

Reformation

Introduction and purpose

The Protestant Reformation in the Sixteenth Century was a major revolution with lasting consequences. It lifted the lid on small, popular movements for reform and change, even though the mainstream Reformation, principally through Luther and Calvin and their followers, was as controlled by governmental authorities and as controlling of what people thought as the Catholic Church.

It would not be possible to summarise in a few pages the whole of church history since New Testament times, but this overview of Reformation through the ages will refer to various key points in that history. The aim is to provide some context and background to celebrating (or marking, at least) the 500th anniversary and, more important, reflecting theologically on some key themes.

The Long View

Church history falls into certain distinct epochs, though they are defined for ease of analysis - it is not so clear that those living and preaching or writing at the time would have identified them in the same ways. What follows is a superficial and simplistic overview of the eras that can be discerned. There was a lot of diversity and many of the views and theologies were carefully thought through and nuanced. But a summary can be helpful.

New Testament times and the immediately following two or three generations (to early Second Century)

There is substantial diversity among New Testament Christians but a strong unity centred on Jesus. Just as the creation at the beginning of time was perfect but incomplete, still to be worked on by humans, so the New Testament church seems to be the highest achieved in history but was incomplete - it was several years, for example, before the persecution scattered believers and the Gentile missions really started. There was such a level of Holy Spirit power and the presence of God that for example economic sharing became natural and those who separated themselves from God by not telling the truth actually died (Acts 4:31-37, Acts 5:1-11 and 1 Cor 11:29-30).

It is clear that certain trends visible in the New Testament became worse in later generations. In particular there was a tendency to speculative doctrine going beyond what was scriptural and to divisiveness. In a way these were risks God deliberately took in creating humans in His image, to be creative and capable of love because not limited to being forced to obey instructions like robots.

The Early Church until Constantine's conversion and Christianity becoming compulsory in the later Fourth Century

It can be surprising to Evangelicals and Pentecostals that some of the sort of practices that we associate with Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches began to appear quite early, during the Second and Third Centuries. The practices that seem to adopt paganism, most directly, such as using icons or statues of saints in worship, really came in during the century after Constantine (the next phase or era). But making the sign of a cross over the breast was an early practice to help focus prayer and to ask God's protection in spiritual warfare.

A key example is the emphasis on miracles - which in later centuries became quite superstitious - but in the Early Church seems to have been a key trigger for non-Christians to turn to Christ, alongside their inexplicable godly conduct (including patience and forgiveness when tortured and killed). After the Reformation, because of the abuses in the middle ages, the Reformers tended to be more rational and to play down or simply deny supernatural miracles.

Another example is the great honour shown to priests and bishops. This can be seen as an abuse and a denial of Jesus' instruction not to call anyone "Father" etc. (Matt 23:8-12) but we have to understand why the church developed in this way by tracing backwards in time to the New Testament. It seems that the apostles and prophets were originally itinerant ministries, establishing foundations by planting new churches or overseeing, directing and teaching the churches. Within a few generations there was much less itinerant ministry. Perhaps local leaders became skeptical of them for fear they were not rooted in local church and accountable, or perhaps there were abuses particularly of prophetic ministry, or perhaps there was an unwillingness to accept the challenge of authority and prophetic insight. It is likely all three factors were in play.

Whatever the reasons, the place of apostles and prophets working in teams was taken by individual bishops or overseers responsible for a large city church and the various house churches in the city and the surrounding region. The structure of local churches became increasingly static and the honour and respect, previously shown to men and women of the Spirit who were gifted and called with Eph 4 ministries, was given to bishops and local elders ("presbyters" in Greek and later translated into Latin as "sacerdotes" or priests). This is a key example of the loss of New Testament theology, lifestyle and power. In our day we are seeing a restoration of the recognition of apostolic and prophetic ministry.

The decline into institutional religion from 315 AD and rise of monastic and other reform movements before the Sixteenth Century

The end of the Third century saw the last widespread persecution of Christians for failing to participate in local civic ceremonies to honour the emperor as a god. The beginning of the Fourth saw an emperor become a Christian at the time he finally secured his grip on power. There are differing views whether he was genuinely converted or was adopting the outward form of Christianity to justify his claims to the throne.

