

The Reformation of Josiah and the Rediscovery of the Scriptures: 2 Chronicles 34

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Observing Reformation

On Oct 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his famous 95 theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, an event which many regard as the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. So each year, on Oct 31, many reformed churches mark what we call "Reformation Day."

Why do we do it? Out of nostalgia for the past? A wistful longing for better times? Or maybe it is our attempt to maintain a distinctly reformed holiday! One we can celebrate in good conscience apart from the cultural trappings that now surround other holidays throughout the year!

Undoubtedly this day is observed for some of these reasons. However, a Reformation Day is only truly meaningful if we are committed to the same reformation in our times. This is not a call to live in the past, but a call to acknowledge very real and present need. To observe and understand the significance of events of the past is not merely to look back with historical interest; it is rather a serious consideration of how the church measures up today to the biblical standards of doctrine, worship, and ecclesiology. Reformation is not to be only a past event, but an urgent and contemporary calling. It is a biblical principle, in Old and New Testaments, that did not begin in Geneva.

Only in this light then is Reformation Day worth observing. Our desire ought to be a new reformation in our time, one that even eclipses the reformation of our fathers in the 16th century.

What, then, is this thing for which we pray, this thing we commemorate and seek after, called "Reformation"? Let us begin with a working definition:

Reformation is when God's people, out of faith and love for Him, cast off the traditions of men and the influences of the world, and passionately return to the purity of biblical direction in worship, doctrine, and practice.

A definition like this, imperfect as it may be, gives us a starting point for our prayers and our efforts. To unpack this definition, it will be better for us to examine some concrete examples of it to see how it works out in real history. Our first instinct may be to look to men like Luther, Knox, and Calvin. These figures are certainly fine examples and there is much we can learn from men such as these. However to focus on them, great as they may be, would be to content ourselves with secondary resources. The Reformers themselves drew, not from their surroundings, but from the Word of God. There is a primary resource on the subject of Reformation, and that is the

Bible itself- which is always contemporary. We will focus on a prime example of this in the book of 2 Chronicles.

2 Chronicles is an Old Testament Record of Reformation

The Chronicler describes at great length the reformation that took place under the greatest men of the church, namely Hezekiah, Josiah, and Asa. These men were the Luther, Knox, and Calvin of the ancient Church. While 2 Kings focuses more on the political and military achievements of these men, Chronicles focuses on how God used them as great reformers who restored the worship, doctrine and practice of the Church and brought her back to biblical roots. This makes the Book of 2 Chronicles nothing less than the divine handbook on reformation.

While 2 Chronicles might not be everyone's favorite book of the Bible, we do well to remember what Paul says in Rom 15:4, *"For whatever things were written beforehand are for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."* 2 Chronicles was written that we might have the hope of reformation, and that this might continue to be our prayer and our desire for the Bride of Christ.

In this article, we will examine a shining example of such reformation in the ancient church, under one of the greatest reformers of all time – King Josiah. If we define reformation as a time *"when God's people, out of faith and love for Him, cast off the traditions of men and the influences of the world, and passionately return to the purity of Biblical direction in worship, doctrine, and practice,"* then we find an exemplary instance of it in 2 Chronicles 34.

King Josiah

First, let's consider the reformer himself. Although the parallel account of his reign in 2 Kings gives less of a view of his younger years, Chronicles gives an insight to his heart at a young age. In fact, in all the accounts of the great reformer-kings, 2 Chronicles reveals a clear view of the faith and love for the Lord that motivated them in reformation. It is important to see that reformers like Josiah were not iconoclasts who sought out controversy or "conservatives" who had an outward taste for the old traditions. Their reformation sprang from a heart of passionate faith and love for God, always the catalyst and motivating force for any real work of God. Without that there is no true reformation.

Josiah became king when he was a young eight years old. Marvelously, Chronicles says of his heart that "he walked in the ways of his father David," and that "he did not turn to the right hand or to the left" (2 Chron. 34:2). Eight years into his reign, at the age of sixteen, the Scriptures say that "while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David." (2 Chron. 34:3). At a young age, and in his teens, his heart was already set on God and seeking God. This consecration bore fruit, for at the age of 20 he began an active work of reformation by purging false worship and its locations from Judah (2 Chron. 34:3).

