

*“For it is by grace you have been saved,
through faith...not by works”*

EPHESIANS 2:8-9

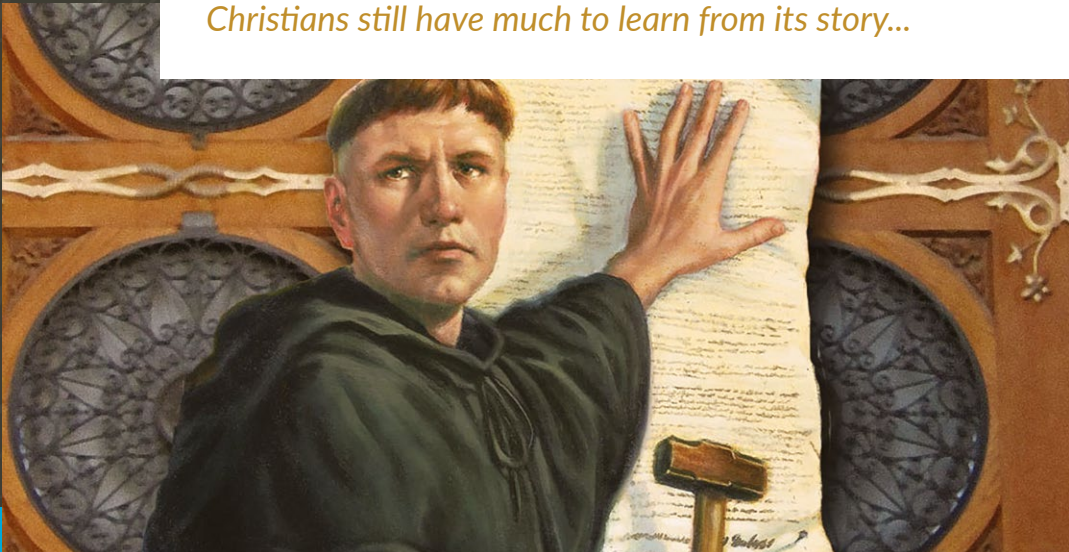
*B*y the early 16th century, Europe was ripe for the Reformation.¹ The Bible was locked up in a Latin translation ordinary people couldn't read. The church offered an intimidating system of ritual and penance to earn salvation.² The 'spiritual' roles of priests, monks and nuns were elevated above everyday occupations. The Pope's church hierarchy was busy hoarding political power and wealth.³

But all this was to be shattered by the new dawn of the Protestant

Reformation. Preceded by the renewed study of the Bible in the decades just before, it was first and foremost a rediscovery of biblical truth.⁴ The good news of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone was proclaimed and embraced across Europe.⁵

The Reformation marks the beginning of the modern era and was “the greatest revival of the Christian church since Pentecost”.⁶

*Today, 500 years since the Reformation began,
Christians still have much to learn from its story...*



🕒 On 31 October 1517 Martin Luther published 95 theses that sparked the Reformation in Europe

Martin Luther

(1483-1546)

EARLY YEARS AND CONVERSION

Full of anxiety over his spiritual condition, the young Luther abandoned his legal studies and became a monk. But the rigours of monastic life were never able to soothe his guilt-racked conscience.⁷



As a lecturer in theology, Luther continued wrestling to find God's favour until, after studying Romans 1:17, he came to see that God freely gives the perfect righteousness he requires, through personal trust in Christ. Luther felt like he "had entered paradise itself through open gates".⁸

The 95 theses

Around that time Luther was angered by the sale of 'indulgences', a practice that offered release from 'purgatory' in exchange for gifts to the church. He argued they cheapened God's grace and bypassed real repentance.⁹

So, on 31 October 1517, Luther nailed 95 theses – points to prompt debate – to the door of Wittenberg Castle church. To his surprise, the document spread like wildfire in Germany and beyond, and provoked opposition in the church.¹⁰



The gulf between Luther and the papacy became wider over the next few months and years as he continued to rely on the sole authority of Scripture to defend his views. He dissented over papal infallibility, the mass, and the meaning of justification.¹¹

These discoveries gave Luther remarkable confidence and also the energy to make them known.¹² A showdown wasn't long in coming...

LUTHER'S STAND AT THE DIET (COUNCIL) OF WORMS

By 1521 the Pope had excommunicated Luther,¹³ who in turn was convinced that the church was radically out of step with Scripture.

