

## The Abiding Impact of the Reformation

By [Billy C. Sichone](#)

*Central Africa Baptist University*

### INTRODUCTION

The Reformation is a well-known phenomenon and epoch in History (Jones 1999; preface). Those aware of its place in history cannot help but acknowledge that God moved in a mighty way to bring about changes that would have lasting impact on centuries long after the central actors have left the center stage (Cunningham 1). Triggers of this Reformation are many but for one reading through the eye of providence, the circumstances<sup>1</sup> came together to foster the Reformation, whose prime mover was arguably the Christian Church (Peterson 1999; 185).

### THE NATURE OF THE REFORMATION

The Reformation is not a one-off event but an accumulation of diverse shades of events that led to the climax during the 16th century when God raised individuals in separate parts of Europe and the United Kingdom to rise to the occasion (Jones 1999; preface). In many ways, the Lord prepared the ground for such a momentous occasion when truth would triumph in the midst of much evil, sin, superstition and crime that had enveloped a greater part of Europe (Ryle 1992; 150).

### CONDITIONS PRIOR TO THE REFORMATION

The Roman Catholic was probably very potent<sup>2</sup>, wielding unrivalled power over certain European countries politically and otherwise. Not even Monarchs were free from the potent influence or control of Papal authority. Germany for instance lay in the very clutches of Papal grip to the extent that even Kings could be deposed or elevated as the Pope desired! In other places of Europe, the state would appoint Bishops since the two were inseparably connected. Continental

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<sup>1</sup> Whether political, social, economic or the quest for nation/statehood, as Peterson (1999) seems to suggest

<sup>2</sup> Although strictly speaking, the Papacy was in its decline from its 1073-1294 height (Renwick & Harman 1999; 89) the Pope of Rome was vulnerable at some point and resided at Avignon, France at some point for security-Peterson (1999;)

Europe was largely and securely in the hands of the Pope of Rome (Renwick & Harman 1999; 89-95).

## **LEADING FIGURES BEFORE AND DURING THE REFORMATION**

England, despite being an Island away from the Continent (i.e. main land Europe) was not spared as it increasingly continued to receive influence from Rome at times resulting in the deaths of several people either burnt at the stake or executed for daring to question the existing ecclesiastical authority (Ryle 1958; 7). The tussles between Rome and England eventually led to the creation of the Anglican Church headed by the English Monarch (i.e. Henry VIII, 1534) but even this did not secure the freedom of the English Church because the flavor of the established church depended on the type of person that was on the throne. If they were inclined towards Romanism (e.g. bloody Mary; 1553-1558), the Church would lean towards that way. Equally, if they were inclined away from Romanism (e.g. Edward VI; 1547-1553), the Church tended to be antagonistic towards Rome.

In his time God raised a different people across the centuries whether on the Continent or the United Kingdom (i.e. Scots, Welsh, English or Irish). On the main land, God raised people like John Huss (1360-1415), Savonarola (1452-1498; the social reformer) and host of such valiant continental reformers that trail blazed the way for the actual reformation epoch. Many died along the way and we may never know them until the day of crowns. God raised other sanctified mortals in ensuing years and centuries but these were some of the early instigators of Reform on main land Europe. The Lord equally raised other Reformers from the United Kingdom such as John Wycliffe (1320-1384; 'The Morning star of English Reformation')<sup>3</sup>, William Tyndale (1494-1536), John Knox (1505-1572), Nicholas Ridley (1500-1555), Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Hugh Latimer (1487-1555), John Hooper (1495-1555), John Bradford (1510-1555)<sup>4</sup> and a host of others, some of whom sealed the faith with their blood. The forces of darkness were constantly waging war against the light and at times darkness apparently seemed to prevail. It was in the midst of this pitch darkness that God begun to stir pockets of protest and Reforms both on the continent and the United Kingdom. God raised a standard equal to the task in these Reformers that were very effective in their own right. For instance, Knox is famously said to have stated that he desired to have Scotland become Christian or he died if that was not granted (Houghton 1980). The English monarch is said to have dreaded his prayers more than the armies of France!

