

WAS THE REFORMATION A MISTAKE?

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In order to answer this question we need to ask four basic questions: 1. What was the Reformation? 2. What were its effects? 3. Was it a mistake? 4. Are there any positive lessons for us today?

1. What was the Reformation?

As the word suggests, the Reformation was a movement in Western Christendom, beginning around 1500 and continuing into the seventeenth century, to reform the Church according to biblical principles. We could also call it a religious revival, for the impetus to reform the Church sprang from powerful spiritual awakenings in the lives of several very able men. In fact, it was because of the truths which they had experienced that they sought to bring the whole Church to the same convictions. Many others were affected in the same way, so that what began as a spark in Germany soon became a roaring fire burning throughout Europe.

There were two essential elements in the Reformation.

(1) The assertion of the uniqueness and finality of the Scripture in all matters of faith and practice. The Reformers argued that the Church was subject to the Bible; and that human reason was likewise to submit to the authority of Scripture. Every man had the right to read it for himself and to interpret it in the light of its own self-testimony. This meant that the traditions of the Church, however ancient, must be brought to the bar of Scripture, and either received or rejected on that basis.

(2) The Reformers proclaimed, on the basis of biblical authority, the biblical doctrine of salvation, the Gospel. They found that the Bible asked

52.

and answered two fundamental questions: (a) What is a Christian? (b) What is the Church?

(a) In answering the first question, they saw that a Christian was not just someone who belonged to a Christian family or community or nation, but someone with a living, personal relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Martin Luther, for several years, sought to answer this question. He struggled to find a gracious God, to know that his sins were forgiven and that he was at peace with God. He did not find the answer in his good works, religious duties, self-abasement, or in the sacraments. He found it in Christ. That was to revolutionize his life.

(b) In answering the second question, they realised that the Church was not simply an organisation or institution, everybody living in a particular area who had been baptised as infants and were on a parish register. The Church was a company of people who knew God, whose sins had been forgiven, and who had experienced the love and power of God in their lives. They had been born again. They were spiritually alive. They rejoiced in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, because of that, they met together for worship and prayer; they organised and governed themselves under God's Word; and they sought to proclaim this same Gospel to others.

So, the Reformation was about two things:

(1) Authority Where did authority for belief and practice lie? The answer was clear. It was not in the traditions of the Church, since those traditions were human and fallible. Nor was it in fallen, fallible human reason. It was in Scripture alone, since Scripture was divinely inspired and revealed, verbally infallible, and factually inerrant. The Bible alone was God's Word to man. Both in form and in content it came from God. The Reformers never made the modern distinction between God's Word and Scripture. Luther said: *"I will not waste a word in arguing with one who does not consider the Scriptures are the Word of*

God". Zwingli said: "*The Scriptures come from God, not from men.*" This meant that the individual Christian and the Church are at all times subject to the authority of God's Word. The believer is not free to think or behave in a way which contradicts that Word. The Church is not free to draw up doctrines or prescribe rules which are inconsistent with the Scriptures. If we would know what a Christian is and what a Church is, we must go to Scripture for the answers.

(2) Salvation How could the sinner be reconciled to the all-holy God? How could the guilty be reckoned righteous, the lost found, the slave set free? Again, the answer was clear. No man could be saved by his own efforts, since they were imperfect. No man could declare himself righteous before God, when he was so obviously guilty. No man could find himself when he was so hopelessly lost. No man could liberate himself from the power of sin. Only God could save. Salvation was nothing if not of the Lord. The great solution to man's predicament was the Lord Jesus Christ. If the sinner was to be put right with God, he must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who had satisfied God's justice, borne God's anger, suffered the penalty of sin, and conquered death. By believing in Him the guilty would be declared righteous, the lost found, the enslaved liberated. This Gospel, the Reformers argued, is divine. It is due entirely to God's love. It is received by faith alone. And it is revealed only in Scripture through the Holy Spirit. Salvation meant not only the agreement of the mind to the truth, but also a persuasion of it, an experience of it in the heart.

