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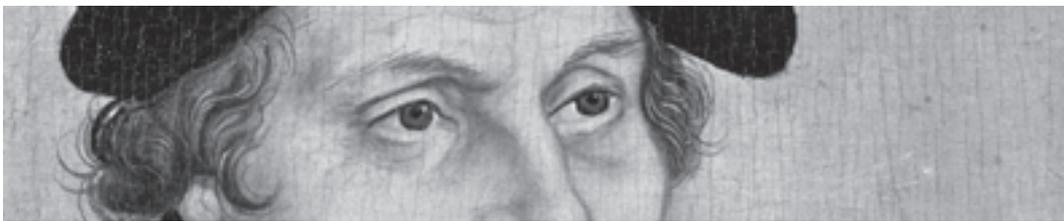
Capturing Jonathan Edwards's Vision of Living in Between

Pages from Church History:

A Guided Tour of Christian Classics

the
REFORMATION

*How a Monk and
a Wallet Changed
the World*



STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

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Almighty God, who through the preaching of thy servants, the blessed reformers, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine forth: Grant, we beseech thee, that knowing its saving power, we may faithfully guard and defend it against all enemies, and joyfully proclaim it, to the salvation of souls and the glory of thy Holy Name; through thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

Prayer for Reformation Day, *Lutheran Service Book & Hymnal*

Almighty God and Father, grant unto us, because we have to go through much strife on this earth, the strength of thy Holy Spirit, in order that we may courageously go through the fire, and through the water, and that we may put ourselves so under thy rule that we may go to meet death in full confidence of thy assistance and without fear.

A prayer of John Calvin

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The final chapter begins by noting the laudable wives of the Reformers. My wife, I can easily say, would rival any one of them. To Heidi I am grateful for everything.

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INTRODUCTION

Historians like dates. And one of the dates that historians like best is October 31, 1517. On that day one monk with mallet in hand nailed a document to the church door in Wittenberg. It contained a list of Ninety-Five Theses for a debate. The immediate concern was an indulgence sale to finance St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and the Sistine Chapel—Michelangelo didn't come cheap. Martin Luther, the mallet-wielding monk, could keep silent no longer. He got much more than a debate, however. He and his list of Ninety-Five Theses triggered a Reformation that would sweep across his native German lands, across Europe, and eventually across the entire world. The world would never be the same. Luther's act gave birth to the Protestant church, now nearly 600 million members strong. Luther's act also brought the world out of medieval times and into the modern age. Little wonder historians like the date of October 31, 1517.

While we like that date, and Luther for that matter, the Reformation is a much broader event than that singular day. To be sure, the Reformation began on that day. The Reformation, however, spanned two centuries and encompassed a cast of characters from a variety of nations. Luther may very well be at the center of the Reformation, but he does not stand alone.

This book offers a look at this cast of characters and what they accomplished for the life of the church. It tells the various stories that make up the one, grand narrative of the Reformation. We move from Germany down to Switzerland, then over to France and back again. We cross the English Channel to see the Reformation in Britain, and we cross the ocean to see the Reformation's impact on the New World. Along the way we meet up with Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel, Menno Simons, and John Calvin. We also meet Thomas Cranmer, Kings Henry VIII and Edward VI, John Knox, John Bunyan, Lady Jane Grey,

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Anne Bradstreet, and many others. While some of these are rather familiar to us, perhaps we are meeting some of them for the first time.

Before we begin our tour, however, it may be helpful to explore why we should even be talking about these Reformers in the first place. So Chapter One begins with a question of fundamental importance: Why does the Reformation matter to us today?

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OLD AND STILL GOING STRONG

Why the Reformation Matters Today

This book is built upon two ideas. First, the Reformation matters. Second, history can be fun. Since you are reading this book, I'm prone to think that you already believe these two points. It might be worthwhile, however, to spend some time on them before we go any further.

"History is bunk," as Henry Ford so famously put it. Newer is better, it has often been said. If conventional and even presidential wisdom is our guide, then the study of history offers little for life in the twenty-first century. On top of that, it's boring—just one relentless repetition of dates after another. But these estimations of history couldn't be further from the truth.

