

Andrew Cook:

We now have the next part our series marking 500 years since the start of the Reformation.

Some of the effects of the Reformation on church life were outlined for us last time. Now dealing with a related question, here are Philip Parsons and Derek French.

Derek French:

Philip, we know that the Reformation affected many countries. What difference did it make to the national life of those nations?

Philip Parsons:

Yes, well let's consider some of the by-products of the Reformation which show the contrast between cultures which have been radically affected by the Reformation and medieval society, and cultures based on other religions.

Derek:

So what are you going to be looking at first?

Philip:

Well the first thing is what has been called the 'The Right of Private Judgement'.

Derek:

What do you mean by that?

Philip:

This principle means that every individual has the right to think for himself and make up his own mind and express his own opinion.

This privilege springs out of the right for everyone to read and study the Scriptures for themselves. This might seem an obvious privilege, but it is not so obvious if you live under a dictatorial regime.

Before the Reformation, if you did not agree with the dictates of the Church, then you had to keep quiet about how you thought or you could be tried for heresy. Even possessing a fragment of Scripture in English in the 14th Century was a capital offence.

Following the Reformation, this freedom did not change overnight. It took many years before true religious freedom became enshrined in the laws of nations influenced by the Reformation. But it is a myth to think that such freedom would ever have occurred apart from the Reformation, and inasmuch as we reverse the principles the Reformers laid down their lives for, then we will find our freedoms are being eroded.

Derek:

What about things such as literacy and education?

Philip:

Yes, this is another area which is very noticeable. There was education before the Reformation obviously, but literacy was encouraged and stimulated by the availability of the Scriptures in the mother tongues throughout Europe, and the right for all to read it for themselves.

It was William Tyndale's aim that the ploughboy should be able to both read and understand the Scriptures. Again, Henry 8th's son, Edward 6th, probably the godliest king England has ever known, established grammar schools, some of which are still functioning today.

And the whole Sunday School movement, set up in the early 19th Century, was an attempt to give education to the poor. The original Sunday Schools were not so much teaching the Bible, but they taught poor children to read and write. They did use the Bible as a sort of text book but [...] the main aim was to teach poor children to read and write. They were held on Sundays because it was the only day that Christians could give for this work.

Derek:

Interesting you say that about those early Sunday Schools, using the Bible to teach them to read and write. I was talking to a prisoner the other day and he's learning to read and write and he's using the Bible to help him understand, so that's still happening today.

What was the influence of the Reformation on things such as people's attitude to work?

Philip:

Yes, well there's what's been called 'The Protestant Work Ethic'. In the Middle Ages there was a supposed spiritual hierarchy of work, with the work of the clergy considered as being more spiritual than others.

We've already seen that much of this 'spiritual' hierarchy was not Biblical, or so called spiritual hierarchy, that was not biblical. Other callings were considered to be non-spiritual and of a lesser order. Even art was largely devoted to the adornment of church buildings and the making of religious images.

Derek:

So what did the Reformation achieve here?

Philip:

Well, it really brought back what we might call the sanctity of all callings or all types of work, with none being considered more spiritual than others. And in fact this is what the Bible teaches, that all lawful callings, all lawful types of work were honourable in and of themselves.

All work is worship, because we are following the example of our Creator, Sustainer and Saviour. After all, Jesus spent more than half of his life employed in manual work as a carpenter and builder.

The Scriptures teach us to '*do all to the glory of God*', and '*whatever our hands find to do, we should do it with our might.*' The thief is to no longer steal but to labour, doing honest work with his hands as the Apostle Paul say in Ephesians.

Because work is God-given it is more than just an opportunity to earn money and witness by our words to an unbelieving world. This means that in all our work we should aim to be the very best that we can be. I would say that the quality of our work is a more important aspect of our overall Christian witness than our verbal witness to others at work.

Of course we should let them know that we are Christians, but sometimes Christians can be unwise and do damage to the cause of Christ by spending their employer's time in trying to proselytize and then turning in rather shoddy work. We should seek to shine in our callings, which then in itself will be a much greater witness than many words and will support our words when we have a legitimate opportunity to speak.

By all means let us speak to our work colleagues about spiritual matters, but let us do so in our own time and not our employer's time!

Derek:

Yes because I was thinking there, that's really stealing from your employer, isn't it, if you're using the time they are paying you to work by not doing that. And if you're doing your work well, that's a powerful testimony, yes.

Philip:

Yes, obviously the odd comment that one makes is perfectly right.

Derek:

Oh sure, yes.

Philip:

But I think we have to be careful about it.

Derek:

It reminds me of a principle. Somebody said to me: for a Christian, lip and life must coincide. In other words what you say, you know, your profession of faith with your words and the way you live your life

here, the way we do our work, should correspond. And if you do shoddy work, you're hindering the verbal witness that you have already made.

Andrew:

There'll be more about Protestant Work Ethic as Philip Parsons and Derek French continue their discussion in the series on 'The Reformation'