



Lessons from the Reformation

The date of the Scottish Reformation is usually given as the 1st of August 1560. Parliament had been called on 10th July but adjourned to that day for preparations to be made. John Knox preached and public thanks were given to God for His merciful deliverance. The anti-Reformation laws were rescinded. The Scots Confession was accepted by the Parliament on 17th August. Today we thank God for what happened 450 years ago. How different our lives and our nation's life would be if the Romish plans of Mary of Loraine, Mary Queen of Scots, the Guises, Cardinal Beaton, the Pope and many others had succeeded! This issue of the *Free Church Witness* will be devoted largely to celebrating the Reformation. Many lessons are to be learned from the Reformation and in this editorial we will focus on a few of these.

A Nation born in a Day

The sudden nature of the Reformation in Scotland is remarkable. True there was preparation in the 14th and 15th centuries by the preaching of the Lollards, especially in Ayrshire. Then there were the lives, preaching and martyr testimonies of Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart and others. Bibles had come from the Continent. Many bright young men went to study in the colleges of Germany and Switzerland and returned home enthused with the new learning. Knox is often credited with almost single-handedly bringing about this Reformation but most of the preparatory work was done while he was a slave in the French galleys or ministering in Geneva and elsewhere. In contrast with other nations such as England where the Reformation was from the top down, a decision of the King Henry VIII, in Scotland all classes were affected and essentially it was a movement from the ground up. It was not an administrative change but radical heart change. Essentially the Reformation in Scotland was a massive revival of true religion. It was a work of the Holy Spirit. We look around today. We see a nation given over to pleasure and the pursuit of money. Everywhere secularism reigns. There is no fear of God. Churches are liberal, or sacramental, or man-pleasing and most are spiritually dead. Can this change? Remember what God did at the Reformation. Priests and bishops were ignorant and immoral. Scotland was spiritually dark and then God arose and everything changed. We need faith today in an Almighty God, in the powerful working of His Holy Spirit. Why should we not also see a nation born in a day?

No Cross, No Crown

There is no doubting that the 'blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. Many happily laid down their lives in preaching the gospel. One thinks of James Resby, the Lollard, and Peter Craw, the Bohemian, burnt in the 15th Century. There is no doubting the impact made on many by the burning of Hamilton and Wishart. From the time of Hamilton around twenty others died as martyrs, for example, Norman Gourlay and David Stratoun who were burned on Carlton Hill, Edinburgh. Each death made its own impact as people witnessed godly men making the ultimate sacrifice for Christ and His gospel. John Knox and many others also put their own lives on the line. But no sacrifice for the Lord is in vain. God calls His church to witness and endure trials for Him today. He tests the reality of our faith. Christ shed His blood for us and demands that we are unashamed in our stand for Him. A costly stand reaps a rich reward.

Vital Role of Scripture

How was it possible to bring about such a dramatic change in the church? Rome's strength was in her tradition and her unity in the Pope. She claimed to possess the truth and that no salvation was

to be found out with her bounds. Her various beliefs and practices were imposed on all by the authority which she claimed resided in herself. She pretended to have the unanimous consent of the church fathers although they differed greatly from one another. As long as the Church based her teaching on herself or tradition her position appeared unassailable. The Reformers however went back to the roots. They asserted that Scripture was infallible and the only rule, was self-interpreting and that the Holy Spirit illuminated the Bible. This meant that the Church and its priests were bypassed. As the message of Scripture was made known, the Holy Spirit witnessed with its truth to the hearts of men and women and they were saved. The translation of the Scriptures into English, the invention of the printing press able to make many copies and at a reasonable price and the distribution of the Bible through Scotland prepared the way for the Reformation.

Justification by Faith

The great doctrine of the Reformation was justification by faith alone in Christ alone. All men and women are sinners and to a greater or smaller extent feel their own sin and guilt. The Roman Church by means of penances, priests and sacraments tried to deal with this, but the sense of guilt remained. Great sins were mortal and there was no forgiveness. Even those guilty of merely lesser or venial sins were sent to the agonies of Purgatory when they died. There was no assurance of salvation. To people oppressed in this way the doctrine of salvation by faith alone was wonderfully liberating. When accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit it brought true peace, assurance and joy. Let us value this great doctrine and not return to the weak and beggarly elements, to the works salvation, to which many are in bondage.

Moral Purity

More than anything else what undermined the authority of the Roman Catholic Church was the immorality of its priests and bishops. The Church's priests professed to be celibate and took a vow not to marry. Yet Cardinal Beaton, for example, had eleven illegitimate sons and three daughters. His successor Archbishop Hamilton was no better. Laws were brought out against churchmen keeping concubines but they had little effect. The ordinary people could see the wickedness of the lives of those who claimed to be holy and they were disgusted. Surely here we have a lesson for today! If our Christianity does not change our lives it is worthless. People read our lives as well as listen to our words. Nothing reinforces the message we proclaim more than our holy, loving, godly witness.

Education

Education had always had a high place in Scotland. Even before the Reformation there were four universities in Scotland but only two in England. Knox's famous idea was to have a school in every parish, a high school in every major town and the opportunity given even to the poorest student to go to university. *The Book of Discipline* of which he was an author proposed that the wealth of the pre-Reformation church be divided between the maintenance of the ministry, education for all and the care of the poor. Sadly the greedy nobility refused to pass *The Book of Discipline* in Parliament and devised means to acquire the revenue of the church lands for themselves. Nevertheless, the Reformation emphasis on education did bear fruit. Even in 1830 the English universities had less than 3000 students whereas the Scottish ones had 4,400 students. Yet England's population was eight times that of Scotland.

A Full Confession

Today it has become common to develop minimal statements on which to base our fellowship or our membership of a certain organisation. Many feel that we should get rid of, or weaken our subscription to the *Confession of Faith* in the interests of unity with more Christians. However at the time of the Reformation the idea was that the *Confession* should be as wide ranging as possible in order to bring people together in the riches of God's truth rather than on a slender form of words which anyone can sign. The *Scots Confession* is a great summary of the truth. Let us aim

at the fullest of confessions, teach men and women towards that and not retreat from any of the truths taught in Scripture. Let us also remember that the Church of Rome never really changes. It practised all kinds of lies, cruelty and treachery to keep the nations in subjection to it. Our freedom was obtained at the cost of the blood of the martyrs. Let us stand fast for the great truths of the Reformation and never yield an inch to Rome.

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