REMEMBER THE EXODUS

History has always been crucial to the people of God. Again and again the Old Testament authors sound the mantra, "Remember." For them, the rallying cry wasn't "Remember the Alamo." It was "Remember the Exodus." Israel was to remember the Exodus, to remember all that God had done for his people in delivering them from bondage in Egypt and in bringing them into the Promised Land. They were to remember the covenant that governed their relationship with each other and with God (see, for example, Exod. 20:2). When something significant occurred in the life of Israel, they erected a monument so they and future genera-

tions would remember what great things God had done for them (see, for example, Josh. 4:1-7). The Israelites did best when they remembered. They flailed and faltered when they forgot. Those who don't know history, as another saying goes, are doomed to repeat it.

History matters no less in the pages of the New Testament. When Christ huddled his disciples one last time before his arrest and crucifixion, he assured them of one precious promise—that the Holy Spirit would come and would help them to remember. He would guide them in remembering and in recording those memories so they would give a true and accurate account of all that Christ did in his life and in his work of redemption on the cross. The Holy Spirit would help them remember and write down for the whole world who Christ was as the God-man and what he did as the Redeemer of his people (John 14, 16).

We see this in the example of Luke and his Gospel. When Luke begins his narrative account of the story, he turns from his profession as a physician to that of historian. He writes to Theophilus:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

For Luke, history mattered. The church depended on it. History mattered to Paul too. He tells us that all of his preaching, indeed Christianity itself, hangs on one combined historical event: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:12-18). For the Old Testament it was “Remember the Exodus,” an event of redemption that prefigured the work of Christ. For the New Testament, it is “Remember Christ and his cross.”

What we learn from all of this is that Christianity isn't a religion of abstraction or of speculative philosophies. God revealed himself in a physical place and in real time. There's no virtual revelation. And the apex of his revelation to his creatures is the incarnate one, the God-man, Jesus Christ, who was born in history, lived in a real place in flesh and blood, and died in plain view. He rose again not in some abstract way but in

reality. He appeared to the disciples and to the crowds (Luke 24), and he ate fish on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias (John 21).

Luke doesn't stop his narrative with the resurrection of Christ. His sequel, the book of Acts, picks up the story with the tragedies and triumphs of the early church. It was of utmost importance to Luke that the church remember how God worked and how Christianity began with a tiny band of desperate disciples. To say that history matters to Christianity is a classic understatement.

THE CLASSROOM OF CHURCH HISTORY

But that's *biblical* history. Of course it matters. What about *church* history? Why should it matter? Or to put it directly, we have biblical history, but we don't need church history. Or to put it even more directly, we have the Bible—we don't need *tradition* too.

While it is true that we must be careful never to confuse biblical history and church history, it is not true that we don't need church history. Further, while it is true that we must always preserve the sole authority of Scripture—which, incidentally, is a Reformation principle—it is not true that tradition serves no purpose. We are not the first Christians trying to make sense of the Bible and trying to proclaim it faithfully and winsomely in the world in which we live. We have guides from the past.

Church history provides us with plenty of examples—good, bad, and even ugly—of Christians from all walks of life and from a variety of contexts who labored to bring their faith to bear upon the world in which they lived. Church history is like one grand classroom focused on living out Christ's final command to his church—to be disciples in the world (John 17:9-21). When we remember the lessons, we tend to do well. When we forget or ignore them, we tend to stumble.

“HERE I RAISE MY EBENEZER”

This line, from the second stanza of Robert Robinson's hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” comes from 1 Samuel 7:10-12. *Ebenezer* means “stone of help.” God “helped” Israel by confounding the Philistine army and defeating them. So Israel would always remember what God did for them, Samuel erected a monument, naming it Ebenezer. The hymn uses this text to stress the impor-

tance of remembering, of looking over the scenes of our life and seeing God's hand at work. As the full line declares, "Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come."

As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel. And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the LORD has helped us." (1 Sam. 7:10-12)

But church history is more than a classroom that keeps us from stumbling. It can also be humbling. "Newer is better" has a certain ring of pride to it. It is as if we are saying we are so much better than those in the past, so much smarter, so much more clever. It is true that technology has advanced and time has marched on. Imagine what Luther would think of our twenty-first-century world. Yet I marvel at what Luther did accomplish. His collected writings in German are over one hundred volumes; the English edition taxes readers at its abridged fifty-six volumes. And he did all that with quill and ink and movable type that took hours on end to arrange. When you look at what Luther accomplished—his books, his sermons, his hymns, his teaching, his founding and building the denomination that bears his name—you might think he lived ten lifetimes. We in our age with everything we have at our disposal should be humbled by these accomplishments.

