

THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

By R. L. Berry

We can learn many a lesson from history if we will heed her voice. There are some historical facts which have made a profound impression upon my mind, and to the which the saints will do well to take heed.

I have in mind the history of the various reformations of the past. There have been several periods of real awakening and spiritual power since the church of God was enveloped in the dark cloud of apostasy.

In a general way their history can be divided into three periods: first; **The Reformatory Period**; second, **The Eliminative Period**; and third, **The Popular Period**. We will notice in the order given some facts regarding spiritual movements of the past.

The Reformatory Period

This period embraces the time when the old order of things was vigorously condemned and combatted; when the hammer of truth broke the back of long-cherished notions and theories; when authorities long established and long revered were slighted and finally ignored; when gospel truth was so vigorously believed and enforced that it made a clear-cut distinction between those who followed them and those who did not.

The blows that Luther dealt the Catholic system were not those of a compromiser. His doctrine attacked and undermined the very foundation of the Roman Church. At the Diet of Worms, Luther was charged with heresy. His writings had been judged and condemned. When he appeared before the Diet the question was asked him if he were the author of the books in question and if he was ready to retract them. He admitted the authorship of the books. To the question of retractions he said, "I have composed books against the Papacy – books in which I have attacked those who, by the false doctrine, their bad life, and scandalous example, desolate the Christian world, and destroy both body and soul." He also said he had written books against individuals with perhaps more violence than he ought to have used, but because it was truth, he did not feel like taking it back. His address did not suit his accusers, who told him to render a clear-cut answer whether he would retract or not, which he did in these words: "I neither can nor will retract anything."

Do you think the Sixteenth Century Reformation could have been effected without the radical stand taken by the reformers? They declared the Pope to be the devil and called the Roman Church Babylon; they declared the mass to be a human invention, calculated to produce money and deceive souls; they tore down the images of the saints and deserted the ancient worship; they derided the lazy monks and priests until many went to work like men; they declared monkery to be a violation of the laws of both God and nature, and the nuns came out and became mothers and consequently useful to society; the buying of indulgences was ridiculed as mere human chicanery and penance as human works. Thus, the Reformation was effected.

The Wesleyan movement may properly be styled a reformation. While John Wesley himself did not formally separate from the English Church, he did separate in doctrine and practice. John Wesley was a radical preacher, blessed with much wisdom and divine inspiration, and he carried well through his life the ideals of his early spiritual ministry. His sanctification as subsequent to conversion; his rules for his societies, such as putting off gold and costly array, etc., are proofs of the clear-cut preaching of his time. That was *the Reformatory Period* of the Wesleyan Movement. These two citations will suffice for our present object. We may state, as a general rule, that *the Reformatory Period* constituted the most vigorous part of the life of any spiritual movement of which we have record.

There is one potent reason why *the Reformatory Periods* are the most vigorous and spiritual periods of religious movements, and that is it is the period of greatest opposition. Opposition and persecution make faith and courage grow, and the very noblest qualities are brought out in the crucible of affliction. People are apt to pray more and live humbler and closer to God than when all goes well.

The Eliminative Period

Every reformation has had fanaticism to deal with. It is a natural result of the upheaval. Sometimes it takes one form and sometimes another.

In Luther's time certain men at Zwickau received such revelations that they declared they did not need the Bible any longer. The leader claimed a direct revelation from God; he appointed twelve apostles and seventy-two disciples; rejected infant baptism; claimed the end of the world was at hand and Christ would soon reign on the earth, etc.; thus mixing truth and error. They ran on until they revolted at civil authority and were miserably overthrown.

Wesley had to combat the same wild-fire fanaticism which delighted in bold assumption, highly colored language, and wild opinions and expressions.

Fanaticism finds expression in a hundred forms and consists of excesses. If it attacks a thing it does so with excess. It goes too far in nearly everything and is especially insubordinate to those in authority. It is spiritual or religious anarchy. *The Eliminative Period* is time in which this fanatical element is gradually sifted out and gotten rid of. Luther had quite a time with the fanatics. He combatted them and reasoned with them to no avail. They had some truth which he ignored, and which hindered their taking his admonition.

