

# The Reformation:

## A Historical Overview and Application

by William Boekestein

“My son, hear the instruction of your father...” (Proverbs 1:8, NKJV)

October thirty-one is the anniversary of an event which, although seemingly insignificant at the time, would prove to be the great impetus for a reform movement that would change history; not only that of a church but of western culture as a whole. The reform movement has become known as the Protestant Reformation. The event, occurring 492 years ago this month, was a simple invitation by an Augustinian monk to debate ninety-five points of doctrine.

Admittedly, this introduction won't arrest the interest of everyone! In fact, the majority of people today aren't interested in the Reformation. Most people either disapprove the Reformation or simply consider it irrelevant. So before proceeding any further, let's address these two concerns.

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the Reformation, while supposedly “aiming at an internal renewal of the Church, really led to a great revolt against it, and an abandonment of the principal Christian beliefs.” Clearly not everyone is celebrating the Protestant Reformation this year and many view the Reformation in the unfriendly terms used above. But was the Reformation really a revolt against the church or was it a call to recover the apostolic Christianity upon which the church was first founded?

The second concern has to do with the relevance of the Reformation. What does a 500 year old event have to do with us? Let me suggest three reasons for studying the Reformation. The first reason is *doxological*, meaning, we want to give thanks to the Lord for his work in history. It is good for us to examine and commemorate his continuing work in the church. Secondly, this study is *educational*; that is, we study the Reformation to learn about our heritage. Only a fool lives as if wisdom began with him. In Proverbs 1:8, God admonishes us to hear the instruction of our fathers. Here he is speaking explicitly of biological fathers but be assured, your *spiritual* fathers have much to say to you as well.

Lastly, this study is *experiential*. In other words, how does your experience compare with the principles of the reformation? If we believe that we can and must learn from history then we must allow history to examine us. How do you and I need to undergo a personal reformation?

### The Setting of the Reformation

There are several important factors that help frame the events of the Reformation.

#### *Medieval Life in General*

First, physical conditions for the medievals were deplorable. One fifteenth-century man described his life in these terms: “O miserable and very sad life! We suffer from warfare, death and famine; Cold and heat, day and night, sap our strength; fleas, scab mites and so much other vermin make war against us. In short, have mercy, Lord, upon our wicked persons, whose life is very short.”

Spiritual welfare was equally poor. Medieval folk were constantly reminded that they were speedily nearing a personal confrontation with death, and therefore with heaven or hell. Ironically, they were not being prepared for this inevitability by the church. Rather than directing troubled souls to the finished

work of Christ, clerics urged their parishioners to “do what lies within them.” Faced with the standard of God’s holiness as the requirement for salvation and the meager resources of their own inability to meet that standard, desperate souls lost hope.

The established church was in crisis because it increasingly failed to resemble the church built upon the foundation of the Lord Jesus and exemplified by the apostles and their followers.

#### *Problems in the church*

As early as the twelfth century God began raising up men such as Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and John Hus (who was burned alive for his convictions) to challenge medieval church errors. Yet, reform efforts failed and in the sixteenth century church reformers continued to focus on needed changes, especially in the following areas.

First, there was a lack of pastoral leadership. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains: The clergy’s chief object—to guide man to his eternal goal—claimed too seldom their attention, and worldly activities became the chief interest. Pastoral care fell largely into the background.<sup>i</sup> Whole generations were left ignorant of the gospel’s reconciling power.

Second, there was an elevation of monasticism (the idea that religion happens when we isolate ourselves from the rest of the world) which undercut the significance of Christianity lived out by common people in ordinary life.

Third, there was an undue emphasis on the saints and on Mary which, it was alleged, tended to minimize the singular glory of Christ.

Fourth, there was an inappropriate homage paid to tradition resulting in the practical neglect of the Scriptures.

Fifth, the church controlled her members’ worship from the cradle to the grave through the use of a sacramental system whereby the church leaders performed acts of worship on behalf of the parishioner. This sacramentalism practically choked out pure, simple gospel preaching which would have encouraged freedom of sincere worship of God in one’s daily life.

Sixth, Rome insisted that man is justified (made acceptable to God) through faith in Christ’s work on the cross *plus* the addition of man’s works. This, the Reformers argued, strikes at the heart of Christianity itself and nullifies God’s gracious and sovereign work in salvation.

Seventh (the problem that most prompted reform) was the papal system of indulgences. An indulgence, says the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, is “The remission of the temporal punishment for sin...granted by the church...”<sup>ii</sup> Indulgences could be secured by any number of means. But what most stirred the ire of the Reformers was their sale by peddlers. Forgiveness had bypassed the heart and gone directly to the wallet. More than others, this abuse produced the spark of the Reformation.

