

EDITORIAL

# Should Pastors Today Still Care about the Reformation?

— D. A. Carson —

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Pastors devoted to their ministry have so many things to do.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the careful preparation week by week of fresh sermons and Bible studies, hours set aside for counseling and administration, care in developing excellent relationships, careful and thoughtful (and time-consuming!) evangelism, the mentoring of another generation coming along behind, the incessant demands of administration and oversight—not to mention the nurturing of one’s own soul—there is the regular array of family priorities, including care for aging parents and precious grandchildren and an ill spouse (or any number of permutations of such responsibilities), and, for some, energy levels declining in inverse proportion to advancing years. So why should busy pastors set aside valuable hours to read up on the Reformation, usually thought to have kicked off about five hundred years ago? True, the Reformers lived in rapidly changing times, but how many of them gave serious thought to postmodern epistemology, transgenderism, and the new (in)tolerance? If we are to learn from forebears, wouldn’t we be wise to choose more recent forebears? I offer nine reasons why the Reformation still matters for today’s pastors.

(1) A pastor is by definition something akin to a GP (a “general practitioner”). He is not a specialist in, say, divorce and remarriage, mission history, cultural commentary, and particular periods of church history. Yet most pastors will have to develop competent introductory knowledge in all these areas as part of their application of the Word of God to the people around them. Some pastors will feel the need to emphasize one area more than another: e.g., a pastor living in a neighborhood with many Muslims will want to devote time and energy to understanding Islam; an Arnold Dallimore will devote forty years’ worth of holidays to produce a magisterial two-volume work on George Whitefield. Nevertheless, pastoral ministry is much more akin to the work of a GP than to the work of an ears-eyes-nose-and-throat specialist, or to that of a surgeon who does nothing but Mohs surgery. And that means he is obligated to devote some time each year to reading in broad areas. One of those areas is historical theology. Well-chosen historical literature exposes us to different cultures and times, expanding our horizons, enabling us to see how Christians in other times and places have thought through what the Bible says and how to apply the gospel to all of life. Keep reading! I was exposed to John Chrysostom and Athanasius of Alexandria when I was a young man; only in recent years have I read much more of them. Reading Reformation sources is one part of this happy privilege and responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> An abbreviated form of this essay has appeared in *9Marks Journal*.

(2) More specifically, a growing knowledge of historical theology accomplishes wonders in destroying the illusion that insightful and rigorous exegesis began in the nineteenth or twentieth century. Not everything that was written five hundred years ago, or fifteen hundred years ago, is wholly admirable and worth repeating, any more than everything that is written today is wholly admirable. But such historical reading is the only effective antidote to the tragic attitude of one seminary (name withheld to protect the guilty) which long argued that its students needed to learn only good exegesis and responsible hermeneutics: they didn't need to learn what others think, for with exegesis and hermeneutics under their belt they could turn the crank and deliver faithful theology all by themselves. How naïve to think that exegesis and hermeneutics are neutral, value-free disciplines! The reality is that we need to listen to other pastor-theologians, both from our own day and from the past, if we are to grow in richness, nuance, insight, self-correction, and gospel fidelity.

(3) But why focus on the Reformation in particular? There are plenty of critics quite happy to write off the Reformation as a period with merely antiquarian interest. One pundit at an Australian institution recently protested that the Reformation was a great disaster because it “killed missions.” Sometimes one doesn't know whether to laugh or cry—but one thing is certain, such negations display no first hand knowledge of the primary sources. More broadly, any serious exposure to the Reformers' writings makes it hard not to see the sweep and reach of the Reformation. Although it was triggered by the question of indulgences, debate over indulgences soon led, directly or indirectly, to probing debates on authority, the locus of revelation (Should we seize on a deposit ostensibly given to the church embracing both Scripture and Tradition, or on *sola Scriptura*?), purgatory, the authority by which sins are forgiven, the treasury of satisfactions, the nature and locus of the church, the nature and authority of priest/presbyters, the nature and function of the Eucharist, saints, justification, sanctification, the nature of the new birth, the enslaving power of sin, and much more. All of these are still central issues in the theological syllabus today. Even the issue of indulgences is still important: both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have offered plenary special indulgences under certain circumstances (though in a more restrained structure than that adopted by Tetzl). Moreover, the study of the Reformation is especially salutary as a response to those who think the so-called “Great Tradition,” as preserved in the earliest ecumenical creeds, is invariably an adequate basis for ecumenical unity—as if there were no heresies invented after the fourth century. On this front, study of the Reformation usefully fosters a little historical realism.

