



## Remembering the Reformation<sup>1</sup>

Why should we consider the Reformation in Scotland? At a time like this, with the world as it is and with the multiplicity of problems that are pressing in upon us on all sides, why turn back and consider an event that happened four hundred years ago?

Well, if I am to be quite honest, I must confess that this is my main reason: because of the state of affairs today. I am primarily a preacher, not a lecturer, not an historian, very fond of history, but not an antiquary. No, I am interested in this because, as a preacher I am concerned about the present state of affairs which is increasingly approximating to the state of affairs that obtained before the Protestant Reformation. You are aware of the state of the morals of this country, and of Great Britain in general, before the Reformation: vice, immorality, sin were rampant. My friends, it is rapidly becoming the same again! There is a woeful moral and social declension. We are being surrounded by the very problems that were most obvious before the Reformation took place. The moral state of the country, these urgent social problems, juvenile delinquency, drunkenness, theft and robbery, vice and crime, they are coming back as they were before the Protestant Reformation.

But it is not only a matter of moral and of social problems. What of the state of the church? What of the kirk? What about the numbers who are members of the church? How many even attend? We are going back to the pre-Reformation position. What about the authority of the church? What about the state of doctrine in the church? Before the Reformation, there was confusion. Is there anything more characteristic of the church today than doctrinal confusion, doctrinal indifference – a lack of concern and a lack of interest? And then perhaps the most alarming of all, the increase in the power, influence, and numbers of the Church of Rome, and the Romanizing tendencies that are coming into and being extolled in the Protestant church! There is no question about this. This is a mere matter of fact and observation. There is an obvious tendency to return to the pre-Reformation position; ceremonies and ritual are increasing and the Word of God is being preached less and less, sermons are becoming shorter and shorter. There is an indifference to true doctrine, a loss of authority, and a consequent declension, even in the matter of numbers. I wonder whether I am exaggerating when I suggest that at the present time we are really engaged in a great struggle for the very life of the Christian church, for the essence of the Christian faith? As I see the situation, it is nothing less alarming than that. We are fighting for a heritage, for the very things that were gained by that tremendous movement of four hundred years ago. That to me is the most urgent reason. We cannot afford the luxury of being merely antiquarian; we should be concerned about this because of the state of affairs in which we find ourselves.

### **The way of recovery is always to go back**

But, somebody might say, why go back for the answer to that? Now the answer to that, as I see it, can be put like this. I am not at all sure but that the greatest of all the lessons which the Protestant Reformation has to teach us is just this, that the secret of success in the realm of the church and of the things of the Spirit, is to go back. What happened in essence four hundred years ago was that these men went back to the first century, they went back to the New Testament, they went back to the Bible. Suddenly they were awakened to this message and they just went back to it. There is nothing more interesting, as one reads the stories of Luther and of Calvin, than to notice the way in which they kept on discovering that they had been rediscovering what Augustine had already discovered, and which had been forgotten. Indeed I suggest that perhaps the greatest of all the lessons of the Protestant Reformation is that the way of recovery is always to go back, back to the primitive pattern, to the origin, to the norm and the standard which are to be found alone in the New Testament. That is exactly what happened four hundred years ago. These men went back to the beginning, and they tried to establish a church conforming to the New Testament pattern.

And so, let us be guided by them, as we look at them and as we try to garner certain lessons from them.

## **The Reformation changed the whole course of history**

What, then, happened four hundred years ago? What do we find as we look at the Reformation? I can only give you some headings.

### ***Men of granite***

The first thing that attracts our attention is the men, the men that God used. Look at them, Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart, John Knox, Andrew Melville, John Welsh, and many others. Here are men worthy of the name! Heroic, big men, men of granite! I am an hero worshipper! Think what you like of me, I like to look at and to read of a big man! In an age of pygmies such as this, it is a good thing to read about great men. We are all so much alike and of the same size, but here were giants in the land, able men, men of gigantic intellect, men on a big scale in the realm of mind and logic and reason. Then look at their zeal, look at their courage! I frankly am an admirer of a man who can make a queen tremble! These are the things that strike us at once about these men. But then I suppose that the most notable thing of all was the fact of the burning conviction that dwelt within them; this is what made them the men they were.

