

Protestant Reformation

What Is the Greatest Lesson of the Reformation?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Part 3 of a series. [Read part 2.](#)

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The greatest lesson of the Protestant Reformation, said Martyn Lloyd-Jones, is that the church truly moves forward only by constantly going back.

"Why Doesn't the Church Experiment?"

As he continued his 1960 address titled *Remembering the Reformation*,^[1] Martyn Lloyd-Jones admitted that some will question the idea of "going back" to the Reformation as the way forward for the church. As he put it, many people say something like this: Why go back to the Reformation looking for answers to today's problems in church and society?

Why don't you do what is being done everywhere else, and in every other realm of life? I read an article in a supposedly Evangelical weekly paper not so long ago, which said, 'Why does the Church stand still?' The man went on to say something like this: 'I see in business and everywhere else that people are making experiments, they are employing the backroom boys and the experimenters, and they are trying to discover new methods, new machinery, new everything — Why doesn't the Church do this? The Church always seems to be looking back.' They regard that as something which is wrong.

By quoting this article, Dr. Lloyd-Jones was perhaps more prescient than he knew, since that is exactly what the Evangelical church is doing in our day. The Evangelical church has become the scene of experimentation on a grand scale. The Purpose-

Driven Church movement is based on the business management philosophy of Peter Drucker, who was not even a Christian. The Emergent Church movement embodies many aspects of dialectical theory found in Hegelian and Marxist philosophies and in many Eastern religions. Ironically, the Emergent Church movement, while seeing itself as cutting-edge, points the church back into the Middle Ages before the Reformation, seeking to re-immense it in mysticism.

But both movements have this in common with the man who wrote the article Dr. Lloyd-Jones quoted: They view the church as one grand experiment, continually employing, as the writer put it, "new methods, new machinery, new everything" to reinvent itself in order to be "relevant" to the society in which it exists.

As we have seen in previous articles, both the Purpose-Driven and Emergent church movements are also emphatically anti-Reformational. They reject the Protestant Reformation as a tragedy and failure because it divided people into, as they see it, "artificial" doctrinal categories rather than uniting them, as they seek to do, under an umbrella of inclusion — inclusion of everything, that is, except sound doctrine.

"The Secret of Success" in the Spiritual Realm

Dr. Lloyd-Jones answered the advocates of turning the church into a great experimental laboratory in this way:

Now the answer to that, as I see it, can be put like this. I am not at all sure but that the greatest of all the lessons which the Protestant Reformation has to teach us is just this, that the secret of success in the realm of the church and of the things of the Spirit, is to go back.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones reminded his audience that dealing thus "in the realm of the church and of the things of the Spirit" requires the gracious moving of the Holy Spirit, and a return to the sole authority of Scripture:

What happened in essence [five] hundred years ago was that these men went back to the first century, they went back to the New Testament, they went back to the Bible. Suddenly they were awakened to this message and they just went back to it. There is nothing more interesting, as one reads the stories of Luther and of Calvin, than to notice the way in which they kept on discovering that they had been rediscovering what Augustine had already discovered, and which had been forgotten. Indeed I suggest that perhaps the greatest of all the lessons of the Protestant Reformation is that the way of recovery is always to go back, back to the primitive pattern, to the origin, to the norm and the standard which are to be found alone in the New Testament. That is exactly what happened [five] hundred years ago. These men went back to the beginning, and they tried to establish a church conforming to the New Testament pattern. And so, let us be guided by them, as we look at them this evening and as we try to garner certain lessons from them.

True from the Church's Earliest Days

And what do we find in the New Testament that was reclaimed and recovered at the time of the Reformation? First of all, we find the right basis for the church, and we find it often in the form of warnings that the foundation was already being neglected and forgotten even in those early New Testament days. The church, from the very beginning, had to move forward by constantly going back:

But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it! (2 Corinthians 11:3-4)

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6-8)

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. (Colossians 2:8-9)

Remember those who rule over you [the sense in the original is, "those who are your spiritual guides"], who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. (Hebrews 13:7-9)

The greatest lesson of the Reformation is, to put it in terms that we have already used, that *the church of Jesus Christ must be the Scripture-driven church*. No human invention can take the Bible's place, or govern how we use the Word of God in the life and ministry of the church. The 21st-century Evangelical church must lay hold of that truth once again, and Christians need to pray for the gracious moving of the Holy Spirit that will bring it about.

Men of Deep Conviction

Dr. Lloyd-Jones went on to speak of the Protestant Reformers as men of deep and abiding convictions: "I suppose that the most notable thing of all was the fact of the burning conviction that dwelt within them; this is what made them the men they were."

He then introduced the remainder of his address by asking, "What were these convictions?" And we shall take up that question about the Reformation in our next article.

Next: [The Reformers' Greatest Conviction](#)

References:

1. Quotations in this article are from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Remembering the Reformation" in *Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions, 1942-1977* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth. 1989).

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