Most historians see him as cynically adopting a religion that was becoming more popular even among the upper classes. But there are several factors suggesting genuine conversion:

- his own mother was a Christian
- although he was not baptised until late in his life this was becoming common because of concerns that a believer might not be capable of true repentance of post-baptismal sins, and he knew that he would have to authorise non-Christian behaviours as emperor (most Christians of the time would obey Jesus' instruction to love enemies and saw military service as non-Christian)
- less than 10% of the population were Christian at the time so it is unlikely it would have been politically expedient.
- he was keenly interested in theological debates.

Whatever the state of his own conscience, his conversion was seen at the time by many Christians as the dawn of blessed time leading to the return of Christ. With historical perspective it can be seen as the biggest disaster to strike the church. In outward form, the result was that within 100 years the whole Roman Empire had become Christian. However, this was achieved by force. Christianity was tolerated from 313 AD but became the official state religion in 375 AD and almost compulsory from the end of the century. Pagan temples were destroyed and some people were terrorised into conversion or compelled by soldiers acting under orders of bishops. Instead of faith overcoming the world, the world overcame the church from within. Instead of the church influencing the society around to become godly, society influenced the church to become proud and violent. Good ends cannot be achieved by bad means!

It would be misleading to see the decline as complete and immediate. It took time for the tendency for upper class Christians to demand to enter the clergy as bishops and for bishops to act like aristocrats. It took time for the church's teaching to be modified to allow the use of force. But there was a decline in spirituality and power, as earthly power was used to settle debates between theologians. The Council of Nicaea which settled the debate on Christ's divinity was strongly influenced by Constantine, who effectively took the chair at a meeting of bishops as Emperor. There was no precedent for this and the bishops were no doubt relieved to have freedom to meet and to have imperial patronage so that people would take notice of their decisions.

During times of persecution it had been the godly character of Christians that impressed their persecutors and caused many to become Christians themselves. A hundred years later St John Chrysostom had to threaten his flock with excommunication if they went to the circus on Good Friday or if they failed to inform on others who went. This is a sad example of a godly man using ungodly pressure on an ungodly congregation made up of people forced to become Christian at least in outward observance.

During this period many longed for closer connection with God and true spirituality but sadly found it in the desert rather than the church. Small communities of monks and nuns were established as "saints" or "holy ones" sought to live New Testament Christianity, with particular emphasis on prayer. This tendency to "escape the world" continued through the Middle Ages, though it can be over-emphasised: many monastic movements were very directly engaged in caring for the poor or sick and in preaching to call others to a deeper life in God. A key feature is that everyone thought that a person born in a Christian country would and should be a Christian once "baptised" as a baby, so evangelistic preaching was not possible as such.

Reformation and Catholic Reformation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

In October 1517 Luther famously kick-started the Reformation by publishing “95 theses” (95 short assertions or arguments). He pinned them to the door of the cathedral in the small city where he was a university professor, which was the usual way of participating in public theological debate. They were an attack on various abuses in the Roman church, principally the sale of indulgences (certificates given by the Pope that purported to relieve the person buying a certificate from a period in Purgatory, being sold to finance wars against the Turkish invaders attacking Austria). He had no idea at the time that this would lead to churches being reformed and organised separately from Roman church structures.

At first he argued strongly that any person could interpret scripture but over time he became more cautious and when the Lutheran churches became organised they placed strong emphasis on preaching: ministers were the guides and guardians of truth. The Peasants Revolt in many German areas, that was finally quashed in 1525, was a significant factor in his change of mind, and Luther argued strongly that Christian princes should put down the revolt by force. From then, reformation on Lutheran lines happened in states where the ruler was inclined to the Reformation.

