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Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 5, Number 2 • Spring 1996

In the very nature of things, the way of all flesh is hard to escape. When God is pleased to raise up men who will preach the Gospel of Christ in power, many glorious things will follow in the train of such a restoration. But after any such reformation and revival, in the second or third spiritual generation, a contingent of managers and handlers will almost certainly move in to consolidate the gains of the “movement.” Some of what they will do will be good and necessary, but the net effect of their labors will usually be to return, in some way, shape, or form, to the way it was before. This is the way of all flesh. And the cry against these well-intentioned handlers must always be *semper reformanda*—a cry calculated to distress overly tidy administrators. Always reforming—does that imply changing anything?

How easily we forget! The potency of the Gospel is always seen best in what it does to old wineskins. Religious man, ethical man, always wants a certain kind of ecclesiastical doing and bustling about. This doing is always careful to color inside the lines, and to keep off the grass. But whenever the Gospel breaks forth in the church, slaying its thousands, one of the first casualties is simple moralism. In the Gospel of Christ, men are charged to repent of all their doings, and to be something other than what they are. This of course provokes the hostility of religious man because he is always in control of what he does, but only God can be sovereign over what a man is. The Gospel of grace is therefore obnoxious to such a man.

Despite this hostility of unbelieving men, God’s grace remains efficacious. Because God is sovereign, and it is His Gospel after all, this exhilarating Gospel keeps breaking out at various times in the history of the church, and in inexplicable ways. The first Puritans were blessed to live at a time when this happened on a widespread scale and were part of what we recognize as a great reformation of the

church. We usually refer to the Reformation as the time when the Gospel was recovered, although it would be more proper to say that it was a time when the Gospel recovered many men than to say that any men recovered the Gospel. The Gospel was not a set of lost car keys, somehow misplaced by us.

But the sinful heart is deceitfully wicked and is good at slipping off the point, especially when the point is the inability of the natural man to understand spiritual things. “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). Religious man likes to think that Paul is here referring to the natural man as man at his worst—the addict, the wino, the prostitute. But Paul is using a word coined by the pagan philosopher Aristotle to refer to man at his best; Paul intended the man who thought he had his act together. Not surprisingly, religious man looks at such passages and demonstrates the problem. He does not understand the things of the Spirit. The Spirit brings to life a new creature; He never brings a list of things to do so that a man may perform his way into the presence of God.

We acknowledge that the Gospel was recovered in the Reformation, we build memorials to the men who recovered it, and yet at the same time we industriously avoid whatever it was that set them free. And after a time, we even forget that they were free, and assume them to be just like us—tiny minds in tight souls. And this is what accounts for the image that comes to mind when we say “puritanical.” It is a testimony to the power of moralism’s revisionist blinders.

But the early Puritans were not as we assume them to be at all. They were genuinely liberated from a soul-destroying religious moralism, and the instrument of this liberation was the Gospel of Christ. In his wonderful study of English

literature in the sixteenth century, C.S. Lewis commented on the impact of the first Puritans:

In philosophical language, the ethical category is self-destructive; morality is healthy only when it is trying to abolish itself. In theological language, no man can be saved by works. The whole purpose of the gospel, for Tyndale, is to deliver us from morality. Thus, paradoxically, the puritan of modern imagination—the cold, gloomy heart, doing as duty what happier and richer souls do without thinking of it—is precisely the enemy which historical Protestantism arose and smote. What really matters is not to obey moral rules but to be a creature of a certain kind.¹

What matters is not “to obey moral rules.” What matters is to be “a creature of a certain kind.” In other words, you must be born again. These are words which have regularly baffled teachers in Israel. Nicodemus was not the first, and he was most certainly not the last. A man cannot set himself on a course of being born again. We do not see any books telling us how to be born the first time, and if we thought about it a little while we would see far fewer books telling us how to be born the second time. This is not something a man can do to or for himself. In the ways of grace, being precedes doing. In the ways of the Spirit, you can hear His sound but do not know where He has come from, or where He is going. Historical Protestantism arose and smote the notion that the “doing man” was actually doing anything worthwhile for God; what matters is a new creation. But only God can bring forth a new creation, and in the preaching of the biblical Gospel, He is pleased to do so.

But time passes and this truth is forgotten. In the meantime, churches were planted and institutions formed which still (to this day) have the name “Protestant.” Consequently the terms and phrases which were used by our fathers

Peter says of first-century believers that they rejoiced with “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8). When we look to the salvation of our souls, when we rejoice at all, it is far too often with a joy expressible. May God hasten the day when we come back to His Word, with a fierce joy in the doctrines of His wonderful grace and our liberty in His gracious creation of a new man.

Endnotes:

- 1 C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 187.
- 2 *Studies in Medieval & Renaissance Studies*.
- 3 *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*.

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