

A Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 1 | Lives of the Reformation | Dec. 1, 2019 | B. Beale

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way— in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.¹

With these words the great Charles Dickens began his book *A Tale of Two Cities*. And by these words he conveys the paradox of the period he describes, the period of the French Revolution at the end of the 1700's. That event was a living summary of the 1700's as a whole, a century that was full of, well, the best *and* the worst. Knowledge seemed to rise up out of its medieval slumber and grow ten feet; and then that knowledge, now a horrible giant, swung its club and killed so much that was good before it. In the 1700's, Western Civilization began to gain a clear and objective way to learn about the world, liberating it from the shackles of superstition; and in the 1700's, Western Civilization began to lose the important parts of life that cannot be put under a microscope—the spiritual, the meaningful things.

So it was the best of times, and it was the worst of times.

Dickens compares that period of the Enlightenment to his own time, Victorian England of the mid 1800's, during the Industrial Revolution. His day, he says, can also be described in superlatives: not good and bad, but best and worst. Dickens' day was a day of extremes, a pivotal moment in the progress of history. Things were and could be far better than in other, calmer seasons; and they could be indescribably worse. The same was true in the Enlightenment of the 1700's.

And the same was true of that epoch we are considering this quarter: the Reformation. The first question to address in a class

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Project Gutenberg.

like ours is, “Why study the Reformation at all?” And I begin an answer by pointing out that the early 1500’s has proven to be, in hindsight, one of the most significant set of decades in all of history. More important perhaps than even the Enlightenment of the 1700’s or the Industrial Revolution of the 1800’s. Both of these built upon the Reformation of the 1500’s, and could not have happened without the Reformation.

No doubt, every age is important in the sight of God, who is weaving together the day of small things, the circumstances of our lives which we may consider menial and unimportant, and in the end these all will prove threads in God’s great tapestry, serving in their own way to glorify Jesus Christ, the Lord and ruler of all times and all domains.

But certain seasons, in the wisdom of God, are louder than others. God’s providence is always whispering in the events of history, in the events of our own lives too—but the whisper can be hard to hear. At determined intervals, however, the whisper rises in pitch until it is almost deafening. The issues that exist, the paradoxes that stand in tension in every age of mankind, in certain ages explode in brilliant color. They boom. And some then hear them as the very best of times, some hear them as the worst of times, but everyone hears them.

Such was the Reformation.

So loud was its eruption that its echo can be heard distinctly today. We will, in the next twelve weeks, listen to this echo; but you have been listening to the echo everyday of your life. If you value freedom, if you think the individual person important, if you believe government should not tell you what and what not to believe, if you prefer hard, scientific evidence over tales about fairies or goblins, if you are convinced that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is more important than religious rituals, and if you can read, these are all, at least in part, echoes of an event that transpired an ocean away and half a millennium ago, an event that brought back to the world the truths and principles of Scripture that had been covered in dust for centuries.

So a study like the one we are about to undergo is of immense importance for anyone who wishes to know why society is the way it is today.

But that will not be the emphasis of our study. Yes, we will consider great ideas, and you will see in these ideas the seedlings of what have sprouted into trees of thought in our own day. But we are not botanists who study these ideological shrubs in a sterile lab. We are Christians. We are called to the most fascinating and dangerous and wild sort of life that any could live, and our hands are black with earth. We are not Christians if there is not dirt under our nails. What I mean is, we are not just called by Christ from our fishing boats to go think great thoughts for him in the privacy of our own rooms, but we are called to go out and fish for men. We are driven by our conviction concerning great thoughts into action.

And so for us, it is not enough to know the great doctrines of Scripture which were recovered at the time of the Reformation. That we must do, but we must also see those ideas enacted in our everyday life.

I think this is one reason for the incarnation of our Savior. He came to seek and to save the lost, he came to give his life as a ransom for many—but he came also to show us what a human life could look like if it is driven by the great ideas of Scripture, what a person would look like if he lived consistent with the glorious truths of God.

“For to this you have been called,” writes Peter, long after he had left his fishing boat for a life of action, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”²

Jesus’ life boomed the great tensions and wrestlings of all mankind, displayed them in high relief, and shouted for us to hear still today in distinct tones just how the gospel looks when applied to the heart and enacted in the life. The fact that we have Jesus’ biography four times repeated at the start of our New Testament reminds us that Christianity is a set of true ideas, but true ideas that drive us into a way of life.

That is one great reason for our study this quarter of, as you see in the title, “Lives” of the Reformation. We will, in the next twelve weeks, behold one of the boldest moments in history, an epoch to shape all that followed it, an epoch that highlights in definite

² 1 Pet. 2:21 (ESV).

strokes the very issues we deal with every day—issues of authority, of God, of mankind, of salvation.