2. What were its effects?

Its effects were profound and extensive. (1) Politically. Without it, there would have been no Puritans, no Pilgrim Fathers. The history of the USA might have been very different. Moreover, the Reformation broke the stranglehold which the Church

had exercised over many nations, and new national kingdoms broke free of ecclesiastical interference. (2) Economically. The Reformation encouraged personal industry and initiative, with a consequent desire to improve economic conditions. (3) Scientifically. The Reformers rescued scientific investigation from Church control. Men were encouraged to think for themselves on the scientific level. (4) Personally. The Reformation emphasised the importance of the individual conscience, a principle upheld in modern democratic society.

3. Was it a mistake?

The assumption behind this question is that the Reformation was a human movement, something man decided to do, an activity organised and directed by able people. But it is impossible to explain it in these terms only. Certainly there was organisation, and the leaders were all able men. But the historical context in which it occurred, the dynamic spiritual experience of Luther, and the astonishing growth and spread of the movement, can only be explained in terms of the mighty Hand of God.

Firstly, take the historical context. Professor A.G. Dickens has said: "*A flaming brand thrown into a heap of wet straw will hardly cause a smouldering. To explain the astonishing swiftness of the conflagration which followed Luther's defiance (at Worms), we must begin by describing the climatic conditions which had made the straw of European society as dry as tinder.*"

Europe was involved in unrest and change of a quite unprecedented nature. Politically, national states were emerging, challenging the medieval concept of Empire and papal supremacy. Economically, there was growing discontent among the peasants. Trade began to increase; cities and towns began to grow in importance; and a monetary economy was developing. The old medieval apathy had gone. Socially, a new economic status gave birth to a lively new socio-economic class, the bourgeoisie, comprising landed

gentry, lawyers, and professional men, industrialists and merchants. This group gained new political weight, acquired higher education, and became open to Protestant thought. Intellectually, the Renaissance had produced a new era of cultural endeavour and expression, as well as widespread intellectual unrest. Renaissance scholars sought to recover good texts of the Hebrew O.T. and the Greek N.T., and people like J. Reuchlin and Erasmus sought to establish the exact meaning of the biblical text. A spate of new Universities emerged, with a new ferment of ideas. Moreover, the invention of the printing press came at precisely the right moment. Dickens has commented: "*Altogether, in relation to the spread of religious ideas, it seems difficult to exaggerate the significance of the Press, without which a revolution of this magnitude could scarcely have been consummated.*" e.g. Between 1517 and 1520 Luther's thirty publications probably sold well over 300,000 copies. And ecclesiastically, the Western Church was in a very troubled condition. It was an age of decline. There had been the scandal of two rival popes, one at Rome, the other at Avignon. A worldly spirit animated many of the clergy. There was little pastoral concern or preaching. Papal financial demands were widely resented, and many popes were politically active and morally lax. Spiritually, new religious movements were at work. The Waldensians in the Alps, the Lollards in England, the Hussites in Bohemia, had rediscovered biblical Christianity. The mystics were searching after a new, direct approach to God. The popular preaching of Savonarola in Florence had inspired an outburst of piety there. Clearly men were longing for personal communion with the living God.

No moment in history could have been more propitious for this powerful movement of God.

Then, secondly, what else but God's activity can explain the experience of Martin Luther? Into 56.

this seething, fermenting world of change, God thrust the young Luther. A brilliant and restless mind, he had, for several years, been searching for the assurance of peace with God. He felt his sinfulness before the holiness and justice of God, but had tried in vain to find peace in a life of acute self-denial and tortured study. He realised that good works, even of a religious kind, were not the cause, not even a cause of salvation. They did not contribute anything to a man's acceptability with God, since none of them was entirely free from sin. Then, in agony of soul, as he was preparing his lectures on Romans, light dawned upon him. He saw that not only was God just, in punishing sin, but that He was also justifier, in freely forgiving the sinner and clothing him with Christ's righteousness when that sinner believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. He felt himself to be born anew and to have entered paradise itself. This moment of disclosure was nothing but the sovereign act of the God of grace.

