



RE- FORM- ATION:



YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW



CARL TRUEMAN



CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



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CONTENTS

Foreword.....	7
1. The Pearl of Great Price: <i>The Relevance of the Reformation Today</i>	11
2. Meeting the Man of Sorrows.....	39
3. The Oracles of God.....	71
4. Blessed Assurance.....	101





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I would like to dedicate these lectures to Arthur S Johnson, English eccentric.

Carl R. Trueman
Newburgh
March 2011



FORE- WORD


One of the drawbacks of putting one's thoughts into print is that it is then so much easier for others to hold one to account for them. Thus, the wise author will not always be disappointed that a book, particularly a book written in comparative youth, goes out of print. The thoughts such a book contains may have been published; but languishing on the shelf in some library, they are a little less likely to haunt the writer's nightmares than otherwise.

It was thus with some trepidation that I greeted the request from Christian Focus to reprint my little, and long-forgotten, book on the contemporary relevance of some aspects of Reformation theology. I had written the book in haste in 1999, in order to deliver at a conference at the Evangelical theological College in Wales. When I did so, I had not yet reached the age of forty, that somewhat

arbitrary boundary marker, on the far side of which it is acceptable, and indeed expected, that one will become dyed in the wool, set in one's ways and inflexible in thought. Thus, I did wonder if, in the intervening years, I might have changed my mind in fundamental ways on the matters about which I had chosen to opine.

It was with some relief, therefore, that I find that, upon a review of the book, I am still in substantial agreement with much that I said all those years ago. I still believe that a critical appropriation of the Reformation is vital to a healthy church today. I am now perhaps more concerned than ever about the need for the church to give her people a realistic view of what cross-centred Christian life and experience are. I am persuaded that the doctrine of scripture, both in terms of the phenomenon of scripture and its function in the church, will remain a primary battleground within the church. Finally, given the lure of Roman Catholicism for many disillusioned evangelicals, I believe that a proper emphasis on biblical assurance is not only necessary for a healthy Christian life but is perhaps more polemically significant now than at any time since the Reformation.

Of course, were I to write the book today, it would be different in certain respects. I would most certainly include a chapter on the importance of creeds and confessions for the effective communication, inculcation and preservation of the faith from place to place and generation to generation. I would also add




Foreword

a chapter on the importance of a clear understanding of the importance of the visible church and of the communion of saints, given that these vital aspects of New Testament Christianity have become so weak in our culture of consumerism and virtual reality. Finally, I would want to modify, or at least off-set, my promotion of biblical theological teaching and preaching by emphasizing the need for the preacher to confront and engage his hearers. 'Hey, I bet you never saw Jesus in this text before,' is not an adequate application of the Bible; and yet too many so-called redemptive historical preachers and teachers in the Vos (or perhaps, to be charitable and not to impute the sins of the followers to the founder) pseudo-Vos tradition, consider their job to be done when they produced a nice, neat, dry-as-dust lecture on a passage which does just that and no more.

In conclusion, I have always been delighted and somewhat surprised at the positive notes of gratitude and encouragement I received as a result of the first edition of this little book; and I trust this new edition will also prove helpful in some small way to a new generation of readers.

Carl R. Trueman
Westminster Theological Seminary
January 2011





1 THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

The Relevance of the Reformation today

To some, the idea that the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could have anything to teach the church of today would be regarded as nonsense. After all, the sixteenth century happened four hundred years ago. Since then, we have witnessed the birth and death of modernity, the rise and fall of empires, the rapid secularisation of society, the decline of great parts of the West, and the increasing cultural dominance of science and the television. What can some cluster of events from three to four hundred years ago which took place in societies dominated by white European males possibly teach us today, living as we do in the age of mass communication, cosmopolitanism and advanced consumerism? Surely these things are irrelevant?

In addition to this, we live in times when the answer to contemporary problems is always seen to



REFORMATION: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

lie in the new and the different. Whether the cause of this constant need for novelty is that consumerism which always needs more and is never satisfied with what it has, or is the result of the impact of ideas of progress and evolution, whereby the best is always yet to come, the result is clear: the past is simply not looked upon as a source of wisdom or guidance for the present and the future. The ubiquity of the epithet 'post-' added on to everything, from postmodernism to postevangelicalism, is symptomatic of this tendency, as is the rhetoric used of those who are always seeking to break with past ways of doing things: they are the radicals, the visionaries, the risk takers. Those who defend any aspect of tradition, whether in belief or practice, are likely to find themselves tarred with the brush of reaction, bigotry, thoughtlessness and fear. The idea that new is good and old is bad runs deep in contemporary society, and this affects the evangelical church as well as the wider culture. The underlying assumption in many quarters is that the past is of no use to the church in the present. We need to bring in new management, repackage ourselves in a more attractive wrapper, and market ourselves in a slicker fashion.

RESCUING THE REFORMATION

I hope that in what follows I am able to persuade at least some who might consider some sympathy with such a position that the past is perhaps not as irrelevant as we might be tempted to feel. I want to argue that key insights of the Reformers are as

12

relevant today—and as applicable to situations today—as they were in the sixteenth century.

Unhelpful friends

But my intention is not simply to rescue the Reformation from its detractors; it also needs to be rescued from some of its friends. There is a brand of Christian for whom the fact that ‘it’—whether an aspect of practice, a form of words, a particular doctrine—was held by the Reformers is a straightforward knock down argument for saying that ‘it’ is right for today. We all know such people. They are often those who have reacted (and rightly reacted) against the marginalising of the Reformers in church life which has been going on now for decades. The dominant role taken by the ecumenical movement throughout a large period of the twentieth century undoubtedly played a part in this. The Reformation was, after all, the time when the western church split right down the middle, Protestants and Catholics, and then fragmented some more, as Protestantism divided into Lutheran and Reformed. Such a tragic period in church history was, from the ecumenical viewpoint, something which needed to be dealt with in order to re-establish unity; and so it was dealt with at various times by regarding the theological disputes as either misplaced from the outset or of no contemporary relevance.

Against such a background, it was right and proper that many chose to take a firm stand. It is indeed still right to assert the central significance of an issue such as justification by grace through faith, and to portray



REFORMATION: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

attempts to undermine this in any way as necessarily involving changes of fundamental theological significance in how Christianity and its history is to be understood. Nevertheless, I suspect that for many of this group, as they reacted against the ecumenical agenda, the Reformers and the Reformation came to hold the status of supreme icons or authorities, whereby any questioning or criticism of them was viewed as tantamount to heresy.

In addition, the agenda of reaction was always doomed ultimately to be the agenda set by the ecumenists: if justification formed a central focus of the ecumenical attack, so it formed a central part of the conservative defence; and the result was that the emphases and concerns of the Reformers themselves and of the Reformation as a whole came to be read through the lens of debates that were going on within the twentieth-century church. This was not necessarily a bad thing; but it was somewhat restricting. If the Reformers had things to teach outside the immediate debates generated by ecumenism, how were we to see it when the questions we brought to the great texts of Reformation theology said as much about church politics in our century as about anything that had gone on in the sixteenth? Other issues of central importance, such as assurance, the sacraments and the person and work of Christ, were only discussed along the narrow lines determined by the ecumenical movement, and much of value was thereby lost.