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THE REFORMATION: A REVIVAL OF RELIGION

BY

J. ROSS STEVENSON, D.D., LL.D.

THE Reformation may be considered from three main points of view. It may be regarded as an intellectual awakening, a revival of learning, making possible popular education and all the science and philosophy of our time. Or we may study it as a political event, a rebellion against corruption and absolutism in government, a great democratic movement toward popular rule and the blessings of civil liberty. But although the Reformation brought Europe out of the Dark Ages into a new era of enlightenment and intellectual freedom, though it was an effective protest against moral wrong and political oppression, and was the beginning of a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," it was primarily and essentially a revival of religion, an awakening of spiritual life. It stirred the universities of Europe. It shook thrones and principalities and powers, but it dealt mainly with the Church. It was a reformation of religious beliefs and practices and its fruitage is to be found in new creeds, new forms of worship and polity, new channels of service, and new hopes for the redemption of mankind.

At the same time it should be remembered that this

revival cannot be understood as a separate and independent religious event. It is safe to assume that it would not have taken place had it not been for the intellectual awakening which preceded it. Nor would it have been worth while—or perhaps I should say it would not have been a real religious awakening—had it not issued in a reformation of social, political, and moral life. I wish we might grasp the full significance of this. There are revivals of religion which simply touch the surface of life. The seed falls upon stony soil where there is no deepness of earth. It springs up and endures for a little while, but it is soon scorched and withers away. A revival of lasting fruitage strikes its roots deep. Not only the soil but the subsoil has to be plowed up and amply prepared for a vigorous growth and a lasting fruitage. Before Christianity could be planted throughout the Roman Empire, the soil of Judaism, with its genius for religion, the soil of Greek thought and language, with its clearness and accuracy, the soil of Roman power and talent of organization, had to be prepared. It took Luther but a moment to post the Ninety-five Theses, but their preparation was a labor of years, and their comprehension and acceptance meant a people made ready—fallow ground broken up—by the Spirit of God.

Different forces produced this intellectual awakening preceding the Reformation. The fall of Constantinople introduced Greek learning into the universities, and made possible the critical study of Scripture by such men as Reuchlin and Erasmus. The invention of print-

ing made possible the more rapid dissemination of knowledge, and the proof that the earth revolves around the sun, the use of the compass, and the discovery of America, opened up a new world of thought and inquiry which forecast the overthrow of bigotry, deceit, and unreality. The intrepid pre-Reformers—Wyclif, Huss, Wessel, and Savonarola—with their fearless denunciations of the existing order, paved the way to a new world. The rising spirit of national independence in England, in Bohemia, in Germany and the Netherlands, in France and Italy, was dynamiting the soil for moral and political changes which must take place. When all was ready the revival began.

It makes us wonder whether God has not been preparing our world for a second Reformation in the great movements which have characterized the recent years. As against the revival of learning we have had our intellectual awakening, the dominance of culture, and the world-wide extension of education. A new national consciousness is everywhere manifest, which has to reckon with relationships to all mankind, and prophets have arisen not only to rebuke the Church, but to demand the overthrow of autocratic governments and all forms of oppression. I wish to speak of this further in another connection.

The Reformation as a revival of religion was constructive rather than destructive in its aims. That kings were tyrants, that popes were scoundrels, that priests and monks were ignorant and immoral, that the whole Church was corrupt, and that reformation of both head

and members was needed, no one could deny. The Church herself summoned councils for the reformation of the clergy and Christian people, and the restoration of ecclesiastical discipline. But how could this be accomplished? Evidently not by exposure and denunciation alone. Men like Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio, with blazing satire scourged the Church from head to foot, without effecting any perceptible change. The great reform councils of Pisa and Constance recognized existing moral evils, but would acknowledge no error in doctrine and thus accomplished nothing of any moment. The pre-Reformers, Wyclif and Huss, clearly perceived that corruption of life was due to erroneous beliefs, and that only truth could make men free, but they did not grasp with sufficient boldness the truth which would serve as a flame of fire to purge away the dross of centuries, and illuminate and purify the Church with the very life of God. It remained for Luther and Calvin and Knox to apprehend the saving, transforming truth of the gospel of Christ, which each had tested in his own experience, and for the reality and power of which each was ready to lay down his life. The message of the Reformation summoned the people of Europe back to Christ, to his sovereignty and all-sufficiency in the work of salvation; back to the Scriptures as the one supreme and only authoritative source of religious truth; and back to the simplicity of the early Church, in which all Christians stood on the same level and had equal place and worth in the sight of God. This positive truth thrust aside all obstructions, such