(4) In addition to the hermeneutical distinctiveness of the Reformation that sprang from *sola Scriptura*, the Reformers worked hard to develop a rigorous hermeneutic that was clear of the vagaries of the fourfold hermeneutic that crested during the Middle Ages. This does *not* mean they were simplistic literalists, unable to appreciate different literary genres, subtle metaphors, and other symbol-laden figures of speech; it means, rather, that they worked hard to let Scripture speak on its own terms, without allowing external methods to be imposed on the text like an extra-textual grid designed to guarantee the “right” answers. In part, this was tied to their understanding of *claritas Scripturae*, the perspicuity of Scripture. Without in any sense reducing the role of the teacher/preacher of Scripture, let alone the many perplexities of Scripture, they were convinced that Scripture does not need an authoritative interpretation of Scripture provided by the Magisterium. Although contemporary discussions of hermeneutics largely focus on slightly different agendas, the parallels are striking. In particular, Calvin's commentaries are so adept at following the line of the text that they are still read appreciatively today.

(5) It has been said that if you want good theology grounded in robust exegesis and expository preaching, turn to Reformed theology, but if you want spirituality, turn to Catholicism. In the past I have occasionally addressed that bifurcation: e.g., “When Is Spirituality Spiritual? Reflections on Some Problems of Definition,” *JETS* 37 (1994): 381–94. Catholic theory on spirituality commonly distinguishes between the living of ordinary Catholics, and the spiritual living of those who are really deeply committed Catholics. It’s almost a Catholic version of “higher life” theology. It is said to lead to mystical connection to God, and to be characterized by extraordinary spiritual practices and disciplines. But although I have read right through, say, Julian of Norwich, I find a great deal of subjective mysticism and virtually no grounding in Scripture or the gospel. And for the life of me I cannot imagine either Peter or Paul recommending monastic withdrawal in order to attain greater spirituality: it is always a danger when certain ascetic practices become normative paths to spirituality when there is no apostolic support for them. The contemporary generation, tired of merely cerebral approaches to Christianity, is drawn to late patristic and medieval patterns of spirituality. What a relief, then, to turn to the warmest of the writings of the Reformers, and discover afresh the pursuit of God and his righteousness well-grounded in holy Scripture. That is why Luther’s letter to his barber remains such a classic: it is full of godly application of the gospel to ordinary Christians, building up a conception of spirituality that is not reserved for the elite of the elect but for all brothers and sisters in Christ. Similarly, the opening chapters of Book III of Calvin’s *Institutes* provide more profound reflection on true spirituality than many much longer contemporary volumes.

(6) The Reformation is of central importance for understanding modern Western history. Three large-scale movements set the stage for the contemporary Western world: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. Each of the three is complex, and scholars continue to debate many facets of each. Nevertheless, the raw claim for the pivotal role of these three movements cannot easily be challenged. In addition to the focused clarity on the gospel fostered by the Reformation, many of its ideas—such as the emphasis on Scripture alone as the final authority, increased clarity on the distinguishable differences between giving to God and to Caesar their respective dues (which in turn led to developments in thought, some helpful and some unhelpful, on the relationships between church and state)—led directly or indirectly to Protestant denominations around the world, which in turn contributed, directly or indirectly, to worldwide missionary movements, and to several European wars.

(7) There are lessons to be learned from the Reformation about the sovereignty of God in movements of revival and reformation. After the fact, it is tempting to trace out what happened and view the sequence of events as almost inevitable—relatively simple arrays of cause and effect. We begin with Luther’s ninety-five theses and show the reasons why the Reformation unfolded the way it did. On the other hand, a little historical imagination easily conjures up an alternative world in which the posting of the ninety-five theses proved to be nothing more than a damp squib. After all, there were other reformers and reform movements that showed early promise, but that largely sputtered out. John Wycliffe (c. 1320–1384) was a theologian, philosopher, churchman, ecclesiastical reformer, and Bible translator, and the work he did anticipated the Reformation, but it could not be said to have precipitated it. Jan Hus (1369–1415) was a Czech priest, reformer, scholar, rector of Charles University in Prague, and architect of a reforming movement, often called “Hussitism,” but of course he was martyred and his movement, though important in Bohemia, achieved little more in Europe than predecessor status. Why did Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli live on long enough to give direction to a massive Reformation, while Bible translator William Tyndale (1494–1536) was murdered? Historical hindsight offers many reasons why this one lived and that one died, why this reforming action fizzled and that one ignited an

irrepressible flame. The historical details are worth understanding, but the eyes of faith will see the hand of God in genuine reformation, and remind us to offer him our praises for what he has done, and our petitions for what we still beg him to do.