### **The Spark of the Reformation**

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, (the Augustinian Monk mentioned earlier) made his way to the church in Wittenberg, Germany. He pounded a few nails through a piece of paper into the door of the church, making a sound that would be heard around the world. On the paper were written ninety-five theses or propositions. Initially, Luther was simply calling for a debate on the question of the *abuses* of indulgences not the practice outright but his request was denied. Instead, the Roman church deployed its theologians to reinforce its official position and attack Luther for his “heretical” views. He was excommunicated and his safety was threatened.

Luther did not back down. He continued writing against the abuses still with the intention of reforming the Roman Catholic Church. However, after

much opposition, Luther published a book entitled *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. After reading this treatise, the Dutch scholar Erasmus, a contemporary of Luther, predicted that “the breach is irreparable.” His prediction proved true. The Reformation would continue to spread, although not from within the established church but from without.

### **The Spread of the Reformation**

The call for Church reformation was dispersed throughout the land primarily through writing and preaching. As Luther continued to write against abuses, others became inspired and propelled the movement forward.

Around the 1530's, the Reformation divided into two branches: the Lutherans (more moderate in their reform efforts) and the Reformed (more rigorous in reform). The latter group was represented by Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger and John Calvin (who was only eight years old at the dawn of the Reformation), all of whom labored in Switzerland.

Chiefly from Calvin's home of Geneva, Switzerland, the Reformation spread to the lowlands of Germany and Holland as well as the British Isles, finding vibrant expression in English, Scottish and Dutch Puritanism. Calvinism, as the Reformed faith is sometimes called, was carried to America by the English pilgrims and by later European immigrants. It is estimated that by the time America declared independence from England, two-thirds of the population were at least nominally Calvinistic.

### **The Cycles of the Reformation**

Despite its earlier vibrancy, Reformed doctrine and life began to decline in the 1800's owing to influences such as the Enlightenment in Europe and Revivalism in America. In the twentieth century the impact of liberalism and the teachings of Jacob Arminius (Arminianism) further damaged the Reformed cause.

Today, Calvinism is experiencing a revival. Previously non-reformed seminaries are embracing reformed doctrine. Reformed books which had long since fallen out of print are rapidly being reprinted. As one writer says, “Calvinism has a bright future, for it offers much to people who seek to *believe* and *practice* the whole counsel of God. Calvinism aims to do so with both clearheaded faith and warmhearted spirituality, which when conjoined, produces vibrant living in the home, the church, and the marketplace to the glory of God.”<sup>iii</sup>

### **The Summons for a Modern Reformation**

The Reformation began in the heart of Luther as he faced his own sinfulness. The established Church offered no remedy for his struggle and thus he began to protest the man-made religious expressions which were devoid of pure expressions of God's grace. As modern day Protestants, let us follow Luther's example in examining our own hearts and lives in light of three Reformation principles.

#### *Sola Scriptura (Latin “Scripture Alone”)*

During the time of the Reformation, thousands of biblical Christians died defending the Bible. They were not defending the right to have Bibles in their homes but rather a way of life and thought based upon the Word of God and not the traditions of men.

Are we orienting our lives around the Word of God with the same intensity as the Reformers? A deeper Christian life comes about only as the Spirit works upon our hearts using his chosen means—the Bible. Are we reading the Bible individually and as a family? Are we worshipping in a church where the Scriptures—not people—are the final authority?

### *Christianity as a Practical Religion*

Where do we practice our Christianity? Many people have the mistaken notion that the highest (or only) expression of our religion occurs in church where religion is thought to be performed by the cleric.

The Reformers placed a premium on church worship but their worship services were geared to promote practical piety outside of worship. Does your religion happen only at church? Or is your faith robust enough to be useful in real life?

### *Soli Deo Gloria (Latin "Glory to God alone")*

How concerned are we about the glory of God? The Reformers were effective in their work, among other reason, because they were passionate about God and about his kingdom. Where is your passion? The personal kingdoms that you and I may be building in terms of wealth, reputation, personal gratification will be gone within a few generations.

How do you glorify God? Consider with me the answer given by one modern-day reformer: The Christian glorifies God "by confessing his sins to God and fleeing to Christ for forgiveness and for having God's nature restored to him. By praising, worshipping, and delighting in the triune God as Creator, Provider, and Redeemer. By trusting God and surrendering all things into his hands... By walking humbly, thankfully, cheerfully before God and becoming increasingly conformed to the image of His Son. By knowing, loving, and living the commands of God's Word. By being heavenly minded and cherishing the desire to be with God forever."<sup>iv</sup>

The glory of God is the Christian's highest ambition. No other goal or desire can measure up. Living for God's glory was and always will be the ultimate goal and result of any true reformation.

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<sup>i</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia entry on "The Reformation," from [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org).

<sup>ii</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia entry on "Indulgences."

<sup>iii</sup> Joel Beeke, *Living for God's Glory*, (Orlando: Reformation Trust), 12.

<sup>iv</sup> Beeke, 147-148.