

## “Is the Reformation Relevant Today?”

Stewart Gill

Diarmaid MacCulloch<sup>1</sup> in the Prothero Lecture read on 7 July 2004, - “Putting the English Reformation on the Map”, discusses how the international Protestant identity of the English Church came to be in tension with the later assertion of sacramentalist Catholic values within it.<sup>2</sup> Let me read the first paragraph:

I had two agendas in mind in constructing this title. The first is the ongoing task of asserting that England did indeed have a Reformation in the sixteenth century. This might seem superfluous: after all, we have all heard of Henry VIII and his marital troubles, and we have all heard of bloody Mary and good Queen Bess defeating the Spanish Armada with a fine speech and a dose of English bad weather laid on by the Almighty. But the Church of England has over the last two centuries become increasingly adept at covering its tracks and concealing the fact that it springs from a Reformation which was Protestant in tooth and claw. The labour of obfuscation began with the aim of showing that Anglicans were as good if not better Catholics than the followers of the pope. It then continued with the perhaps more worthy aim of finding a road back to unity with Rome, in the series of ecumenical discussions which began in 1970, known by the acronym ARCIC (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission). The participants in these discussions have not been anxious to emphasise difference, and very often they have fallen back on the Anglo-Catholic rewriting of English church history pioneered by John Keble and John Henry Newman in the 1830s, as the Oxford Movement took shape.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch is Professor of the History of the Church, in the Theology Faculty, Oxford University; he is a Fellow of the British Academy, and co-edits the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. He has written extensively on Tudor England; his biography *Thomas Cranmer: a Life* (Yale UP, 1996) won the Whitbread Biography, Duff Cooper and James Tait Black Prizes.

<sup>2</sup> D MacCulloch, “Putting the English Reformation on the Map”, *Transactions of the RHS* 15(2005), pp 75-95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 75-76

The MacCulloch lecture chronicles how the Reformation in England came to align not with Lutheranism but with Reformed Protestantism, and compares Henry VIII's reforms with contemporary Reformations in mainland Europe seeking a 'middle way'. Edward VI's Church is contrasted with the temperature perceptible in Elizabeth's religious settlement – which nevertheless asserted Protestant values with no concessions to Catholicism. The anomalous role of cathedrals in England is identified as a major source of the English Church's later deviation from mainstream European Reformed Protestantism, which itself produced attempts to recreate a Reformed Church in the English North American colonies.

This is an important issue not only within Anglicanism but indeed within other denominations as to the relevance of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation for today. As we normally celebrate Reformation Day around this time it is indeed appropriate that we consider this topic.

As by way of background, let me speak first of all of the nature and context of the Reformation.

1. **Geographical loss of ground.** At the close of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Christianity faced a major challenge. The prospect was far from promising. Institutional Christianity was seriously threatened, and the Church was losing ground geographically and apparently waning in inner vitality. It had lost outposts in Asia and North Africa or seen them seriously constricted. In Asia Minor and southeastern Europe the churches were subject to the Ottoman Turks, who were Muslims. Islam was steadily expanding.
2. **Corruption at Rome.** In Europe the Papacy and much of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church was largely staffed by men who regarded their posts as an opportunity for luxury and power. The attempts of reformers of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries to make the Papacy an instrument of reform brought to the office functions which required larger staffs with increased powers and income commensurate with their importance. Men also sought positions for themselves and their families on the Papal curia. On the eve of the Reformation, the Papacy and the Papal curia was an offense to many honest people. Corruption in the administrative centre of the Church was contagious.
3. **Secularisation by National Monarchs.** The evils were further aggravated by the secularization attending the heightened control

of the Church by absolute monarchs. The struggle of earlier centuries to free the Church from domination by lay princes was increasingly resolved by the power of each king to appoint the bishops in his own realm and to forbid any Papal decree from being published within his territory without his consent. With the passing of years the powers of the monarchs over the Church mounted.

