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#### BOOK REVIEW

Timothy George. *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011. 270 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9780830829491.

Huldrych Zwingli's prayer, "Almighty, eternal and merciful God, whose word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, open and illuminate our minds, that we may purely and perfectly understand thy Word and that our lives may be conformed to what we have rightly understood" (p. 239) probably gives a good summary of what George believes to be the thread of conviction running through the Reformers of the sixteenth century. The Reformation itself was many things to many people, but no one disagrees with the fact that its events changed maps in Europe and that the world became a very different place as a result of them.

There were, of course, several socio-politico-economic issues involved in the Reformation. Many, including well-instructed Christians, argue that the important results of the Reformation were to shake up the church, reduce papal authority and influence, and break the church into the many denominations that remain extant. George, led by the insight quoted above into the mind of one of the major architects of the Reformation, tries to show us that "the Reformation was not about . . . any . . . personality. Much less was it about the ups and downs of church politics by which the church is ever beset. No, the Reformation was about the Word of God, which was to be proclaimed faithfully and conscientiously to the people of God" (p. 243). And if it is so, then the Reformers remain a powerful force in instructing this and other generations of Christians about the way we should properly treat the Scripture as the Word of God.

The Reformation may have been ignited by disputes about the

correctness of a fund-raising scheme to build a cathedral, however, it did not stop there, but it went deep into the issue of the place of the Word in the life of the church as well as individual believers. The world may know Martin Luther as a controversialist and Calvin as a political organizer and systematic theologian. However, these and other Reformers saw themselves in a completely different light. George helps us to understand why, in spite of the numerous things they were famous—or, if you like, notorious—for, Luther saw himself not as the creator of the 95 Theses but as “Doctor of Sacred Scriptures” and Zwingli “brought together . . . the supremacy of Scripture over human tradition and the illumination of the contemporary reader by the Holy Spirit” (p. 240). Calvin, in spite of all his seminal works, was, to himself, simply a “minister of the divine Word” (p. 241) or a “Reader in Holy Scripture to the Church in Geneva” (p. 241).

George demonstrates clearly the benefits accruing from reading with the Reformers. These include: (1) a deeper understanding of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which, rather than being narrow minded, was actually a principle of well-read intellectuals who were only expressing the thought that the Scriptures, to the Christian, are the means to test any other doctrine; (2) a realization that the different products of the Reformation such as the 95 Theses, seminal works by Calvin and others, etc., were not simply intellectual exercises, rather, they were, to the Reformers, necessary to correctly build the basis of the pastoral work of the church; and (3) an appreciation that in the face of wars and social upheavals that pitted them against much more powerful forces of the day, the Reformers received encouragement from the strong belief “that God would surely honor his Word” (p. 234).

In helping the reader to see these, George examines the personal lives of several major characters. Should we think that Erasmus was “a double-dealing man—as slippery as an eel none could catch” (p. 75)? Or was he the layer of the “eggs that Luther hatched” (p. 94)? What insights can we glean from avowed opponents of the movement? The English Roman Catholic William Chillingworth was not trying to praise the Reformers

when he said, “The Bible, the Bible only I say, is the religion of Protestants” (p. 12), but no one could describe *sola scriptura* more comprehensively than that. Chillingworth was drawing conclusions from his observations—albeit from an adversarial position.

This book is able to draw deep lessons from the other side of several “settled” positions in the struggle for the soul of the Christian church. The image of Calvin as an establishment man who in popular culture was a “body despising, fun-killing, proto-puritan of the most somber kind” (p. 249) stands in deep contrast to the real man who was always a displaced person who “never felt completely at home even in Geneva . . . and wrote for sojourners, refugees and emigrants, for pilgrims who like Abraham and Sarah of old were looking for a city whose builder and maker was God” (p. 253). This same Calvin, in accepting his lot as a pilgrim and stranger in this world, deeply believed that “there will be no inheritance for us in heaven, unless we are pilgrims on earth!” (p. 253) The refugee problems that resulted from the persecutions and wars, the role of several European centers in offering shelter or creating emigrants, as well as other issues, are set in relief to place the events temporally as well as spatially in regard to their background.

The role of the Roman Catholics—especially the force massed to launch the Counter Reformation—is largely absent from the book. This is understandable because of the limited scope the author has set for himself; however, the book still tries to analyze the effects of the Reformation on Christianity, even in the Roman Catholic system.

Luther and the Reformers fought the popes and the liturgical system of the Middle Ages. “The old joke . . . that down in Rome there was one pope sitting on seven hills while up in Germany there were a hundred popes sitting on every little anthill” (p. 13) remains relevant: Were the Reformers fighting a corrupted papal/liturgical system? Was the liturgy itself the problem? I did not find a satisfactory answer to these questions in the book. Despite this minor complaint, I think there is a lot of profit in George’s inside track on the mind of the Reformers, as they tried to “reform the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church on the basis of

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the word of God and to do so by returning to the historic faith of the early church as they found it set forth in the pure teachings of the Scriptures” (p. 18).

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