, family, and social life. The person who has been justified by having believed in Jesus continues demonstrating his faith, not only in words, but also in actions that glorify God and benefit his neighbour and society.

To believe in Jesus Christ means, as well, to make a serious commitment to Him, to his Church and to society. We do not accept Jesus Christ in order to avoid our moral

responsibilities and to live as we please, once we have obtained an insurance policy for all eternity. There are serious ethical demands inherent in the Gospel.

The Lord Jesus was careful to warn people about the difficulties along the way that he proposed. He did not hesitate to spell out the demands of discipleship ([Mt. 10:34–39](#); cf. [Mark 8:34–38](#)). No one could complain that he had deceived him with an offer of “cheap grace”. His main concern was for the quality, not the quantity, of his followers.

When Jesus was in Jerusalem, at the Passover feast, many believed on his name, having seen the signs that he did; “*but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men ...*” ([John 2:23–24](#)). He was very cautious about keeping the statistics on those who were converted. His miracles captivated the people, but Jesus did not take advantage of his extraordinary powers to attract people who were not truly willing to follow him. When many of his disciples left him, [p. 244](#) offended at his teaching, he did not beg them to return. He asked the Twelve, “*Will you also go away?*” Faith had triumphed in them. They decided to remain ([John 6:60–69](#)).

We need much wisdom from above in order to present to the people of Latin America the ethical demands of the Gospel on the lives of those who profess to believe it, without twisting the biblical concept of salvation. We will find the necessary equilibrium in our proclamation in God’s written revelation and in the ministry of his Spirit.

Salvation is by *grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone*—a faith that does not remain alone. On what do we base this conviction? On nothing less than the Word of God, which we have cited many times in this message. This brings us to another of the great affirmations of the Reformation: the supreme authority of Holy Scripture.

SCRIPTURE ALONE

It may be stated that it was basically on this declaration that the Reformers and the official church of their day came to a parting of the ways. The leaders of the Reformation accepted the supreme authority of the Scripture, not only in regard to the doctrine of justification by faith. They determined to submit their faith and their life to the final authority of the biblical canon, and to no other authority, whether that of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, that of natural reason, or that of the impulses of the heart. They accepted and proclaimed the Scriptures as their objective, final authority.

On making this transcendental decision, the Reformers were simply continuing a long tradition that comes from Old Testament times and the days of Christ and his apostles. The Old Testament prophets appealed to the written law as their final authority. Christ authenticated his ministry before the people by appealing to the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms ([Luke 24:44](#)). His apostles also supported their message with the authority of the Old Testament. The primitive church accepted both Testaments and thus had a more extensive canon to which to appeal as the basis of their decisions of faith and practice. The Reformers made the “*thus says the Lord*” and “*it is written*” resound powerfully throughout Western Christianity.

Throughout the centuries the principle of *Scripture alone* has been threatened and challenged by natural reason, by pietistic sentimentalism, by ecclesiastical pressures (both Catholic and Protestant), and by the presumption of leaders who consider themselves authorized [p. 245](#) to impose their private system of interpretation on the people of God.

In this critical hour in which we as Evangelical Christians have been called to live and take on serious responsibilities, we must frequently ask ourselves exactly what is our supreme authority in faith and practice, in the face of the intricate problems presented by our people, in the light of the new solutions we hear proposed in theological circles and

in the socio-political field. We must decide, as well, where the final authority lies, in the face of our own tendency to look exclusively to the past, or to live in the future, in some future eschatological time, ignoring the present moment, in order to preserve outworn traditions, interpretations, and practices that are our own additions to the sacred text and not the Word of God itself. We must remember that the Reformed church must constantly be reformed, in the light of the written revelation of God, under the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we have decided to accept the supreme authority of Scripture—recognizing that it is totally inspired by God and infallible—it behooves us to use the best available text and to interpret it according to accepted rules of biblical exegesis, in order to arrive at our theological conclusions. This implies making an effort to derive from the text the significance that the sacred writers wanted to communicate within a certain cultural context. Then we will make every possible effort to apply this meaning to our own lives and to the Latin American situation, asking the Text what it has to say to us in our particular socio-cultural context. We will also bring to the Text the questions raised by our contemporaries, allowing the Word itself to answer these questions, without trying to force the text to say things that will put a sugar-coating on the answer we give, or to support our own theological peculiarities. Dr. Cecilio Arrastía has said very accurately that *“we must not make a coup d’etat to the Text”*. The Reformers advocated the free examination of the Scriptures, but not free interpretation. The universal priesthood of believers—another of the great doctrines exalted by the Reformation—does not authorize anyone to twist and distort the biblical text.