### **Revitalization of Spiritual Life**

Despite the problems, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a fresh surge of life in the Christianity of Western Europe. Through it Christianity permeated the life of the region more effectively and brought it nearer the ideals of the New Testament than in any earlier time. From that surge was to issue a missionary movement of unprecedented dimensions. The faith would be planted among more peoples than ever before. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century no other religion had had as wide a geographic expansion as Christianity. Moreover, earnest Christians fought the evils attendant upon chronic wars between rival dynasties and sought to check the exploitation of peoples by European conquerors, explorers, merchants, and settlers and make contacts with Europeans accrue to the benefit of non-Europeans.

The surge of life in Christianity was seen chiefly in Western Europe. There it had two main expressions; First, in the emergence of Protestantism; and secondly, in a renewal in the Roman Catholic Church which purged it of much of the glaring corruption of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, which gave birth to new monastic movements, and which inspired the most extensive missionary activity that any religion had yet produced.

### **The Nature of the Reformation**

- 1. A Revival of Religion.** The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant Reformation was not an isolated movement, nor did it mark a complete break with medieval Christianity. At various times there had arisen in the Medieval Church attempts (usually abortive) at reformation, and it is in the context of such attempts, along with the new spread of learning related to the Renaissance, that the work of Luther and Calvin should be considered. They did not think of their task as being the founding

of a new Church; they saw it in terms of restoring that purity which had been in part lost and in part obscured by medieval corruptions. The Reformation was not unconnected with those intellectual, social and political movements which had arisen in the centuries preceding the 16<sup>th</sup>, such as the Renaissance. In fact, some historians have been so impressed with these connections that they have concluded that the Reformation was “just the manifestation in religion of a wider movement of the human spirit.” But this is to confuse occasion with cause, for while there are links, there are also aspects of the movement led by Luther and Calvin which had little or nothing to do with intellectual or cultural factors. The old biographer of Luther, Roland Bainton, has put this point well: “The Reformation was not derived from any... other movements, however much its course may have been conditioned by them. With some it could form alliances, to some it was unalterably opposed. And if it abetted them at all by weakening Church controls, such was not the intent. The Reformation above all else a revival of religion. So much is this the case that some have looked upon it as the last great flowering of the piety of the Middle Ages.” The Reformation was a revival of religion, which reformed institutions, doctrines, and life; and, as such, it had more definite links with the reform movements of earlier days than with the 15<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance. Some of the earlier efforts at reform had included: (a) the reform of monasteries and the rise of the preaching orders; (b) the reforming popes; (c) the conciliar movement, expounding a theory that church councils were superior to the papacy, and that reform can be achieved by these councils; (d) movements outside the Church or condemned by the Church, such as: the Waldenians, the Albigensians, the Lollards (followers of John Wycliffe), the Bohemian Brethren (followers of John Hus), and Savonarola, (e) the Christian mystics, such as: John Tauler, the Friends of God, the Brethren of the Common Life; and (f) Christian humanists, such as: Erasmus, John Colet, Thomas More, Jacques LeFèvre, and Johann Reuchlin.

2. **Its Context. (a) Ecclesiastical.** A movement like the Reformation came into being not so much because people were irreligious in the Middle Ages, but because they were very religious. Repeatedly over a long period of time notable persons had declared in various ways that a reformation of the church was needed. Almost everyone would agree the need for reformation, although when one turned to what reformation meant or how to bring it about, there was a great

difference of opinion. Several of the councils, beginning with the Council of Constance, had so popularized the idea of a need for reform that many people were talking about it, were aware of the need for it, and were desiring it.

**(b) Political.** The major force at work in the political world at the time was a strong sense of nationalism that tended to bring European countries into centralized self-controlled units. Politically Europe was a group of nation-conscious states, heirs of the medieval Empire, which had long fought with the Papacy for supremacy, and was now but a shadow of its former glory. Most of Europe was dominated by five nations: England, France, Spain, Italy and Germany – the Germanic Countries called the Holy Roman Empire.

I just want to speak briefly about England.

