

Neither Reformed Nor Revived

“The Protestant Reformation is the greatest event in Christian history.”

This statement, made in a recent Bible Conference by a prominent author and contemporary church historian, is increasingly the view (whether stated, realized or not) of significant numbers of Christians and leaders who have fled from the apostasy, liberalism, and trivialized Christianity all about us, into the comforts and encouragement of Puritan and Reformed theology. Here are some of the “facts” that encourage and give credibility to this statement.

1. The Reformation eclipses even Pentecost. This can be demonstrated, in that the vitality of Pentecost survived less than a century, while the power and influence of the Reformation has been increasing for over four hundred years.
2. The Reformation has given us a wealth of excellent literature, writings of great men. Pentecost left us nothing but the Bible.
3. The Reformation was a recovery of the Christian church from a state of moral and theological decay and ruin, back to its primitive spiritual life and power.
4. It not only restored the church to its pure doctrine, but also discovered and propagated biblical doctrines which the church had heretofore not known, which doctrines have greatly advanced the kingdom of Christ.
5. The Reformation gave us systematic theology, an orderly arrangement of various doctrines all fitted into a logical order and sequence, making it possible for us to have a comprehensive and exhaustive understanding of the Christian faith.
6. The Reformation gave us concrete creeds, confessions and catechisms, making it easier to define the faith, identify heretics and cults, and which mark out the requirements for membership and fellowship in the church. These are far easier to understand and subscribe to than scripture.
7. The Reformation gave us Calvinism, the apex of excellence in theological systems.
8. The Reformation gave us the “doctrines of grace,” a brief but totally adequate affirmation of the gospel.
9. The Reformation spawned a world of religious educational institutions: Schools, colleges and seminaries, which set up accreditation authorities to assure that they should stay strong in the faith, viable in spiritual life, and correct in doctrine.
10. The Reformation prepared the way for the great 18th century revivals, and the 19th century worldwide missionary movement.

Some of the above statements will be recognized as matter-of-fact . . . assertions commonly known by churchmen, or any informed Christian. Some would seem to be great cause of thanksgiving for the Reformation. Others may sound a bit disturbing, startling, if not outright alarming, after due scriptural considerations, especially in view of the New Covenant.

If the Reformation deserves to be accorded the above reverence in the history of redemption, it was strangely overlooked by the Holy Spirit. Every other major event in the coming Kingdom was prophesied. If the Reformation was the salvation of Christianity it is touted to be, then why is it not even a blip in prophecy?

It is not at all true that the vitality of Pentecost survived less than a century. The spiritual life infused into New Covenant believers at Pentecost is identical with that which flourishes today. It has never weakened, waned, varied, or mutated. A flood of counterfeit Christianity began its fraudulent work in the first century, but the Blessed Spirit came at Pentecost to be with the church forever. If He abandoned it for any period of time, then the Lord Jesus either lied or was mistaken. On the other hand, the unpromised, unprophesied influence of the Reformation does continue and flourish, but there is cause to wonder how much of it is blessing, and how much of it is cursing. There is cause to doubt that an avalanche of “Christian literature” is the unmixed blessing it claims to be. Was God not able to fully reveal Himself, His truth, His will, His salvation to His people millenniums before the invention of the printing press? Are not the Holy Scriptures the plenary inspired word of God? May we improve upon that by our own writings? Was the Roman Church really able to deprive God’s elect people of the truth by denying them the Bible? Were not some of our Lord’s harshest indictments hurled at those Jews who had by the “writing and traditions” of their “great men” set aside the word of God? It is an indisputable fact that the tiny measure of good writings of men are but needles in the haystacks of false doctrine flowing from the religious presses owned and controlled by the Great Whore. If you doubt that, then you haven’t taken a walk through a religious bookstore lately.

How shall we reconcile Matthew 16:18 with the “fallen church” of the Dark Ages? Was this religious monstrosity, stretching corrupt tentacles into every kingdom within its reach on the eve of the Reformation, really all that was left of Christ’s invincible church? Impossible! How should the gates of hell so triumph against the people of our Sovereign Christ? The true church was never in decay, corruption and disrepair. She has always been strong, vital and powerful. We neither have, nor need, the pages of history to prove this. History has no uninterrupted chronicle of her life from the third through the thirteenth centuries for two reasons: She was outlawed by the apostate church, and was forced to operate clandestinely for survival. And she had no access to the means to record

her own history. What the church is told of her during that time was written by her enemies, who spared no epithet to slander and discredit her glory. Which shall we believe, the promise of our Lord, or the revilings of His enemies? No, what happened in the sixteenth century was not a reformation of the living God. She has never needed that, nor ever will.

