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Reformation  
& Revival



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**T**he word “Reformation” is magic to my heart, just as I am sure it is to yours. Say “Reformation” and immediately we think of that heroic sixteenth-century era when so many things that have burned bright in men’s imaginations ever since took place.

## **Our Reformation Heritage**

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One thinks, for instance, of Luther nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of Wittenberg Castle Church, challenging, as it turned out, the whole Roman system of his day. We think of Luther at Worms a few years later, facing the Holy Roman emperor and being told that he must recant the things he had been saying. His famous response to the emperor, nobles and ecclesiastical dignitaries of central Europe ran thus:

Unless you prove to me by Scripture and reason that I am mistaken I cannot and will not recant. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. There is nothing else I can do. God help me. Amen.

Those magnificent words have echoed down through the centuries, and no wonder.

Luther stuck to his guns. He translated the Bible into German, and preached and wrote tirelessly to spread the evangelical truth. He became the pioneer of reformation throughout Germany. His name will be honored as long as history lasts.

We think of Calvin, that shy scholar who wanted nothing more than to be a man of letters, reading and writing books for the whole of his adult life. But Farrel told him that he must come to Geneva and share in the work of the Reformation there, which he did. Sleeping only four hours a night he toiled away at the *Institutes*, that great Christian classic which is still for many of us in a class by itself. He com-

mented on the greater part of Holy Scripture, setting new and superb standards of faithful exposition. Calvin died at 55, absolutely worn out—another of God's heroes.

We think of John Knox, willing to spend 19 months as a galley slave because of his activities as a Reformer, and then finally rewarded by a few amazing weeks when virtually the whole of Scotland turned to the Reformation. Almost overnight Scotland became the thoroughly Reformed nation that it has been in substance from that day to this.

We think of the English martyrs. There was William Tyndale, defying the king by translating the Bible. He was burned eventually in Belgium because Henry VIII sent word to the continent that he must be put to death.

There was Thomas Cranmer, Henry's archbishop of Canterbury, who bided his time until it was possible to produce a Reformed confession of faith, a Reformed prayer book, and a Reformed book of discipleship for the Church of England. All too soon his royal monarch, Edward VI, died, and Mary came to the throne. She resolved to bring England back to Rome. She had about 330 English Protestant leaders burned at the stake, including Thomas Cranmer. They put him under intolerable pressure. We would call it brainwashing today. Under this pressure, as others have done since, Cranmer recanted, signing a document to that effect a few days before he was to be burned at the stake. He had been told that when he signed he would be pardoned. But when he found out he was not—he was going to be burned anyway—he sat up all night writing a recanting of his recantation. He died holding his hand outstretched into the flames, saying, "This hand that has offended shall first be burned."

These stories of Christian heroism are still vivid. So when we say "Reformation," we think of these things and thank God for them. The treasures of wisdom enshrined in the theology of these Reformers is more than any of us have

succeeded in mastering in these days. This is the faith in which I live and by which I hope to die, and I am sure the same is true of you also. Thank God, we say, for the Reformation!

#### The Overlooked Reformation

Then we look at the church of our day and find our hearts saying, "We need *another* Reformation." But I want to ask, are you sure you know what you are saying? As we form our idea of reformation from these historical memories we are in danger of settling for too narrow a notion of what reformation is—too narrow a notion of what it was in the past and too narrow a notion of what it will be again if God again visits His people. What I have said, striking the chords of memory with regard to the achievements of the Reformation martyrs, has not told anything like the full story of the sixteenth-century Reformation. These are high spots which stick in our minds, and rightly so. But there was more to it even than that. We tend not to remember what more of it there was.

Most of us are children of a movement for which the historical name is Pietism. Pietism was an answer to deadness in state churches. The Pietist movements in every country gathered groups of lively Christians and brought them together on a regular basis for Bible study, prayer, fellowship and mutual encouragement. These little groups became beacons of light in the dreary darkness of a semi-dead state church in country after country.

I am thinking of groups gathered by the Puritans in England in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I am thinking of the "praying societies" in the national church of Scotland and of Pietist gatherings in Holland and Germany in the late seventeenth century; also of John Wesley's Methodist societies in the days of the evangelical awakening in the eighteenth century, and of many other midweek fellowship meetings not linked with Wesley's organization,

in English parishes which the revival touched. There were also Welsh societies that began in the eighteenth century, when the evangelical awakening hit Wales, and continued until the end of the nineteenth century. God blessed these meetings and made them sources of light and life to many as the years went by.

