

REFORMATION REBOOT!

THE NEED OF THE 21ST-CENTURY CHURCH

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EP Books are distributed in the USA by:

JPL Books, 3883 Linden Ave. S.E., Wyoming, MI 49548

order@jplbooks.com

www.jplbooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-78397-279-1

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INTRODUCTION

The Protestant Reformation: an event that happened almost five centuries ago. How relevant is it today? Granted, there were commemorations in 2017 to mark the nailing-up of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, but this is 2020, not 2017, let alone 1517!

I studied the Protestant Reformation at school. Perhaps 'studied' is a little too flattering. More accurately, I *endured* those history lessons which covered the seemingly unending phenomenon called the Protestant Reformation. I enjoyed hearing about Henry VIII and how he beheaded two of his six wives. I remember the teacher being much more amused than the pupils were by the title of the 'Diet of Worms.' I struggled to spell 'transubstantiation,' before nearing any understanding of its meaning. No need to worry. Transubstantiation will not be mentioned again in this book. Neither will those worm pies or severed heads.

Fast forward to the summer of 1995. I was still in the classroom but, by now, I was standing at the front rather

than sitting at a desk — a much happier place to be. On the last day of term, a senior colleague handed me a pair of hard-back books with imposing artwork emblazoned on the front and back covers, and told me: ‘You should read these over the summer holidays. Every young Christian man should read Merle d’Aubigné on the Reformation.’ The books were a gift, not a loan, and I began to read.

The title of the first chapter of the first book, ‘Christ Mightier than Druid Altars and Roman Swords,’ was stirring enough to accelerate my pulse-rate, and the words of the first paragraph still send a shiver down my spine:

Those heavenly powers which had lain dormant in the church since the first ages of Christianity, awoke from their slumber in the sixteenth century, and this awakening called the modern times into existence. The church was created anew, and from that regeneration flowed great developments of literature and science, of morality, liberty, and industry. None of these things would have existed without the Reformation. Whenever society enters upon a new era, it requires the baptism of faith. In the sixteenth century God gave to man this consecration from on high by leading him back from mere outward profession and the mechanism of works to an inward and lively faith.¹

The pages that followed were saturated with history — a history written with passion and vigour. The political exploits of kings and bishops ran side-by-side with the heroics of ordinary folk. It was not a local, little history

either; it began in the distant mists of pagan Britain before spanning sixteen centuries. It was architectonic, panoramic, and altogether glorious. It reminded me of a view of the earth across many thousands of miles of outer space. In short, it was a page-turner. And it was a book on the Reformation!

The Reformation did not simply occur because Henry VIII's roving eye landed on a girl nearly twenty years younger than his middle-aged wife. It did not happen because Martin Luther had a few spare nails and a brand new hammer he wanted to try out. It did not even happen because a sixteenth-century version of Brexit suddenly swept across Europe. *The Reformation happened because God made it happen.* The God of heaven determined to visit his people and to return to them the greatest gift of all: the gospel of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

How important is the Reformation? I would summarize like this:

- *Because of the Reformation*, we have Bibles in our own languages, to read from and to preach from.
- *Because of the Reformation*, we have a renewed and enhanced understanding of the gospel and of theology.
- *Because of the Reformation*, Europe was turned upside down religiously and politically.
- *Because of the Reformation*, we have a great deal more peace, freedom and democracy in our world than would be the case were it not for the Reformation.

- *Because of the Reformation*, we have the children of the Reformation: the great English Puritans, the Scottish Covenanters, the French Huguenots and the German Pietists. We also have the leaders of the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century: George Whitefield and the Wesleys in England; Rowland, Harris and Pantycelyn in Wales; Jonathan Edwards in America; men like C. H. Spurgeon and J. C. Ryle in the nineteenth century, and others who have followed them since.
- *Because of the Reformation*, the worldwide missionary movement of the last two hundred years was born.

In 1995, I decided that I wanted to stand in the line of the Reformation, and (nearly a quarter of a century later) I still do. The Protestant Reformation was nothing less than a rediscovery of the ‘faith that was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 1:3), the clear message that no one can be saved by their own efforts or by any outward ceremony, but only by faith in Jesus Christ — a crucified and risen Saviour. I love the Reformation because, at its heart, is the biblical gospel that the Lord Jesus gave to the apostles himself — the gospel that must be believed, if anyone is to know God and live for ever.

This book, however, is not a historical study. It mentions history from time to time, by way of illustration, but I really want to think about the timeless lessons, not of *the* Reformation as such, but of *reformation* in general. Why?

Because today, the church and the world desperately need another one. Perhaps God will give us another reformation. If he does, it would not be exactly like the one five hundred years ago. It will, however, share this in common — *it will bring us back to the gospel, and therefore back to the Bible.* For this reason this book focuses on the Bible. As a reader, you will need a Bible at your side rather than a Reformation wall-chart or timeline. Turn to Isaiah 17 and, having meditated on the discussion questions below, proceed to the first chapter.

Questions for discussion

1. Did you learn about the Reformation at school? Did your experience prejudice you against the subject, or excite your interest?
2. In 1916, Henry Ford wrote ‘History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present.’ What do you think of his assessment in the light of what you have just read about the Reformation?
3. What other benefits do you think have come to the world as a result of the Reformation?
4. What do you think are the greatest needs of church and society? What kind of reformation are *you* praying for?