But we will behold this epoch through the biographies of ten men—ten living, breathing (at the time) figures who not only discovered the gospel through the Scriptures, but ventured all upon it.

We will see John Wycliffe and John Huss, morning stars who did not live to see the Reformation, but who welcomed it from afar and, like John the Baptist, prepared the way.

We will consider Martin Luther, the first and greatest of the Magisterial Reformers, the fiery German monk who rediscovered the Apostle Paul and with his pen set the world on fire. We'll see his fellow professor at Wittenburg and close companion, Philip Melancthon, who calmly set the rediscovered truths in order and helped men and women learn them.

The first Magisterial Reformer of Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli, follows after, with his militant adherence to the sovereignty of God over all things.

And after him, William Tyndale, fleeing England for his life so that he can, by his life's labors, offer England a Bible in her own language; and Thomas Cranmer, used of God in the lion's den, as he suffers the politics of the English court and turns them for the good of God's elect.

John Knox comes next, perhaps the boldest voice that ever bellowed the gospel in Scotland, turning that nation from Baal to Yahweh.

Then John Calvin, as one untimely born, yet who like Paul before him labored more than all the rest, or at least whose writings seem to have had the longest and most profound appeal.

And lastly, Menno Simons, the peaceful Anabaptist who wandered like a hunted exile for the sake of Scripture and conscience.

These ten were apprehended by the word of God, by the gospel of Christ, and for that gospel they suffered excommunications, exile, loneliness and danger, death sentences and public dishonor.

These were men of whom the world was not worthy. And these men are for us living examples of what the Christian life can be.

Hagiography and historiography

I have introduced now our class, and offered you the reasons for our studying the Reformation and, in particular, these ten living examples of it. Now you know *what* we will be studying.

But I need to say something about *how* we will study these men—that is, about the sort of history we will be doing.

I am talking about historical method, or what is often called historiography. And there are many schools of historians, even Christian historians, who think history should be done this way or that. Without descending into the details, I do want to touch on something that has a bit to do with method, but very much to do with our attitude as we approach the history of these men.

Luther famously said that history is like a drunken man on a horse, who falls off on one side, then remounts, and falls off on the other side. Well, the same might be said of historical method. There are two ditches on either side of our horse, and our hope is that we might avoid falling into either.

Hagiography

On the one hand, there are those earnest believers who, quite often out of goodwill, exalt their Reformation heroes far above what those heroes actually were. They partake not of historiography, but of what is called hagiography—the study of a “saint” in the Roman Catholic sense, as though we were studying a god and not a man, one who is almost incapable of error. The irony in this approach, of course, is that Protestantism appeared in the Reformation in order to combat this very tendency in man, seen in the Medieval Roman Catholic church.

Medieval Catholicism had its infallible pope, and its perfected saints. By superstition it produced exaggerated tales about holy men and women who transcended our common Christian experience and did war with demons, performed at least two miracles, and lived lives quite similar to the most interesting biblical figures. You can see the appeal of this kind of history.

The only problem is that it is not history. It is hagiography—it is a legend, a myth, not reflected in the historical evidence but developed in the imaginations of adoring fans afterward.

In the introduction to his phenomenal *History of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff asserts the chief duty of the historian to be this:

The first duty of the historian, which comprehends all others, is fidelity and justice. He must reproduce the history itself, making it live again in his representation. His highest and only aim should be, like a witness, to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and, like a judge, to do full justice to every person and event which comes under his review.³

The greatest danger for us if we, in our admiration of these great men of the Reformation, should choose to ignore or downplay their weaknesses and to exaggerate their strengths, is that we would prove ourselves liars. Again, the irony would be great, for the Reformation was more than anything else a revolt against dishonesty and in favor of the truth.

We will find in the Reformers men tempted in every way as we are, and not without sin. Luther was later in life as viciously anti-Semitic as the culture around him, and had a temper we should not imitate. Zwingli in his early years got his girlfriend pregnant, even though he was a priest who had sworn to celibacy. Thomas Cranmer helped a wicked king divorce his wife for another woman, and Calvin, it seems, was proud.

So we will pray God grants us the courage to be honest about our heroes, and not to fall into this ditch on one side of us called hagiography.

