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A Biblical Worldview To Win The Future

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The Reformation of All Things

"When it comes to sustaining freedom, there are two equal and opposite errors often made. One error is the arrogance and stupidity of thinking that freedom will last forever and will never need renewing. And the other is to think that once freedom is lost, it can never be regained."
- Os Guinness

As Guinness reminds us, covenants can and should be renewed and restored from time to time. The Bible instructed Israel, even in the wilderness, to provide for a "covenant renewal ceremony"every seven years, or as needed. (Deut. 29; Josh 24).

Our nation has a deep need of our renewed covenant with our mighty God. In order to do this, we must remember the mighty deeds of God and restore Him to his proper place of honor. The Reformers paved a way for the church to be restored apart from papal indulgences and abuse of power, but their most impactful inheritance was arguably the translations and Bible manuscripts they left behind.

In Marshall Foster's 45 years of preaching the gospel, he never tired of telling the stories of the Reformers, their sacrifice, and the tidal wave of impact their efforts saw crash through the last 500 years of history by unleashing the Bible into the hands of the people. The Bible was, and continues to be, the greatest and most powerful "freedom document" in the history of the world. In 1328 A.D., the idea of a common, English translation of the whole Bible was unheard of.

While the Bubonic Plague was tearing through England, and more than 100 years before Martin Luther posted his famous 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, a strong willed priest and professor at Oxford, John Wycliffe, endeavored to translate the whole Bible and make it available to the masses, in order to spread scriptural knowledge among them.

By the time of the plague, the Bible was largely found only inside Catholic churches, where copies were often chained to the walls. For Wycliffe's efforts, the Roman church exhumed his remains, burned his bones, and threw his ashes into the Swift River. Marshall would say, from there, the Bible went out to all the nations of the world! Indeed the translations of Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, altered Western Civilization forever, and the risks they took, and the truth they stood for should give us hope for our own renewal and reformation here in America.

The English People Reading Wycliffe's Bible
Sir George Clausen, 1925-1927

REMEMBERING THE REFORMERS
REFORMATION DAY CELEBRATED

JAN HUS PREACHING AT BETHLEHEM CHAPEL *Alphonse Mucha, 1916*

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther posted 95 "arguments" on the door of a church in Wittenburg Germany, wanting to simply have a debate with his fellow churchmen. Instead, some of his student supporters took the pamphlet down, and ran off to a publisher. and history was changed forever. Luther was not looking to turn the world upside down. He was seeking truth. Luther himself looked to men who studied the Scriptures more than 100 years before his time (John Wycliffe and Jan Hus to name a few). The key component of the Reformation was the translation and printing of the Bible in the language of the common people.

Why did this idea cause such a fervor? And why does it matter now? It is of critical importance. This arcane 16th-century religious and cultural revival set the stage for all freedom and liberty in the modern era.

The controversial ideas included the priesthood of all believers, the efficacy of grace rather than works, even the "Puritan Work ethic" so famously brought to New England was motivated in large part by John Calvin's Reformation-era admonishment for believers to do "all things to the glory of God". The middle class was largely non-existent prior to the Reformation and literacy was limited to the churchmen and the wealthy. The working class (nearly all living under tyranny) were left uneducated and unable to study and understand the truths of Scripture. Three men, and their students, changed the entire modern world with the mighty shield of faith, the power of the pen, and the church has largely forgotten them.

"The Bible is for the Government of the People, by the People, and for the People."
– John Wycliffe in his General Prologue to the Bible translation of 1384, and paraphrased by Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg

SCRIPTURE ALONE

Before Luther, John Wycliffe with his first English translation of the Bible for the people (d.1384), Jon Hus (burned at the stake -1415), and William Tyndale (burned at the stake-1536) set the stage for the unstoppable, worldwide spread of Christian liberty. In the case of Wycliffe (who died of natural causes and continued his ministry at his church in Lutterworth) his ideas were so feared by the Roman bishops (and so contagious) that 40 years later, they dug up his bones, burned his remains, and threw his ashes into the river Swift. Thus began the spreading of the Gospel to the ends of the earth! Some estimate that the Wycliffe Bible translation and smaller pamphlets distributed by the Lollards, helped to convert up to 40% of the English people by the time of his death. Over the course of three centuries, and connected by the power of ideas, these men paid the ultimate price for freedom.

Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and many others were deeply impacted by their writings, and by the dawn of the 17th century, almost every household in England and Scotland would have a Bible - the Geneva Bible (based primarily on Tyndale's translation) - in their hearts and on their dining room tables. Tyrants would still rage, but now the people were coming to understand a higher law, a divine strategy to liberate the world (Luke 4:17-21). Following that strategy, they would begin to *"bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron."* *(Ps. 149:8)*

Do you believe that America needs to be reformed? Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines reform: "to abandon that which is evil or corrupt, and return to a good state; to amend; to correct; to restore." The proven pattern to reform is documented in history and summarized well by Miles Coverdale, fellow Bible translator with William Tyndale. He said, "Wherever the Scripture is known it reformeth all things, and setteth everything in order." How did the Scripture reform nations in the past? The quest to uncover these answers runs through underdog heroes who have transformed nations from the bottom up, facing insurmountable obstacles along the way.

