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The Timeless Relevance of the Protestant Reformation

"And the LORD of hosts shall stir up a scourge for him according to the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb: and as his rod was upon the sea, so shall he lift it up after the manner of Egypt," Isaiah 10:26.

The final message in a series commemorating the glorious Protestant Reformation, preached 20 years ago, on November 3rd, 1996, in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church by the then minister, Rev Ivan Foster.

In our text, there is a demonstration of the unchanging nature of God and of His mode of operation. This is a prophecy of the destruction of the Antichrist, given by the Lord through Isaiah some 750 years before the birth of Christ. The Lord states that He shall act against the Antichrist as He acted against the Midianites, some 1250 years before Isaiah's day, and as He acted against the Egyptians some 250 years prior to that. Three thousand two hundred and fifty years and three thousand five hundred years respectively have passed since the two incidents mentioned in our text and yet more years will pass before the prophecy is fulfilled, but when God acts in fulfillment of this prophecy, it will be in a display of very, very old-fashioned power. The lesson that we draw from this is that God has not changed nor will He ever change. As He acted in the days of Pharaoh, in the days of Gideon, so He will act in the end of this age when He puts down Antichrist and his minions.

This being so, the Bible's record of God's words and dealings with men is of unique and timeless relevance. The record of His dealings with mankind that is contained in the uninspired writings of men, while not to be trusted and obeyed unquestioningly, nevertheless provides us with a record from which we may learn much about heaven's purpose for this world.

With this in mind, we turn to the records that we have of the great Protestant Reformation and recognise them for the valuable source of information on the purpose of God that they are.

Tonight I wish to suggest to you that the history of the Protestant Reformation provides us with :—

I. A TIMELESS INDICATION OF THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN

Humanity in Europe at the beginning of the 16th century had returned to its instinctive and natural mode of behaviour — that of wickedness. At the close of the 1st century, we see the gospel of Christ entering Europe from Asia, bringing with it the spiritual and social changes which are clearly demonstrated for us in the accounts of the missionary journeys of Paul in Acts. What happened under his ministry continued under the ministry of post-apostolic preachers, as the Word of God was taken into the nations of the world. The spread of the gospel is indicated in Rom 15:24 & 28. Whosoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company. . . . When therefore I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain. Here are signs of the westward advance of the gospel within 35 years of the Saviour's crucifixion and within the lifetime of the first generation of New Testament believers.

The 5th century record of Patrick's ministry in Ireland, contained in his own extant testimony, gives us some idea of how nations came under the influence of the gospel and were radically changed. By Patrick's day, many errors were beginning to creep into the church but, nevertheless, a great measure of gospel truth was being preached amongst the nations of Europe some 400 years after the apostles.

Yet when we come to the beginning of the 16th century, it is as if there never had been any gospel preached in Europe! Man, through disobedience and rebellion, had reverted to his natural state.

1. What is man's state before the gospel brings him light and salvation? Paul gives us the answer in Ephesians 4:17-19. This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of



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God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. This is natural man under the microscope of God's Word. Here is the heart, the mind, the soul of every unconverted person to whom I am speaking. His understanding is darkened; he is alienated from God; he is ignorant and blind; he is given over to lasciviousness and uncleanness! This is what man was like in Paul's day; it is what he is like today and it most certainly was what he was like at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the lands of Europe.

2. Man will return to that natural state should the restraint of the gospel be removed. Romans 1:20-32 provides us with the tragic and shameful consequences of the inclinations of unrestrained man. The direction is downward and hell-ward. Uncultivated nature provides us with a vivid illustration of the spirit of sinful man reverting to corruption when released from restraint. Just as a field, once under fruitful cultivation but for a long time neglected, returns to producing weeds and briars, so Europe had reverted to its heathen darkness of pre-christian days. The heathen terminology of the pre-christian era had not returned. No! The language of Christianity was still employed, but the practices of the people and the theological essence of the religion they professed was that of paganism.

Man had indeed reverted to nature.

The Protestant Reformation provides us with :—

II. A TIMELESS MANIFESTATION OF THE MERCY OF GOD

The lifting of man out of the depths of the sin, into which he had sunk once more, was a manifestation of the changeless mercy and grace of God. Man would remain in a state of sin but for God. The Evolutionist tells his disciples that man is on an upward journey from a former animal state. Do the increasing number of victims of robbery, brutal violence, terrorism, rape and child-molestation really believe that man is on an upward spiral? Far from rising above his former station and practices, man is sinking down. He ever demands more licence to sin; more freedom to indulge in gross immorality. Laws restraining corrupt habits are being revoked or liberalised and such campaigns for change are supported by the supposed wise and great!

Man is not rising upward but, true to his nature, is sinking downward, having turned his back upon the sanctifying influence of Christ and His Word.

If man is to be elevated to a higher level it is by God's grace and mercy alone that it will be accomplished. The Protestant Reformation demonstrates how this is done.

1. God's working amongst men in mercy was according to grace. The prophets and the apostles all taught this to be so. Please read the following Scriptures — Ezekiel 16:8-14, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Ephesians 2:1-10. Are not the marvellous deliverances described in these verses all of God?

Where were the deserving nations in Europe? Did Germany deserve the blessing bestowed upon it under Luther? Did Geneva deserve what heaven bestowed under Calvin and Farel? What of Scotland under John Knox and England under its many great reformers? Were they more deserving than other nations? No! The mercy of God bestowed upon these nations was of the outworkings of sovereign grace.

2. God's mercy was free. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, Romans 6:23. Eternal life is a gift from God. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast, Ephesians 2:8-9. Thus the reformers preached the astounding message. This was in contrast to the peddling priests of Rome who sold religion, who made a merchandise of the mercy of God and pardon for sin. Such peddling is still the chief employment of Rome's priests.