It is, in fact, the most natural thing in the world for live Christians to get together in fellowship meetings to pray, praise God and encourage each other in this way. And it has happened in this century in parts of the world where little or nothing was known about the Reformation. I am thinking here of the revival fellowships which emerged in the East African church, mostly, though not exclusively, Anglican, in the 1930s. The East African revival keeps flaring up in place after place, though it is 60 years old.

In the days of the Reformation this had already begun. Luther started it. Did you know that? And the Reformer of Strasbourg, Martin Bucer, encouraged the pattern in his churches. He had a Latin name for it: *Ecclesiola in ecclesia* (the little church within the big church). These fellowship structures are integral to the Reformation heritage.

We think of reformation as the outward activity of putting straight doctrines formally professed by the big church and patterns of life practiced in the big church. We think of it as cleaning up superstition and sweeping out errors. But we do not always think of reformation involving the renewal of spirituality. As children of the Pietist heritage, we think of the renewal of spiritual life as something distinct from reformation. This, we say, is an inward work, and should be thought of in different terms from those in which we think of reformation. I want to say that we are wrong in this—wrong historically, and wrong biblically, as I am going to show.

### Substantial Reformation

The sixteenth-century Reformation was the outward aspect of an inward renewal such as I have been describing, and if God visits us today with revival, some outward reordering will be involved in it. We are talking of one work of God viewed from two standpoints, not two works.

It is a fact that the Reformers saw themselves as pastors and evangelists, no less than as theologians and ecclesiastical statesmen. That was true of Luther, Bucer, Calvin, Zwingli—every single one of them. They saw themselves, not only as “washing and cleansing the face of the church,” that is, getting doctrine, church order and liturgy straight, but also as letting loose that gospel of God which through the Spirit transforms whole communities and brings new faith, love, and life wherever it is preached.

In the sixteenth century this is what actually happened. Calvin's Geneva took John Knox's breath away. He described it as the most perfect school of Christ that the world has seen since the days of the apostles. Godliness and righteousness were everywhere. Calvin's Geneva was not just formally right; it was substantially, spiritually right.

The same was true of Scotland in John Knox's great days, and of England also in ways most of the history books overlook. The records of the preaching of Latimer and Bradford, and of the sudden blossoming of Christian philosophy in England tell their own clear story. The work touched clergy and laymen with spiritual life as well as touching the organized church with formal correctness.

When we talk about reformation, therefore, we should realize that we are talking about this two-sided, but single, vivifying work of God.

You have probably heard of the Puritan evangelist of Kidderminster in the midlands of England, Richard Baxter. In 17 years of ministry he produced a community half the size of Geneva but of a moral and spiritual quality equal or

superior to it. There was an amazing transformation of that city under his ministry. Family catechizing, family worship, church discipline, preaching, reading, counselling, and small-group ministry under Baxter's oversight, were all part of it, and reformation was Baxter's name for it. He wrote a book on pastoral theology, titled *The Reformed Pastor*. Baxter explains "Reformed," not as holding to what we would call "Calvinistic doctrine," but as being spiritually alive. He speaks like this: "If God would but reform the clergy, the people of England would soon be reformed." Kidderminster was a model, and Baxter wrote a full account of it because he believed that other communities would profit by his experience. He hoped that he would see wholesale revival in England in his day.

Well, you know what happened after the restoration of Charles II. Two thousand Puritan clergy were ejected from their pulpits, and the national reaction against godliness lasted for more than half a century. For those who will receive it, however, the inspiration of the Kidderminster model remains, and we do well to take it to heart today.

#### **Biblical Examples of Reformation**

The Bible records many striking spiritual movements which the textbooks refer to as reformations. In every case this same two-sidedness applies. These movements had an outward aspect; immorality and idolatry were put away. But they also had an inward side; men and women were stirred to seek God and renew their covenant with Him.

Joshua 24 tells how Joshua, at the end of his life, called the people together and challenged them, saying:

Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve (Josh. 24:14-15).

The people replied, "We too will serve the Lord."

Joshua continued, "[Then you must put away your idols.] You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins" (v. 19). The people said they would do it, and a covenant was made. It seems that for a time there was a real return to God in the way Joshua commanded.

In 2 Chronicles, three striking movements are recorded, led in each case by a godly king.

Second Chronicles 15 tells of reformation under King Asa.