The Eliminative Period is a very important period. In *the Reformatory Period* old things were overturned and some things came out that should be eliminated, but **the difficulty lies in knowing when to stop.** Luther eliminated too much. It left the Lutheran Church more nearly like that from which it came than any other. It left the image of saints; it left a modified transubstantiation; it left the rule of the bishop, etc.; and it left infant baptism, confirmation, and such like.

While Wesley himself held well to the truth in his lifetime and his successors did also, still the time came when the process of elimination began. The preachers should be less peculiar; the

modest simple costumes of early Methodist women were regarded as a sort of weakness, and nobody but old fogies would think of doing as they did now; gold and silver appeared, and one rule after another, one principle after another, was eliminated until it hardly resembles itself. The “glorious doctrine of sanctification” ceased to be a prominent doctrine, was eliminated, and today is very seldom heard.

The Eliminative Period includes not only the elimination of little practices that have come up and been introduced during the first period, but it also includes doctrinal points, and in this is required as much wisdom and divine guidance as the other. If too much is eliminated the way is prepared for *the Popular Period*. If that which is really superfluous and without Scriptural warrant is left out it will establish that work and God will work in it.

The Popular Period

The movements going before arrived at *the Popular Period*. They are now popular with the world. Conditions of membership are easy and the profession popular. God has departed. The glory is gone. Their membership is made up mostly of sinners. They have modern organizations, modern church houses, with facilities for entertainment, etc., and modern preachers, who know what to leave out to please the people. The process of elimination has embraced nearly every essential New Testament doctrine and practice and has left them as badly in need of a reformation as those societies out of which they originally came. Persecution is past entirely; all they have to do is to keep popular, and the institution will grow.

This is the stage of Protestantism today. They look with disdain upon those who follow the old paths, who dress plain, who discard gold and costly array, who wash the saints’ feet, who believe in sanctification, who live holy lives, and who live according to the New Testament doctrines. Jesus says, “Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you.”

What Shall We Do?

In view of the facts of history before us, I feel like issuing a warning to every child of God and especially to the preachers. We are now in *the Eliminative Period*, and **I counsel a return to *the Reformatory Period***. There is nothing inconsistent with real reformation work going on at the same time as eliminative work. Some things perhaps needed eliminating; if so, all right, but to start a program of elimination or allow one to go on, is cause sufficient to sound an alarm.

Thirty years ago, God let down as direct a reformation as any of the reformations which went before. To us today God has passed a reformation of truth, a getting back to the Bible, to simplicity of organization (the New Testament kind), to purity of doctrine and life; a getting back to one fold, one church, to obedience to all the ordinances and commands, to justification and sanctification, and to divine healing.

Catholicism and Protestantism both need reforming. They constitute the Babylon the Great of Revelations. The command is, “Come out of her, my people.” By the thunderbolts of truth God’s people were delivered from Babylon, and by a clear presentation of the doctrine of justification

we were saved from committing sins, and by a presentation of the doctrine of sanctification we were sanctified.

Do you suppose for a moment that God will abide with us if we depart from the Scriptures? And do you not know that during periods of elimination many suggestions are made and much plausible argument presented to eliminate things held as truth for years, and which indeed are really in harmony with the principles of righteousness? **Whenever a thing becomes popular God is done with it; he can not use it any longer. Do not eliminate too much.** Stop at the right place. There is no question but that real radical preaching in the Spirit will raise up a really holy people. **And there is no question but that if we lower the standard and round off the corners of gospel truth, we shall soon become popular, but twice dead and destitute of power and of God. If we want God to abide with us, we must abide in His Word. A little more preaching of the old-time truths is what is needed at the present."**

– R. L. Berry, *The Gospel Trumpet*, October 20, 1910, pages 4-5