Writing a little later than Luther, Jean Calvin was a French lawyer, turned theologian, who took Luther’s lead and developed a systematic theology that is valuable for study today. His personal devotion to God is evident from other writings and the key elements of his theology begin with the proposition that all human life is designed for the glory of God. Calvin also insisted on the importance of obeying human authorities, however opposed to the truth they might seem. So he was reluctant to encourage formation of Reformed churches in his native France because the monarchy was committed to Roman Catholicism. He settled in Geneva where he persuaded the ruling magistrates to reform the church in accordance with his ideas.

Whether spurred on solely by the Reformation or by the continuing pressure from groups within the church wanting reform, the Counter-Reformation or Catholic Reformation gained ground in the second half of the Sixteenth Century with a zeal for purity in the church and for showing faith by good works. This was led mainly by new monastic or quasi-monastic movements such as the Jesuits and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. There were pioneering mission movements outside Europe among pagan people, often in colonies but not exclusively (there is a long and inspiring tradition of Catholic martyrs working to evangelise in Japan and China from the Seventeenth Century, for example).

The Radical Reformation and various reform or renewal or restoration movements in the Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries

From 1525 in many places in central Europe there was a Spirit filled revival among mostly ordinary folk where the distinctive features were baptism of believers (hence the name given by their enemies of “Re-baptisers”) and voluntary choice to be part of a church congregation. There was significant diversity of beliefs and practice but most were non-resisters and refused to swear oaths (because of faithful obedience to Jesus’ instructions).

Anabaptists were persecuted by Protestants and Catholics alike because they refused to conform to the requirements to attend the state sponsored church. Like Early Christians refusing on grounds of conscience to offer incense to the “divine Emperor” Anabaptists were persecuted for failing to swear an oath of allegiance to the state (which was usually an annual requirement in most of the city states in Europe at the time).

The movement fragmented - partly because of a lack of leadership and connection between groups due to persecution, but partly because of the difficulties in maintaining unity in doctrine when reading scripture as a local congregation was the key to hermeneutics.

A number of Independent congregations were established in the late Sixteenth/early Seventeenth Century in England. Whether influenced by Anabaptists (who were quite numerous in Holland) or simply following through the logical implications of being excluded from influence in the Anglican church, the leaders of these congregations took a radical step to form a congregation on the basis of a covenant to one another rather than following the pattern of an established church. Some of these groups rediscovered, through prayer and Bible study, perhaps with the example of Anabaptists, the importance of baptism of believers. If the pre-requisite is faith a baby cannot be baptised. The first baptist church is traced to 1612 but it was during the Civil War in the 1640s that Baptists were free to evangelise and to meet separately as committed congregations, when their influence grew. The Quakers and other radical groups were key to a Spirit-filled revival in certain parts of the country on the 1640s and 50s. Around that time, the armed conflict in continental Europe between Protestant and Catholic states ground to a halt mainly through exhaustion - neither group could gain military dominance. Small scale reform groups surfaced in various places but the next major movement was the Pietists. Originating in Lutheran churches it was a movement or tendency towards individual devotion that was not organised but spread widely. Similar movements, emphasising personal piety in spiritual disciplines and in conduct arose at the same time (late Seventeenth Century) among French and Spanish Catholics (Jansenism and Quietism). Pietism influenced Count Zinzendorf who, in 1722, offered refuge on his estate to a group of Moravian Christians who traced their simple faith and practice back to Hus (martyred in 1415). In 1727 they began a 24/7 prayer meeting that lasted over 100 years and was the springboard for mission throughout the world.

The Methodist revival grew out of John Wesley’s encounter with the Holy Spirit - his description “My heart was strangely warmed” in 1741 is best understood as an experience of baptism in the Spirit (he had already spent some years in disciplined devotion in community with a small group of like-minded friends and had been involved in missions work in Georgia). He developed a small group model for church that facilitated the longest running revival to date, lasting over 50 years, and missionary zeal in Britain and overseas.