It is a curious fact that among individuals raised up to foster Reform were those from the devout children of Rome. These individuals were initially committed to

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<sup>3</sup> Renwick & Harman (1999; 99)

<sup>4</sup> Ryle; Five English Reformers, Banner of Truth Trust; John Foxe gives moving accounts as well of the Martyrs

the Roman church, supporting its practices, abuses, false piety and its syncretic mixture of truth with error. At that stage the Bible was locked away in Jerome's Latin Vulgate and so only open to the learned Priests claiming to be the only ones able to interpret it. At the time many Priests were also limited in what they could interpret or teach as everything was strictly regulated by the church. To depart from the norm implied severe sanctions that no sane person dared invite upon themselves. Not only was the Bible locked away, lay people were not allowed to own one lest the wrath of man was unleashed on them.

Pockets of the Children of Rome that God raised over the centuries and years included names like Aurelius Augustine (354-430; Renwick and Harman assert that he was the greatest theologian in his age; 1999; 58), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Thomas Akempis (1380-1471), Savonarola (1452-1498), and Martin Luther (1483-1546), the prime Reformer in Germany<sup>5</sup>. After much wrestling with truth, Luther pasted 95<sup>6</sup> points on a Church door meant for debate resulting from having been fed up with what he observed and experienced on his visit to the Vatican. Luther, a Professor in Theology, triggered the debate in 1517. Indeed, It was a brave day when he did this because, unknown to himself, he would trigger a wide revolution whose impact would ripple deep into the future. In 2017, we commemorate that one brave act whose effect we continue to feel, despite the five centuries between us. But Luther was not the only instigator of Reform at the time, other warriors were raised including Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), John Calvin (1509-1564), Theodore Beza (1519-1605)-Switzerland, Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) - Germany and others that were not only part of the actual Reformation in Europe but would eventually carry on the Reform long after the prime instigators would have left the center stage. John Calvin, often called "the reluctant Reformer" (Jones R.T. 1985; 123), providentially found himself in Geneva (1536), initially just in transit when he was coerced, in the name of God, to take up the Reformation mantle by William Guillaume Farrell<sup>7</sup>. Calvin reluctantly took it up and would soon prove a very deep theologian, voluminous writer, civic leader and Preacher. Harman and Renwick (1999; 119) assert that Calvin was in fact the greatest individual of the Reformation era, given his prowess and influence. Calvin is said to have been so productive that he literary worked himself to death, passing into eternity in 1564, buried in an unmarked grave at his request (Jones 1985; 128 & Renwick & Harman 1999; 124). Such was the resolve of these mortals raised by God during the Reformation!

## **THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND EFFECTS OF THE REFORMATION**

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<sup>5</sup> Renwick & Harman 1999; 108

<sup>6</sup> It may interest you to know that Luther had earlier raised 95 thesis of disputation for debate but had no effect.

<sup>7</sup> Harman & Renwick (1999; 121). The story of the Church; Jones (1985; 123). The Great Reformation; Needham (2004; 215). 2000 years of Christ's power.

But then, our primary task is not to recount the works of this army of people but to highlight the lasting effect of the all-pervasive reforms that ripped through and rippled across the world. We seek to highlight some of the effects and impacts that resulted from the “Great Reformation,” as Tudor Jones would call it.

That the Reformation was so potent an epoch is beyond debate. While some like David Watson claim that the Reformation was a tragedy and blot on the Church image (Bray 2000; 1), others state that it was such a watershed whose immense impact we are yet to completely measure or comprehend. Yet there is a third group that are indifferent and wonder why the noise to remember such a distant epoch which does not have any directly relevance to the present. This latter group further asserts that the remembrance of the Reformation amounts to hate speech or applauding a bad event that is against the Roman Catholic. Others still, claim that the Protestant Reformation has no connection, bearing or impact on what eventually evolved because as the inherent desire for nationalism, enlightenment etc. arose long after the Reformation (Lee 2010; 1, Bruhn 2008). Whatever leaning one may have about the Reformation, it is a land mark historical period in the lives of Protestants (and others too) that cannot be ignored or easily whiled away. The epochal event is too important to forget, given the tremendous post Reformation effects that continue to resound in the present day, whether in the centers where the Reform actually took place or the far flung places such as Africa that were probably not even aware what was going on outside their native continent. In this paper therefore, we highlight some key effects of the reformation which people may not realize trace their genesis to this movement:

1. Access to the Bible in native languages. Thanks to the Reformation, the Bible is available in several languages other than the original or Latin. Prior to the Reformation, it was very hard to come across a Bible, let alone dangerous. The Reformation ensured that the picture changed yet many of us take our Bibles for granted. Men and women paid the price with their blood for us to freely have this Bible in our possession. We truly owe a lot to the Reformation (Ryle nd Tract 56; 7)!