**England.** The War of the Roses in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century broke the power of the feudal nobles so that Henry VII in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century (1485-1509) could emerge as a strong monarch. He had two major goals: first, to secure an alliance with Spain, and second, to gain control of Scotland by peaceful means. To secure the alliance with Spain, his son Arthur was married to Catherine, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, in 1501. Arthur died shortly thereafter, and Catherine was rather quickly promised to another son. In 1509 Henry VIII was married to Catherine and became King of England. This marriage was a major factor in the English Reformation. In regard to Scotland, Henry VII's daughter was married to the Scottish King. The long term outcome of this marriage was that in 1603 King James VI of Scotland became James I of England, uniting the two countries under one king.

England, France, Spain, and the German states were jockeying for power; and since the Papacy in some aspects represented another temporal power, the way was prepared for the emergence of national churches as a reaction against the centralized control from a foreign power.

**(c) Social.** The period following the Crusades had witnessed the rise of the merchant “middle” class, whose independence of thought and non-feudal outlook tended to alienate them from the Roman Church. Protestantism in the main drew its leaders from the lower and middle social strata; while the Roman Catholic reformers were mainly of aristocratic origin. This fact has given rise to the understandable but

misguided attempts to describe the Reformation as a social revolt. The fact that the new merchant class was educated, and could read the books and pamphlets which the new printing presses made available, helped to prepare the way for the dissemination of reformation thought.

**(d) Intellectual.** The Renaissance had widened men's intellectual horizons, and Erasmus' New Testament had turned people's attention back to the sources of the faith. Already the vernacular Bible had enabled ordinary readers to compare and contrast the Church which they knew with the Church of the New Testament. This intellectual awakening, in which the Greek scholars driven from Constantinople after its fall to Islam in 1453 shared, helped to promote a more critical approach to traditional dogma and the Church's hierarchy.

- 3. Its Aims.** The fundamental purpose of the Reformation as conceived by both the German and Swiss reformers was the restoration of the church to its former purity of faith and life; it was revival of religion, not innovation or revolution in religion. This revival involved, among other things, the removal of abuses in practice and doctrine, and the recovery of the Gospel and or personal religious experience. The removal of these abuses which had scandalized many of the best Christians in the Middle Ages; and the need for a cleansing was all too obvious to people who were familiar with the Renaissance Popes of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Clerical morality from the papal see to the rural parish was certainly not the morality of the New Testament. There were reforms needed in the area of doctrine. The practice of indulgences was not new, but it had become increasingly mercenary, and it was based upon a doctrine of grace mediated through priest and sacramental system. The Reformation also aimed at the recovery of an evangelical doctrine and experience of grace.
- 4. Its Methods.** The constituted authorities to bring about changes or reforms in the medieval Church were the Papacy or the Councils. But the Papacy had opposed collective movements since the Middle Ages and, since the captivity of Avignon (1305-77) had become a monarchy. The Councils were composed of men in high positions who wanted to share in the Church's government and to make the Pope's yoke less heavy. The Councils tended at last simply to seek the interests of the higher clergy. The Church had apparently lost the ability to reform itself. The corruption in the Church seemed to

require newly constituted authorities such as, Luther, the prince and the city councils. In Protestantism generally the authority of the Bible was set over against the authority of the Church. There was also a return to what may be called a 'Pauline' soteriology, with its stress on the sinfulness of sin and the primacy of divine grace. Linked with these was the tendency of the reformers to be opposed to priestly and sacramental religion and to renew stress on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

- 5. Its Interpreters.** The term 'Protestant' came out of the movement. In 1529 the German princes set aside a former agreement that had given the Lutheran churches a legal right to survive. The princes who were Lutheran protested the setting aside of the agreement; they were therefore, called Protestants. Gradually the term was spread to include virtually all groups in the West outside of the Roman Catholic Church. The term 'Reformation' is much older. In the Middle Ages it meant enforcement of the original rules. To reform a monastery meant to return to the original regulations. At the end of the Middle Ages it was generally perceived that what the Church needed was a 'reformation in her head and members' (a phrase first used in 1311). The expression 'Protestant revolt' also appears in literature, with reference to the revolt against the Catholic Church. 'Reformation' carries a Protestant bias, and Protestant revolt carries a Catholic bias. The term 'Protestant Revolution' is also used, usually in a social, economic and cultural approaches. There has been a radical change in Roman Catholic historical scholarship since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier Catholic historians tended to see Luther in the most uncomplimentary terms. Beginning with Joseph Lortz in *The Reformation in Germany* (1939-40), and seen more clearly in Philip Hughes or Daniel Rops' *The Protestant Reformation* a new understanding and appreciation is seen, and the Reformation is studied with more insight and objectivity. With Protestant scholars, they evidence a more balanced approach which stresses the continuity of the Reformation and the basic catholicity of major Reformers.