(8) The Reformation stands out as a movement that sought to integrate exegesis of the biblical books with what we would today call systematic theology. Not all the Reformers did this the same way. Some acted as if they were expounding the biblical texts, but tended in reality to jump from seminal word or phrase to the next seminal word or phrase, stopping at each point to unload theological treatments of the various “loci.” Bucer, for example, followed the text more closely but also unloaded his treatment of the “loci” as he went along, making his commentaries extraordinarily long and dense. Calvin strove in his commentaries for what he called “lucid brevity,” and he reserved his systematic theology primarily for what grew to become the four volumes of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Indeed, Calvin’s commentaries are so “bare bones” that not a few scholars have criticized him for not including enough theology in them. But what is striking about all these Reformers, regardless of their successes or failures to bring about appropriate integration, is the way in which they simultaneously attempted to expound the Bible and engage in serious theologizing. By contrast, today few systematicians are excellent exegetes, and few exegetes evince much interest in systematic theology. The exceptions merely prove the rule. There are many reasons why the Reformers were models in this regard—but whatever the reasons, we have much to learn from them.

(9) The Reformers read their own times well. While leaning on the “norming norm” of holy Scripture, they truly understood where the fault lines lay in their own time and place. Some of the same issues prevail today. On the other hand, what we should take away from the Reformers in this regard is not simply the list of topics on which *they* majored, but the importance of understanding *our* times and learning how to engage our times with the truth of Scripture. Doubtless this is the place where it is worth including a few lines on some of the ways in which we should *not* slavishly seek to imitate the Reformers. Their agendas are not always ours, and should not be. Moreover, the mode of discourse they commonly deployed was far more inflamed than what is acceptable today—though it is not always clear if the contemporary restraint is a function of increased tolerance and courtesy, or the result of apathy and indifference to truth. After all caveats have been entered, however, the degree of invective in the age of the Reformation, especially (but not exclusively) from the pen of Luther, was not admirable, and his anti-Semitism was utterly without excuse.

There are three wrong approaches to the Reformers and their writings. First, we may ignore them, but that will simply guarantee that we impoverish ourselves. Second, we may idolize them, but like all idolatries this one displeases God and guarantees we will not listen very well to other voices in the history of the church. Third, we may do no more than remind ourselves of their errors, failures, and shortcomings, and in consequence dismiss them with contempt; but if we treat all historical figures this way, consistency demands that we listen to no one, starting with ourselves.

There is so very much that is good in the Reformation heritage, even if I want to distance myself from parts of it. So let me end by mentioning a diversity of sources one may use to get started. The collected works of Luther are available in CD: my copy (given to me by a former student) is much cherished. If you want to warm yourself with Reformation spirituality, start with the wholly admirable book by Calvin that I’ve already mentioned, viz., *A Little Book on the Christian Life* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2017). This is a fresh and delightful translation of several of the opening chapters of Book III of the *Institutes*. I am currently reading it through with the students in my Spiritual Formation Group. Serious readers

will want to scan some of Calvin's commentaries and work their way through the *Institutes*. At some juncture, it is important to read good biographies of the main players. For Luther, the standout volume is still that of Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: New American Library, 1950). I first read it when I was in seminary almost fifty years ago; my wife has just read it, and found it no less gripping than I did. I have many biographies of Calvin; I cannot say which one is "best." Stimulating and challenging are the essays in the recent book by Eric Landry and Michael S. Horton, *The Reformation Then and Now* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2017). For those wanting to immerse themselves in the way Genevan pastors, in the wake of Calvin's teaching and influence, gave themselves to pastoral ministry, one simply cannot do better than read Scott Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: OUP, 2013)—a work both scholarly and lucid, both informative and edifying.

Keep reading!