2. Recovery of long lost and neglected cardinal doctrines. The Reformation recovered the long lost and buried doctrines of Justification by faith rather than works. Once Martin Luther stumbled across this great doctrine, burned on his heart, he could not help but talk about it, to the point of defying even the seemingly invincible Pope! His famous words “Here I stand, I can do no other...so help me God” send a solid ring tone of deep conviction. He was ready to die for that truth. All the five Solas were battle cries and watch words of the Reformation. Today, Justification by faith continues to bring much freedom and delight into the hearts of countless souls, despite many attackers of the doctrine such as N.T. Wright (Tyler 1999:3)<sup>8</sup>. Dr. J.I. Packer is probably right when he

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<sup>8</sup> Wright NT discusses Justification in Chapter 7 of his 192 paged book “What saint Paul really said...”

asserts that this (i.e. Justification) is the principle doctrine of the Christian faith and according to him, needs to be the first in any ordo salutis. The discovery of truth cast away shackles of fear and abuse that had been imposed on the masses by the corrupt church then. Justification by Faith restored the glorious liberty we have in Christ. Sadly, today people seem to be marching back into the domain of ignorance domain because they do not seem to know or appreciate this powerful doctrine. This is true not only of the Romanists but of professed Evangelicals too (Pollitt 1996; 3; Hunt 1985; 8)!

3. Scholarship<sup>9</sup>: The Reformation laid a high premium on the need of education and self-improvement. They insisted that people needed to be consistently reading and updating themselves so that they improve their lot to the greater glory of God. It is from the Reformation era that we derive and draw the need to study the Holy Scriptures in the original languages so that the precise meaning of a text is known, hence determining the authorial intent. Prior to the Reformation, it appears people did not care as much about the precise meaning of scripture and other writings. We can safely assert that we understand the Bible and other books better in our present age, thanks to the scholarship insisted on by the Reformers who themselves demonstrated high levels of scholarship (Ryle and Tract 56; 2). Luther himself was a Professor (Needham 2004; 68) while Calvin was a Lawyer and Theologian (Needham 2004; 204). Their heirs the Puritans were great scholars in their own right (Barker 1996:9-16) and on goes the ripple effect.

4. Human rights: This point may surprise many people that the Reformation triggered the need for human rights (Mbewe 1999). If one reads Ryle's great write up entitled 'what we owe to the Reformation' they cannot fail to notice what a great blessing the Reformation was! The Reformation engendered a deem need of liberty of conscience as well as the need to treat all people free without abuse because they are created in the image of God. The Reformation freed people from the tyrannism of Romanism as Ryle and Sullivan would highlight. Not even the Jesuit influenced Counter Reformation of the 1540s could completely reverse things (Harman & Renwick 1999; 148)<sup>10</sup>. So potent and far reaching was the protest having spread like wild fire. From religious liberty saw the emergence of the battle for freedom of association as well as the inalienable rights that were enshrined in the USA constitution by the founding fathers of 1776. Without the Reformation, it is difficult to imagine whether such watershed changes would have taken place. Today, Roman Catholicism trots around as the default champion of human rights when in fact it stood against every proclamation of freedom back in those dark, dark days!

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<sup>9</sup> It must be admitted here that the Jesuits were great scholars and educators. Harman and Renwick document this in their book "The story of the Church" pp 148.

<sup>10</sup> Harman & Renwick state the following: "The Jesuits became the life and soul of the Counter Reformation, their influence being very powerful in the Council of Trent in its last years. They specialized in Education and established flourishing schools all over Europe, where young people were turned into eager instruments for promoting the designs of the Vatican..."

5. Government: The government with its three arms was to some extent instigated by the Reformers. Although the earlier Reformers tended to blend the Civil Government and Church together, later Reformers and their heirs tended to insist that the two needed to be separate so that they offer checks and balances. Further developments have resulted in the three arms as we know them today. But the Reform achieved much more. Tudor Jones (2004; 251) states that out of the Reformation emanated several types of Church polity or government including Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, in addition to the already existing episcopal government in its various shades. Murray (1965; 178-301) draws important lessons from papers written by the Reformers and Puritans on Church polity.