Luther immediately saw that the idea of buying your way to heaven through the purchase of indulgences was a denial of the Gospel. Indulgences were certificates issued by papal authority in the belief that they would relieve people from some of the penalties of their sins. Luther saw that nothing except the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ could do that. Therefore, he began to attack the abuse of indulgences, by which large fees were charged for their purchase. At first he simply condemned the abuse, but later saw that the very idea of an indulgence was a denial of the Gospel. His 95 theses, which he nailed to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, were his attempt to get the whole matter debated. In them he called attention to basic Scriptural truths. His concern was to reform an abuse, not to start a movement. But he had re-discovered New Testament Christianity, and he wanted the Church to make the same discovery. However, the papacy seemed unable to see the intensity of his convictions, and a gap widened between the Church and

Luther. He, in turn, began to see other truths more clearly, especially Biblical authority, the priesthood of all believers, and the validity of only two sacraments. He began to preach and teach them. Soon the Reformation fires began to spread.

Luther was clearly God's man for that hour. He had a dynamic personality, a brilliant mind, and was a profound, passionate preacher. Dr Lloyd Jones has called him a volcano. The only explanation of his experience and preaching is the activity of God. Everything was ready, and at God's time Luther was converted. Only a man like Luther could have given impetus to such a movement as the Reformation, for he was a man of fire, a prophet, to whom the Word of the Lord came.

Then, thirdly, the astounding growth and spread of the movement was due to God's activity. Others were affected in the same way. Zwingli in Switzerland was influenced by Luther, but also came to the same experience through his own study of the Bible. Through his preaching the Reformation spread west through German Switzerland. John Calvin was also converted. He lived in the French cantons of Switzerland, and was the greatest theologian and biblical expositor of the Reformation. Thousands came to be taught by him from all parts of Europe, and Geneva became the focus of the missionary endeavours of the movement. The Reformation spread further to West Germany, France, the Netherlands, Scotland and England, East Germany, Hungary and Poland. In Scotland John Knox was the spearhead of the movement, whilst in England it developed in a more uneven way. The Lollards had prepared the way. Henry VIII assisted it by severing his connections with Rome, assuming the title of Supreme Head of the Church. But it was the preaching and teaching of men like Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, and other English Reformers that enabled a modified Calvinism to take root in this country.

So the Reformation directly affected large areas of Europe, and the succession of powerful preachers, able theologians and skilful writers, was an indication of the mighty hand of God being revealed in the salvation of thousands upon thousands of men and women.

4. What are the lessons for us today?

There are five.

- (1) We need to ask the right questions - What is a Christian? What is the Church?
- (2) We need to uphold and proclaim the biblical Gospel. It is clear, true, and it works.
- (3) We need to assert the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. The Bible stands up for itself. The Church has lost authority because it has lost confidence in God's Word.
- (4) The basis of union between Churches must be agreement about the Gospel and the Bible. Any other form of union will be shallow and weak. If we are going to work for union, let it be the unity which our Lord prayed for in John 17, that of true believers who are convinced of the power of the Gospel, and the authority of the Scriptures.
- (5) God is still the living God, the God of history. He controls the movements and events of men and works everything out according to His purposes. At the crucial moment He revealed Himself to Luther and Calvin. He came to them. And He is still the same.

THE SUBSTANCE OF AN ADDRESS GIVEN BY THE AUTHOR AT RUGBY, CANTERBURY AND EXETER; HIS AIM WAS THE MORE

LIMITED ONE OF INTRODUCING THIS IMPORTANT SUBJECT
RATHER THAN PROVIDING AN ANALYSIS AND DETAILED
HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF IT.