It is noteworthy that the text separates the ideas of "walking in the ways of his father David" (which he did while very young), and "seeking the God of his father David" (which marked the beginning of his reformation). Josiah was not just committed to following the good example and traditions of David, good as they were. He was committed to seeking the LORD and doing his will. This practice is essential to true reformation, for it is not simply preferring one tradition over another as handed down but seeking the will of God from the Scriptures. Today being reformed has become, in some senses, embracing conservative and confessional traditions often labelled the 'reformed tradition'. Once we start to think of ourselves as maintaining a tradition, we begin to lose sight of what reformation really is. Returning to the 'ways of David' was not the essence of this reformation, and returning to the 'ways' of the fathers is not enough for us. We have great human examples of reformers, such as Calvin and Knox, but

maintaining their "tradition" is not what makes us reformed, no more than "walking in the ways of David" made Josiah a reformer. Reformation does not start by seeking the ways of our fathers even if they are great examples. Rather, it begins by seeking the God of our fathers (2 Chron. 34:3 3). Reformation begins with a heart of faith returning to the God of our fathers, via doctrine, worship and practice.

The Nature of Josiah's Faith

Toward the end of the chapter a further glimpse of Josiah's heart of faith is given, this time in the words of God through the prophetess Hulda. She says that Josiah's heart was tender toward God, and twice mentions his humility (2 Chron. 34:27).

When thinking of great reformers, the qualities we usually envisage first might be zeal for the truth, courage in the face of opposition, and boldness in proclamation. These characteristics are important and Josiah certainly had them, but God Himself highlights Josiah's heart of humility. We would be wrong to miss the significance of the condition of the reformer's heart in considering great works of reformation. In being called to be a king or a reformer of a nation it is common to overlook the priority of meekness and humility to hold such a position. Pride comes before a fall, but what comes before reformation is humility before God and man.

Calvin said in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "If you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, I will answer, first, second, and third, it is humility." If humility is that central to true faith, it must also be to true reformation. If we want to see reformation in our times, we must start by humbling ourselves before God. Further, we must maintain a meek spirit before others when it comes to the articulation of our convictions and how we present the scriptures to others. Josiah shows us that a heart of humility goes a long way in this matter.

Josiah's Reformation of Irregular Worship

All the great reformers of the ancient church were known for restoring true worship by the guidance of Scripture alone. This is always a key element of what reformation is.

The historical background to Josiah's reformation is the long idolatrous reign of Manasseh. Though he eventually repented many of his idolatrous worship practices had become tradition by the time Josiah came to the throne. The young king set his heart to reform and restore the true worship of God. To achieve this he not only had to purge *worship of false gods* but also *false worship of the true God*. It is important to differentiate between the two.

The worship of false gods, such as Baal, was the first focus of Josiah's reformation (vs. 4) and should be at the forefront of any present-day reformation. But there were also man-made unbiblical worship practices in the land that were an attempt to worship the true God, which were of equal concern to Josiah. Unbiblical worship will eventually lead to entirely false worship, which is why it is important to hold to the scriptural standard. Josiah was compelled to return to this scriptural standard and did several things to accomplish it.

He tore down "high places"

The high places were shrines where people often sought to worship the true God, but in a manner and location that God had not commanded (2 Chron 33:17).

He took away the "wooden, carved, and molded images"

These idols were not always images of false gods, but were often attempts to visually represent the true God. It is important to comprehend this form of idolatry where unbiblical modes of worshipping the true God are used. A notorious example of this is the golden calf in Exodus 32,

which is called by the same Hebrew term (*massecah*) as is used here of these molded images. Aaron claimed the image was “your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”, and declared a feast to be held for the LORD. Aaron and the people were trying to visually represent the true God with an idol, which the Lord had clearly forbidden.

These “molded images,” such as Josiah tore down in Judah, were often attempts to worship the true God by false means. This is also what happened on the “high places”—they were attempting to worship the true God, but in the wrong place, and by their own methods. Josiah put a decisive end to not only the worship of false gods, but the unbiblical worship of the true God, with the important standard being *is this sanctioned and commanded in Scripture*.

This important distinction between outright idolatry and a false, unbiblical attempt to worship the true God is being forgotten today. God can be worshipped in a false way, for our worship is not sanctified by our motives. We cannot invent our own ways to worship and think it is fine because we are *trying* to worship the true God. The true God will only be worshipped according to His own word.

The examples today may be more subtle, but no less real. The point to glean from this text is that reformation demands that we distinguish between the will of God and the will of man when it comes to worship. Josiah had this discernment and this is precisely the thing that made him a great reformer.

