

HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers some great reformers

HERO 8: LUTHER, CALVIN, ARMINIUS AND ERASMUS

The last edition remembered Tyndale, who was strangled and burnt for translating the Bible into English. His dying prayer was that the eyes of King Henry VIII would be opened. Just two years later, the assassin king decreed that Tyndale's Bible should be available in every parish in England. Sadly, the bloodshed continued. Under 'bloody' Mary I, even Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, who left us the Book of Common Prayer beloved by Anglicans ever since, was torched. A fellow Oxford martyr, Hugh Latimer, encouraged another hero to face the flames with these words:

*'Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.'*¹

But where did the English heroes gain their inspiration? It started on 31 October 1517, when Martin Luther posted his '95 theses', accusing the Pope of heresy, on the doors of Wittenberg Church. The Reformation had begun. But Luther did not want to launch a new church; they were protesters before Protestants were forced to separate. In a sense, the existence of a Protestant Church today is the legacy of their failure to reform the Catholic Church.

Luther's conscience

What was Luther's problem? It was the many



abuses of church power which exploited the ignorance of the layman. In particular, the sale of indulgences to buy time out of purgatory scandalised the reformers. The church where Luther pinned his 95 theses contained relics that would shave 1,902,202 years and 270 days off purgatory for visiting pilgrims. One of the most manipulative advertising campaigns of all time used this

catchy jingle: 'When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs'. Friars would plead for money saying 'the wailing voices of your dead relatives and friends implore you' have mercy! We are in wretched agonies, and you can redeem us for a pittance, but you don't want to'.² But if the Pope could release anyone from purgatory, why did he need money to do so? In fact the money was being collected to build St Peter's, Rome, the biggest skyscraper of its day.

So what caused Luther, an Augustinian monk, to turn on the Pope, the superpower of his day and also his employer? Luther's conscience was troubled by his own transgressions. Reading in Romans 1:17 of the righteousness of God only confirmed his hostility to God, and his despair at ever finding peace with a righteous God.

'I raged with a fierce and trouble conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted...night and day I pondered until I



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grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereby I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven.'



the Pope's envoys:

'Your imperial majesty, unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of the Pope or councils since it is plain that they have often erred and contradicted themselves) by

manifest reasoning I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything. For to act against conscience is neither safe for us nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God helps me.'

five emphases

Whereas Augustine had said that God helps us obey his laws, Luther said we underestimate the perfection demanded by them. Rather, God transfers his righteousness to our account when we trust in him, 'at once a sinner and righteous'. It was Paul who first explained justification by faith. But the reformers returned to the Bible with their five emphases: grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, all truths that we access through Scripture alone. The church authorities were demoted, Luther taught that the church is a priesthood of all believers,³ under the authority of Scripture. Hence Luther saw a desperate need for Bible translation into the common language.

a diet of worms

Luther's conflict came to a head at the improbably named 'Diet of Worms' (a council in the German town of Worms). He was forced to defend himself from accusations of heresy by

Luther's unlikely protector after Worms was Frederick of Saxony, an ardent Catholic who acquired the questionable relics of Christ's nappy, a branch from the burning bush and milk from the Blessed Virgin. Remembering the treachery of a previous emperor whose promise of safe conduct to Czech reformer Jan Hus ended with a burning pyre, Frederick had Luther kidnapped, given a false identity as 'Junker Jorg', and a comedy beard. Luther was taken to the imposing mountain castle of Wartburg, where he worked on his Bible translation. Like Tyndale's, his translation became a best-seller and the most influential book for German speaking people. Perhaps his hymn 'a mighty fortress is our God' had special resonance for Luther as he thanked God for his extraordinary protection in Wartburg's mountain stronghold.

Freedom to challenge authority had its drawbacks. One Catholic scholar soon lamented that 'tailors and shoemakers, even women and

other simple idiots' were debating texts with priests and monks. And while moderns might cheer, soon every authority was being questioned. Potentially 'every man was his own Pope', each beholden to his own conscience, however little it had been shaped and educated by Scripture. As a result, there were uprisings and revolts across Europe. Schism led to the proliferation of denominations that today stands at 38,000.⁴

The ripples of this revolution are still felt today. When CMF canvassed signatures for a campaign against euthanasia, we frequently met Protestants who said 'I'm not sure what I think about that issue'. This might demonstrate a concern to think through complex issues and arrive at a reasoned position, but it also reflects a Protestant bias to individualism that paralyses collective action. Catholics were on the whole, better informed, united and committed to act on the Church's teaching.