Iconoclasts

But of course there is another ditch on the other side. Probably in reaction to those who idolize the Reformers, others take too much pleasure in dethroning them. We might call this group the modern iconoclasts—the iconoclasts were those persons during the Reformation who, upon discovering that the images and statues of the Roman Catholic Church were really idols, broke into churches and physically destroyed them. They were right to despise the idols—they were wrong to go in by force and throw

³ Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 22.

them to the ground. Often they were motivated by a mob mentality, or by the simple but base desire to destroy.

In the same way, there are some today who lean too far toward iconoclasm in regard to these Reformation heroes. They see some persons setting up the Reformers as idols, so they come in and with delight cast the idols to the ground, taking pleasure in the shock of those who watch them do it.

G. K. Chesterton calls this sort of person the “candid friend,” and describes him like this: “I venture to say that what is bad in the candid friend is simply that he is not candid. He is keeping something back—his own gloomy pleasure in saying unpleasant things. He has a secret desire to hurt, not merely to help.”⁴ To paraphrase Chesterton, the “candid friend” would say of the Reformers, “I’m sorry to say your Reformation heroes were messed up,” only the candid friend is not really sorry to say that at all.

One of the greatest problems with this approach is that it lacks the Christian virtue of love. It reminds me of those preachers of the gospel, mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, who labored not in love but “out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.”⁵ And not only does it lack love for those who admire the Reformers, it lacks love for the Reformers themselves—they too, for all their faults, are God’s beloved children and dear sheep for whom Christ died. We ought to be as charitable in our judgments of them as we would wish future historians to be charitable in their judgments of us.

The middle way

So then, what would it look like to stay in the saddle and not fall off on either side, neither worshiping the Reformers nor shattering them on the ground? That of course is what we will aim to do in this class.

I believe the best example of historiography is given to us in Scripture itself, which is a historical book. How did the biblical authors do history? The Bible is a book unlike any other, that is true, but it is also a book quite similar to other works of history; God chose to have his book be history, so there are consequently

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Public Domain Books), Kindle edition, 61.

⁵ Phil. 1:17.

parallels we can draw between the Bible's historical method and our own.

I offer only one long example of biblical historiography, but I think it perfectly rides the middle way between hagiography and iconoclasm which we have just described. That example is Hebrews chapter 11; let me make a few observations about that chapter as we conclude this lesson.

You probably recall that Hebrews 11 is the hall of faith—it begins by extolling faith itself: “Now faith,” it reads, “is the assurance of things hoped for.” And then it launches into a chapter-long list of biblical heroes of the faith, drawn from the Old Testament, who are all highly praised. Abel, Enoch, and Noah are named from the ancient world; Abraham gets several verses, and Sarah gets one. Then there is Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and then Moses, Rahab, the judges, David, and the prophets.

Here are all our heroes from the Old Testament, and there is not one negative comment about them. In fact, many of them are praised more highly than any of us would praise them. For, the chapter points out, they had faith in God—they trusted a great God, though they themselves were weak. So, this chapter stands contrary to the trench of iconoclasm. It encourages us to have heroes, even heroes made of frail and failing men and women.

But notice, the reason Hebrews 11 sometimes makes us uneasy is because of just how frank and honest the Old Testament accounts of these heroes are. The accounts do not hide from us the failures—sometimes the catastrophic failures—of these historical heroes. Noah got drunk and stripped himself in his tent; Abraham gave away his wife to save his own skin. Moses and Gideon both shrunk back in fear, hesitating to obey God's call. David killed a man and stole his wife; and Samson the judge is an excellent example of exactly what not to be and not to do in almost every case.

But the point is, the Old Testament authors did not conceal these embarrassing facts of history from us. God intended to have the gross wrongdoings of his own children publicly displayed in the Scriptures for all generations to see. He did not try to hide them in order to portray these men and women as more than they actually were. God is the only absolute hero of the Old and New Testament, and the failures of all others reaffirms that to us. God

is the only flawless hero of the Reformation, so we need not fear when our other lesser heroes prove to be, well, lesser.

This is therefore the model, the attitude we will attempt to emulate in the lessons ahead. Here are ten men of enormous faith, acting out that faith in a loud and powerful moment of history. They are for us what Hebrews 12:1 calls the biblical heroes of old: a great cloud of witnesses which surround us. Their struggles are our struggles, their strengths often our strengths, their weaknesses usually our weaknesses. They are tempted like us, and like us they find strength in the Almighty Author of history and, by that strength, they conquer against all earthly odds and against all worldly and demonic powers.

Their age was the best of times, and it was the worst of times—but above all, it was the time God had appointed for the reemergence of his word out of the centuries of rubble that had accumulated upon it. It was the time for truth to triumph, and by the Almighty hand of God, through the small instruments he chose to use, triumph it did.