The Priority of God's Commands in Worship

Of other Old Testament kings such as Jehoshaphat, Amaziah, and Azariah it was said, “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, nevertheless he did not take down the high places.” These ‘almost-reformers’ were content to leave some traditions alone. Maybe they reasoned that as long as the people were sacrificing to the LORD on these high places, what’s the harm? Today, modern innovations in worship are excused by the same reasoning. What is the harm? The harm is that we fail to give God what he commands, and what pleases and glorifies him most, according to His word.

One passage that highlights this point is Jeremiah 32:35:

They built the high places of Baal, which are in the Valley of the son of Hinnom, and caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I did not command them, nor did it come into my mind that they should do this abomination.

The people were worshipping false gods by killing their own children (which violates the first, second, and sixth commandments). Yet what God highlights is that he did not command this as the way of worship. Following the emphasis of the passage, worship practices that are not commanded by God are just as offensive to him (or more) as the hideous practice of child sacrifice. The disobedient element of man-made worship innovations put them all in the same category as the unthinkable practice of child-sacrifice as God did not command them.

This is why Josiah took the high places and the molded images down in spite of their long tradition. In spite of the people’s intentions, God had not commanded them.

Josiah's Reformation of Outright Idolatry

Another observation is noteworthy about Josiah's purgation of false worship. The Biblical description of it is a tsunami of violent verbs. Every sentence in the account has verbs like “purge, break down, smash, cut down, grind into powder.” The parallel text in 2 Kings 23 is

even more vivid with its verbs, such as “defile, pulverize, execute, desecrate.” The verbs tell the story of Josiah's policy toward false worship and idolatry—make no exceptions, take no prisoners, show no mercy. He did not do these things out of hubris, for remember how the text speaks of his humility! He did these things out of godly zeal for the worship of God, which is the same kind of zeal that moved our Savior to drive out the merchants and moneychangers from the temple. Of Christ it was said, “Zeal for the LORD's house has consumed me” (Psalm 69:9; John 2:17). Josiah exhibited the same kind of zeal for the true worship of the true God.

Now, this zeal must be tempered by humility, and this zeal, in a modern context, might not exactly be expressed by burning, smashing, and pulverizing things. But there must be zeal if there is to be reformation and passion for the true worship of the true God. It is precisely this zeal and passion that makes Josiah stand out as perhaps the greatest reformer in all of church history.

Josiah's Rediscovery of the Scriptures

Lastly, we come to the central event of this chapter, and the key event of Josiah's reign: the discovery (or re-discovery) of the Scriptures.

Josiah set out to repair and renovate the temple, just as Hezekiah did before him. In this process, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law. How long had it been lost? How long had God's people gone without Scripture? This explains a lot about the previous century when the kings simply did what was right in his own eyes. The church and its worship were in a state of utter chaos without the guidance of scripture.

A similar loss of the scriptures was also a precursor to the reformation of the sixteenth century. The Roman Catholic Church for centuries had purposefully hidden the scriptures from the people and replaced God's word with papal doctrine in order to manipulate, suppress, and control their people. Luther, Calvin, and Knox played the role of Hilkiah the priest in rediscovering the scriptures.

In the course of the chapter Hilkiah gives the book to Shaphan the scribe (one wonders what a scribe had to do in a time when the scriptures were lost!). Shaphan then goes to Josiah, first reporting about the progress of the temple repairs and the temple's financial situation. (2 Chron. 34:16-17) Then in a seemingly incidental way he tells Josiah about the book and reads it to him. (2 Chron. 34:18). Josiah's reaction again reveals his heart and character. In shock, in contrition, he tears his clothes and immediately sends for a prophet. His intention to reform is then immediately implemented.

A contrast exists between Shaphan, a scribe with no Scriptures who seemed most concerned about the building and the money, and Josiah, who was most concerned with God's Word and its message. A modern distraction is reflected here, when churches become preoccupied with their buildings and budgets to the point where the ministry of the word loses its centrality and urgency. However, Josiah's reaction stands out. He immediately recognizes God's word for what it is and responds, for the sheep recognize the Shepherd's voice. Similarly, Paul said to the Thessalonians that when they received their words they welcomed them as truth, the word of God (1 Thes. 2:13). Acknowledging the word of God for what it is in truth is essential for understanding His will and beginning to follow it. Josiah received it for what it was in truth, as the only authority for faith and life.