We are also humbled by the depth of the Reformers' devotion to Christ. We talk much about the spiritual disciplines in our contemporary times, but the Puritans wrote the book on the matter. J. I. Packer likens the Puritans to the great California Redwoods, towering in their spiritual maturity and insight. In some ways we are not standing on their shoulders—we are standing in their shadows. Studying the various figures in church history, and especially the lives of the Reformers, can be a humbling experience, an experience that we, basking in the hubris of the twenty-first century, sometimes desperately need.

Finally, we are not only taught humility, we are also taught about what matters most when we look to church history and the Reformation

in particular. The Reformation was a time of great challenge for those who longed to be true to the Word of God. They debated and wrote. They preached and prayed and were imprisoned. Some gave their very lives for what they believed. This was a crisis moment. In times of crisis, the peripheral and non-essential has a way of dropping off, leaving one with what is central and essential, with those things that matter most.

REFORMATION

The word *reformation* comes from the Latin verb *reformato*, which means “to form again, mold anew, or revive.” The Reformers did not see themselves as inventors, discoverers, or creators. Instead they saw their efforts as rediscovery. They weren’t making something from scratch but were reviving what had become dead. They looked back to the Bible and to the apostolic era, as well as to early church fathers such as Augustine (354–430) for the mold by which they could shape the church and re-form it. The Reformers had a saying, “*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*,” meaning “the church reformed, always reforming.”

THE LESSONS OF THE REFORMATION

The things that matter most to us all center on the gospel. The church simply can’t afford to forget the lesson of the Reformation about the utter supremacy of the gospel in everything the church does. Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, has dedicated his life to bearing witness to the unimaginable horrors and atrocities of the Holocaust. He speaks of the unspeakable. And he does so because humanity cannot afford to forget the lesson of the Holocaust. It is far too easy to forget, especially when forgetting eases our conscience. History, however, compels us to remember. In studying the Reformation, we remember what the church is all about, and we remember how easy it is for the church to lose its grip on the gospel.

If he said it once, Martin Luther said it a hundred times: “The church’s true treasure is the gospel.” Luther lived at a time when this true treasure had been traded for something worth far less. As a monk, he stood in a long line of succession that stretched back through centuries of theologians and churchmen who had heaped up layer upon layer of

extrabiblical teaching and practice, obscuring the church's true treasure of the gospel. Like scaffolding that surrounds and hides the beauty of a building, these layers needed to be torn down so the object that mattered could be seen without hindrance and without obstruction. Luther, with a little help from his friends, tore down the scaffolding, revealing the beauty and wonder of the gospel for the church once again. Luther called his own (re)discovery of the gospel a "breakthrough" (*durchbruch* in German).

In the process he brought about an entire revolution of church life, practice, and doctrine. Many of the doctrines that we Protestants take for granted find their crystallized expression in the thought of the Reformers. Theologians speak of the *Solas*, from the Latin word *sola*, meaning "alone." Usually we list five *Solas*:

- 1. *Sola Scriptura*, meaning "Scripture alone": The Bible is the sole and final authority in all matters of life and godliness. The church looks to the Bible as its ultimate authority.

- 2. and 3. *Sola Gratia*, meaning "grace alone," and *Sola Fide*, meaning "faith alone": Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. It is not by works; we come to Christ empty-handed. This is the great doctrine of justification by faith alone, the cornerstone of the Reformation.

- 4. *Solus Christus*, meaning "Christ alone": There is no other mediator between God and sinful humanity than Christ. He alone, based on his work on the cross, grants access to the Father.

- 5. *Soli Deo Gloria*, meaning "the glory of God alone": All of life can be lived for the glory of God; everything we do can and should be done for his glory. The Reformers called this the doctrine of *vocation*, viewing our work and all the roles we play in life as a calling.

