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The Essential Character of the Protestant Reformation

"I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD," 2 Chronicles 34:15.

The first 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

In this, the first of a planned series of messages commemorating the 16th century Protestant Reformation, I wish to speak upon the character of that great movement which embraced all of Europe and which, to this day, still exercises a profound impact upon the life of our nation.

When I think of that great time of blessing, I am deeply ashamed of the image that Protestantism has today in our land and throughout the world. Much of what is considered Protestantism would be utterly repudiated by the Reformers.

The murder campaign waged by loyalist gunmen here in Ulster is, in the eyes of many, the action of Protestants. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The mindless hatred that is so often featured as an expression of Protestant views is likewise far from being in any way representative of the spirit of Protestantism.

The time-serving politicians of Ulster are seen by many as representatives of the thinking of true Protestants. How saddening that is for any with an understanding of and love for the doctrines of the Reformation.

Ecumenism

What will I say of the ecumenical ministers, the false prophets, who have disguised their wolfish character beneath a sheep's fleece? They manage to present Protestantism as being all it ever sought to overthrow, all it repudiated and opposed even unto blood. They have reconciled Popery and Protestantism, they have married the truth to the lie. They are the greatest source of shame and grief to the lovers of Bible truth.

None of these considerations moved the Reformers to act as they did, nor did anything of the aforementioned activities characterise the great work that they led.

Revival

The Reformation was nothing less than a great revival of true religion, resulting from a glorious out-pouring of God's Holy Spirit upon the preaching of His Word in a number of European nations in and around the same period of time. It was a time akin to the apostolic age when, instead of apostles, we had reformers raised up to lead the work of God.

In our Bible reading, 2 Chronicles 34, we have a reformation set forth. It is, in all essential details, a parallel to the Protestant Reformation since all movements of the unchanging and unchangeable Spirit of God are essentially the same in character. The Lord has said of Himself: I am the LORD, I change not, Malachi 3:6. The character of all His dealings with men never changes. The story of Josiah's reformation will provide us with information about the 16th century Protestant Reformation.

I. THIS REFORMATION BEGAN WITH THE REDISCOVERY OF THE WORD OF GOD

I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD, verse 15.

The treatment of the Word of God by a nation or an individual tells much about their spiritual state.

1. The Word of God was lost. The finding of the book by Hilkiyah the priest indicates that it was lost. It was lost also in the days prior to the Protestant Reformation. Copies of it were laid up in monasteries and church-



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es, but as a revelation of God's will and purpose it was effectively lost to the people of the world. Europe lay enshrouded in a blanket of gross spiritual ignorance. Popes and peasants, princes and prelates engaged in the practice of wickedness that rivalled the activities of the darkest ages the earth has ever experienced.

Is not the Bible lost today? It has not ceased to exist but it is lost. It is out of sight and forgotten. Once it spoke to such an extent that it moulded the mother tongue of this nation. Above all, it taught men right and wrong. Today, I dare to say that the average teenager in Ulster is as ignorant of the Word of God as if it had ceased to exist at all. Few families conduct family devotions. Few individuals read carefully the Word of God. It is, in truth, lost to the nation.

2. Its influences have ceased in national life. A consideration of the top ten news stories, any day of the week, any week of the year, presents us with abundant evidence of the absence of Bible morality. Murder, the torture and slaying of the most innocent and weak, the grasping after wealth by any means possible, abortion — these things mark a nation that has lost the Word of God.

3. Even in God's house it is lost. This is saddest of all. Many professing believers rarely read the Bible in a systematic and searching fashion. It lies on the parcel shelf of cars, in dressing table drawers — neglected and lost. It is lost to many pulpits. Preachers who would be classed as fundamental present the shallowest of expositions of the truths of the Bible. Their theology orbits around a few well-known texts which they fail to explain fully and expound. "Daily Readings" type sermonettes have taken the place of the weighty words of our pulpit predecessors.

II. ONCE THE WORD OF GOD RE-EMERGED IN THE NATION, IT AFFECTED ALL WHO CAME IN CONTACT WITH IT

The king, his court, the people — all were affected by the Word of God.

1. The effect was radical. The changes it initiated were above human contrivance. The Word of God elevated the thoughts of the people above that of which the depraved mind of man is capable.

