

Andrew Cook:

In the year 1517, a very important event took place. It changed the history of the church. A notice was nailed to a church door in the town of Wittenberg. It was put there by a German monk called Martin Luther and the notice became known as Luther's 95 Theses. They were points on which Luther disagreed with official church teaching. This was the beginning of what became known as the protestant Reformation.

Well, that was 500 years ago, but is the Reformation still important to us now in the twenty-first century? The answer to that question has to be 'yes', because without the Reformation, a true biblical understanding of salvation would not be what it is today.

So as it's 2017, here on *Serving Today* we're marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. We're going to take some time to learn more about it. Where and why did it start? Who were the key players and what was its long term effect on the church?

As this series unfolds, we trust that it will help you to see how much we owe to people like Martin Luther, who under God, brought the Christian church back to the Bible, facing strong opposition as he did so.

To help guide us through the story of the Reformation we welcome back *Serving Today* regular, Philip Parsons. As well as being a Bible teacher, Philip has a keen interest in church history and he's here to share that with us in the company of our good friend Derek French.

Derek French:

Philip, we start a new series today about Church History. Why is this an important subject, especially for church leaders to think about?

Philip Parsons:

Well in answering that question I would say that many Christians today don't have very much interest in church history so we do need to ask the question: why should this be? Some might say, "Well it's not important." Why are so many people in our churches largely ignorant of the past periods in the life of the Christian church? And I would suggest there are a number of reasons for this ignorance.

Derek:

Well, take us through those, would you? And what would come first?

Philip:

Well, first of all, we have been affected to some extent by what I call the 'spirit of the age'.

Derek:

What are you referring to there, Philip?

Philip:

Well, we live in a generation which is dominated by an evolutionary mind set which as a result tends to regard the past in a somewhat patronising manner. And there has been a great deal of progress over the last hundred years or so, that anything earlier than recent times is sometimes regarded as a bit primitive.

Having said that, I do detect in recent times a change in this pattern of things. For instance, in the English speaking world there have been some very good history programmes on the media, which have shown some of the ancients - that they weren't quite as primitive and ignorant as we might have supposed. But this idea that 'the old is of little value' still persists among some Christian groups.

Derek:

And that's quite sad isn't it, because they really miss out on the great lessons that church history teaches us?

Philip:

Yes.

Derek:

Yes it is. Okay so that's your first reason. What's the second?

Philip:

I think perhaps the second is because of the way some of us were taught history at school and biblical history in Sunday school.

Derek:

Now that's something perhaps unexpected. What do you mean precisely?

Philip:

Well, first of all history was taught at school as dates and politics and generally with little or no spiritual perspective. And at Sunday school many of us were taught Bible stories more or less in isolation from where they fitted into the framework of history.

Think back, for instance. If you were taught about the Reformation at school, it was a largely as far as England was concerned a political event, with Henry the Eighth breaking from the Church of Rome because he wanted to divorce his first wife.

This, however, is only a very small part of the truth and ignores the fact that there was a great spiritual movement going on and taking place all over Europe at that time. And so to think of it just as a political thing, or primarily a political thing, is certainly an imbalance and perhaps creates the wrong idea in our minds.

Derek:

Yes, I can understand that, and I know when I was at school I didn't particularly enjoy my history lessons!

Philip:

No, neither did I.

Derek:

But since leaving school I've realised that studying church history, I realised not only is it extremely fascinating but so profitable. We learn so much. We see the application of Scripture worked out in the lives of God's saints in the past, yes.

What do you have in mind next?

Philip:

Another reason is because of the influence of the Ecumenical Movement. This aims to unite all sections of the Christian church. But this reunion can only be achieved if the breach with Rome in the 16th century is regarded as a serious blunder by the Reformers and something that must be reversed.

A close study of the facts shows us that the Reformation was, and I say this advisedly, the greatest work of God since the days of the apostles. So you can see why it would be inappropriate for an ecumenist to study this period of church history, except perhaps to denigrate it or to down grade it or not make much of it.

Derek:

Yes, I can see that very clearly. And I think you have one further reason, is that right?

Philip:

Yes, it's what I would call the '*New Testament and us only*' position. Now this point of view looks at church history through what I would call 'sectarian spectacles' and regards many past eras of the church, except the New Testament, as being so much in error that they are not worth considering.

This was certainly true of the background that I came from. I don't remember hearing anything about the Reformation or the Puritans or the 18th century evangelicals.