There were other “Awakenings” in North America among groups with a Calvinist theology as well as among Methodists, and in the Nineteenth Century an Evangelical movement affected most streams, particularly the Church of England. Many Evangelicals felt they should meet simply in a way faithful to their understanding of scripture, rather than within the organised church which, since the late Sixteenth Century had combined elements of Catholic practice with Reformed theology, in a deliberate attempt by Elizabeth 1 to stabilise the disruption caused by extreme views on all sides. The main group of such believers were the Brethren, a lively and missional movement from the 1820s to early 1900s, when its rejection of baptism in the Spirit and exclusivism led to swift decline. Another important

movement was the Salvation Army which grew out of Methodism when William Booth was forced out of the Methodist denomination for insisting he was called to evangelistic work and that women should be free to preach and lead.

Pentecostal groups emerged from the Holiness movement (which had an emphasis on individual response to God, consecration and devotion) when experiences the Baptism in the Spirit transformed individuals and whole churches. This caused re-evaluation of spiritual gifts seen in scripture but assumed to be limited to New Testament times. The context of Holiness churches was conducive to Pentecostals forming new churches and it seemed that their experience would not fit well into existing structures. During the 1960s, however, many in the historic denominations began to experience baptism in the Spirit, including the Roman Catholic church.

Other distinctive movements arose from the Charismatic/Pentecostal environment. One influential group of movements was initially called House Churches and later New Churches. Another has been the New Wine movement (principally within the Church of England) - the largest element of this is a church planting movement coming out of Holy Trinity Brompton. This was originally inspired from outside, by John Wimber (Vineyard), but has become the major reform movement in the Anglican church.

Over time Pentecostalism in a broad sense has become the dominant form of Christianity in the Two Thirds World.

The Contemporary situation

There are many 'options' for people and congregations to adopt but among the encouraging trends discernible are:

- a growing unity among leaders of different streams within the Pentecostal, New Church and Charismatic movements
- restoration of various elements of New Testament theology, practice and power that have been lost, particularly as technology facilitates the spread of ideas and example
- movements/networks gathering around 'fathers' rather than based on organisation
- mission through communities and teams, arising from commitment to prayer.

There are some challenging trends too, including:

- a tendency for some Evangelical and Charismatic leaders to become more liberal in ethics and theology
- a reluctance on the part of many to commit to a Biblical understanding of the corporate life of the church
- what appears to be syncretism in many African and Asian churches.

Restoration and other theological approaches

History can be viewed and analysed in various ways and theological insights in many more ways.

An example of a fairly common approach is to view the church as declining into error very quickly after New Testament times and to see church history as falling into two simple eras: pre- and post-Reformation. This is the approach that a Calvinist theologian would commonly take. Such a theologian would no doubt welcome fresh insights but the basic grid for understanding scripture would be as set out by Calvin in the generation after Luther and developed by his followers.

Another approach would be to see the church as one, united institution that was needlessly torn apart by the influence of very secular human authorities sponsoring the Reformers, when it could have been reformed by the activities of monastic or lay renewal movements (and the church still needs reform).

A more “progressive” understanding of reform would be to see various movements in church history recovering aspects of truth lost since the Early Church. This broad approach can be used in different ways but it is the most fruitful. Typically, the historian is looking at the past from the perspective of marginalised groups, apparently powerless from a human point of view, rather than from the perspective of the dominant forces. Doing this it is possible to discern many aspects of church life recognisable in the New Testament but often missing from the dominant organisations calling themselves churches.

Examples of such movements would be

- many of the monastic movements from the Sixth Century onwards,
- the followers of John Wycliffe and Jan Hus in the Fourteenth Century
- the Anabaptists in the Sixteenth Century
- Baptists and Quakers in the Seventeenth Century
- Wesleyan revivalists in the Eighteenth Century
- the Brethren and Salvation Army in the Nineteenth Century
- the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in the Twentieth Century

There are many other examples, often less well known. In fact there have been radical movements looking to the New Testament rather than their church traditions for inspiration in *every* generation.

From this perspective it is possible to see many aspects of New Testament Christianity that were lost by the institutional church but were discovered afresh by various reform groups.

The German Swiss theologian Karl Barth coined the phrase “the reformed church must always be reformed” (he actually used Latin words to express this, *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, but the idea has been often adopted since). There is always more to be reformed.