When Asa heard these words and the prophecy of Azariah, son of Oded the prophet, he took courage. He removed the detestable idols from the whole land of Judah and Benjamin and from the towns he had captured in the hills of Ephraim. He repaired the altar of the Lord that was in front of the portico of the Lord's temple (v. 8).

That is reformation in our usual narrow sense, a matter of putting right the outward form of things. But in this movement there was more. Asa gathered the people together, and they committed themselves solemnly to the Lord by sacrifice: "They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and soul" (v. 12). It was what so many thousands in Europe did in the sixteenth century. They set themselves to seek the Lord with all their being. As we read further:

They took an oath to the Lord with loud acclamation, with shouting and with trumpets and horns. All Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly. They sought God eagerly, and He was found by them. So the Lord gave them rest on every side (vv. 14-15).

In 2 Chronicles 29-31 we read of Hezekiah's reformation. Chapter 29 tells how Hezekiah systematically rooted out idolatry. But then chapter 30 tells in detail how Hezekiah

brought the people together to keep a solemn Passover to God and to renew their commitment. The week of the Passover became such a momentous time to them spiritually that they lengthened it. We read, "The whole assembly then agreed to celebrate the festival seven more days; so for another seven days they celebrated joyfully" (v. 23). Do you see what is going on? They were saying, "This time in the Lord's presence has been so good, so enriching, so momentous in our experience that we will extend it." And they did. Verse 26 says, "There was great joy in Jerusalem." New closeness to God always brings joy, and new closeness was the reason why joy was great in Jerusalem in those days.

In 2 Chronicles 34-35 we read of reformation under Josiah. (There is a parallel and supplementary account in 2 Kings 22-23.) Israel was surrounded by nations that worshiped nature gods represented by idols, and this kept flowing over the borders to corrupt successive generations of Israelites, just as nowadays in this era of swift communication the so-called wisdom of the East comes flooding into North America. When the effect of Hezekiah's reformation in the previous century wore off, paganism took over, and purging had to take place all over again. Chapter 34 tells how Josiah stamped out idolatry. But there in 2 Chronicles 35, we read about the other side of the renewal: Passover, worship and praise.

There was a similar movement under Ezra recorded in chapters 9 and 10 of his book. Ezra 9 records the outward aspects of revival in the ceremonial putting away of pagan wives who, contrary to the will of God, had been taken by Israelites. The people repented. Then Ezra prayed for forgiveness, and there was a new commitment to God by those who had sinned in this way. This was the inward reality of reformation as we would call it.

In Nehemiah 8-10, the outward form of reformation was a return to Scripture, explained by Ezra and a team of

preachers. Then the people were moved to tears, and a great national recommitment followed. Reformation? Yes. But it had this inward aspect as well as the outward aspect. In Scripture, outward and inward always go together. You do not get one without the other.

At Pentecost renewal took the form of movement out of the old covenant into a new order of things in the Spirit. But notice how from the start these early believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). That is a new lifestyle. "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (v. 46). The inward aspect comes from faith in Christ; it expresses itself in joy. But it has as its outward aspect, worship, regular prayer and celebration of the Lord's Supper.

In Revelation 2-3 the Savior rebukes the churches, telling them to put away their sins and return to Him. But for what? For the outward reshaping of their corporate lives? Yes, certainly, but for much more than that—for true spiritual renewal in every department of their personal lives as well.

Spiritual movements vary in what they exhibit, but there is always some of the outward purging, reshaping and reforming, and with it some of the inner renewing of faith and communion with God for godliness. The late Max Warren linked revival with reformation, and pictured the latter as reforming troops for battle so that the army may go to fight again. It is God gathering His troops, refitting them, showing them afresh their objective and sending them out to fight once more. That is a good image to have in mind as we think of the dimensions, outward and inward, of God's reviving work.

**Nature of True Reformation**

What I am saying can be summarized in four points.

**1) Reformation is a divine visitation**

You have this in Zechariah, for instance. The visions of renewal and restoration, which fill the first few chapters of his prophecy, prompted Calvin to say, "This doctrine may be fully applied to our age," and we may equally apply it in our own. Zechariah wrote,

Therefore, this is what the Lord says, 'I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there My house will be rebuilt.' . . . Proclaim further: This is what the Lord Almighty says: "My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem" (Zech. 1: 16-17).

That is reformation in the outward aspect, and it is all of God. But with it, says Zechariah, the Lord brings the inward reality too. "Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,' declares the Lord" (Zech. 2:10). Such a divine visitation is the inmost heart of any truly significant change in the condition of the church.