These doctrines form the bedrock of all that we believe, and the Reformers gave these doctrines their finest expression. In addition to the doctrines we routinely believe, the Reformers also laid out for us many of the practices of the church that we take for granted. The church had lost sight of the sermon, celebrating the Mass instead. The Reformers returned the sermon to the church service. In the case of the Puritans in England, they returned it with a vengeance.

Congregations didn't sing in the centuries leading up to the Reformation. In fact, Jan Hus, one of the pre-Reformation reformers, was

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condemned as a heretic for, among other things, having his congregation sing. Luther and the other Reformers restored congregational singing to the church. Knowing this should humble us every time we sing in church. We should offer our heartfelt thanks to Luther, and we should remember what Hus gave for the privilege.

JAN HUS (1372–1415)

Priest and rector of Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, Czech Republic (then Bohemia), Hus was a forerunner of the Reformation. Inspired by the ideas of John Wycliffe, Hus held to the authority of Scripture, a view that led him to challenge many practices of the Roman Catholic Church. He wrote against papal authority and, as Luther would later do in the Ninety-Five Theses, against indulgences. He proposed a Bible translation into Czech, congregational singing, and the preaching of the Bible. For these views he was condemned and martyred. A century later Martin Luther would take his stand for these same ideas.



Jan Hus

The Reformers also revolutionized daily life outside the church. They gave new meaning to work and to various roles—spouses, parents, and children; employees and employers; civic rulers and citizens. Prior to the

Reformation, the only work that really mattered was church work. The rest of life was simply viewed as putting in time.

In the chapters that follow, we'll have much more to say on these doctrines, church practices, and views on life and work. The Reformers have left us a significant legacy on all these matters. Sometimes these are lessons that we still need to learn.

DO WE STILL NEED THE REFORMATION?

So far we have been assuming that the Reformation matters because it serves the church and because it was a most valuable time in the church's life when so many had lost their way. Some, however, have a different opinion of the Reformation's value.

The dean of American church historians, Mark Noll, has recently published a book with a rather provocative title, *Is The Reformation Over?*¹ Noll and coauthor Carolyn Nystrom offer an answer that will be hotly debated. They say, yes, the Reformation is over. This book represents one particular viewpoint that stretches back to another hotly debated document entitled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" (ECT). This document speaks of the newfound unity between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals "nearly five hundred years after the divisions of the Reformation era."²

This approach views the Reformation as a necessary and most helpful corrective of a medieval Roman Catholic church gone quite bad and adrift from the gospel and the authority of Scripture. But times have changed, some argue. Consequently, the Reformation is over. Instead of trumping the Catholic/Protestant distinction, we should seek unity within the church, a unity that attempts to bridge the Protestant/Roman Catholic divide.

In other circles, such as recent movements within the Anglican Church, the Reformation is seen much more negatively. It is seen as the source of division and strife, an unfortunate occurrence in the life of the church, and a sin of the past that must be atoned for. This views the Reformation not as a breakthrough but as a breakdown of the unity of the church, a failure to live up to Christ's command that the church be one (John 17:23).³

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Luther and the other Reformers cast their vote for unity, but not for unity at all costs. The ecumenical spirit of our contemporary age neglects the caution of the Reformers, establishing a Christian unity that is built on the flimsiest theological foundations. Against the current drive for ecumenicism and even for pluralism, the Reformers remind us that unity apart from a solid biblical and theological base builds a grand castle on mere sand.

There are also those within Evangelicalism or Protestantism who look askance at the Reformation. They see the Reformation as causing too many divisions, too many denominations. They don't seek unity across the Roman Catholic/Protestant divide, but they do seek unity within Protestantism. They see the Reformers as classic theological nitpickers, too concerned over minutiae, who unnecessarily split the church. They cringe to think of all the denominations left to us by the Reformation and cry out for unity.

Against all of these challenges to the Reformation, we need to realize that the Reformers saw nothing less than the gospel at stake. We sometimes forget what Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others risked in taking a stand for the gospel. They risked their very lives. Regarding the Reformers' work as nothing more than sowing seeds of unfortunate division shows both little knowledge of and little respect for what they did. They were human, and they had their faults and shortcomings. They sinned, sometimes greatly. But they also, like the imperfect characters of the Bible, were used greatly by God. In other words, the church should be grateful for the Reformation. And in this age of religious pluralism, theological laxity, and biblical illiteracy, perhaps the Reformation is needed more than ever before.