### ***The authority of the Bible***

What were these convictions? What did these men believe? What did they teach? What were their characteristics? Here is the first, obviously: their belief in the authority of this Book. The pre-Reformation church was moribund and asleep under a scholastic philosophy that displayed great cleverness, with intellectual and critical acumen. But it was all in the clouds and dealt with vague generalities and concepts, while the people were kept in utter ignorance. The men who did the teaching and the lecturing argued about philosophic concepts, comparing this view with that, and indulging in refinements and minutiae. But, in contrast, the great thing that stands out about the reformers was that they were men who went back to the Bible. They said, nothing matters but this. This, they said, is the Word of God in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, this is not theory, supposition, or speculation, this is the living God speaking to men: he gave his Word to the prophets, they wrote it; he gave it to the apostles, they recorded it; and here it is for us. Here we have something which is in a category of its own, the living Word of God speaking to men about himself, about men, about the only way they can come together and live together. They stood for the authority of the Bible, not for scholastic philosophy.

You see, my friends, the importance of looking back at the Reformation. Is not this the greatest need at the present time, to come back to this Word of God? Is this authoritative or is it not? Am I in any position to stand above this Book, and look down at it and say, That is not true, this or that must come out? Is my mind, is my twentieth-century knowledge the ultimate judge and decider as to the veracity of this teaching? It is since the time, a hundred years ago, when that notion began to creep in, that the church has been going down. But the reformers based everything upon this Book as the Word of God to man, which they were not to judge but to preach. And you and I have got to return to this. There can be no health, there can be no authority in the church, until she comes back to this basic authority. It is idle to talk about this as the Word of God in a sense which still allows you and me to decide that certain things in it are not true! The Book hangs together, the Lord Jesus Christ believed the Old Testament. After his resurrection, he took his disciples through the books of Moses and the Psalms and the Prophets. He says, I am there, let me show you myself there. Read them, why have you not understood them? Why have you not believed all that the prophets have written? That was their trouble, it has always been the trouble of the church in periods of declension, and we must come back to the Protestant reformers' position and recognize that we have no authority apart from the authority of this Word of God.

### ***The sovereignty of God***

In this Book they found also the mighty doctrine of the sovereignty of God, which taught them not to approach their problems in a subjective manner as you and I are prone to do. Their concern was not, how can I get a bit of help, how can I get some physical healing, how can I get guidance, how can I get happiness and peace, how can I get a friend who will help me in my loneliness? No, they saw themselves before this almighty, sovereign God and the one question was, How can a man be just with

God? They bowed before him! They were godly men; they were God-fearing men. God was at the centre of their thoughts, the controller of their activities and their lives. The sovereignty of God! They did not talk much about free will, as I read them, but they knew that God was over all, and he was to be worshipped and to be feared.

### ***The person and work of Christ***

And then there was the great central doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ and his perfect finished work. They did not feel sorry for him as they looked at him on the cross; they saw him bearing their sins, they saw God laying on him the iniquity of us all, they saw him as a substitute, they saw God putting our guilt upon him and punishing him for our guilt. The substitutionary atonement! They preached it; it was everything to them. The finished, complete, atoning work of Christ. They gloried in it! And that in turn, of course, led to the great pivotal central doctrine of justification by faith only.

### ***Justification by faith only***

Now, I may be mistaken, but as I see the contemporary situation, the greatest battle of all, perhaps, at the moment is the battle for justification by faith only. 'Works' have come back! I was reading a religious newspaper a fortnight ago which carried the words 'Saint Gilbert' as a heading to a paragraph. The writer of the paragraph was of the opinion that this man whose Christian name was Gilbert was undoubtedly a saint and we must accord him the name and the dignity of a saint. Then he went on to say this: *'Of course I know that in actual practice he called himself a rationalistic agnostic.'* Though this man Gilbert called himself a rationalistic agnostic, a so-called Christian paper says that nevertheless he was a saint. And they justified their assertion on the basis of his life: he was a good man, he was a noble man, he had high and exalted ideals, he gave much of his life to the propagation of the League of Nations union, and to uplift the human race, he tried to put an end to war, he made protests against war; therefore, the argument goes, though he denied the being of God, though he did not regard the Bible as the Word of God, though he did not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, nevertheless, he was a saint. What makes a man a saint? Oh, his works, his life!