In the 16th century, these reformers, as we now call them, lit such a fire of reform that they transformed the world and laid the foundations for the best of the advances of the modern world. The story of their battle for truth against cruel, autocratic tyrants provides us with a roadmap of reform for all time. The bedrock of true reform is the Bible in the hands of the people. Throughout the centuries, the godly strategy for defeating evil has always been an internal-to-external, generational family plan. From there God's power and blessing influences every area of culture. God's worldwide covenant of blessing was initiated through Abraham.

Jan Hus at the Stake
Janíček Zmilelý z Písku

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– Os Guinness

THE AMERICAN INHERITANCE:
JOHN W ITHERSPOON

Speaking of Abraham in Genesis 18, God says, "For I have chosen him so that he may teach his children and the sons of his house after him to keep the way of the Lord and to do what is just and righteous." The most powerful force in America is not our government, our economy or our military. The force that has created the most free nations in history is the peaceful and virtually unreported armies of godly families. If we mentor our families and friends to live out God's Word in their own lives, we can once again impact all areas of society.

Here is a story to inspire and challenge your family. Notice how the power of only a few individuals from one family tree helped build two great nations. John Knox, a former bodyguard and defrocked priest turned reformer, returned to his native Scotland in 1560. He had spent 15 years in prison and exile. He preached the liberating Gospel with such power from the pulpit of St. Giles Cathedral that much of his nation was converted. So much so that "Mary Queen of Scots feared the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe." As a result of Knox's faithfulness, the lives, culture, and government of Scotland were transformed in a decade. Four generations later, a descendant of John Knox, the Scottish Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon, brought to America a reformed, covenantal and crucial Evangelical faith across the Atlantic. By this time, in the 1740s, Scotland had once again entered a time of economic turmoil, famine and persecution from its powerful overlord to the south, England. The Witherspoon/Knox family endured trials and even imprisonment, as they worked to revive the true faith in their Scottish homeland. They persevered. Elizabeth and John had ten children. Only five survived childhood. Eventually, John was invited to become the President of Princeton University (at the time, the College of New Jersey) and his influence upon the formation of our Constitution cannot be overstated.

In the 1760's the colonies were being pressed toward war with England. They were determined to create the world's first constitutional republic rather than fall back into the European model of divine right kings and impoverished commoners. If the colonists were to succeed they would need political, military, and spiritual leaders that would surpass any in history.

John Witherspoon, as the head of the College of New Jersey, became the teacher of those future leaders. He combined a deep faith in the biblical Christianity of the Reformation with an understanding of how to apply that faith to every academic discipline, including nation-building. During his tenure there were 478 graduates of his college. With only three professors, including himself, John was able to mentor all who attended the college through the tutorial method across six academic fields. He was then able to preach to them each Sunday in the campus chapel. Until 1902, every President of Princeton was a minister. America's collegiate youth were largely mentored by ministers like Witherspoon until the 20th century.

John Witherspoon
Rembrandt Peale, 1794

"Surely the Wrath of Man shall praise thee; the remainder of Wrath shalt thou restrain."

– Psalm 76:10

Of his graduates, at least 86 became active in civil government and included: one president (James Madison), one vice-president (Aaron Burr), 10 cabinet officers, 21 senators, 39 congressmen, 12 governors, a Supreme Court justice, and one attorney general. Nearly one-fifth of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, one-sixth of the delegates of the Constitutional Convention, and one-fifth of the first Congress under the Constitution were graduates of the College of New Jersey. It can truly be said that John Witherspoon discipled his new nation by training the leaders, just as his ancestor John Knox had done in Scotland 200 years before. Witherspoon was arguably the most influential college president in American history.

Along with leading a college and serving in the Presbyterian Church, Witherspoon threw his efforts into the political drive for freedom. He was elected to the Continental Congress and and served on approximately 100 committees. As the debate over independence raged in Philadelphia on July 2, 1776, John stood and declared, "We are ripe for independence and in danger of becoming rotten for want of it, if we delay any longer!" He was the only ordained minister to sign the Declaration of Independence (22 others had ministerial training.) The next year the British took out their revenge on him, ravaging his college and burning his personal and college libraries. He also lost two of his sons in the War for Independence. The cost of freedom for Witherspoon was indeed high.

On July 31, 1776, in a fiery sermon, Witherspoon challenged his congregation:

"I beseech you to make a wise improvement of the present threatening aspect of public affairs, and to remember that your duty to God, to your country, to your families, and to yourselves is the same. True religion is nothing else but an inward temper and outward conduct suited to your state and circumstance in providence at any time. And as peace with God and conformity to him adds to the sweetness of created comforts while we possess them, so in times of difficulty and trial, it is the man of piety and inward principle, that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen and the invincible soldier. God grant that in America, true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one may, in the issue, tend to the support and establishment of both."

John Witherspoon was a product of the Reformation, and an indispensable leader used by God to help found this freest and most blessed of all nations. The Reformation reveals that a small minority of believers, with little power, wealth or influence, can transform a nation and even the whole world. Every one of America's unique cultural institutions has its roots deep in the biblical reasoning of our forbears. Regardless of what powers may be arrayed against us in the battle ahead, we can trust Him to "reform all things!"

- taken from the writings of Dr. Marshall Foster

Martin Luther in the Circle of Reformers
anonymous, between 1625-1650

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