One emphasis of the New Church movement since the 1970s has been “restoration” of what was lost in history. Whether we are like Seventeenth Century Baptists looking for a recovery of the New Testament church, or like the Quakers at the same time who believed they were the New Testament church continuing in their day, let us seek all that God has to reveal and bring us into!

“A remnant shall return”

There is a scriptural and theological background to this search for restoration. Many aspects of Old Testament history and prophecy seem to point to a remnant of God's people rediscovering things that were lost and facilitating others entering into what they pioneered.

The paradigmatic Old Testament story is the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. The keys to interpretation are in the New Testament, where we see

- the church as a continuation of the chosen people, inheriting the promises of Abraham through faith in Christ
- Jerusalem as the heavenly city and the church in perfection coming down from heaven as we respond and obey (Gal 4:26 and Hebrews 12:18-29 and Rev 21)
- the Temple as a symbol of the church, the people of God created to be filled with His presence and as a place of worship and proclamation of who He is.

The history of the Exile and the return, and the many prophetic scriptures, have a significance for us as we seek God for the restoration of New Testament theology, lifestyle and power. Appendix 1 is an example of notes of a study on Haggai 1 to illustrate the principle.

During the early stages of the Reformation, in 1520, Luther published a very influential paper called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* - a title that clearly applies the symbol of the Exile to the reality of the condition of the Roman church. The paper addresses each of the seven sacraments recognised by Rome and highlights the ways they had become superstitions and had been abused to hold the laity in subjection.

This theme of a remnant that overcomes and pioneers for the benefit of the whole people is implicit in many parts of the New Testament, particularly in the book of Revelation and Appendix 2 gives a brief indication of how this theme unfolds.

The distinctive contributions of restoration and renewal movements

Luther

Luther's theology was based on a revelation that scripture alone is the guide for faith and doctrine (the Roman church taught that church tradition was also important and in practice kept scripture away from uneducated people). Through reading scripture he became convinced that salvation is by faith alone and by grace alone.

Luther never broke free from the notion that anyone born in a Christian country and baptised was of necessity a Christian, even though his theology suggested that an individual needed to respond by faith. The state churches in most North German principalities and states (including Prussia which became dominant in the Eighteenth Century) became Lutheran.

Calvin

Calvin's main contribution was a theological system that explained and shaped the reforming tendencies, and was the dominant system until the Wesleyan revival. Like Luther he worked on philosophical foundations set by St Augustine (and not evident in other Early Church Fathers, nor in Eastern Orthodox thinking) which tended to views that everything is pre-determined by God. Although Calvinist theologies have very great strengths they can be criticised for failing to explain adequately how a good God can predetermine bad things. In extreme forms, some Calvinists teach double predestination (that some individuals are predestined to hell).

Like Luther he retained the basic assumption in the Sixteenth Century worldview that everyone in the territory would be Christian and part of the state sponsored church.

Catholics

The key distinctive of the Catholic Reformation was to promote faith expressing itself in good works. In addition there were renewed movements seeking to restore worship and prayer and much new impetus to trying to convert people outside "Christian countries," but the key emphasis was on caring for the marginalised, particularly the poor and sick.

Anabaptists

Luther called them the "new monks" because their determination to show their faith by good works, and to obey Jesus' words literally, seemed to him to be as bad as a Catholic doctrine of gaining merit through good works. To the Catholics they were Protestant because of their insistence on reading scripture (usually as a congregation rather than in isolation) as the sole guide to doctrine and practice and on salvation by faith alone and by grace alone. Their theology was not often clarified until after 1575 when they were tolerated in the Netherlands, and included many features of New Testament theology, lifestyle and power lost from view in the institutional churches, but the key distinctive was a commitment to radical discipleship. "If anyone would follow Christ he must follow Him in life." (Hans Denck)

Baptists

During the Seventeenth Century, first in England then in other countries, Independents and Baptists pioneered churches based on a voluntary covenant or agreement to meet as a congregation. Through their theology and practice a vision developed of a church being pure and holy, separate from the world and putting into practice what they discerned through reading scripture in community.

Pietists

As the name suggests, the key contribution was a renewal of personal devotion to God through scripture reading and prayer.