Calvin: the glory, majesty and excellence of God

Bias towards subjective individualism still affects our spiritual lives today. A missionary returning to Britain remarked:

*'I suddenly saw that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the centre was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that... I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centred in me and my need of salvation, and not in the glory of God.'*⁵

Calvin was acutely aware of this. He rebuked a Cardinal with these words: '[Your] zeal for heavenly life [is] a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to *sanctify the name of God*.'⁶ In other words, even the vital

truth about eternal life can be so skewed as to displace God as the centre and goal. He challenged the cleric to 'set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, *zeal to illustrate the glory of God*'. This was an all-embracing slogan of the reformers like Calvin: the work of grace in the sinner as a mirror for the glory of God.

For Calvin, reformation was fundamentally about putting God's glory back to centre stage. Rome had destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways – by calling upon saints to intercede when Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man; by adoring the Virgin Mary, when Christ alone shall be adored; by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass, when the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross is complete and sufficient. Wherever a concern for God's glory, majesty and excellence is voiced, Calvin's concern is being expressed.

deeper reforms

'Reformed Theology', is short-hand for deeper reforms led initially by Calvin. Whereas Luther kept many Catholic practices such as infant baptism and the 'real presence' of Christ in communion bread, Calvinists wanted to strip back tradition further, reducing seven sacraments to two, baptism and communion. The 'puritan' principle took hold in Scotland, whereas the English Anglican reforms were always a halfway house.

inevitably, Calvin and predestination...

Calvin is often associated with the doctrine of predestination, though it was not his idea or main preoccupation any more than it was Luther's. One critic was the Dutch cleric Arminius, who like Pelagius and Augustine

a millennium before had fought over the issue of human freedom.⁷ Just a few years before, Luther had had a similar fight with the humanist Erasmus. Erasmus spoke for many then and today when he voiced concern that the Protestant idea of grace undermined man's dignity, in that it depicted man as a helpless slave without free will. Luther was blunt about the human predicament in *The Bondage of the Will*, published in 1525, as an answer to Erasmus' book, *The Freedom of the Will*:

'For since, apart from Christ, sin and death are our masters and the devil is our god and prince, there can be no strength or power, no wit or wisdom, by which we can fit or fashion ourselves for righteousness and life. On the contrary, blinded and captivated, we are bound to be the subjects of Satan and sin, doing and thinking what pleases him and opposed to God and His commandments'

So let's not blame Calvin for inventing a harsh new doctrine of God's sovereignty. He wrestled with the heart of the gospel, at great personal cost. He fled for his life amidst the stench of burning flesh in France, and like Paul was lowered out of a window to escape, on a rope of bed sheets. He taught that once we accept the biblical verdict of our powerlessness to save ourselves, it is down to God's grace to save whom he will. If there was no divine election (God's free choice to save), it would be something in us that affects our redemption, and it would no longer be God's work.⁸ Certainly Scripture is clear that God does many things we could not do for ourselves; he enables hearers to



understand a spiritually discerned message (Acts 16:14), convicts people of sin (John 16:8), enables sinners to repent (Acts 5:31, 11:18, Ephesians 2:8), and brings about rebirth (John 3:3-8; Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9). That last metaphor is telling; after all, how much choice and power did we have over our first birth? That still leaves the difficult question of why he chooses some and not others - not a merely academic question when you consider your loved ones who may face judgement. But let's be as clear as Luther and Calvin, God is

right and free to judge mankind for our rebellion.

The mystery is why he chooses to save any at all. The Bible teaches that God is merciful and delays judgment out of mercy, that men might turn to him. But for every verse that affirms man's responsibility to turn to God, there is another affirming God's sovereignty and free choice, often in the same passage. It is tempting to airbrush out one or other of these contrasting truths.⁹ Instead we need to submit to what the creator has revealed for our benefit, however hard it is for fallen minds to reconcile. Consider both truths in the passages below and shudder at the awful necessity of judgement. Then thank God for his mercy!

giants with feet of clay¹⁰

Luther and Calvin are giants of church history. Yet it is sobering to remember that while they were revolutionaries of their day, they were also products of their times, and inevitably complicit in some of the sins of their age.¹¹ Having escaped persecution and violence from Catholics, at times they persecuted to bring

God's sovereignty

Man needs God's intervention to rescue him from sin and death. God is right to judge, and free to choose whom he will