#### **D. SOME GENERALIZATIONS**

Several generalizations ought to be kept in mind.

1. In the first place, in general terms, there were at least two reformations, not just one, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There was a Protestant Reformation, and there was a Catholic Reformation. Both movements sought to cleanse the Church of that which marred its life, and both sought to restore what had been lost at least in part by the medieval church. Although the Catholic Reformation began a generation prior to Luther, its later course was so consciously in opposition to Protestantism that it has often been called the counter-Reformation; and for this reason, is usually related after the account of the Protestant Reformation.
2. The Catholic Reformation was internal and accepted the main ecclesiastical structure of the Church as unchangeable; on the other hand, the Protestant Reformation was in a sense external in that it rejected the Papacy, while at the same time retaining many other features.
3. Protestantism is characterized by great diversity in its expressions. It took, according to some, four main forms: Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican (arguable that was reformed in character), and Radical (including Anabaptists, Free Spirits, and Anti-Trinitarian humanism).
4. The Reformation was closely allied with the state. Whenever it was successful, it was due largely to the support given by princes, city councils, and other civil magistrates.

## **LESSONS FROM THE REFORMATION FOR OUR OWN DAY**

There are at least two of the great doctrines that need reasserting today and in every age. These are the inerrancy of Scripture and the sovereignty of God. Moreover there are a number of lessons that we can learn from the Reformation Age that are relevant for our own.

### **The Inerrancy of the Scriptures**

The reformers above everything else gave a great amount of time to studying the Scriptures. It was however not a dry academic study of the Word of God that they conducted but it dwelt in them richly, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, and thus became "a light unto their feet, and a



lamp unto their path". The Reformation was built upon a correct understanding of the Word of God. As William Cunningham wrote:

The Lord was pleased to lead the reformers to a careful study of His word, and to guide them to correct views of its leading principles. He qualified them largely for opening up and expounding its statements to others,-- He led them to give much time and attention to this occupation, and made their labours, in this department, orally and by writing, the great means of their usefulness and success; and we may be assured, that it will be, to a large extent, through our capacity to open up and understand the whole mind of God, as revealed in His word,--a capacity to be acquired only by the fervent prayer and diligent and continued study of the inspired volume itself,--that we shall best grow in grace and in the power of Christian usefulness.

Such an emphasis upon the Bible leads us to ask how the reformers viewed the Scriptures.

At the Diet of Worms in 1521 Luther made his famous statement to the Emperor: "Since your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason. I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything. May God help me. Amen." Long before this point Luther had taken a stand upon the inerrancy of Scripture. For example, in his commentary on the *Psalms* (1512-16). He believed in the absolute authority of the Bible as is expressed in one of his comments on Augustine demonstrates: "Augustine has put down a fine axiom -- that only Scripture is to be considered inerrant."

It is true that Luther has been criticised because of his reference to the letter of *James* as an "epistle of straw". However, Luther's questioning was not of the inspiration of Scripture but the canonicity of the letter. By 1522 it appears that Luther dropped this attitude towards *James*. Luther constantly emphasised the point that he believed in the authority of the Word of God.

Calvin also held to an inerrant view of the Word of God throughout his career as a reformer. The main purpose of Scripture for Calvin as it was for Luther was to bring us to know God through Jesus Christ his Son, which is salvation in all its fulness. Calvin wrote in his *Institutes*:

The letter, therefore, is dead, and the law of the Lord slays its readers where it is both cut off from Christ's grace and, leaving the heart untouched, sounds in the ears alone. But if through the Spirit it is really branded upon hearts, if it shows forth Christ it is the Word of life 'converting souls'...

