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2000 YEARS OF CHRIST'S POWER

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'We need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion.' C.S.Lewis: *Fernseed and Elephants* p35

Introduction

Dr Nick Needham has undertaken the ambitious task of writing a series of books on the panorama of church history. Entitled '2,000 Years of Christ's Power,' they have been written with two main intentions. Firstly, with the conviction that Christians today can benefit a great deal from learning what God has done in the past, and secondly, to fill a gap in the literature of church history. According to Dr Needham *'Church history books tend to fall into one of two categories. Academic works produced for the benefit of other academics, written in a complex and demanding language..., or popular works written in much simpler language, which can sometimes be rather careless about their historical facts, and often approach the subject from a very narrow theological point of view...'* (Part 1 p13)

So far Dr Needham has written three volumes and plans to write two more. Part 1 covers the age of the Early Church Fathers (AD60-600AD), Part 2, the Middle Ages (600-1400) and Part 3 the Renaissance and Reformation (1400-1600). It is planned that Part 4 will cover the 17th Century to the Enlightenment, and Part 5 will bring the story up to the 21st Century.

Objectivity

Dr Needham writes as a conservative evangelical but has sought to be objective in his assessment of those in the past who often had much less Scriptural light than we do today. Needham says *'I have striven throughout these pages to be objective and impartial, and not let my own theology interfere with the way I describe and assess people and events. As I study the colourful panorama of Church history, I hope I can appreciate the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ's gracious presence with His people in spite of what I would regard as sins and errors.'* (Part 1 p16) *'Human life and history, and Church life and history, are more subtle and complex than a simple "goodies-versus baddies" approach will allow.'* (Part 2 p11)

Dr Needham also tries to give an accurate view of periods of church history which evangelicals can be tempted to see only the good in. For example, although he very much believes that the Reformation was a positive movement, he tries to analyse it in a realistic way *'...the Reformation became mixed up and tainted with a lot that wasn't quite so wholesome or quite so good.'* *'The Protestant Reformers were profoundly people of their own times, as we are of ours. We shouldn't expect perfection of them, any more than a future generation will discover perfection in us.'* (Part 3 pp12-13)

Readability

The books are interesting to read, the story flows quickly and although there are lots of names and dates (which can be difficult to remember) there is greater detail given to more important times such as the Reformation and to more influential people such as Augustine. To aid memory, at the end of each chapter there is a list of some of the people who have been covered, along with some quotes from their writings, these help us to become better acquainted with the people and the times they lived in.

Lessons for today

The Bible

We should be grateful for having the bible in our own language. Many errors which have damaged the church have often been due to ignorance of the bible. Scholars relied on inadequate Latin translations whilst ordinary people did not have the Bible in a language they could understand. People such as Wycliffe and Tyndale suffered, even died for the Bible to be in the vernacular and this should inspire us to stand firm for the truth. *'[Tyndale] early conceived it to be his mission to translate the Bible into English from the original Greek and Hebrew, and to give it to the common people as the surest way of overthrowing Roman error'*. (Part 3 p379) For us to neglect the bible either through not reading it or rejecting some of its doctrine seems criminal compared to the value previous Christians had for it.

Examples of previous Christians

These books highlight the love and zeal many believers had for Christ. Their example is both humbling and inspiring, especially as much of modern Christianity seems to be shallow and lukewarm. Many seemed to live for him entirely and would face persecution and suffering rather than disown Christ. The devotion they had can be witnessed in the quotes at the end of each chapter: *'In loving You, O Lord, I do not just have some vague feeling; my love is positive and certain. Your Word touched my heart, and from that moment I began to love you.'* Augustine's Confessions, Part 1 p259.

Christian impact

It is apparent from the books how much of church history is intertwined with political and social history (especially in Europe). Christianity has had a huge impact on the world, which has led to moral and social changes in the countries which embraced it. Often when a monarch or ruler of a country became a Christian they would Christianize the nation they were ruler over. King Alfred in England is just one example *'Alfred saw it as his God-given destiny to create a flourishing Christian civilisation in his kingdom of Wessex. Acting as a "sacred king," he consecrated his royal power to the supreme mission of organising Church affairs, raising moral and academic standards among the clergy, and promoting the religious knowledge of the English people.'* Part 2 p143.

It is important for Christians today, when government and media seem to undermine our heritage, that we don't forget how the Christian faith has shaped our laws and morals; without it we would be a very different country.

Standing firm

Surrounded by so much false teaching today it is an encouragement to read how Christians in the past stood firm. The list of false teaching and doctrines seems almost endless from the Gnostics (2nd Century) to Arianism (4th Century) to all the Roman errors. However, we can be encouraged because church history shows us that the truth of God's Word has been preserved and spread through the ages even when there seemed to be very little gospel light. Christians such as Athanasius' and Luther should inspire us to stand boldly for the truth: *'I [Luther] am conquered by the holy Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not withdraw anything...Here I stand. God help me. Amen.'* Part 3 p98. Evangelicals should not be bullied or dulled into submission or moral relativism (for example on issues such as sexual immorality and women in leadership) but stand firm to God's word and to what Christians have always believed.

A Church rooted in history

Sometimes Christians of other denominations will criticize the Church of England for not being as reformed as they are. Comparisons are often made with some non-conformist churches such as Baptists or Independents or with the Puritans. However, the structure of the Church of England has been influenced by faithful Christians in the past.

For example the use of liturgy and reciting of creeds is similar to the practice of the early church, *'The use of "liturgy" - fixed, written prayers and exhortations to be read out by the bishop and congregation - is found from a very early date in Christian worship. The oldest known example...occurs in the writings of Hippolytus (AD220) (see Part 1 p72). Likewise in Calvin's church in Geneva the Apostles' creed, set prayers, Lord's prayer recited by congregation, confession of sin and Scripture readings were all used in worship (Part 3 p233) and such could be said of Zwingli's communion service (Part 2 p151) and the Lutheran churches (p139-140). The degree of common practice at the Reformation was also due to the way in which the Reformers were influenced by one another. For example Bishop Hooper was exiled for a time in Strasbourg, Basel and Zurich whilst 'adding to the increasingly Protestant complexion of England was an influx of distinguished protestant refugees from Continental Europe...leading reformed churchmen such as Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr did settle and work in England during Edward VI's reign, helping to inject a strong dose of the reformed ethos into English Protestantism. Martin Bucer in particular worked with Cranmer in preparing the second edition of the BCP' Part 2 p392.*

Works like Needham's remind us that the structures of the Anglican Church are rooted in history. For example, having Bishops may be seen as unbiblical by some but it is a role that goes back to the earliest days of the church, for example Ignatius was the bishop of the church in Antioch until executed in AD110. Likewise, people may object to state involvement in the church but this has been used to evangelize countries, or to prevent divisions tearing apart the church as with the Lutheran Church after the Peasants' Revolt. (Part 3 p133).

Conclusion

A knowledge of church history should give us confidence to stand firm for the truth as we see how the gospel has been maintained and spread through the ages. We can learn from and admire the good examples of past Christians but also avoid their errors. It should also make us thankful for having the bible in our own language when so many believers through the ages did not. It is also

interesting to see how the Church of England has its roots in church history. Ultimately by Christ's power The Great Commission is being fulfilled and will be fulfilled to the end.

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