Moravians

The example of the Moravians has inspired the modern missions movement. Though they can be criticised for reducing the gospel to personal salvation their influence was much needed.

Wesleyans

All of the elements of New Testament theology, lifestyle and power identified in the table in Appendix 3 are seen in the revival movement spearheaded by John Wesley. Perhaps the most important element was discipleship, seen not in an individualistic way but as arising from corporate prayer and study, and resulting in practical obedience, mission and good works.

Wesley combined an intentional and disciplined personal piety with a broad theological understanding drawing on Early Church Fathers to interpret scripture. He was inspired to evangelism by the Moravians and experienced a baptism in the Holy Spirit (though he did not use the term much, his associate John Fletcher used it extensively to describe what was happening in the Methodist revival). Above all he saw that we need close community and accountability to encourage and challenge us to deep devotion and the holy living that results.

Salvation Army

Booth's compassion for the poor and determination to see transformation of the whole person led to the key distinctive of the Salvation Army being faith and works - true faith demonstrated in good works that change not just individuals but the whole of society. Wealthy businessmen were threatened by campaigns for decent pay and working conditions; politicians were disturbed by campaigns to increase the age of consent to limit exploitation of young girls; many marginalised people were given useful work and livelihoods in what would today be called social enterprises; and the gospel was preached to those who had already experienced something of the love of God in action.

Brethren

With a simple approach to faith and worship, the Brethren's key contribution has been a vision for the New Testament church restored, a Bride without spot or wrinkle ready to welcome Jesus' return. Many of the house church pioneers in the 1960s and 1970s were from a Brethren background.

Pentecostals and Charismatics

Many elements are evident in the theology and practice but perhaps the most noticeable has been a restoration of expressive and passionate worship, particularly musical worship.

New Churches

Perhaps the most important contribution is recovery of a New Testament ecclesiology including: ministry of apostles and prophets; small group gathering; body ministry; simplicity; restoration of New Testament church; and looking forward to the Bride being ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Appendix 3 contains a table illustrating the key contributions of each of these movements (dark blue) and other elements of New Testament theology emphasised by them.

Conclusion

Church history gives some indications of what was lost and what has been restored through the commitment of reform and renewal movements to rediscover New Testament theology, practice and power. It seems this has always been done by hearing the Holy Spirit through prayer and scripture, but the voice of the Spirit is amplified by hearing the Spirit through others - seeing the example of others and receiving their encouragements and challenges.

Appendix 4 contains an indication of some further reading - the tip of an iceberg!

Appendix 1 - A Remnant shall return

Re-building the Temple: What does Haggai 1 mean for us today?

Introduction

Holy Spirit is given as deposit to set us longing for the whole -
2 Cor 1:21-22 Eph 1:13-14 - *much more to come*

Paul's statements addressed to you (plural/corporate) not you (individual)

See the vision for church as God intends

What is the Temple?

Key to understanding prophetic scriptures 2 Pet 1:20b-21 - inspired by Holy Spirit. New Testament gives us prophetic keys to understanding Old Testament scriptures.

Scriptures give us pictures in the Old Testament to help us understand something of NT spiritual truths. Eph 2:19-22, 1 Cor 3:16, 1 Pet 2:4-6 - Temple a symbol/picture of the church, God's dwelling by the Spirit (like the physical building next door: church is people not buildings but it is important for All Nations to fulfil its calling to invest in the physical facility (unlike some other churches)

Historical background

Returning from exile

- after 70 years
- first wave 538BC found land spoiled and buildings ruined
- Haggai 520BC
- Temple completed 515BC

Ezra nearly 60 years later and Nehemiah another 12 years after Ezra

Four problems - signs of God's judgment because His house is not the priority

Sown much - harvested little

seed - God's word - evangelism -

Eat - never enough

God's word - feeding us - so much more

Drink - never filled

Holy Spirit - so much more

Clothes - never warm enough

Relationships good - but can be so much more

In each case the spiritual application for us is that we are delighted in what God is doing but also not satisfied because there will be so much more