The troublesome monk's fate was to be decided by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms. Facing possible execution, Luther bravely made the journey – cheered on by supportive German crowds.¹⁴

The authorities challenged Luther to retract his writings. Aware of the magnitude of his stand, he clearly answered: "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of Scripture or by clear reason... I cannot and will not withdraw anything, since it is neither safe nor right to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."¹⁵

Luther, now a marked man, was whisked away by his sympathetic local prince, Frederick the Wise. In the safety of Wartburg Castle he spent a year writing to equip the emerging reformation in Germany.¹⁶



Luther before the Diet of Worms (1521)

The impact of the Reformation

Beyond Germany, many others took up the work of reformation, and Luther's writings continued to be key. Huge numbers were converted through the recovery of the Gospel, with massive implications for all of life and society.¹⁷

The centrality of the Word of God

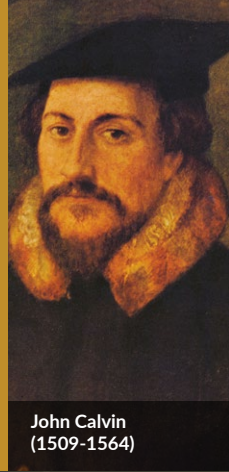
The opening up of God's Word propelled the Reformation.¹⁸ After Worms, Luther promptly set about translating the New Testament, and back in Wittenberg he dedicated himself to preaching and teaching the Bible.¹⁹

In the Swiss city of Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli firmly believed that God's powerful Word can be understood by all – not just the educated. As he preached and trained others, the Bible

became central to life and worship.²⁰

In Geneva John Calvin was primarily a preacher of the Bible and emphasised ongoing reform by the Word.²¹ His sermons and writings on the Bible provided a deep and clear theology to strengthen the church, and have touched every area of our culture.²²

The Reformers brought God's Word to people in Europe in a way that had been unknown for centuries.



John Calvin
(1509-1564)

The authority of Scripture alone

As God's Word, the Bible is completely authoritative and reliable in all it says. Its truthfulness is confirmed in many ways and especially by the Holy Spirit in believers. The Bible clearly reveals what is necessary for salvation, and equips believers for the Christian life. The teaching ministry of the church sits under the final authority of Scripture alone.²³

Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone

All people are cut off from God by sin. There's nothing we can do to earn peace with God. In fact, in ourselves, we don't even want to. But by God's grace Christ took our punishment in his death on the cross, and we have his perfect righteousness imputed to us. This free gift of salvation is received by simple faith alone – faith that God himself gives to believers.²⁴

For the glory of God alone

God has done everything for our salvation – the glory is his alone. God's glory is also the great aim of the Christian life. Having been freely forgiven and brought to know God in his Word, the believer is motivated to worship and live for him. Our high calling is to do all for the glory of God, even if that includes suffering. And we rejoice "in the hope of the glory of God" to come.²⁵

THE FIVE 'SOLAS':

Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus, Soli Deo Gloria

The priesthood of all believers

The Reformation made a huge difference to everyday life. By teaching that every believer is a priest before God it swept away the medieval idea that the clergy were spiritually superior.²⁶ This revolutionised worship services, which were no longer held in Latin and now included congregational singing.²⁷

And crucially, whereas only priests, monks and nuns had 'callings' in the medieval world, the Reformers taught that all the roles of

'ordinary' life are callings from God to be done to his glory. We serve God best not by joining a monastery but as farmers, shopkeepers, teachers or housewives.²⁸ The Reformation also brought a fresh appreciation of marriage and family life as good and godly callings.²⁹

Just as Reformation ideas changed the theological and ecclesiastical world, they also transformed the social and political landscape.³⁰

*"we are all priests before God
if we are Christians"*

Martin Luther³¹

The magistrate and citizen

In opposing the church's pursuit of worldly power, the mainstream Reformers taught that the civil ruler should be free from church control – in contrast to medieval theology.³²

And while some feared that reformation meant revolt, the Reformers denounced mob violence as a way to force change.³³ Calvin wrote that Christians are to be responsible citizens, placing "our neighbour's welfare ahead of our own".³⁴

The Reformation did not get everything right in this area. The fundamental importance of freedom of religion was not understood by many of the key figures.³⁵ This would develop later, as faithful believers worked through the implications of the Reformation's emphasis on going back to the Bible.

Some Reformers were ahead of their time in this respect and, in England, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was a powerful attack on religious persecution.³⁶

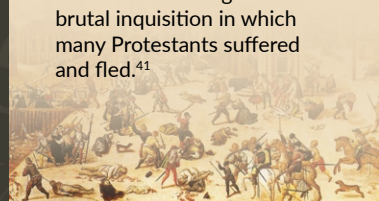
OPPOSITION

During the 16th century the Reformation was established in much of Western Europe and made inroads into Eastern Europe.³⁷ The Reformers' Spirit-empowered work had unleashed the light of God's Word and Gospel.

