

Historical and Theological Forum

The study of Christian history and theology obviously involves much in the way of remembering what has been said and done by Christian leaders. We commemorate and celebrate the lives and achievements of those who have gone before. One expects that each year therefore, there will be the occasional anniversary of note. 2015 however, seems to be a year simply filled with numerous anniversaries of historical and theological significance. Therefore it was felt very appropriate to commence a new section within the Journal, a section where we will ask for personal comment and reflection from a variety of scholars on relevant topics.

The following is just a representative sample of the anniversaries happening in 2015, apologies are offered for those not mentioned, it is certainly not a comprehensive list: Selma (50 years); Founding of the Salvation Army (150 years); Hudson Taylor founds the OMF (150 years); Death of Andrew Fuller (200 years); Birth of Richard Baxter (400 years); Execution of Jan Hus, together with Order to exhume and burn by fire, the mortal remains of John Wyclif (600 years); Magna Carta (800 years); 4th Lateran Council (800 years); Bernard founds monastery at Clairvaux (900 years); and Consecration of Westminster Abbey (950 years).

We begin this new Reflection Forum by asking for personal reflection from Dr. Nathan Finn, Dr. Christian George and Dr. Michael McMullen¹, on the significance of some of the anniversaries occurring this year. We will begin chronologically and simply work from the farthest historical events.

MJT: The year 2015 marks the 950th anniversary of the Consecration of Westminster Abbey in London. Quite apart from simply the incredible

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longevity of Westminster, why do you think it is a significant enough event to remember?

Christian George: Westminster Abbey is a masterpiece of stone and glass that boasts the burials of those like Oliver Cromwell, Geoffrey Chaucer, Isaac Newton, Charles Dickens and African missionary David Livingstone. The stones of this abbey, originally set by Benedictine monks for the worship of God, would eventually witness the composition of the King James Bible, a translation that held unrivaled tenure until the late nineteenth century. The nave of Westminster Abbey also looked down upon the Westminster Assembly, a council of Puritan theologians who forged the Westminster Confession of Faith which served as a model for the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 and The Philadelphia Confession of 1742, both of which gave identity and trajectory to the Baptist tradition.

MJT: This year also marks the 900th anniversary of Bernard's Founding of the monastery at Clairvaux. Why do you believe this event to be significant enough to commemorate?

Christian George: Several years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Clairvaux, a small city in northeastern France where Bernard founded his religious community on June 25, 1115. Unlike the followers of Francis of Assisi in the following century, 12th century Cistercians were self-sufficient and hardworking, earning their wages by manual labor and agricultural development. Bernard's expression of Christianity is worth celebrating on this, the 900th anniversary of his monastery's formation, for it was based on the rhythm of life found in the earliest apostolic churches (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). Bernard was one of Charles Spurgeon's favorite pre-Reformation preachers. In a sermon, Spurgeon once asked, "What Protestant can refuse to love the holy Bernard? Was there ever a more consecrated servant of God or a dearer lover of Christ than he?" Moreover, in comparing his own love for Jesus Christ with that of Bernard's, Spurgeon confessed, "I feel as if I had not begun to love my Lord."

MJT: The year 2015 marks the 600th anniversary of the Council of Constance, where the Order was given to exhume and destroy John Wyclif's mortal remains, though the order would not be executed for another 13 years. What is it about Wyclif that makes him a significant enough figure worth remembering?

Nathan Finn: John Wyclif (1320–1384) is important for a number of reasons. First, more than any other theologians in the late-medieval era, Wyclif came closest to arriving at convictions that the Reformers would later emphasize. He affirmed the supreme authority of Scripture and advocated making the Bible available in the vernacular. He is most famous for the latter, and rightly so. Wyclif's followers, the Lollards, made this a key priority in their movement and the modern-day parachurch ministry Wycliffe Bible Translators is named in his honor. Along with William Tyndale (1494–1536), Wyclif is one of the two historical "patron saints" of English Bible translation.

Wyclif also anticipated the Reformation in other ways besides his view of Scripture. He held to an Augustinian view of salvation and rejected transubstantiation, views that would later be echoed by most of the magisterial Reformers. Wycliffe also rejected the universal temporal authority of the pope and advocated an English national church separate from the Church of Rome well over a century before the creation of the Church of England under Henry VIII. Wyclif is often coupled with his near-contemporary Jan Hus (1369–1415), but Wyclif was actually closer to the Reformers in most of these views than Hus proved to be.

What really prevents us from marking the start of the Reformation with Wyclif rather than Martin Luther is that Wyclif apparently continued to hold to a medieval Catholic view of justification. Wyclif did not affirm justification by faith alone, but like most medieval theologians, he argued that justification is on the basis of a combination of faith and good works as mediated, in part, through the Catholic Church's seven sacraments. So while we should rightly honor Wyclif's because of his many important contributions, we should not follow him in his understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification.

MJT: The same Council of Constance also condemned the Czech pre-Reformer Jan Hus and had him burned at the stake. Why is the life and work of Hus of particular significance?

Michael McMullen: We classify Jan Hus (or John Huss - c.1374–1415) as one of the three main pre-Reformers, along with John Wyclif and Girolamo Savonarola. In my Seminary office, I have a 1929 biography of Hus that I will often show to my students because of who the author is, Benito Mussolini. I will usually also read the following eye-opening section from its preface, "I hope that the reading of these pages will familiarize the public of independent thinkers with the epoch, the life, and the work of the least known of the heretics who lived north of the Alps." Mussolini also interestingly hoped that his volume might, "arouse in the minds of its readers a hatred of every form of spiritual and secular tyranny, whether it be theocratic or Jacobine."