We are confronted again by a generation that no longer believes in justification by faith only. We are told that 'the greatest Christian' of this century is a man (Albert Schweitzer) whose belief in the deity of Christ, to put it at its mildest, was very doubtful, who certainly did not believe in the atonement, whose creed seemed to be what he calls *'reverence for life'* – yet we are told that he is the greatest saint and Christian of the twentieth century! Look at his life, they say, look what he has done; he gave up a great profession and he has gone out to Central Africa, look what he has suffered, look what he has given up, he might be wealthy, he might be prosperous, but he is living like Christ, he is imitating Christ, he has done what Christ has done! You see, it does not matter what you believe. According to this teaching, it is the life that makes a man a Christian. If you live a good life, if you live a life of sacrifice, if you try to uplift the race, if you try to imitate Christ, you are a Christian, though you deny the deity of Christ, though you deny his atonement, though you deny the miraculous and the supernatural, the resurrection and many other things, nevertheless you are a great Christian and a great saint!

My friends, John Knox and other men risked their lives, day after day, just to deny such teaching and to assert that a man is justified by faith alone without works, that a man is saved not by what he does but by the grace of God, that God justifies the ungodly, that God reconciles sinners unto himself. It is all of God and none of man, and works must not be allowed to intrude themselves at any point or in any shape or form. The battle for justification by faith only is on again! And if these celebrations do nothing else, I trust that they will lead us to a rediscovery of the absolute centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith only.

### ***Men of prayer***

The other thing I want to note about them is this: their power in prayer. We must not think of these reformers only in terms of doctrine, though we must start with that. This other thing was equally notable and remarkable about them, they were men of prayer. Did not Mary Queen of Scots fear the prayers of John Knox more than she feared the English soldiers? Of course she did! Why? Because he was a powerful man in prayer. Have you read about the prayer life of John Welsh, the son-in-law of John Knox? There was a man who spent nights in prayer; his wife would wake up at night and find him on his knees almost stone-cold. What was he doing? Praying for the townspeople to whom he was ministering, asking for power, asking for authority. These men, every one of them, were men of great

prayerfulness; they spent hours of their lives in prayer, knowing that in and of themselves, though their doctrines were right and orthodox, they could do nothing. I like to hear that story of another of these men, Robert Bruce. We read that when he was praying with some ministers one day, he felt they were lifeless and dull. He cried to God that the Holy Spirit might come down upon them but nothing seemed to be happening. Then as he began banging on the table they were all conscious of God coming among them and thereafter men spoke of Bruce as one who knocked down the Holy Ghost among them! Is not that the kind of man we need today? Where is the power, where is the influence, where is the authority? These reformers were only men like us but they knew these things. They were men of prayer, who lived in the presence of God and who knew they could do nothing without him.

### ***Real preaching***

This brings me to the last point: their preaching. The reformers re-introduced preaching and they put preaching at the centre instead of ceremonies and sacraments. Yes, but let us remember that there is preaching and preaching. Merely to speak for twenty minutes is not necessarily preaching. Though you may have taken a text and divided it up very cleverly, it is not necessarily preaching. Oh, there is preaching and preaching! What is the test of preaching? I will tell you; it is power! *'Our gospel came unto you'*, says the apostle to the Thessalonians in the First Epistle, chapter 1, verse 5, *'not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance'*. Who had the assurance? The preacher! He knew something was happening, he knew God was using him, he knew that he was the vehicle and channel of divine and eternal grace. 'Much assurance'! And that was the sort of preaching you had from the Protestant reformers. It was prophetic preaching, not priestly preaching. What we have today, is what I would call priestly. Very nice, very quiet, very ornate, sentences turned beautifully, prepared carefully. That is not prophetic preaching! No, what is needed is authority! Do you think that John Knox could make Mary Queen of Scots tremble with some polished little essay? These men did not write their sermons with an eye to publication in books, they were preaching to the congregation in front of them, anxious and desirous to do something, to effect something, to change people. It was authoritative. It was proclamation, it was declaration.

Is it surprising that the church is as she is today; we no longer believe in preaching, do we? There used to be long sermons in Scotland. I am told that the Scots do not like them now, and woe unto the preacher who goes on beyond twenty minutes! Have you noticed how we have less and less preaching today? Instead we have discussion. Let the young people say what they think, let us win them by letting them speak; and we will have a friendly chat and discussion, we will show them that after all we are nice, decent fellows, there is nothing nasty about us; and we will gain their confidence; they must not think that we are unlike them! Was John Knox like one of the people? Was John Knox a matey, friendly, nice chap with whom you could have a discussion? Thank God he was not! Can you imagine John Knox having tips and training as to how he should conduct and comport himself before the television camera, so as to be nice and polite and friendly and gentlemanly? Thank God prophets are made of stronger stuff! An Amos, a Jeremiah, a John the Baptist in the wilderness in his camel-hair shirt – a strange fellow, a lunatic, they said, but they went and listened to him because he was a curiosity, and as they listened they were convicted! Such a man was John Knox, with the fire of God in his bones and in his belly! He preached as they all preached, with fire and power, alarming sermons, convicting sermons, humbling sermons, converting sermons, and the face of Scotland was changed: the greatest epoch in Scotland's long history had begun!

