

People and the Reformation Moderator's Comments Posted 26 October 2020

By Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes

October 31 is remembered in some places, not as a wretched Halloween Day, but as the date when, in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses in Latin to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg in Saxony. In doing so, he unwittingly, to some degree at least, triggered off the Protestant Reformation. It was not the first split in the Church. For a starter, the Western and Eastern Churches had excommunicated one another back in 1054. The centre and core of the Reformation can be gleaned from the five slogans: *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *solo Christo* (Christ alone) and *soli Deo gloria* (to the glory of God alone). These brought new meaning to the gospel for ordinary believers. The story, however, does not end there, so we might consider now two other aspects: the issues of the significance of everyday life, and the enjoyment of the Christian life.

In the New Testament period, Paul's epistles were expected to be read or understood by all the congregation. The Reformation sought to recapture that practice. William Tyndale would devote his whole life to making the Scriptures known in English. John Foxe records that one day a Roman Catholic scholar at dinner with Tyndale declared that 'We were better be without God's law than the pope's.' Tyndale replied: '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 dost.'

It is hardly a coincidence that near-universal literacy was achieved first in Scotland, then in Protestant Germany. Protestant worship services were in the vernacular, not Latin; there was an emphasis on congregational singing; and, surprisingly perhaps to modern Christians, there was a more frequent celebration of

the Lord's Supper.

Everyday areas of life were ascribed a renewed dignity. Luther said that housework has 'no obvious appearance of holiness, yet these very household chores are more to be valued than all the works of monks and nuns.' The greatest of the preachers of the English Reformation, Hugh Latimer, declared: 'Our Saviour Christ ... was a carpenter, and got his living with great labour. Therefore let no man disdain ... to follow him in a common calling and occupation. For as he blessed our nature with taking upon him the shape of man, so in his doing he blessed all occupations and arts.'

The priesthood of all believers and the dignity of all work gave a dignity to every area of life. This was not totally unknown in the medieval Church, and Gerhard Groote of the Brethren of the Common Life used to say: 'Labour is holy, but business is dangerous.' Nevertheless, the medieval Church tended to set up a two-tier system of Christianity. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, was intended for monks not ordinary people. It was Luther who tried to apply it to every Christian.

Family life received a new impetus and value. Luther defended marriage (e.g. in *On the Estate of Marriage* in 1522) but he was realistic about it: 'For since a Christian expects another life to follow this, it is very sensible for him to accept here days that are less good ... God himself recognized that when he made man and woman and brought them together.' There were serious flaws - Luther once advised Philip of Hesse to contract a bigamous marriage rather than go through a divorce.

For all that, Steven Ozment has concluded that the Reformation family was characterised by four things:

1. greater family cohesion;
2. no real culture of youth;
3. a capacity not to be easily bullied by the outside world;
4. a strength whereby it was a major player in society.

This takes us to the second aspect of the Reformation: its promotion of joy. Edward Gibbon was the most erudite of historians, and he seems to have concluded that the two happiest periods in history were from the death of the tyrant Domitian in A.D 96 to the accession of the worthless Commodus in 180, and Gibbon's own eighteenth century. Erudition is not the same as wisdom. How does one measure joy?

In 1520 the artist, Albrecht Dürer expressed his desire to memorialise Luther whom he described as 'the Christian man who helped me overcome so many anxieties'. In a society where perhaps only 5% of Germans were literate, it is difficult to gauge how many felt the same way about Reformation teachings, but the number was not inconsiderable. There is a widespread view that the Reformation destroyed, for example, 'merrie old England', but Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* gives a picture of raucous ruffians as much as anything else.

Tyndale considered that the gospel signifies 'good, merry, glad, and joyful tidings, that makes a man's heart glad and makes him sing, dance, and leap for joy.' He was not alone in this. The words of the Heidelberg Catechism indicate the Reformation's connection with true joy.:

Q. 52. What comfort is it to you that Christ shall come to judge the living and the dead?

A: That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same Person who before has offered Himself for my sake to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as Judge from heaven; who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall take me with all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory.

In recapturing the gospel, the Reformation also sought to recapture the significance of everyday Christian life, and what it means to have joy and peace in believing.

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