Prior to the Reformation, there were various attempts to reform the church. Some movements addressed issues of church leadership and government, trying to wrest control from the papacy. Other groups tried to reform the extravagance of the church and its pursuit of wealth. Others addressed the lackluster spirituality that was all too prevalent. These movements could put their finger on the problem—they just couldn't arrive at a solution. All of these movements failed where the Reformation succeeded. The reason? The Reformation got to the heart of the matter:

right theology. The Reformers rightly diagnosed the disease, and they rightly administered the necessary cure.

Today we can fall into the same trap as those failed movements that attempted reform. We can put our trust in programs. We can rely on new leadership or the application of innovative management techniques. We can count on moral reform. The Reformation sounds a clarion call of caution to all such attempts. If we as a church don't get it right on the doctrines of the Bible, Christ, and salvation, we'll never head in the right direction, no matter how innovative or energetic or zealous we may be.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF HISTORY

I mentioned that this book is built on two foundational beliefs. We have been discussing the first one, the belief that the Reformation matters. Here is the second: *history can be fun*. I'm almost convinced, with apologies to my colleagues, that history teachers themselves are responsible for history's bad reputation. We have sometimes been so concerned with the vital task of conveying information that we have neglected to see the people we teach about as flesh and blood, as three-dimensional characters. In the quest to convey dates and facts, we have failed to see the people of history in their family roles and dealing with the foibles of life. We have often missed their sense of humor, their sense of wonder at life.

History is only boring if we make it so. In the chapters to follow, I have endeavored to show these Reformers, these towering Redwoods as J. I. Packer calls them, as real people who lived with both feet on earth. I have tried to tell their very human stories.

I once read a review of a biography by the niece of the subject. She thought the biography superb in every way except one. The author failed, she thought, to display her uncle's sense of humor. She commended the author's careful discussion of his life and his insightful take on the complex issues of his thought. But she was always struck by her uncle's sense of humor. And on that count she thought the biography fell short of telling the true and full story of her uncle's life. We must always think of our larger-than-life heroes from church history as human beings. We

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need to see them laughing. As that niece reminds us, until we see them laughing, we really haven't seen them at all.

Of course, life isn't always laughter. Just as we experience in our own lives, these figures faced trials and tragedies. Martin Luther, by all accounts, knew how to laugh. He also knew how to cry. We not only see the Reformers laughing at their own foibles and at the ironies of life—we also see them struck by the trials of illness and betrayal, by the sheer frustration of life's limitations. We learn from their writings and work. We also learn from the example of their extraordinary and everyday lives.

CONCLUSION

We study the Reformation because of what we can learn. We learn of the treasure of the gospel. We learn how easy it can be for the church to lose sight of its value. We learn of the origin of most of the practices of church life that we simply take for granted. We learn what doctrines should matter most. We learn how to proclaim those doctrines in the world in which we live. And we learn about real people, gifted and talented, who also possessed the flaws and limitations of humanity. Above all, we learn from them that our faith and trust lie not ultimately in their lives and in their examples, but in the God-man, Jesus Christ. They all point us beyond themselves to him. Luther said it best: "We are beggars."

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE: FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OLD AND STILL GOING STRONG: WHY THE REFORMATION MATTERS TODAY

1. Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is The Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).
2. “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” *First Things* 43 (May 1994), 15-22.
3. See various documents related to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), such as “The Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine” and “Agreed Statements on Authority in the Church,” available online at www.prounion.e.urbe.it.

CHAPTER TWO: A MONK AND A MALLET: MARTIN LUTHER AND THE GERMAN REFORMATION

1. Portions of this chapter are reprinted from Stephen J. Nichols, “Luther and the Reformation,” *New Horizons* (26:9), October 2005, 3-4.
2. For a fuller discussion of Luther, see Stephen J. Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).
3. For further discussion and a complete text of the Ninety-Five Theses, see Stephen J. Nichols, ed., *Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).
4. *Ibid.*, 35-37, 39.
5. For a fuller treatment of the Reformation *Solas*, see James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines That Shook the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).
6. See his sermon by that title in the book *No Little People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003).