3. His mercy was abundant. Nothing that springs from a perusal of the records of the Reformation is more evident than this. What abundant mercy was displayed in those glorious years of heaven's power! It



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was abundant both in its application to individuals and in the extent of its outreach amongst the nations. Multitudes of the most depraved were lifted from the darkest depths and brought into the kingdom of God. Hannah's song must have been often repeated in those wonderful times. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory, 1 Samuel 2:8.

Again, the history of the Protestant Reformation provides us with :—

III. A TIMELESS REVELATION OF THE PROPENSITY OF SATAN

As we saw in our last study of the reformation times, the enemy, Satan, had come in like a flood. If we examine Europe at the beginning of the 16th century, we have a picture of just what it is the devil is seeking to spread amongst men.

1. Darkness. The devil is an enemy of light. In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them, 2 Corinthians 4:4. (See also Colossians 1:12-13). The darkness regarding God and His salvation that filled the minds and souls of men was pit-black and naturally gave rise to the most depraved of practices. We have a living example of those times as we watch our present generation slide downward into gross ignorance and sin, in the wake of the Bible-rejecting ministers infiltrating the pulpits of the nation.

2. Rebellion. He sets men against God. Europe was in open and blasphemous rebellion against heaven's laws at the beginning of the 16th century. That same spirit is seen at work today. The apparent increase in an interest in all things religious in British politics at present is a renewal of interest in popish religion. There is no light in the religious utterances of politicians, only continued rebellion against God's truth. The growing influence of Rome in British political life will have the same corrupting degenerate results as it has had in Italy, France, Poland, the Irish Republic and every other nation where its evil shadow has fallen.

3. Misery. No matter how we may feel about some of the dreadful deeds that have been committed of late by priests and prelates of Rome, we cannot but feel for the wretchedness and misery into which many in the nation have fallen, as a result of their wicked and horrific crimes against the young and the feeble. There is a groan of misery going up from the United Kingdom at the present time, that is similar to that which arose in the days before the Reformation.

4. Destruction. Europe would have destroyed itself had not God in mercy intervened in the 16th century. That is still the devil's purpose for men.

The modern movement for a united Europe will develop into the kingdom of the Antichrist. And it will bring God's judgment upon those ten kingdoms which will ally themselves with the Man of Sin. Even the abundant mercy of God has a limit. How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD: they would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil, Proverbs 1:22-33.

Finally, the history of the Protestant Reformation provides us with :—



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IV. A TIMELESS DEMONSTRATION OF THE DUTY OF CHRISTIANS

The action of the saints of God during the Reformation provides us with a pattern for today.

1. They raised their voices in testimony. When once the light of God's Word began to dawn in Europe, then there arose a chorus of voices witnessing of the mercy of God freely offered to sinners. William Tyndale retorted to a popish opponent in Little Sodbury in England: "I defy the Pope and all his laws; if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest." Before he died a martyr's death in Vilvorde, Belgium, he lived to see the first of his New Testament translations arriving in England in 1526. Two of his greatest opponents at that time were Sir Thomas More and Bishop Fisher. Both of these evil men were canonised as saints by the Pope this century, thus endorsing their wickedness and hatred of the Word of God. As he prepared for death at the stake, first being strangled and then burned by fire, William Tyndale cried aloud in prayer: "Lord! open the King of England's eyes." That for which Tyndale was executed was the maintaining of certain biblical doctrines: the justification of the sinner by faith in Christ alone; the belief that the forgiveness of sins by embracing the mercy of God offered in the gospel was enough for salvation; the rejection of human tradition as a binding rule of conscience; the denial of the existence of purgatory; the rejection of the freedom of the human will; the rejection of the invocation of the saints. For maintaining these truths William Tyndale was murdered by the Church of Rome. Such was the witness raised by tens of thousands of saved sinners in the days of the Reformation. May we follow in their steps in this day of popish ascendancy.

2. They protested against sin. The Reformation was not a political movement but a spiritual one that centred upon the greatest of all human issues — man's sinfulness before God. Here is the true meaning of Protestant. It means one who witnesses against evil. "Just what is sin?" is the question of the day. The answer is simple. Sin is the transgression of the law, 1 John 3:4. Everything that was contrary to the Word of God was withheld by saints of God in those days of glorious revival.

3. They sought to serve. The Reformation provides us with abundant examples of selfless toil by those converted to Christ. The labours and suffering endured by men and women and youths as they sought to tell of Christ is inspiring. It was utterly selfless. The readiness to give up home and family and livelihood and often life itself in order to tell one's neighbours of Christ and His power to save from sin, makes the generation that experienced the Reformation in Europe one of the most unique and Christ-like that has ever graced this earth.

4. Their labours were not in vain. We still enjoy the harvests planted by those courageous and godly generations. Sitting here in freedom and comfort with the plain Word of God in our hand is a direct consequence of the blessing of God upon those faithful and courageous souls of long ago.

Debt

What a debt we owe to our Protestant forefathers! The very least we can do to commemorate their deeds of love is to remember them and avail ourselves of the freedoms their sacrifices and labours ensured for us. That Bible in your hand is marked by the blood of countless thousands of martyrs and confessors who toiled and suffered and died that you might have the opportunity to read of the love of God for sinful men. What will not be the end of those who despise such dear-bought privileges? Of how much sorcer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? Hebrews 10:29.

Duty

We have a solemn duty to preserve their work and witness and pass it on to future generations. Christian, dedicate yourself afresh to this task which grows ever more vital as the darkness of the final dark age descends upon the world.