

Andrew Cook:

Here on *Serving Today*, we're studying some church history as this year it's the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

In recent programmes, Philip Parsons highlighted for us why church history is often neglected, but then also, more positively, what it teaches us. That was really to introduce the main focus of this series which is 'The Reformation', a particularly important period of church history.

It initially affected mainly Europe and North America, but its effects went all around the world.

Philip Parsons begins by telling us what were the main features of the Reformation.

Philip Parsons:

It is a very important era of church history, perhaps one of the most important in many ways. Then in recent times it has become fashionable for some who would say they are evangelicals to rather belittle the Reformation. They even go as far as to say it was a mistake.

In contrast to these views, one leading 20th century evangelical, Professor John Murray said, "*The Reformation was the greatest revival of faith since the days of the apostles.*" Now I would tend to agree with that view. Certainly a high view of the Reformation was that of the translators of the Authorized Version of the Bible. In the preface to that issue they refer to it as, '*our blessed Reformation*'.

Derek French:

Yes, it was a pity that a lot of the copies of the Authorized Version don't have the preface of the original one in it. They have the reference to King James but the original is not always printed.

So how did it all begin, what was its origin?

Philip:

Well, the Reformation was a mighty work of God reviving his church. If you think of the conditions before the Reformation, the whole of Europe was dominated by spiritual darkness. The church had a kind of strangle hold on all of life. You couldn't be born without the aid of the church, you weren't allowed to live without the church's say-so and you couldn't even be buried without the permission of the church.

The church through its priests, backed up by the whole hierarchy up to the Pope, controlled all of life. For such an invincible system to be shaken to its very core, as it was by the Reformers, surely marks out the Reformation as one of God's mightiest works in history. Let me just outline some of the providential circumstances which gave rise to the Reformation and which demonstrate its divine origin.

First of all it was a movement from within an apostate church. There was at least one other small group of believers who had remained free from the dominion and many of the false doctrines of Rome. These were the Waldenses of Northern Italy, but God did not use them to revive his work. They were themselves revived and renewed, but the work started elsewhere within the medieval church.

Only the power of God could have produced such a fruitful work from barren ground. This fact alone should encourage us to pray for reviving in branches of the church where perhaps there is significant error.

Derek:

Philip, did it start in just one place or was it wider than that?

Philip:

No it would be wrong to say it started in one place. It was a movement that simultaneously sprang up in many different places at once.

Once Luther had nailed his 'Theses' to the church door at Wittenberg, it was as though this was just what people had been waiting for. Within two months, the 95 Theses had been circulated, translated and printed throughout the whole of Europe.

It had not been Luther's aim to start a popular movement of such magnitude; he had intended that theologians and scholars debate the theological points. But it was as though there was a tinder-dry forest just waiting to be set alight and Luther's document was the match.

Subsequent to his simple and unremarkable act of that fateful 31st October 1517, he said himself that it was as though he was being pushed and jostled and carried along by a power totally outside his control. It wasn't his personality or some powerful organization; it was God at work.

Derek:

What would you say was the cause of its wide influence?

Philip:

I think one of the causes, one of the reasons why it spread so rapidly, was it was helped in a sense by the appalling spiritual state of the church at that time. As we've already indicated, there were some who were true believers, but a very small minority. They would doubtless have been longing for better days. And there were others who could see through the hypocrisy and corruption of much of the system.

The almost universal spiritual darkness that prevailed just before the Reformation was shown up for what it really was once the true gospel light began to shine again.

Derek:

Is it fair to say, and correct to say, that the development of technology at that time was a help to cause the Reformation to spread?

Philip:

Yes, that certainly is the case. It was aided by the comparatively recent invention of the printing press which had been invented in the previous century, so pamphlets and books and Bibles could now be produced in quantity in a comparatively short time. Previously they had been copied laboriously by hand. God's perfect timing was thus evident, even in the use of this modern technology.

God had also prepared the way by another remarkable act of providence.

Derek:

And what was that, Philip?

Philip:

In the 15th century the Turkish Empire was expanding and in 1453 Constantinople, which is modern Istanbul, fell to the Turks. It was the fall of this great city that resulted in many of the writings of the early church being scattered across Europe. The monks in Constantinople had up to that time jealously guarded these writings which included the New Testament in Greek.

As the Turkish army advanced upon the city there was a fear that when the city was taken, many of these Christian books would be destroyed, so they were smuggled out of the city before it finally fell. And the spread of this literature across Europe led to the Renaissance, or Re-thinking, which in turn helped to pave the way for the Reformation.

It's good to study the lives of the Reformers as individuals. When we do, I feel sure we find our hearts are warmed and our faith strengthened. But it is also as important to know why they did what they did, because they were men of like passions with ourselves and yet they turned the medieval world upside down!