Josiah Sees the Judgement of God in the Scriptures

Josiah also acknowledged the righteousness of God's judgment on the nation, according to the words of scripture. He did not make excuses or blame his predecessors but took responsibility,

repented, and initiated the task of reformation. This is an important point to note if we desire and pray for reformation. It is always tempting to deflect responsibility to the people around you or people who came before you. However, with the knowledge of God's word comes a very personal responsibility to repent over breaking it and to commit to following it yourself in your own age.

Josiah then sent for Hulda the prophetess who told him that God's wrath was still coming. An unavoidable judgment loomed on the horizon, but because Josiah's heart was humble and tender toward God he would not experience it personally. He gathered the nation, led them in a covenant to keep God's word, and continued on with the reformation even after he heard of the certainty of God's judgment to come.

Such an attitude reveals the sincerity of Josiah's motives for returning to God's word and reforming the worship of the church. He did not bring these changes because he thought the LORD would bless the nation and give them prosperity and peace. In fact, he knew the opposite was true. God's patience was at an end and they were about to be conquered and deported to Babylon. Josiah knew this outcome but he still led the nation in a covenant to keep the word of God. He saw the necessity of returning to the Scriptures in obedience to the LORD, regardless of the circumstances or the outcome. This is the kind of faith that is at the heart of reformation. An unwavering, unqualified commitment to return to the purity of biblical direction must be maintained.

Josiah's Covenant

Josiah's "commitment" was really a "covenant." Just like Hezekiah before him, Josiah made his commitment clear by making a covenant. The covenant that Josiah made with the Lord is the crescendo of the chapter (vs. 29-33). Josiah led the elders and all the people in a covenant to keep God's word with all their heart.

Covenant making often goes hand-in-hand with reformation. Every reformer-king of the Old Testament, including Josiah, Hezekiah, and Asa, all led the people in a covenant with God. Such covenant making accompanied the reformation in Scotland as well. Covenants embody and articulate reformation. A covenant is a way to clearly define our commitment and our duty, especially in times when reformation is so urgent. Making a covenant is a good and biblical way to express and commit ourselves to our biblical duties in response to the specific challenges of the times. It is a corporate expression of faith and commitment to Christ and His word. Insofar as covenanting has fallen out of practice in our modern times we are poorer for it. Any significant impulse toward reformation remains indistinct and diffuse without the clarity of commitment that a covenant brings.

The substance of Josiah's covenant is that he, the elders, and the people would return with all their hearts to the word of God as their direction for faith, life, and worship. This played out in several ways, such as in the keeping of the Passover in the next chapter. But the principle itself is the true heart of what reformation is.

Sola Scriptura

This principle is encapsulated in the Latin phrase *Sola Scriptura*, or "Scripture alone," and it embodies the principle that God's word alone is sufficient and infallible to teach us the way of salvation, the way of worship, and the way to live for the glory of Christ. The implied corollary to this is that the teachings and traditions of men, which are not drawn from the scriptures, are actually impediments to truly knowing, loving, and worshipping Christ. There is a place and a need for teachers, councils, and confessions, but these must all be based upon the only, final, infallible authority, which is God's word.

Examples of true reformation in the Bible and beyond can be characterized by this principle of *Sola Scriptura*. Scripture alone must be rediscovered and reclaimed as our only infallible direction for faith, worship, and life.

In Josiah's time and John Knox's time, the scriptures were lost, or purposefully hidden, and had to be rediscovered. Today we are not in danger of literally losing it, yet our danger is that it may be lost in plain sight.

Our need is to continually re-affirm our commitment to God's word alone, and to rediscover it in our homes and in our churches constantly. We need to return to it, daily and instinctively, and lay it up in our hearts with a sense of discovery each day. In our churches we must have this kind of corporate commitment to preach, teach, and worship according to the Scriptures alone, and rediscover the vitality and joy that comes with a simple and singular focus on God's word.

Reformation is when God's people, out of faith and love for Him, cast off the traditions of men and the influences of the world and passionately return to the purity of biblical direction in worship, doctrine, and practice. Praise God that he has granted us true examples of reformation in the history of the church. Let it be our prayer that God would grant it again, and that reformation would be more than the stuff of history or a nostalgic idea to us, but that it would be a living commitment and our greatest desire for the body of Christ.