

Reformation Now 2017 – S1: The Move of the Spirit

[1] Introduction

Reformation weekend, what an honour and a privilege!

- Of course, the anniversary (in and of itself) is arbitrary.
- BUT it's helpful to mark the occasion. (Xmas, Easter etc.)
 - **FIRST:** because God uses the Church triumphant to encourage the Church militant.
 - *“Remember those who led you, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” [Heb 13:7]*
 - **SECOND:** because all history belongs to God.
 - *“I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning” [Isa 46:9b-10a]*

So where do we begin?

- It should be simple – an important event, of course we care!
- It should be easy – a familiar event, of course we know!
 - **But if you stop and think about it for a moment, things don't seem quite as straightforward.**

FIRST: because there's so much to say and so much been said.

- Fancy doing some historical research?
 - 149 historical books about the Reformation in 2017 alone.
 - 84 books about Calvin in 2010 alone.
- What about the main players?
 - 13 volumes of Zwingli;
 - 28 volumes of Melancthon;
 - 55 volumes of Luther's works;
 - 59 volumes of Calvin's works.
 - *“Many approach the Reformation in much the same way as medieval travellers approached the vast dark forests of southern Germany – with a sense of hesitation and anxiety, in case what lay ahead should prove impenetrable, or in case they should find themselves hopelessly lost. They are often like explorers venturing into new terrain, unsure what there is to find, at times bewildered by the unmapped wilderness, at others exhilarated by unexpected vistas and valleys.”*
[McGrath, Reformation Thought]

SECOND: because we're not exactly sure why we should care.

- After all, the Reformation was:
 - Messy:
 - Many years, countries, figures.
 - A long time ago:
 - People looked different, thought different, etc.
 - Not always pretty:
 - They were sinners, just like you and me.

I think Reeves & Chester put it best:

“Are the Reformers like embarrassing grandparents? Are they a part of our story we would rather leave behind? Or that we can safely ignore? Or are they perhaps heroes we are content to lionize at a safe distance? The sensibilities of the Reformation can certainly seem strange to modern people. Was Europe really thrown into turmoil by debates over whether righteousness was ‘imputed’ or ‘imparted’, by a declaration that we are right with God or simply by a new power to win God’s approval? Did people really fight over whether we are saved by faith alone or faith and works combined? *Was there really a time when theology mattered this much to people?*” [Reeves & Chester]

I think they hit the nail on the head there.

- We have no problem with messy.
 - Charismatic renewal.
- We have no problem with it being a long time ago.
 - Creeds in Christmas carols.
- We have no problem with it not being pretty.
 - We know about sin.

Our problem is that we struggle to imagine anyone caring so much for Godly doctrine that they were willing to risk their careers, their churches, their platforms, their reputations, their safety, even their very lives – all for the sake of four little words, “Thus Saith the Lord”.

Oh! How desperately, how direly, how deeply do we need men and women like that today! We need them on our streets, in our universities and classrooms, in our workplaces, even in our Churches! THAT’S why we’re here. THAT’S what Reformation Now is all about. Not for our sake – but to plant a flag that’s as much a prayer as it is a protest: HERE I STAND, GOD, I CAN DO NO OTHER!

[2] Celebrating the Reformation as God's Story

And so we return to the same question: **where do we begin?**

- I could give you the history.
 - It's certainly fascinating – like a soap opera!
 - BUT that's not our remit tonight.
 - AND we've made space tomorrow.
- I could make it about the main players.
 - Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Farel, Bullinger, Ursinus, etc.
 - BUT they themselves would rebuke us:
 - “[No] man should measure [the] sublimity [of Christ] by the little measure of my childishness. Rather, I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise higher than I can lead them” [Inst. IV.17.7]

If we make it *primarily* about the history, then the Reformation becomes limp and lifeless – a fascinating footnote, a scintillating essay, all grist for the mill, but not water for the soul.

If we make it *primarily* about its main players, the Reformation loses its very soul and centre – the glorious gospel of grace not towards heroes and champions, but towards helpless sinners whose only refuge is the empty hand of faith.

It is good to familiarise ourselves with the history and sit at the feet of the Reformers. But that would be merely to *commemorate* the Reformation. **We don't want to *commemorate* the Reformation this weekend**; we're not an ecclesiastical funeral parlour! We're not building a mausoleum or erecting a plinth in memory! **NO – our desire this weekend is to *celebrate* the God of Reformation**, to rejoice in the God of Revival, to exult in the Gospel of the Glory of Christ that the Reformation so signaled! The very Gospel that the Reformers poured themselves out for!