In order to achieve the contextualization that does justice to the Text and at the same time answers adequately the questions raised by Latin Americans, two factors are indispensable—serious exegetical study of the Text itself, and a thorough knowledge of our socio-cultural context. But above all we must re-affirm our confidence in the integrity and efficacy of Holy Scripture; we must renew our commitment of obedience to biblical authority; we must depend on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who will lead us into all truth and keep us within the community of the saints, so that we may be instructed, [p. 246](#) exhorted, and edified by our brethren in the faith, who also have the Word of God and in whom also dwells the Spirit of truth and love. Let us not attempt to be “lone rangers” galloping here and there through the rugged paths of theological reflection.

If we do not embrace the objective normativity of the Scriptures, if we do not submit to the lordship of Christ, if we are not in tune with the Holy Spirit, if we withdraw from the community of faith, we will easily fall prey to subjectivism or to relativism, or we may innocently fall into the trap set by some ideology, of whatever shade it may be.

We are conscious of the serious hermeneutical problem that we are facing today in Latin America. We do not pretend to close our eyes to the difficulties that exist along the way in biblical interpretation. But we are convinced that for us as Evangelical Christians the problem will be even greater if we retreat before hermeneutical systems that approach Scripture with rationalistic or existentialistic presuppositions, tacitly denying the supernatural nature of the Word of God.

In the second and third chapters of the second letter to Timothy, there are two basic exhortations concerning the Scriptures. The Apostle instructs his disciple Timothy to *persevere* in the Word and to *preach* the Word. The reasons for these exhortations, which also can be of help to us, are found in the text itself. To a world disoriented morally and spiritually and confused by the ambassadors of error, what we must announce, in season and out of season, is the Word of God. But we cannot be faithful spokesmen of this Word if we do not persevere in it, holding it in high regard, recognizing its divine inspiration,

and trusting in its efficacy for the salvation and spiritual growth of those who receive it as the revelation of the Lord.

If we do not persevere in the Scriptures, we will find ourselves perplexed, lost in the labyrinth of doubt, confused by the false teachers; we will turn our ear away from hearing the truth, and we will be attracted to the myths or fables that they propagate.

In one of his books, Dr. Frederick Huegel relates that one day Admiral Byrd, who was engaged in scientific investigation at the South Pole, stepped out of his ice hut for a breath of fresh air. He was alone. Suddenly he stopped, frightened. He had strolled too far. Turning around, he realized that it was impossible to see his hut. He could see nothing but snow. He understood that if he set out to find his hut and if he did not locate it on the first attempt, he would lose all sense of direction and would have no fixed point by which to orient himself. He had a stick in his hand. He stuck it into the ice. “*Here*” he said, “*is my centre, and I will not leave it until I have found* p. 247 *my house.*” He then walked in several directions, without losing sight of his stick. At last, after several attempts, he found his hut and was safe.¹

Dr. Huegel uses this story to illustrate his point on the central place that the cross of Christ occupies in the plan of redemption. But Admiral Byrd’s experience also makes us think of the written word of God, which should serve as a guide for us in the midst of the confusion that reigns in the world. Let us be sure that our post—the Word of God—is firm and erect; let us hold it as the point of reference in our theological pilgrimage and, without losing sight of it, let us continue to explore confidently, without fear.

Only thus will we have assurance for ourselves and confidence to point out the way for others to follow.

The Reformers desired to have the Scriptures as the basis and authority for every doctrine that they believed and taught. Whether they achieved this aim in every case is the subject of additional study. What is certain is that this zeal for the supreme authority of the Bible is part of the great inheritance that we have received from the Reformation.

We Latin American Evangelical Christians have also desired to be the people of the Book, proclaimers of the Christ revealed in that book, and the followers of the ethical principles that that book teaches. We admit that we still have a long way to go in studying, comprehending, and obeying its contents; but we still hold it fast, and will not let it go. It is in this stance that we are pre-eminently heirs of the Reformation. We may be in disagreement with one or another of the doctrines, or with some particular emphasis of the Reformers, but we can never take issue with their firm determination to exalt “*the living and abiding word of God*” (1 Peter 1:23).

May this Word be the norm for our thinking and our feeling during this Congress that we are inaugurating today, and in the difficult but glorious task that we have ahead of us in our Latin America.

Dr. Emilio Antonio Núñez is President of the Central American Seminary, Guatemala. He gave the keynote address *Heirs of the Reformation* at CLADE II on Reformation Day, October 31, 1979. p. 248

¹ Frederick Huegel, *La Cruz sin Velos*, Buenos Aires, La Aurora, 1947.