There, as I see it, were the great and outstanding characteristics of these men. What was the secret of it all? It was not the men, as I have been trying to show you, great as they were. It was God! God in his sovereignty raising up his men. And God knows what he is doing. Look at the gifts he gave John Knox as a natural man; look at the mind he gave to Calvin and the training he gave him as a lawyer to prepare him for his great work; look at Martin Luther, that volcano of a man; God preparing his men in the different nations and countries. Of course, even before he produced them, he had been preparing the way for them. Let us never forget John Wycliffe and John Hus; let us never forget the Waldensians and all the martyrs of those terrible Middle Ages! God was preparing the way; he sent his men at the right moment, and the mighty events followed.

### **Lessons**

Shall I try to draw certain lessons for ourselves? The conclusion of all this is that righteousness, and righteousness alone, exalts a nation, and there is no righteousness without a preceding godliness. The

times are cruel; the world is in a desperate plight; there is an appalling moral breakdown before our eyes. Marriage is breaking down, home life disappearing, little children not knowing home and loving parents. It is a tragedy! Can nothing be done? Is there no hope? To me the main message of the Protestant Reformation of four hundred years ago is to point us to the one and only hope. Things were bad in Scotland when God called John Knox and sent him out as a burning flame and the others with him. Our position is not hopeless, for God remains, and with God nothing shall be impossible! The conditions could not have been worse than they were immediately before the Reformation; yet in spite of that the change came. Why? Because God was there and God sent it. So the only question we need ask is the old question of Elisha face to face with his problem: *'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?'* And I want to ask that question now: Where is the God of John Knox? Our commemoration will have been in vain if we do not ask that question. If we stop with John Knox it is not enough; the question is, Where is the God of John Knox, he who can give us the power, the authority, the might, the courage, and everything we need, where is he? How can we find him? I suggest to you that the answer is to be found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in chapter 4, verses 14 to 16. They seem to me not inappropriate as I end.

How can we find this God? Here is the answer: *'Let us hold fast the confession.'* It does not actually mean there, of course, the *Westminster Confession*, though in reality it does! Hold fast the old *Scots Confession*. You will never find the God of John Knox without that. *'Seeing then that we have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast the confession'*. What is the confession? It is the confession about *'Jesus the Son of God'*, our great high priest; the *Scots Confession*, the *Westminster Confession*, the faith of these fathers. We must have it because without it, who dares go into the presence of God? As it is put there in Hebrews 4:16: *'Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace.'* What is the *'therefore'*? The knowledge that we possess, that we have got this great high priest that has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, and that he is *'touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin'*. Where is the God of Elijah? How can we find him? How can we receive the power that we need? We must go back to the confession, go back to the faith, go back to the Word, believe its truths, and in the light of it go with boldness, confidence, assurance, to the throne of grace, to obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. We are living in an appalling time of need, sin and evil rampant; the whole world is quaking and shaking. Is the end upon us? The times are alarming – *'time of need'*. The one thing necessary is to find this God, and there seated at his right hand, the one who has been in this world and knows all about it, has seen its shame, its sin, its vileness, its rottenness face to face; friend of publicans and sinners, a man who knew the hatred and the animosity of the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees, the doctors of the law, and Pontius Pilate. The whole world was against him, and yet he triumphed through it all; he is there, and he is our representative and high priest. Believe in him, hold fast to the confession. Let us go in his name with boldness unto the throne of grace, and as certainly as we do so we shall obtain the mercy that we need for our sinfulness and unfaithfulness, and we shall be given the grace to help us in our time of need, in our day and generation. The God of John Knox is still there, and still the same, and thank God, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Oh, that we might know the God of John Knox!

DM Lloyd-Jones

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Endnote:

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<sup>1</sup> Fifty years ago Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones was invited to address a meeting in Edinburgh's Usher Hall to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Reformation in Scotland. This is an abridged version of that address. See D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times* (pp. 90-105), which is published by the Trust, for the fuller version.