6. God centered Worship<sup>11</sup>: The Reformation, although varied across where it was later entrenched tended to make worship simple and theocentric unlike the various ceremonies and superstitions that had gripped the Roman Church prior to the Reformation. Instead of elaborate Mass or some such ceremonies, the Reformers (especially Zwingli) insisted on making worship orderly and simple away from the drama, superstition and dread that the previous regime has included. Although Zwingli and Luther severely differed over the Eucharist and vestments, they none the less both insisted that God should be at the centre of worship. Murray (1965; 38, 55) makes a good case in the collected papers from the Reformation era. They demonstrate how theocentric the Reformers sought to be. Needham (2004) makes a similar observation about John Calvin and others. The Regulative principle has regulated practices in many Reformed Churches, although the breeze from the affective principle is making serious in-roads into the anthropocentric postmodern era church.

7. Institutions, instruction and enterprises: The Reformers insisted on the need for formal and informal education as highlighted earlier. Thus, they were not content with the status quo and went on to reform, establish formal schools or places of Instruction (Renwick & Harman 1999; 124). More than that, they studied and taught as much as they could. John Calvin is said to have been such a voluminous author, preacher and civic leader at Geneva. It is said that his productivity kept over four secretaries consistently on their toes trying to catch up with his high output! Not only was he a writer, he was a teacher and preacher too, giving several lectures and expositions from right across the Bible! Scores of people from within the continent and the UK travelled to learn at the hands of this great Reformer. Names such as Knox and others come to mind. Calvin would say something like this: “send me sticks and I will turn them into swords”! Such as their commitment and resolve! After his demise, Theodore Beza<sup>12</sup> and others succeeded him to carry on the work of teaching. Philip Doddridge, though of the

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<sup>11</sup> I would further argue that the Reformers introduced a Biblical world view. Dockery & Thornbury would agree

<sup>12</sup> Although some accuse Beza of having altered some of Calvin’s original views on Predestination, election etc.

18th Century did much to establish and run a school and so did the Puritans before him. But then, other saints established successful businesses in their day, demonstrating the need for empowerment, independence and earning one's keep. Dr Gregory Jones (2016; 4-7) demonstrates that Wesleyan witness included enterprises that left a lasting impact on the present and succeeding generation.

8. Writing: As already alluded to in the previous section, The Reformers read and wrote all the time! Their works still follow them to this day. Luther, Calvin were prolific writers their heirs, the Puritans, followed their model. Calvin commented on every book except Revelation and Daniel, yet that was not his only work! He wrote the Institutes of Christian Religion (1536) which was a form of systematic theology as well as an apologetic of sorts. Aquinas' Summa Theologica was magnanimous but Calvin's was even clearer!<sup>13</sup>

9. Spreading the word exploiting the printing press: The Reformers were driven to share God's word and thus used every extant cutting edge means to spread the word of God. The Printing press had just been invented and they exploited it to the full (Needham 2004; 378). The Church needs exploit available means that are ethically sound such as the social media among others.

10. Social enterprises: The reformers insisted on a holistic well-rounded life style. They probably could have been better known for insisting on correct doctrine and practice, the off shoot resulted in far much more including social and economic enterprises such as clinics, hospitals, schools and a host of other good things. The Wesleyan Methodists for instance spared no efforts in ministering to the whole man. Once again, Dr Gregory Jones (2016; 5-7) input comes in handy. He makes a case of Wesleyan influence having been accompanied by much accompanying works although these works in themselves never save anyone. That is practical Christianity.

11. Missions: The Reformers were not content to keep truth to themselves but did everything within their power to send forth the truth they knew as the bread of life. They gathered people around them, trained them and then sent them far and wide. We think here of Wycliff's Lollards and Calvin's missionaries to Brazil among others (Harman & Renwick 1999; 100; HistorySage.com 2013; 2). The mission field, in their view, was both local and abroad, in keeping with the Biblical modus operandi. Martin Luther first thought of the German and translated the Bible into the native language. Wycliffe and Tyndale translated the Bible into English while William Carey, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone and a host of other fearless missionaries trooped out their comfort zones fired up by the zeal of the earlier Reformers.