as confession and penance, which a medieval priesthood had placed between the soul and God. It overthrew all man-made deliverances as to truth and belief, to which assent was necessary in order to salvation, and in place of a divine right of kings and an apostolic succession of infallible bishops, it put the priesthood of believers and the rule of the people. The effect of this Reformation preaching, under the power of God's Spirit, was to bring to distressed souls the assurance of pardon, a new, free spiritual life in Christ, and courage to stand for the right. Only a truth as great and strong as eternity can grip the conscience and alter the bent of men's lives and make them free. Such a truth we need just now amid the throes and anguish of world travail. Some one has said that the present Great War is primarily a religious war. Men are not unanimous as to God. They are not agreed as to his character and purposes. The term, God, is not distinctly Christian. A man's god may be wholly pagan, the embodiment of force and the patron of a race or nation, so that it is consistent for him to do in the name of his god what he would not do in the name of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul expressed this very forcibly when he said, "Though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or on earth; as there are gods many, and lords many; yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him." Surely the world at this time needs to know that God is the Father of men, that each is made

in his image and is to be recognized, not as an enemy to be slain but as a brother to be loved, and that there is one Lord, who must be supreme over all nations and in every relation and department of life, whose cross must be the dominating factor in all faith and service.

That the Reformation bore a rich and abiding religious fruitage is evidenced by the new and more Scriptural definitions of the Christian faith, by the simpler and more spiritual forms of Church worship, and by a ministry which gave guidance, strength, and hope, to seekers after God. But what I would have you note more particularly is the moral, the social, the political consequences of this religious revival of the sixteenth century. Dr. Roberts in the address which is to follow will portray the influences of the Reformation in their broad and beneficent sweep, but let us not forget the religious fountain from which these influences streamed. People sometimes speak of an ethical revival, and we are told that the coming revival will be social in its service. I can well believe that, because every true revival of religion has borne at least some fruitage of this character. The first recorded service of the Church after Pentecost had to do with a case of poverty. A lame man was laid at the gate of the Temple, because then as now the place where men meet God is the place where they come into contact with human need. And the gospel of Peter and John was equal to the social task of curing the cause of the man's poverty, so that he might thenceforth take care of himself and no longer beg for alms. The same power which gave strength to

the man's ankle bones so that he could walk, gave strength to his heart that he might enter the Temple to praise God. As I read Church history, genuine revivals of religion and thoroughgoing reformations of society are inseparably connected. It was so in the sixteenth century; it was so in the evangelical revival of the seventeenth century; it was so in the great awakening of 1800. It should be so in the coming revival. Our Permanent Committee on Evangelism expressed a great truth in its annual report when it declared, "Unless sinful men and women are led to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and are by him joined to the living Church, there can be no service rendered by the Church which will satisfy God or be of value to society; while on the other hand, the evangelism which does not lead men into loving and unselfish service for society is both unscriptural and dangerous."

Could we but discern the signs of the times, we might discover that we are already in the midst of a great awakening, in some respects the greatest of all history. When we think of the interests at stake, of the vast forces which are arrayed and the awful cost of the struggle, we should look forward in hope to a compensation or a consummation, which will show that the upheaval has not been in vain. At the beginning of the Christian era the Church was being formed. Under the influence of Greek thought and Roman organization and pagan cults the Church was deformed and rendered impotent, though still the body of Christ. The Reformation restored the Church in large part to her

apostolic norm and life, and great has been her service for God and humanity in the years that have passed. However, in spite of her resources and opportunities, she has not been equal to the tasks which have confronted her. She has not been able to fulfill her Lord's commission and disciple the nations. There is needed a transformation which will rid the Church of all selfish and worldly aims, and fit her through the fullness of the Spirit to bring the kingdom of this world into the captivity of Christ. When the gospel of a crucified, risen Christ was first proclaimed, it gripped the individual soul and made each Christian the child of God and the heir of eternal life. In the succeeding years we find on the pages of Church history illustrious names, great personalities, the apostles, the Church Fathers, the Schoolmen, the pre-Reformers. The personal power of the gospel is thus demonstrated. The Reformation, while it developed conspicuous individual leaders, made them also great national figures. We naturally associate Luther with Germany and Knox with Scotland, and following the Reformation we have the rise and progress of strong and enduring national life. Our own life as a nation, our principles, institutions, and purposes, can be understood only in the light of Reformation history. In this national consciousness the power of personality is not eliminated, but is lifted up into a higher unity and a larger life. We have now reached an era where the gospel must serve not only the best interests of personality and of nationality, but of a Christian universality, a world brotherhood, in which nations brought

into close touch with one another shall not attempt to annihilate one another like the warring factions of feudal times, but shall trust one another and serve one another as members of a Kingdom into which shall be gathered all tribes and nations, a Kingdom which is to rule over all and endure forever, the Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.