The remedy

- go up into mountains - place of encounter with God (not always the natural place to find timber for building!) Gen 22 Abraham and Isaac to worship; Ex 3, Ex 4, Dt 9 & 10, etc. Moses; high places
- fetch wood and build - workable material: the Holy Spirit uses spiritual plane and chisel to tongue and groove, to make strong connections

The applications to us

- encounter with God is what matters, but especially corporate - worship and prayer with others
- work with the workable material: recognise (ask God to show) the people He is setting alongside you
- relationships/joining in reality/dealing with disagreements and building friendships
- gospel is not words but embodied words answering questions prompted by miracles and transformed lives
- Life Groups (not all the same but with scope for flexibility)
- we all need one or two we look to for discipling and several close friends around us, and if we have been Christians more than a few months we should have several new/younger Christians we are discipling
- whether we see more of God's glory depends on our response
- keep eyes fixed on the Big Picture, the vision ... for His glory!

The end is certain and is glorious: Habakkuk 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Appendix 2 - 'Whoever has an ear ...'

The overcoming remnant in the New Testament

Introduction

Jesus' ministry was often in parables so that only those responding to Him would have spiritual hearing and sight Matt13:10-17. But this is not exclusive nor a 'higher level' of knowledge - knowing Him is open to all who will lay down their lives and follow. Matt 7:24 Luke 9:57-62, 11:28, 14:27; John 10:27; Heb 4:2, 12:1-3

Why a remnant?

The prophets frequently refer to the unfaithfulness of the whole people with a call to repentance and often with a promise that the nations will benefit: e.g. Isa 45:18-25.

In the New Testament Jesus' calls us to radical discipleship and Paul gives glimpses of the glory to be revealed in and through the people of God (Jews and Gentiles together). The church is to bring salvation to all creation: Rom 8:19; Eph 1:10, 3:10; Col 1:20; 1 Tim 2:4.

Yet the Servant/People of God was reduced to one man, Jesus, at the Cross and then through the Spirit was expanded out to the 120 (Acts 1) and the thousands (Acts2 onwards).

A remnant of overcomers

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 contain the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor and in each case there is a call to hear and obey and so to overcome ("the one who conquers" or the "one who overcomes").

Rev 7 a remnant is sealed (called and anointed when they respond in faith) - 12,000 out of each tribe (not literally but signifying a small proportion out of the people of God). But they are not the only ones to be saved and rewarded - from v 9 John sees a great multitude.

There are other places in Revelation this theme appears but a clear passage is Rev 14:1-5. The overcoming remnant seems to be the cause of the release of proclamation of the gospel in the following passage (verses 6-13), leading to the destruction of the demonic forces in opposition to God, symbolised as Babylon. This in turn releases the Second Coming (verse 14 onwards). The church has finally fulfilled its purpose (Matt 24:14)!

Appendix 4 - Some resources

INTRODUCTIONS

Reformation

<http://www.eauk.org/church/tag/evangelicals-and-the-reformation-500-years-on.cfm>

<http://www.eauk.org/idea/the-protestant-reformation.cfm>

(Evangelical Alliance - there are more resources on their site - articles in the magazine 'Idea')

<http://www.desiringgod.org/here-we-stand>

<http://www.reformation500.uk/about-the-reformation.htm>

<http://www.history.com/topics/reformation>

Radical Reform movements

<http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/pdf/WhoweretheAnabaptistsbooklet.pdf>

<http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/evangelical-revival-in-england-11630228.html>

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/history>

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/sermons-essays-books/wesleyan-theological-journal-1966-2010/>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-9/salvation-army.html>

<http://www.revival-library.org/index.php/pensketches-menu>

REFORMATION HISTORY

Diarmaid MacCulloch *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*

Euan Cameron *The European Reformation*

Alistair McGrath *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*

HISTORY OF RADICAL REFORMATION MOVEMENTS

Donald F. Durnbaugh *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism*

C. Arnold Snyder *Anabaptist History and Theology*

Vinson Synan *The Origins of the Pentecostal Movement*

William K. Kay *Apostolic Networks in Britain*