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The Glorious Legacy of the Protestant Reformation

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage, Galatians 5:1.

The third of four messages preached 20 years ago, in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church by the then minister, Rev Ivan Foster, to commemorate the glorious Protestant Reformation

Nearly 500 years have passed since the beginning of that remarkable occurrence we call the Protestant Reformation. Such a distance in time permits us to examine thoroughly the effect of that great spiritual and social upheaval.

The sacred record of the gospel's impact upon the city of Samaria (Acts 8:5-8) ends with a wonderfully expressive statement. And there was great joy in that city. That was the legacy that was left behind after a time of spiritual blessing. What was left behind in Europe after the Reformation had taken place? To answer such a question fully would require volumes of historical data and comment. To answer it in the course of a sermon requires us to concentrate upon one central aspect of the effects of the Reformation.

The Lord Jesus summed up His purpose in redemption in the familiar words of John 8:32 & 36. And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. Freedom follows the Son of God. The life that He touches by His grace and power is brought into glorious liberty. The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound, Isaiah 61:1.

Was that effect observable in the countries reached by the Reformation? Without a doubt, I believe that it may be justly stated that the legacy of the Reformation, in the countries of Europe where it was welcomed and received, was spiritual freedom. The yoke of bondage that had chafed both the souls and the shoulders of myriads, for many centuries, began to be thrown off, as the light of God's Word penetrated the thick mists with which the superstitions and deceits of popery had enveloped the nations. The message of the Bible is summed up in Micah 6:8. He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? Such truth could only emancipate and benefit men and it did.

Bondage

If Christ came to give freedom then mankind is in bondage. All men are born servants and slaves of sin. But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness, Romans 6:17-18. Here is the past and the present of the true child of God. They were servants (doulos, slaves) to the lusts of their depraved nature and served them until Christ delivered them by the power of His grace, regenerating them and making them new creatures who desired and sought after holiness. For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works, Titus 2:11-14.

Where there is true freedom, there the Son of God is to be found ruling and reigning in the hearts of men, for in His service is perfect freedom. Europe emerged from the bondage of superstition, from the slavery of ignorance and from the yoke of the dread of an unknown eternity, as the gospel of the Son of God passed through the lands bringing light, life and liberty.

The unfettering of men's souls and minds from the dark yoke of popish superstitions was seen immediately



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in the moral and social affairs of men. While a Saul may be turned into a Paul in a very short time, it takes longer for a nation to be altered in its habits and ways, even when large numbers of its people have been altered by the grace of God. The affairs of an individual life may be reformed much more quickly than the moral and social and administrative structures of a nation. The decision of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8) to change his life, as a result of the workings of the grace of God in his heart, took little time to effect in comparison to the decrees of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3:29) or Darius (Daniel 6:25) or Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1). Nevertheless, the nations of Europe began immediately to change and that despite the stout opposition that wicked men mounted against such changes.

There were wars in the wake of the Reformation, but they were not the fault of the Reformation. While we do not contend for the sinlessness of the reformers, we do contend that the evil events that followed the Reformation were very much the consequence of the resistance of wicked men to the rule and reign of Christ through His Word. The Reformation was no more to blame for the harmful upheavals and the wars that followed in its wake than were the apostles for the rioting and civil disorder and bloodshed which often followed their preaching. In the days of the apostles and in the days of the reformers, dark forces were at work to hinder and crush the gospel witness. As vile men laid false accusations regarding their ministries against the apostles (Acts 17:5 etc.) so false and slanderous accusations were laid against the reformers. So firmly has the 'mud' stuck, that all that many know of the Protestant reformers are the lies their enemies told against them!

Dear Christian, recall your own conversion. Allowing for mistakes that may have been made, were the difficulties, that many of you encountered, the result of you being opposed by good people as you embarked on an evil course, or was it the result of blind sinners opposing you as you sought to obey the Lord? Your answer is in itself an explanation of the evil upheavals that followed the Reformation.

I wish to take my text and speak upon Liberty — the glorious legacy of the Reformation.

Our text sets out:—

I. THE AUTHOR OF LIBERTY

The liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free. Christ is the One Who sets men free.

1. He purchased our freedom with His blood. Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many, Matthew 20:28. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation, Revelation 5:9.

2. He leads us to freedom by His Word. And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free, John 8:32. The charge given to Paul as a preacher of the gospel to sinners was to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me, Acts 26:18. Under the instruction of God's Word, a sinner finds life and is led into liberty. As it was in the night of the passover in Egypt, when Israel began a journey that led them to the freedom of the promised land, so everyone who has sought refuge under the Saviour's blood has likewise begun a journey of increasing freedom which will end in the light of freedom's perfect day. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day, Proverbs 4:18.

3. He keeps us in freedom by the grace of His Spirit. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty, 2 Corinthians 3:17. In surrendering to His leading we are led into further liberty. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death, Romans 8:2. Let us yield to the rule of God's Holy Spirit and we will find Him to be a guide to liberty from the power and dominion of sin. Truly, if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed, John 8:36.