The word “doctrines” does not appear in the Bible except in a bad sense. Doctrine was simply the teaching and preaching of the early apostles, evangelists and pastors. Any variation from that is referred to as “doctrines” of men or of demons. The word in the plural began to emerge in a positive sense out of controversy. Struggles for power and dominance in the fallen church (which has been tied to civil authority after the third century) brought certain theological differences to the forefront. After considerable (often bloody and brutal) conflict, a “church council” or “synod” settled the dispute by approving a particular view. This view then became a “doctrine.” Thus in pre-Reformation days, there appeared doctrines under the Roman system, such as that of God and Creation, of Man, of the Fall, of the Deity and Humanity of Christ, the Trinity, as well as those of Papal Infallibility, of the Immaculate Conception, Veneration of the Saints and others. With the advent of the Reformation, and the publication of the Bible in the people’s vernacular, Christians were able to read the word of God themselves. What they gleaned from the Bible did not always concur with views approved by the established religious hierarchy. More controversy, more councils and synods, and more doctrines. These various doctrines then were arranged in a system suited to harmoniously relate each individual theological statement to all the others. This is “systematic theology.” These theological statements are then distilled into “Confessions” and “Creeds” which allow each division of Christendom to identify and separate itself from all others. They are incorporated into catechisms which purport to teach people truth by putting to their minds questions, and then to their memories the creedally fashioned answer.

All of this certainly makes for a more informed and educated people. We can more intelligently and cleverly dispute with, not only the false teacher, but also our brother or sister in Christ. But these myriads of meticulously defined doctrines cannot give us life or make us more spiritual. They often become bigger, more important, more relevant, more useful and more sacred in the eyes of their subscribers than the Holy Scriptures themselves, so that people put away the Bible and rely solely upon their confessions and creeds. This amounts to a complete denial of the Reformation’s *Sola Scriptura!* Calvinism may be the best theological system that man has ever devised, but it is still something devised by man. It may be *based* on the Bible (are not everyone’s doctrines based on the Bible?) but it is not the Bible. Nothing is Scripture but Scripture. Nor are the so-called “Doctrines of grace” an adequate statement of either grace or the gospel. Grace is infinitely greater than five polemic statements which emerged from the Synod of Dort. And the gospel is far more than a doctrine of imputed righteousness. Nor does systematic theology answer all the mystery of the word of God. There is an enormous mass of mystery in the mind of God that will not yield to mortal logic. It must continue to lie as it is in the Holy Scriptures. *“Tis mystery all! Let earth adore! Let angel minds inquire no more!”*

The first schools in this nation were Christian schools, begun by devout and godly people. But they had a fatal flaw that absolutely insured their apostasy. The Puritan society was a sacral one, allied with the state and ordered by civil law. When the church walks hand in hand with the secular world, the secular world always pulls the strings. The rules and guidelines may begin well, but ultimately the prince of this world will have the school forsaking Biblical truth for worldly philosophy in order to have worldly accreditation. No matter how orthodox the founding creed, the Trojan horse of accreditation will see that students are taught a lie; and those deluded students will then fill the pulpits of the denomination’s churches. Sadly, that has been the unvarying history of every Christian school. They all apostatize, and take their churches down with them.

The 18th century “revivals” were no more revivals than the “Reformation” was a reformation. The New Covenant utterly excludes the idea of either revival or reformation of the Christian church. *“And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me forever . . . and I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me”* (Jer. 32:39-40). God’s people’s hearts are forever fixed upon Him, and Christ has built an invincible church against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. How, then, can there be a falling away and a reviving of God’s people, or a reforming of His church? The outpourings of God’s Spirit in the 18th century were **evangelistic harvests**, and most of the converts came from the Reformed sector. Far from echoing the sacralism and Covenant Theology of the Puritans, its preaching repudiated it! The theme was, “you must be born again!” Excluded from the state-sanctioned Reformed churches, those evangelists took to the open air and told that generation of sprinkled, catechized, creedal professors that they were all going to hell except they were regenerated by the sovereign grace of God! Jonathan Edwards, for rejecting the Half-Way Covenant and insisting that church members be regenerate, was accused of preaching like a Baptist, and put out of his pastorate. George Whitfield complained that “all of his chickens were becoming ducks,” for Reformed churches lost their stranglehold on Christianity, and people forsook them by the droves, becoming Baptists and Methodists. That spiritual awakening did precipitate a modern period of missionary outreach, but it was (and still is) pale and weak in comparison to the complete evangelization of the known world during the first few decades after Pentecost. This was accomplished without any missionary boards, denominations, seminaries, creeds or societies. Men and women, full of the Holy Spirit, simply went everywhere Divine providence sent them, doing what Jesus said they would, bearing witness of Him!

Now, it has not been my purpose in the above to dishonor those instruments of God used in the Protestant Reformation, or to be ungrateful for the blessing we enjoy through their sacrifices. Nor do I wish to hold in contempt our beloved brothers and sisters who go under the name of Reformed, but to put things in perspective. Too many people, wishing to distinguish themselves from the mass of riff-raff calling itself “Christian,” are strutting under the Reformed banner, unaware of much unbiblical false doctrine and practice that still survives there. Too many have shelved their Bibles and are spouting creeds and wrangling over which is the best Confession. Our Lord will be more glorified, and our ministries better served if we proclaim no creed, but Christ, confide in no book but the Bible, own no excellence or validation except that which God is pleased to give in the power and witness of the Holy Spirit.