'For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son...and those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified' Romans 8:29-30

'Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not depend then on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy... One of you will say to me "then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it "why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath- prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory- even us...?' Romans 9:14-16, 19-24

'For he chose us in (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight....' Ephesians 1:4

order to anarchy and dissent. For instance, it was Luther who expressed anti-Semitism in Germany that was later exploited by Nazis in the 20th century, calling Jews 'venomous beasts, vipers, disgusting scum, devils incarnate'. He recommended a pogrom against

man's real choice

Man is responsible for responding to the grace and mercy of God

"Do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked?" declares the sovereign Lord. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" Ezekiel 18:23

'I tell you in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.' Luke 15:7

"God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us...In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." Acts 17:27, 30

'The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.' 2 Peter 3:9

'I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone...This is good, and pleases God our saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.' 1 Timothy 2:1-4

them and permanent expulsion:

'My advice is: First, that their synagogues be burned down, and that all who are able toss sulphur and pitch. Second, that all their books- their prayer books, their Talmudic writings, also the entire Bible be taken from them ...that they

be forbidden on pain of death to praise God... their private houses must be destroyed and devastated, they could be lodged in stables... if this avails nothing, we will be compelled to expel them like dogs.'

Thankfully Luther softened and shortly before his death preached: 'We want to treat them with Christian love and to pray for them, so that they might become converted and would receive the Lord.'¹² Likewise, Calvin's reputation is tarnished by his part in the trial of Michael Servetus. A man with unorthodox views on the Trinity, he was burned at the stake by civil authorities after questioning by Calvin, who did have reservations. Perhaps we have to judge by the standards and methods of the day, at a time when violent revolution was in the air. Yet it is hard to claim the approval of Jesus for acts of violent coercion.

It is tempting to feel superior, we who live in a more 'enlightened age'. But we should ask ourselves what these giants of God's household would say about Christians today. What would be our shameful blind spots; practices that we have accepted uncritically from our culture?

conclusion

Thank God for the reformation heroes who, at great personal cost, turned us back to the gospel teaching of the early church. They

the reformers' legacy Luther

- honestly faced up to the holiness of God and the wretchedness of man
- wrestled with Scripture as the means to understand God and reform the church
- delighted in the mercy and grace of God, and risked his life to bring it to others

Calvin

- had a passion for God's glory, majesty and all-surpassing excellence
- faced up to the difficult teachings of Scripture on judgement and man's need of rescue
- risked his life to teach others to turn to Christ whilst there is time

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him

Some of the most influential Protestants recently have been 'new Calvinists' such as Tim Keller, John Piper, CJ Mahoney, Mark Driscoll, Don Carson and John Stott. To see how a Calvinist prioritises the glory of God, whilst preaching our deepest joy in him, read John Piper's *Desiring God*.¹³

wrestled with Scripture and challenged authority so that the common man might be freed from exploitation and condemnation. Even better, that others might discover and live for the majesty, excellence and glory of God in Christ. Do we have such courage and passion? ■

1. Collier W. *History of the British Empire*. London: T Nelson and Sons, 1870:124
1. Tomkins S. A *Short History of Christianity*. Oxford: Lion Books, 2005:136
2. 1 Peter 2:9
3. According to *Christianity Today*
4. Newbiggin L. quoted in Stafford T. God's Missionary to us. *Christianity Today*. 1996 Dec. 40 (40):29
5. Dillenberger J. *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings*. Scholar's Press 1975: 89
6. Bunn A. Heroes and Heretics 5. *Nucleus*. 2011; Spring: 34-37.
7. Some argue that the grateful acceptance of free forgiveness is not itself a virtuous act. Others that man's responsibility and predestination are compatible. Imagine a teacher who persuades a pupil to obey the fire alarm; the pupil's will was engaged but the teacher was totally in charge.
8. For instance, it is tempting to reduce predestination to the more palatable foreknowledge of who would turn to Christ, as preached by Jacob Arminius.
9. The two extremes are often labeled hyper Calvinism (downplaying man's responsibility) and Arminianism (downplaying God's sovereignty).
9. If you have ever wondered where this phrase came from, see Daniel 2
10. Ephesians 2:2 'the ways of the world' are governed by the social and spiritual climate of the age
11. Luther M. 'On the Jews and Their Lies', 1543, available at bit.ly/wrKox
12. Piper J. *Desiring God*. Nottingham: IVP, 1984.