Like Wyclif, Hus adopted a critical stance toward some of the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church, the very Church of which he was a Priest. It was common until fairly recently, to portray Hus as simply a Wycliffite in Bohemia. One would be as mistaken in claiming that as one would in merely portraying him as little more than a forerunner of Martin Luther. While Luther certainly declared his indebtedness to Hus ("We are all Hussites without knowing it"), the Bohemian pre-Reformer was very much a man of his time theologically, as Wyclif too was in many ways, lacking as he did the doctrine of justification of faith alone. Hus's criticisms of the Catholic Church had much more to do with the life and behavior of the clergy, than with their actual theological positions. Though in saying this, Hus remains a man of extreme courage, standing against the punishment he knew only too well, would follow his actions. Hus was very active for example, in denouncing church abuses, and criticizing both the papacy and the abuse of the system of indulgences.

Hus's motto was, "Truth conquers all", and one thing we must remember and celebrate Hus for, along with his courage and stand for godliness among ministers, is his emphasis on Scripture as the source of true doctrine. As he wrote in his *De Ecclesia*, which really became his own death warrant, "And, in this way, every Christian is expected to believe explicitly and implicitly all the truth which the Holy Spirit has put in Scripture, and in this way a man is not bound to believe the sayings of the saints which are apart from Scripture, nor should he believe papal

bulls, except insofar as they speak out of Scripture, or insofar as what they say is founded in Scripture simply.”

MJT: This year will mark the 400th birthday of Richard Baxter. What is it about Baxter’s life and ministry that would mark him out for you as significant?

Christian George: Few divines were held in higher esteem than Richard Baxter, the Puritan pastor of Kidderminster whose 400th birthday we celebrate this year. A white, marble statue of him can be seen in Aberdeen, Scotland, and I have always thought, when standing beneath it, that marble was a choice stone for a man whose books, like his likeness, continue to withstand the erosion of time. The Reformed Pastor, one of his most popular works, has served as a compass for countless pastors throughout the ages who seek to marry orthodoxy and orthopraxy in ministry. Charles Spurgeon, whose personal copy of Baxter’s book is found in the Spurgeon Library, once said that it “stirs my very soul whenever I read its glowing periods.”

MJT: 2015 marks the 200th anniversary of the sad passing of Andrew Fuller. Why would you choose Fuller as someone we should see as significant this long after his death?

Nathan Finn: Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) was the leading theologian among British Baptists during the so-called long eighteenth century. He came of age in an era when Particular Baptist life had come under the influence of High Calvinism, a theological tradition that downplayed evangelistic urgency and the importance of immediate repentance and faith. Many High Calvinists were also antinomians who denied that holiness is a necessary element in the Christian life. In part through his reading of puritans such as John Bunyan and John Owen, as well as his engagement with early evangelicals, especially Jonathan Edwards, Fuller embraced an evangelical Calvinism that emphasized intentional evangelism, the necessity of personal holiness, and eventually the Great Commission to make disciples among all nations. His friend William Carey (1761–1834) is often considered the “father” of the modern

missions movement among English-speaking evangelicals.

Fuller's most famous treatise, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1785; revised 1801), proved to be the most important work in undermining High Calvinism among Baptists and other Dissenters. He also wrote against other theological errors of his day, including Arminianism, Deism, Universalism, Socinianism (a form of Unitarianism), Antinomianism, and Sandemanianism. The latter is especially relevant today. Sandemanians affirmed an "intellectualist" view of salvation that denied that repentance is a necessary component of saving faith. This error persists to the present day, often under the name of "Free Grace." Fuller demonstrated that repentance and belief are two sides of the same coin and argued that authentic faith always leads to transformation.

Fuller is a role model for us in many ways—especially modern pastors. First, he was a first rate pastor-theologian. Many contemporary pastors have recovered a healthy emphasis on theology from and for the church; Fuller is a key example of this emphasis from the Baptist tradition. Second, he was a missional theologian. Fuller framed all of his theology through the saving work of Christ, emphasized personal evangelism and church planting, and labored for over two decades as the head of the Baptist Missionary Society. Finally, Fuller was an apologetical theologian. He understood that a key part of the pastor's responsibility is to defend sound doctrine by both articulating biblical truth and critiquing the shortcomings of soul-deadening errors. My prayer is that God will grant us a generation of pastors who are theologians, missiologists, and apologists for the glory of God and the sake of his church.

MJT: The year 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the events associated with Selma, AL. What is particularly significant to you about those events?

Nathan Finn: The Selma to Montgomery March in 1965 was a key moment in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. It almost did not happen because of brutal pushback from local white authorities, but the third time the march was successful. I would highly recommend that readers watch the recent film "Selma," which provides a basically

historically accurate—and very moving—portrayal of the events.

Many observers—especially among whites—felt like the Civil Rights Movement was a success because of the end of racial segregation in the South. However, Martin Luther King Jr. and others rightly understood that African-Americans could never enjoy full civil rights without having full and free access to the polls. So Selma did two things. First, it helped put voting rights front and center at a time when many politicians wanted it to remain on the legislative backburner. Second, Selma, much like the Birmingham Campaign before it, helped introduce many white Americans (especially in the North and West) to King's strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience. In fact, many northern clergymen came to Selma to participate in the event.

Selma—and the Civil Rights Movement in general—provides a helpful example of faith-based activism. Most of the key leaders in the Civil Rights Movement were ministers. While some of them were theological liberals, many were broadly evangelical, especially in their views of sin and salvation. King in particular should be included in the pantheon of faith and culture role models alongside folks like William Wilberforce, Abraham Kuyper, Carl F. H. Henry, Francis Schaeffer, Richard John Neuhaus, and Chuck Colson.