For the Reformation – when all is said & done – was God's story. It was the move of the Spirit to shine light into darkness. So THAT'S how we'll begin this evening. With the story of God.

[3] The Glorious Teaching of God Throughout the Ages

“The LORD was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness, to magnify his teaching and make it glorious” [Isa 42:21]

What did Reeves & Chester ask?

- “Was there really a time when theology mattered this much to people?”

There really was – and right here in Isa 42 we see why.

- Godly truth is not disposable.
- Godly truth is not a distraction.
- Godly truth is not destructive.
 - **The truth of God is GLORIOUS.**
 - **The truth of God is MAGNIFIED.**

THIS is what the Reformers saw –

The wisdom and kindness of God revealed across the ages!

A treasure for us to find and savour!

In the OT the treasure chest is unlocked:

- Abraham:
 - Believed God at his word – *“Reckoned to him as righteousness”* [Rom 4:3]
 - **We can have peace with God only by the open hand of faith.**
- Israel:
 - *“It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you”* [Deut 7:7-8]
 - **We’re counted as God’s people not because of anything we’ve done, but simply because God loves us.**
- Prophets:
 - *“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh”* [Ezek 36:26]
 - **God’s power to make it happen.**

In the NT the treasure is given:

- *“But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift” [Rom 3:21-24]*
 - Or in the words of Jesus: **“With man this is impossible, but for God all things are possible”** [Matt 19:25-26]

THIS is what the Reformers saw – the glorious gospel of grace, magnified through all the ages!

Justification by faith, through grace, alone.

- “And we, too, being called by his will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” [Clement, First Epistle Ch. 32]
 - **Whereas ONCE there was no assurance –**
 - Now we can look Satan in the eye: ‘What of it? Tell me more of my sins, for I know the friend of sinners!’
 - **Whereas ONCE we could only hope for a spiritual ceasefire –**
 - Now we have peace with God through Christ Jesus! [Rom 5:1]
 - **Whereas ONCE there was no confidence –**
 - Now, the gates of hell shall not prevail! [Matt 16]

THIS IS WHY: *Articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae.*

[4] At the Reformation’s Root – God’s Love for His Bride

That’s what the Reformers saw.

That’s what they poured their lives out for.

That’s what they spent their lives pursuing.

But Isaiah continues his description – **and here’s what they faced.**

“But this is a people robbed and plundered, all of them trapped in holes and hidden in prisons; they have become a prey with no one to rescue, a spoil with no one to say, ‘Restore!’” [Isa 42:22]

- **Here’s what the Reformers faced** – the same old story.
 - **God’s people, tripped, trapped, imprisoned, in shackles.**
 - “In what darkness, unbelief, traditions and ordinances of men have we lived, and in how many conflicts of the conscience have we been ensnared, confounded and captivated?” [Luther, TT 288]
 - “Christ’s truth, even if it is not driven away scattered and destroyed completely, still lies hidden, buried and inglorious. The poor little church has either been wasted with cruel slaughter or banished into exile, or so overwhelmed by threats and fears that it dare not open its mouth” [Calvin, Preface to King Francis]

“But now thus says the LORD; he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ... [You] are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you” [Isa 43:1-4]

God’s enemies are clever.

They’re cleverer and stronger than you and me.

But to take the bride of God and imprison her is the height of stupidity.

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch” [Isa 62:1-5]

POST TENEBRAS LUX!

If the Reformation was SIMPLY intellectual, if it was SIMPLY political, if it was SIMPLY political, cultural or historical, then we’re wasting our time here. But that’s NOT what we’re doing – we are celebrating the Reformation as a move of the Spirit of God, to preserve the people of God, by the Word of God, to the glory of

God –he will not keep silent, he will not stay still, he will not rest, for we are the precious possession of God, and he will not let us go!

“The righteousness of the Church was hidden and, as it were, buried for a time. ... Though she be plunged under thick darkness... yet she has God for her avenger in heaven. ... He now restores to the Church its name, when he assembled it by the word of the Gospel. This majestic work of God, therefore, ought to confirm [to us] that he will never forsake his Church; and although wicked men tear us to slanders, and beat and spit upon us, and in every way endeavor to make us universally loathed, let us remember that God [will] vindicate us in the world – [for our] names he has deigned to write in heaven”
[Calvin – Comm. On Isa 42:1-3]

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us!