But the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation soon began in earnest.³⁸ Many of the corruptions in the church were dealt with, but Rome's opposition to Reformation doctrine was boldly asserted and sometimes forcefully imposed.³⁹

In France the growing reformed church – supplied with ministers from Calvin's Geneva – met fierce persecution, including the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572 (below).⁴⁰

In Italy too, Rome was seriously alarmed at the spread of the Reformation. From 1542 it instigated a brutal inquisition in which many Protestants suffered and fled.⁴¹



The Reformation in Britain

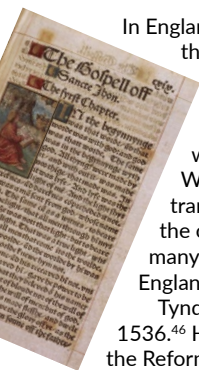
Luther's writings had to be smuggled into Britain but found prepared ground – John Wycliffe had taught many of the same biblical truths 150 years earlier.⁴² Political developments were pivotal to the Reformation's progress in Britain.⁴³

TYNDALE'S TRANSLATION

In England the Reformation initially spread through underground networks, and was in need of an accurate and readable English Bible.⁴⁴

Seeing this priority and working from mainland Europe, William Tyndale masterfully translated the New Testament from the original Greek. Published in 1525, many copies were secretly shipped into England, fuelling further reformation.⁴⁵

Tyndale was executed in Belgium in 1536.⁴⁶ His dying words were a prayer for the Reformation in England: "Lord! open the king of England's eyes".⁴⁷



THE BREAK WITH ROME

In the early 1530s Henry VIII's personal troubles contributed to him forcing a break with Rome. He sought an 'English Catholicism', but the shake-up put many evangelicals in positions of influence.⁴⁸

Cautious reform followed and, in a remarkable answer to Tyndale's prayer, by 1538 every church had to possess an English Bible.⁴⁹ The accession of Edward VI in 1547 saw bold reforms in church theology and practice (e.g. the Book of Common Prayer) led by Archbishop Cranmer. Reformation seemed to be advancing.⁵⁰



MARTYRS UNDER MARY

When 15-year-old Edward died in 1553, his Roman Catholic half-sister Mary I quickly restored the link with Rome and began a brutal purge of Protestants. Almost 300 were burnt at the stake by 1558.⁵¹

But such public executions drew sympathy. Before hundreds, Cranmer offered his 'unworthy hand' to the fire, in repentance for his written recantation. Other martyrs openly declared their hope of God's mercy towards the nation.⁵²

During the relative freedom of Elizabeth's long reign (1558-1603), England became firmly Protestant.⁵³

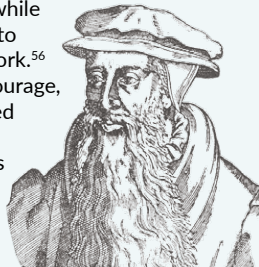


KNOX

In Scotland the Reformation church was a persecuted minority.⁵⁴ John Knox was one of those who fled, forging strategic links with English and European Reformers.

His return to Edinburgh in 1559 coincided with a revolt by Protestant nobles against the Catholic, French-backed monarchy.⁵⁵ This saw persecution end, but the real battle had only just begun. Knox fought for the building of a faithful church in place of the old, while Mary Queen of Scots tried to silence him and undo his work.⁵⁶

Knox's resolution and courage, and especially his Spirit-filled preaching, were absolutely central to the Reformation's growth and survival in Scotland.⁵⁷



Lessons for today

Scripture our ultimate rule

The Reformation emphasised that God speaks with authority and clarity in his Word. This emboldened the Reformers to stand against the consensus in their day. We too need to be shaped by the unchanging Word of God and not conformed to the world's values.⁵⁸

Whether on the definition of marriage, the sanctity of all human life or the distinctions between male and female, God's perfect Word is clear and should be our guide and rule.



The greatest need

As in Reformation times, every person's greatest need is God's free gift of salvation in Christ, received by faith alone. But nobody will recognise this need until they see the reality of their sin.

Naming the particular sins of our age and proclaiming the uniqueness of Christ as Saviour are both unpopular in a society that rejects objective truth.

Yet we must boldly declare the whole Gospel – and vigorously defend the freedom to do so.

Living to the glory of God

The Reformation recovered the magnificent truth that all of life is to be lived for the praise and glory of God. Certainly, God is wonderfully glorified in our salvation and worship.⁵⁹ But that's not all.

Freed from earning our salvation, as believers we are called to live for God in whatever we do. This

transforms tasks we might otherwise see as insignificant. In this sense, there is to be no division between 'ordinary' and 'spiritual' activity: "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God".⁶⁰

As servants of Christ, we are to treat all of life – not just our 'church life' – as an arena

to glorify God.⁶¹

So we must aim for God's glory in our work, whatever that is and whether it is paid or unpaid. We carry out our family roles "in the Lord". And in wider society we honour God as we love our neighbours as ourselves and submit to rulers as his servants.⁶²



References available at christian.org.uk/reformation-ref