The Scripture, according to Calvin, originates from God. In his comments on 2 Tim. 3:16 he wrote:

All those who wish to profit from the Scriptures must first accept this as a settled principle, that the Law and the prophets are not teachings handed on at the pleasure of men or produced by men's minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit. If anyone object and ask how this can be known, my reply is that it is by the revelation of the same Spirit both to learners and teachers that God is made known as its Author. Moses and the prophets did not utter rashly and at random what we have received from them, but, speaking by God's impulse, they boldly and fearlessly testified the truth that it was the mouth of the Lord that spoke through them. The same Spirit who made Moses and the prophets so sure of their vocation now also bears witness to our hearts that He has made use of them as ministers by whom to teach us. Thus it is not surprising that many should doubt the authority of Scripture. For although the majesty of God is displayed in it, only those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to see what should have been obvious to all, but is in fact visible only to the elect. This is the meaning of the first clause, that we owe to the Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it.

Since we encounter Jesus Christ in the Scriptures and we cannot encounter Him apart from them then it became important to assert the Word of God as infallible and inspired. John Murray in his work *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* writes on Calvin and infallibility:

The quality of infallibility does not in the least degree militate against the purpose to be served by that mode of verbal revelation; it enhances that purpose. The witness of our Lord and his apostles is to a Scripture imbued with that quality. An infallible word revelation does no prejudice to the uniqueness of Christ as the incarnate Word but rather continues to insure for us that which the disciples undoubtedly enjoyed. The absence of any tension in Calvin's thought between what he rightly claimed for Christ as God's ultimate and eternal testimony, on the one hand, and the Scriptures of both Testaments as the Word of God written, on the other, witnesses to his fidelity to the testimony of Jesus himself and to his perception that the Scriptures as God's inscripturated Word, invested with the infallibility of God's own sacred mouth is correlative with the centrality of Christ as the image of the invisible God and indispensable to the situation in which we are placed in this last era of what is the consummation of the ages.

### **The Sovereignty of God**

B.B. Warfield wrote: "It is the vision of God and His Majesty which lies at the foundation of the entirety of Calvinistic thinking". The God of the reformers was the God of Isaiah "sitting on the throne, high and lifted up" -- the God who does His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. He is the great Potter who has power over the clay. Perhaps one of the best treatises ever written on the whole subject of sovereignty was John Calvin's last three chapters of book one of his *Institutes*.

In May 1925 as C.W. Hodge Jr, gave his closing lecture to his second year theology class he spoke of the glories of the Reformed Faith. He said: (i) It is theism come to its rights - it declares God to be God - He is

sovereign, almighty Person whose purposes cannot fail; (ii) it is pure religion because it casts men in utter dependence upon God, and (iii) it is consistent evangelicalism - It teaches salvation by Christ alone, through grace alone, by faith alone. So the Reformed Faith exalts God and casts man at the feet of his Creator. *Soli Deo gloria* was the motto of the reformers - they ascribed all the glory to God.

### **The Place Given to the Scriptures**

What a contrast there is between the attitude of the reformers and that of much of the professing church of our day! James Packer has spoken of the Spirit withdrawing from the church because of her irreverent disregard for His Holy Word. God grant that there may be a mighty movement of the Spirit which will bring men back to the Bible as "the oracles of God".

### **The Place Given to Church Discipline**

For many years Calvin battled at Geneva to establish a thorough discipline, but it was only after 1555 that the consistory had a free hand to put it into practice. The consistory took note of the lives of the citizens, of the preachers themselves and of the children. However, they not only observed but also took action. A barber was banished because of blasphemy against God and contempt of the preachers and because he had attended a mass.

*The Scots Confession* gave the three notes of the true church as (i) the true preaching of the Word, (ii) the right administration of the sacraments and (iii) ecclesiastical discipline rightly administered. The demand for church discipline was displeasing to some of the Scottish nobility but Knox persevered in his efforts in this direction.

