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REDISCOVERING BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Reformers were not communicating a new message. They were simply re-emphasising, and perhaps to some extent re-discovering, the teachings embedded in Scripture. The essence of the gospel had been commonly taught in the early church, but it had become lost in the secretions of Roman Catholic teaching.

Luther and Calvin had their precursors in two earlier giants: John Wycliffe (c. 1320s-1384), often known as ‘the Morning Star of the Reformation’, who taught similar truths in England; and Jan Hus (1372-1415) who was burnt at the stake almost exactly a hundred years before Luther pinned his theses to the Wittenberg church door. So when Luther and Calvin sought to open up the clear teaching of Scripture, they saw themselves as building on the legacy of others. Luther himself said, ‘We teach no new thing; we repeat and establish all things which the Apostles and all godly teachers have taught before us.’¹

1. Luther, *Commentary on the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (1:4a), quoted in Michael Reeves and John Stott, *The Reformation:*

John Jewel, the Bishop of Salisbury, underlined this when he wrote, ‘We bring you nothing but what the Apostles and Christ our Saviour brought before us.’² Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626), who was head translator of what became known as the King James Bible, asserted aptly, ‘We are not innovators, but renovators.’³ In other words, they were reaffirming the teachings of the early church—which had been encrusted by the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries, and to which additions had been made over the generations.

THE HISTORY OF THE TERM ‘EVANGELICAL’

It is sometimes implied that the word ‘evangelical’ dates back only to the sixteenth century, as if the evangelical movement had begun as a sectarian reaction to the monolith of the Roman Catholic Church.

The word was used as far back as the second century in debates with the early heretic Marcion (around A.D. 180) to describe those whose aspiration was to be faithful to the New Testament text. The first-century believers held to the apostolic teaching regarding the authority of Scripture and Christ’s deity, death and physical resurrection. They also believed in God’s act of justifying those whom He brought to salvation, through Christ’s death. These were the hallmarks of the New Testament church.

What You Need to Know and Why (Hendrickson Publishers, Lausanne Library, 2017).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 34.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

So the word ‘evangelical’ predates the creation of both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. It derives from ‘*euangelion*’, a Greek word which the Bible translator William Tyndale (1494-1536) described as ‘good and merry, glad tidings which makes a man’s heart glad, and makes him sing, dance and leap for joy’.⁴

WHAT THE REFORMERS RE-DISCOVERED

What was it that Luther and Calvin re-discovered? Their teaching was rooted in three long-forgotten and neglected cornerstones of New Testament Christianity, namely:

- The doctrine of justification by grace through faith.
- The acceptance of Scripture rather than church tradition as our final authority in all matters of belief and conduct.
- The belief in the priesthood of all believers, which emphasized that all believers could have direct access to God without a priest acting as a go-between.

Calvin viewed what passed for Christianity in late mediaeval Europe as sub-Christian. He wrote boldly to a senior Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, Jacopo Sadoletto (1477-1547) in 1539: ‘The light of the divine truth has been extinguished, the word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion and the pastoral office subverted ... there is almost no divine worship untarnished by superstition.’⁵

4. ‘A pathway into the Holy Scripture’ in *The Works of William Tyndale* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010).

5. Responding to an attempt by Cardinal Sadoletto in a letter written to

In re-emphasising these monumental truths, the Reformers sought to answer three central questions:

- *How can I be saved or made right with God?* Through the justifying and gracious work of God through Christ.
- *Where can I find my guidance for living and understanding God's purpose for my life?* How can I know what is true? What is my final authority for understanding God's purposes for me in the world? Pre-eminently through reading and understanding the teachings of Scripture which are above all, and ahead of any church tradition.
- *Can I gain access to God directly, without going through a priest?* All people have direct access to God through Christ, our great high priest, without needing the intervention of any earthly priest.

The Reformers summarised their central tenets in a series of '*solas*' (sole, or alone). At the heart of the gospel is a divine declaration that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer because of God's grace alone (*sola gratia*). Such justification is through faith alone (*sola fide*), in Christ alone (*solus Christus*) and for the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*). The true record of this message is found in Scripture alone, which is the voice of God (*sola Scriptura*). See Chapter 2.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLES AND COMMENTARIES

Luther was a prolific writer. For a four-year period, in the early stages of the Reformation, he wrote the

secessionists in Geneva to return to the Roman Catholic Church.

equivalent of a two-hundred-page book every two weeks: commentaries, lectionaries and works of biblical theology.

Calvin produced his masterly *Institutes of the Christian Religion*⁶ at the age of only twenty-seven. These *Institutes* are still widely-read, and used today in some of the most influential theological colleges in the French-speaking world as a basis for studying biblical theology and doctrine.

Others copied Luther's example, perhaps the most famous of whom was William Tyndale whom Melvyn Bragg regards as 'one of the greatest Englishmen.'⁷ Just as Luther was the father of the German language, so Bragg and others argue that Tyndale was father of the English language. Bragg in fact argues that it would be impossible to understand Shakespeare without Tyndale, as Shakespeare quoted so frequently from Tyndale's text in his plays.

In a few short years in the 1530s Tyndale managed to translate most of the Bible from its original languages into an accurate and easy-to-read format. It was however illegal at that time to read the Bible in English in England, but he smuggled sixteen thousand copies into England before he was caught in 1535. So great was the excitement amongst its readers that some priests complained that people were reading the Bible aloud to each other even during the sermons.

Tyndale, like Luther, wanted the Word of God to be heard because he understood it to be the voice of

6. Hendrickson Publishers and others.

7. Melvyn Bragg, *Tyndale: A Very Brief History* (London: SPCK, 2018), p. ix.