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II. THE NATURE OF LIBERTY

It is a spiritual liberty. It is a liberty of the soul, the spirit, the heart, the mind. Thus we find those who were under physical bondage enjoying this liberty while still slaves. Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather, 1 Corinthians 7:21. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus, Galatians 3:28. Thus, those imprisoned for Christ, those slain for Christ, still enjoyed their liberty. Who was more free on the day that Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were burned, by the orders of 'Bloody' Queen Mary, than the two men amidst the flames? The words of Latimer to his friend show the spiritual liberty of mind and soul and spirit they were enjoying. Who but a man with an unshackled spirit and mind could utter those memorable words at such a moment? "BE OF GOOD COMFORT, MASTER RIDLEY, AND PLAY THE MAN: WE SHALL THIS DAY LIGHT SUCH A CANDLE, BY GOD'S GRACE, IN ENGLAND, AS I TRUST SHALL NEVER BE PUT OUT."

1. It is a freedom from the condemnation of the law. There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit, Romans 8:1. The hymn writer put it well. "The wrath of a sin-hating God with me can have nothing to do. My Saviour's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view".

2. Free from the power of sin. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace, Romans 6:14. The word dominion means lordship. Sin no longer rules and reigns. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death, Romans 8:2. The believer is not left to try and forge a path of holiness through the undergrowth of his own entangling corruptions, but rather he is led in a plain path of triumph and victory over sin. Again, picture the scene of Israel leaving Egypt and walking through the Red Sea unmolested and dryfoot. Such may be our walk of triumph over sin as we yield to the Spirit's leading.

3. Free from the fear of death. Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage, Hebrews 2:14-15. Death holds no terror for the child of God. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better, Philippians 1:23. Here is no fear but rather joyful longings for Christ and home. For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death, Psalm 48:14. The child of God has a friend in life and in death. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me, Psalm 23:4.

III. THE THREAT TO LIBERTY

We may become entangled again. The yoke may be slipped upon our shoulders again and we may find ourselves once more bound and fettered.

1. There is a threat to our national liberty. It is posed in the rise of Romanism, through the flood gates treacherously opened by those who have deceitfully gained positions in churches which profess to be Protestant. These deceivers are using their positions to promote the cause of false ecumenism and its goal of union with the stronghold of present-day antichristianity, the Church of Rome.

Such a deception has been given great impetus by the continued presence amongst such churches of those who profess faith in Christ and his Word. Such continued disobedience on their part helps conceal the true nature of ecumenism.

2. There is ever the threat to our personal freedom. It is posed by our old enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil. The child of God is commanded to remain separated from sin. Failure to obey that command results in a loss of liberty. Was this not what happened to Samson and to David, to name but two of the many whose follies are recorded in God's Word, in order to serve as a warning to us who follow? Pride presses us to think ourselves secure and untouchable and free to engage in sin. Those who are so deceived



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end up like the church of Laodicea of whom it was said by Christ: Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, Revelation 3:17. Pride and carelessness are the snares that we must avoid if we are to maintain our personal liberty.

IV. THE PRESERVATION OF LIBERTY

We are commanded to stand fast in the liberty. That means we must exercise our liberties, we must make use of the benefits we have in Christ or else we will lose them. Many a person has lost a property by allowing others the uninterrupted use of the property. When the owner sought to occupy it for himself he discovered that such an attitude had, under the law, caused him to forfeit all claims to the property. Neglect the liberties that are ours in Christ and we shall most surely lose them. When God sees His blessings despised and discarded, He removes them from such a people. Let us stand fast then in the liberties which we presently enjoy.

1. Stand fast in prayer. And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint, Luke 18:1. Pray without ceasing, 1 Thessalonians 5:17. The blessed art of praying is forgotten through neglect in many homes and fellowships. It has become perfunctory and mechanical. Does this not constitute a loss of the blessed liberty we have to come with boldness before God's Throne of Grace? I sadly think it does.

2. Stand fast in the Word. Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle, 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Again, neglect has cost many the Word of God in its purity. New versions of the Bible have come into vogue and Christians, careless and indifferent, have blindly swapped their old faithful versions for the new unfaithful translations such as The New International Version. I believe that a lover of God's Word, one whose delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night, will not yield up his Authorised Version of the Holy Scriptures, but will see it as a blessing from heaven and that which Providence has signally approved over the centuries since its publication.

3. Stand fast in service. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not, Galatians 6:9. It is the gospel labours of the child of God within the nation that keep it and preserve it from the weeds of immorality.

Villages

The decline in evangelical witnesses in our villages, towns and cities has resulted in the present over-running of every aspect of our society by impurity. Retreat is the order of the day in so many evangelical circles. It must be halted. It is only as efforts, like those undertaken by George Whitefield and the Wesleys, are engaged in, that we are able to see the onslaught of sin repelled and a recovery of any measure of decency. Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven, Matthew 5:13, 16.

4. Stand fast in contending. Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. We must man the ramparts and seek to resist the enemy's attack upon the truth of God.

Separation

Christians should not be part of a denomination or fellowship where attacks upon God and His Word are mounted. They should leave as God's Word instructs us to do. Neither should we remain silent when voices are raised in opposition to Christ, irrespective of who may be offended. It was the protests of our forefathers which preserved for us the gospel. Had they been silent, today would find us slaves of ignorance and folly.



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Remember that contending for the faith and keeping ourselves pure from sinful contamination is ever linked with the winning of souls. A love for the souls of men will motivate us to seek to preserve God's Word for the present and future generations. The words of Jude at the close of his epistle bring this clearly to us. But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen, Jude 20-25.

Amen and amen.