What a contrast with the church of our day. Church leaders in many large denominations can deny important doctrines and commend or condone disreputable practices and still retain their offices. Moreover what slackness there is with regard to church membership. Earlier this century one of the great leaders in the battle against liberalism was the American theologian, J.G. Machen, and he wrote on these problems in the church. He described what he saw on a visit to a city in the U.S.A. It was not, he says, "an altar to

an unknown god, but something that filled me with far more sorrow than that could have done. I saw a church with a large sign on it which read somewhat like this: 'Not a member? Come in and help us make this a better community'. " Machen adds: "Truly we have wandered far from the day when entrance into the church involved confession of faith in Christ as Saviour from sin."

### **The Desire For True Unity**

The reformers are often blamed by the ecumenists for causing a "breach" in Christendom. However, we should note the desires among the reformers for a true unity. Calvin and his colleagues reached out the hand of friendship to the followers of Zwingli and agreement between them was reached. The effort to secure agreement with the Lutherans failed, but at least the attempt was made. Luther was often rather intransigent, but Calvin is known to have said that even if Luther called him a devil, he would still say that Luther was a distinguished servant of God.

Calvin in a letter to Cranmer gave support to the archbishop's suggestion in 1551 that a general council of Protestants be held. He declared that this was to be reckoned among the greatest evils of the time that the protestant churches were so divided from one another. "As far as I am concerned," wrote Calvin, "if I can be of any service, I shall not shrink from crossing ten seas to further the fellowship of the members of Christ." He went on to express his longing "that all churches of Christ were united in such unity as would make angels rejoice." This desire on the part of Cranmer and Calvin should be noted and should mark us today.

### **Devotion to God**

In 1536 when William Farel laid hold upon Calvin as he was passing through Geneva and urged him to take up duty there, Calvin was unwilling. However, Farel thundered a solemn curse on Calvin's future studies if he failed to take up the post of duty, and Calvin yielded. After a few years he was forced to quit Geneva, but was invited to return in 1541. He confessed that there was no place under heaven that he dreaded more than that turbulent city. Farel thundered at him again and Calvin said: "I offer my heart a slain victim for a sacrifice to the Lord." His emblem was a hand holding out a heart to God and his motto: "My heart I give to thee, O Lord,

readily and entirely." This was the spirit of the reformers and it should be ours too.

### **The Reformers were Men of Prayer**

D'Aubigné tells of Luther pleading with God on the morning of the day in 1521 when he was to face the Emperor and his court. "Pleading with God," writes D'Aubigné, we find "the most secret springs" of the Reformation. There, he insists, is where the reformers found their power. Later at the Diet of Augsburg the future looked black for the reformers and their cause. It seemed as if the might of the Empire would be used to crush them. Philip Melancthon, Luther's colleague, said: "there remains nothing for us to do but to call upon the Son of God." They called and were delivered.

Mary, queen of Scots, said of John Knox that she feared his prayers more than a regiment of armed men. He was praying to the last. As he lay dying he said: "I have been these last two nights in meditation on the troubled state of the church in Scotland... I have called God for her. I have fought against hosts of wickedness... and have prevailed."

### **Dependence on the Spirit**

Calvin has been called "the theologian of the Spirit" because he set forth so fully and clearly the doctrine of the Spirit. B.B. Warfield wrote of him: "Above everything else, it is the sense of the sovereign working of salvation by the almighty power of the Spirit which characterises all Calvin's thought of God." Calvin and his fellows and pupils were conscious of their utter dependence upon the Spirit. The movement of which they formed a part was a mighty movement of the Spirit. It was not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts.

This is our need today - a mighty outpouring of the Spirit. In 1881 George Smeaton wrote: "For the present sore and ulcerated condition of the Church nothing but a new effusion of the Spirit will avail." He went on to urge that "the Church of the present has all the warrant she ever had to wait, expect and pray." The Reformation could be compared to wind chimes which remain silent until the wind blows upon them. The chimes must be put in a position in which they will catch the wind. There is no use placing

them inside the house they must be made ready in a place where the wind will blow. Unless God send forth His Spirit there will be no turn in the church but if like the reformers we are ready, in the right place, and attitude, then God can use us as he most surely did the reformers of the sixteenth century to thunder forth His Word which has the power to bring about change in the lives of men and women.

*Soli Deo gloria.*