The king demonstrates for us just what happened to those who were touched by the Word of God. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the law, that he rent his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiah, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Abdon the son of Micah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah a servant of the king's, saying, Go, enquire of the LORD for me, and for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do after all that is written in this book, verses 19-21.

Here are the marks of true repentance. How Josiah's actions contrast with those of Ahab when he heard the Word of God proclaimed against his sins. And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly, 1 Kings 21:27. Ahab's response was an outward response, lacking totally in any brokenness of heart. Josiah's reaction was one of genuine repentance for he sought the Lord in prayer.

Many of you here have heard words from this preacher that ought to have had you crying out in agony of soul. No one could fault a sinner who, upon hearing that he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned (Mark 16:16), rent his clothes in agony of soul. The unconverted man or woman, boy or girl, is drifting day by day to an eternal hell. Truly, great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out upon those who die without Christ. Ought not this solemn, dreadful truth to have brought a reaction from you, sinner, akin to the reaction of Josiah when he heard the message of God's Word?

2. The effect was personal. The king demonstrates this. He humbled himself before God for his sins, verse 19. He sought the Lord in prayer, 21, 26-27. This is what happens to sinners in revival. Religion takes on a personal aspect. We are no longer merely a face in a congregation but in revival we become individuals conscious of standing alone in the presence of the Almighty God. Thou God seest me, Genesis 16:13. Such



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is the overwhelming sensation of the soul in a day of revival and true reformation. The sinner becomes conscious of the omniscience of God. For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings, Proverbs 5:21.

3. The effect was national. It was a movement that spread out from the palace into the streets and homes of the nation, 31-33. Within a short period in the 16th century, the Word of God had penetrated into the most remote corners of Europe, and nations of men were faced with the solemn truth of a God Who dealt with sinners on an individual basis and not through priestly or monkish intermediaries. Everywhere, men began to see that there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 1 Timothy 2:5. Direct dealings with God through Christ was a truth brought home to the hearts of many, as a result of the rediscovery of the Word of God and its proclamation in Europe some 500 years ago.

4. The effect was beneficial. Apostasy, with all its resultant wickedness such as sodomy and murder, brings a nation no joy or advance. Singing and joy were reintroduced to the house of God as a result of the rediscovery of God's Word. And the singers the sons of Asaph were in their place, according to the commandment of David, and Asaph, and Heman, and Jeduthun the king's seer . . . And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, 2 Chronicles 35:15, 18. It should be noticed that the singers and the singing were those ordained of God under the hands of His servants David and Asaph. A consciousness of the absence of joy in the worship of God today has prompted some to ape the ways of the world and introduce the sound of the music of Hollywood. Many so-called services are but religious versions of television performances. This is not of God. This is neither an expression of true spiritual joy nor will it induce true joy. True joy results from the revealing to the soul by the Holy Spirit of the bountiful mercies of God through Christ toward poor sinners, as they are set forth in God's Word. The fountain of true joy has its origins within the pages of God's Book.

III. THE ULTIMATE CONSEQUENCE OF THE BOOK'S INFLUENCE WAS DELIVERANCE FROM JUDGMENT FOR JOSIAH

Hear what God said unto Josiah, following his repentant reaction to the message of the Book of the Law found by Hilkiah. Behold, I will gather thee to thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace, neither shall thine eyes see all the evil that I will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same. So they brought the king word again, 28. This same message of mercy and assurance of hope is given to every repentant sinner who believes the gospel.

1. He had assurance of peace with God. Josiah would die in peace, undisturbed by the judgments of God that would be visited upon the sins of the nation. Such is the sweet promise made to all who bow before the message of God's Book. They find peace with God. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, Romans 5:1. Peace with God through justification through Christ's blood— were these not the watchwords of the Protestant Reformation? They were the experiences of Josiah and all who obey God's Book as he did. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life, John 5:24. So said the Son of God.

2. He had escape from judgment. He would not see the judgment that would befall the nation. As Lot was taken out of Sodom before the fire fell, even so would Josiah be taken away by the Lord to Paradise before the judgment fell upon rebellious Judah. This is the portion of all who hear and heed the Bible. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked, Psalm 91:8.

The Book of God presents you with the way of peace with God and of escape from wrath to come. It points to Christ and Christ alone. May you find the Book that is lost and may the experience of Josiah, and of the countless millions in the great Reformation and in the intervening years, be your experience as you repent and believe the gospel now.