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<sup>13</sup> Needham (2000; 272) makes an interesting comment about Thomas Aquinas ('The Church Doctor') as having been one of those that probably taught that forgiveness of sin could be acquired through indulgences which were later abused

12. Purity: The Reformation in its various shades insisted among many things, the need for higher stands of purity and therefore holiness among its congregants (Renwick & Harman 1999; 121, Ryle 1985; 33-49). The Reformation was so forceful on this point to the extent that Rome begun to feel uncomfortable resulting in the Counter Reformation and other reactions (Renwick & Harman 1999:146-149). For instance, in an earlier period, men like Savonarola insisted on purity of piety and life among people but his reward was the loss of his precious life. His clarion call did not die with him but lived on in the lives of others that would come after him. Perhaps the fullest expression of his call was seen in the lives of the Puritan era when purity of life, action, motives and all was a major focal point, all for the glory of God. Puritanism gave way to the great Evangelical awakening that salvaged England out of the despond of sin. Spirituality appears to have cycles with intermittent seasons of much sin and apostasy. Whitefield, Wesley, Harris and a host of other preachers labored un-fatigably to turn the tide to the glory of God (Dunn 1983; 16). On and on went the fire for higher purity in individual and public life. That explains in part, why even the most godless nations that once knew the touch of God insist on some sense of uprightness and purity in public life of its elected officials especially that of President. The Puritan effect is still evident around the world for sure, aside from some of their living monuments both in New England and England itself. Insistence on a regenerate ministry restored dignity to the Christian Ministry. We are in decline now.

13. Scripture interpretation: Prior to the Reformation, the Bible was interpreted in all sorts of ways included the allegorical, random or magical/mystical approach. It was hardly taken for what it meant-The inspired word. The Reformers thrashed all these wrong approaches and insisted on the literal interpretation of scripture unless the genre dictated otherwise (Needham 2004: 70). In insisting on the literal interpretation, they set aside superstition and wrong application of the Holy Writ establishing the authorial intent. This further led to the establishment of the perceived scriptural authority, although its inherent inspiration never alters. We need a fresh Reformation again to tame exegetical fallacies (Carson 1996: 15).

14. Science: Contrary to what many people hold, Science and the Bible are never at odds but complementary<sup>14</sup>, if not Science explaining what Scripture has already stated. In effect, the word "Science" means knowledge in which case theology is the queen of the Sciences as the Puritans used to aptly quip (Watson 1958). The Renaissance triggered curiosity, scholarship and a desire for investigation raising questions on many issues in God's creation. The Reformation insisted on the need to establish truth by various ways and methods

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Einstein is quoted as having said the following interesting words: "Religion without science is blind, Science without Religion is lame." As quoted by Dr John Wright in his book "Designer Universe: Is Christianity compatible with modern Science?" Another, Dr Ted Burge, argues that Science and Christianity are not at odds. It is the interpretation that causes the apparent tensions. Not all his evidential arguments would pacify the Presuppositional perspective but he certainly has a case. Dr Ross would clearly agree with him



as long as they were perceived consistent and sound. Thus, in later years when the modern era arrived, scientists (most who were theists), took on various projects to discover what God had placed in nature. Out of good sound science has come so much improvement though postmodern science is again being affected by the winds of the times. That said, the Reformation's quest for truth has borne fruit and continues to rather than superstition and squalor that preceded it.

15. Preaching and its primacy: The Reformers insisted that preaching should be the primary means of disseminating God's word in the local assembly and otherwise (HistorySage.com 2013; 2-10). They placed a high premium of 'the art of prophesying' as good old Perkins would say. Preaching was considered important in worship because then God was speaking from the preached word. As such, it was accorded a special place on the Lord's Day explaining why preaching is still central in Reformed churches across the world. Further, the preaching was most biblically sound and applied well in the given contexts (Watson 1958). The venerable Ryle made much of this matter and so did Dallimore as he wrote on the Great awakening of the 18th Century.