**2) Reformation is a work of Jesus Christ**

In Revelation 2-3 renewal is pictured as Jesus coming down from His throne by the Spirit and drawing near to renew His people and enable them to overcome. This is needed today. Sin and worldliness, error and folly, have crept in. Churches are corrupted. Purging is needed. Spiritual light burns dim. The secular community goes downhill like the Gadarene swine rushing toward the edge of the cliff, and the church cannot stop it. The church has lost its influence. How different from the sixteenth century! The Lord Jesus, again and again, must come to raise up a standard against the evil that comes in like a flood.

**3) Reformation is a constant task for God's people**

We cannot restore spiritual life, but there is something we can do to prepare the way for Christ's coming. It is what is meant by that famous slogan, which I am sure we have heard but have never perhaps thought about as we should: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (the church that has been reformed needs always to be reformed). That tag has to do, not simply with outward order, but with renewal of inward spiritual life.

**4) Reformation always begins with repentance, seeking God in new ways and putting away wrong things**

This is clear from Christ's words to His people in the letters of the Book of Revelation, just as it is clear from the stories of spiritual movements in Old Testament times.

Revelation 3:18-20 is the answer to the question: What can we do to bring about reformation? Can we do anything at all? This passage tells us that the people of God can do three things. First, *perceive* the grim reality of their current situation, just as our Lord called on the Laodiceans to perceive the depths of their own spiritual need. They said they were rich but they did not realize that they were "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Jesus said, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (v. 19). Leaving realism, so that we stop pretending all is well when it is not well and face the guilt of our own unfaithfulness and half-heartedness, is something we can all do.

Second, *pray*. We can talk to Jesus about our need and ask Him to visit us and in mercy deal with our lukewarmness. The great men of the sixteenth-century Reformation were praying men. Luther once said, "I am too busy to spend less than three hours a day in prayer." It was said that Mary Queen of Scots feared the prayers of John Knox more than she feared the armies of England. The Lord calls us to become men and women of prayer, starting where verse 18



starts: "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see." Jesus tells us to take note of His rebuke and respond in prayer.

Third, *prepare*. We may prepare the way of the Lord in the sense presented in Isaiah 40:3, where it is said, "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." That means, clear the road, throw out the stones, get rid of the roadblocks. Sins embraced are roadblocks. We must forsake them. Ask God to search your heart. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24). Take the Psalmist's prayer to yourself and ask God to show you what stones need to be put away. Isaiah says that "every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed" (40:4-5). That will happen in part through the work of God's people preparing and clearing the road.

We can ask the Lord to search us right now. We can ask Him to save us from that desensitizing complacency which has made us lukewarm, half-hearted Christians, living with perfect orthodoxy (I expect) in our heads but like men in a dream—with no spiritual vitality in our hearts.

That is what we are summoned to do in Revelation 3:20. This was not written as an evangelistic text, though it has often been used that way. It was written to backsliding believers. So when Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with Me," He is calling for repentance and promising a renewal of fellowship and strength to those who heed His call. Will you hear Jesus as He speaks those sentences to you? Will you open the door?

Will you enthrone Him at the center of your personal and church life?

Scripture, you see, teaches us not simply to think but also to act with regard to reformation. We cannot precipitate it, but we can put ourselves in the way where it is found, and what we can do we should do. May God give us ears to hear, eyes to see, hearts to respond and wills to act. As He speaks to us, in these days, may we realize that it is He Himself drawing near to us and that He is on His throne to renew us, sustain us, reform us and finally bring us to glory. Praise to Him forever! Amen.

#### Author

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No church is obedient that is not evangelistic.

*John Blanchard*

The driving force of the early Christian mission was not propaganda of beautiful ideals of the brotherhood of man. It was proclamation of the mighty acts of God.

*James S. Stewart*

Every single believer is a God-ordained agent of evangelism.

*R.B. Kuiper*

The command to evangelize is a part of God's law. It belongs to God's revealed will for His people.

*J. I. Packer*

When our hearts are filled with Christ's presence, evangelism is as inevitable as it is contagious.

*Robert E. Coleman*

Evangelism never seemed to be an "issue" in the New Testament. That is to say, one does not find the apostles urging, exhorting, scolding, planning and organizing for evangelistic programs. Evangelism happened! Issuing effortlessly from the community of believers as light from the sun, it was automatic, spontaneous, continuous, contagious.

*Richard C. Halverson*

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