16. Capitalism, wealth creation and work ethic: Where ever Protestantism flourished tended to become prosperous, reason being that the Reformers insisted on the need for the Christian to work hard to the glory of God. The saint needed to be productive at all times as instructed by scripture and not be content to live on hand outs. This resulted in industry, research, earnest hard work and manly dominion emanating from a Biblical worldview. In many senses, many western nations remain prosperous because they have retained this work ethic, despite hurling out the religious underpinnings. Professor Charles Hill (2003; 97-98) has commented on this fact in his monumental book, 'International Business'. He claims that the Protestant insistence on hard work has led to higher productivity, innovation, individualism and progress<sup>15</sup>. Wherever Romanism flourished, you witness a lot more social intervention rather than disciplined resolute hard work to earn one's keep. According to Peterson (1999; 187) Romanism tended to militate against capitalism and thus kept people in poverty but the Reformation turned the tables, thus opening the door to genuinely earned prosperity and wealth creation.

17. Social reforms: Not only were the Reformers insistent on purity of life, they ensured that the whole person was addressed. Although the Reformers themselves primarily focused on the spiritual reforms, they also ensured that their influence permeated everyday life. More than that, they worked to reform institutions, laws and practices that tended to impinge on people's lives. John Calvin for instance essentially set up or reformed the social systems at Geneva,

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<sup>15</sup> Hill makes the following assertion while quoting Webber's claim: "according to Weber, there was a relationship between Protestantism and the emergence of modern capitalism. Weber argued that Protestant ethics emphasize the importance of hard work and wealth creation (for the glory of God) and frugality (abstinence from worldly pleasures)..."

some of which are still applied to this day. The Reformers taught, lived and applied what they knew. Where their proposals were rejected by the crown, they went on to practice and establish their convictions thus setting an example. In later generations, their thinking became engrained in many causes including social justice among all social classes. According to Herman and Renwick (1999; 105) effected a serious and deep Social reform among the masses and intellectuals before the Romanists occasioned his death in 1498. The Great Awakening rescued entire nations from decadence. Preachers like Whitefield, Wesley and Harris were greatly used by God (Bennet 1987; 9; Dunn 1983; 16)

18. Puritanism and morality: The Puritan era drew much from their spiritual ancestors, the Reformers. English Puritanism, for instance, aimed at reforming the established Church with limited success (Murray 1971; 3, 85). Their standards were very high which permeated to society in various ways. Drawing from the Reformers' insistence on Education and application, the Puritans generally ensured they were as exemplary, educated and applicatory in their outlook to life. Similarly, the Pilgrim Fathers took with them the same values as they immigrated to New England in the 1600s. This standard, somehow finds its way in American public life today although the principles of piety are generally long lost. Sullivan (2016) seems to suggest that the Reformation demands (by Luther and others) have been met by the Church of Rome and hence sees no reason for continued antagonism. This view is suspect because the Reformers and their heirs demanded a deeper reform beyond just the physical outward reforms.

19. The Great Evangelical awakening (late 1730's onwards): The great awakening of the UK and in some senses of America were (remotely and indirectly) off shoots of the Reformation (Renwick & Harman 1999; 165; Murray 1971; 112; Dunn 1992; 3, Thornbury 1977; 22). Having set a high standard of holiness by the Puritan era, there came a declension that needed God's intervention. The hunger for a new visitation obviously was from God but the standard of holiness had been set by a previous era of Puritanism. God graciously visited the nations brining about many social and spiritual transformations. To some extent, this was an off shoot of the Great Reformation.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this essay we have traversed part of the landscape the Reformation effected. Today, we witness the Reformation being remembered as well as ridiculed but that matters less because what God did, continues to be evidently a reference point. We do not remove the Ancient boundary stones as God has ordained it. As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of this pivotal moment in history, always remember that God always has his people in every age and moving history towards His sovereign ends. That another Reformation is needed is beyond question as many of the evils that the Reformation thrashed out have made bold

returns garbed in a different dress. These vices have made serious inroads within Evangelical ranks and threaten to take us back to Romanism, as the venerable JC Ryle once warned (Ryle 1992; 126). The firm principles laid by the Reformers are fast being erased by post modernism, we must and need to resist this temptation to abandon ship, no matter how strong. Ecumenism and compromise on cardinal truths relating to the five Solas, battle cries of the Great Reformation is not a viable option. We need to push on towards greater reform and purity!

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

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