Today, there is still much to be learnt from the Reformation for us and much to be understood about the spirit of the Reformation. That is where this book excels and soars beautifully! Michael Reeves manages to capture the imagination with the spirit behind what drove the Reformation in a concise (only 191 pages) and exciting way. His selection of stories of the Reformers brings a warm light on these ‘mighty men of old’ who inspire us through their bold courage in the face of adversity and threat of death. Yet he does not paint an idealized caricature lest we idolize these men who would have wanted nothing of the sort. Instead, he presents them in their humanity—as imperfect tools in the hands of a masterful God who used them to shine the light of His glorious Gospel brightly once again and ignite a flame that would burn until this day. For me, I think it essential that every serious would-be ‘Protestant’ should at least endeavour to have a basic understanding of what is meant by that term. Studying the Reformation then is of much benefit—and this book is a great introduction to whet the appetite and leave one wanting more! It is very well written, compelling, funny and engaging. I managed to finish it in 3 sittings—I just couldn’t put it down! I hope this book review will help you and maybe inspire you to read this book and hopefully many others.

**Ignorance is not true bliss**

Many Evangelicals these days know little of the origins of the movement that they find themselves in. Protestants today can look like anything but what they would have in the 1500s at the inception of the Reformation. Sometimes it makes me really question what it truly means to call oneself a ‘Protestant Evangelical’—that term seems to have lost all
distinction when we look at the vast landscape of churches and individuals who appropriate for themselves the title without bearing any resemblance to what it signifies. However, I think those terms still have meaning and should be understood as they were originally meant if we are to have any meaningful understanding or significance to our bolstering of those titles.

All too often it is taken for granted that the way we presently understand our faith is just the way it always has been. However, we’ll never understand the times we find ourselves in until we understand where we came from, and more importantly, we are prone to repeat the mistakes of the past if we do not learn from it. The distinctives which set Europe ablaze in the 16th century brought with it the blood of literally thousands of both Catholics and Protestants who saw their beliefs as worth more than their very lives. To dismiss the issues which they parted ways over is to do disservice to their sacrifices. “All those martyrs suffered for nothing if what they died for was either untrue or irrelevant.” Moreover, the issues which caused such violent division were of primary importance to Christian faith and are not long gone squabbles of ancient history, but continue even to this day! It is because the issue at hand centered around how a person is justified before God—it was about the Gospel itself. To this day, the battle for the true Gospel rages on, and as such—the Reformation continues to be relevant to us now. 

Semper Reformanda (always reforming) was the heart beat of the intention of many of the Reformers—that, the Reformation was not meant just to be a one-time event, but a constant state of the church—always being reformed by the Word of God.

Bird’s Eye of the Reformation: A Prologue

Reeves lays out the history of the Reformation chronologically divided up by chapters which trace some of the main personalities leading the charge of reformation. He starts off with Luther’s infamous “here I stand” speech when he defied the emperor and Roman Catholic church at Worms. “He announced that he could not retract his attacks upon false teaching, for that would give even more rein to those who thus destroyed Christianity.” When he was given a last chance to recant, Luther boldly concluded:

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1 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 188.
2 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 184.
4 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 15.
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“I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.”

And with that, although there were many before Luther who had got the ball rolling and set the stage, it signaled—at least formally—the start of the Reformation, from which there was now no going back. What was set into motion was an irreversible chain of events which even Luther himself could not have possibly had any idea would have erupted into such a wide reaching movement. After his ordeal, clearly shaken with good reason, Luther exclaimed that “even if he had a thousand heads, he would rather have them all lopped off than abandon his gospel.” Such an example of resolve is sure to bring inspiration to many a timid soul.

Going Medieval on Religion

Reeves then takes a step back and gives some background on the Reformation in his first chapter entitled “Going medieval on religion.” Any proper appreciation of the immense significance of what was happening during the Reformation requires that we have an understanding of the climate in which it emerged. It was a world quite unlike ours in many ways—but yet still oddly much like ours at the same time! It was a time where the masses were largely illiterate and uneducated, and therefore considered incapable of having explicit faith. “So while an ‘explicit faith’ was considered desirable, an ‘implicit faith,’ in which a person came along to church and received the sacraments, was considered perfectly acceptable.”

Add to this the fact that both the Bible and Mass were in Latin, a language that few spoke, and one begins to understand the deep rooted theological ignorance of the general populace who depended solely on the clergy and Catholic Church to dispense eternal truth. “God will not deny grace to those who do their best’ was the cheery slogan on the lips of medieval theologians.”

The system that emerged however brought anything but rest to guilt-ridden congregants and the system of indulgences and belief in purgatory mildly assuaged such worries. However, these were also manipulated for profit by the church and turned into

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5 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 15.
6 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 15.
7 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 18.
8 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 20.
another means of enslavement to a works-based ‘gospel’ which was no Gospel at all. It separated the poor who would have no means of paying for expensive indulgences or afford to have chantries of priests praying and holding masses for the souls of the rich to expedite their time in purgatory. Christ seemed to be a daunting figure to the public mind, who saw Him mainly as a terrifying Doomsday Judge rather than a gracious Saviour—and so even the cult of the saints flourished as they seemed more approachable. Add to this relics which were treated as magic talismans, the ‘Great Schism’ controversy with the popes, and corrupt popes such as Alexander VI—who threw orgies in the Vatican—Julius II, another pope who had illegitimate children, and Leo X who was an agnostic, and you start to get a view of the condition out of which the Reformation arose.

However, as different as it is, this is not entirely unlike our times. There is still widespread corruption of the Gospel where people still cling on to justification by works. Though most in developed nations are literate and educated, Bible-literacy among Evangelicals particularly in the West is shamefully low. What we find is no longer an imposed ignorance from a Papal Church or inaccessibility of the Scriptures in the native tongue, but rather a self-imposed ignorance and apathy to the Word of God. So-called ‘churches’ today manipulate people with profit-driven methods, self-help, prosperity-gospels, and ‘relics’ which resemble more of mysticism than Christianity. We still have problems of corrupt religious leaders and an inaccurate view of Christ as Saviour. The Reformation is still very pertinent.

Forerunners to Reformation

What arose though from these ashes of dead religion were men like John Wycliffe, who identified the Bible as the supreme source of authority and not the pope. Illegal Bible studies started to appear as people for the first time tasted the truth of God’s liberating word that had been hidden from them for so long and it was a deep gulp of cold water to theologically parched lips! Jan Hus followed on the heels of Wycliffe, rebelling against the

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9 Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 22.
10 Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 29.
pope, critiquing the church and propagated Bible teaching. He was burned as a ‘heretic’ declaring, “You may roast this goose [Hus means ‘goose’ in Czech], but a hundred years from now a swan will arise whose singing you will not be able to silence.”11 Almost exactly a hundred years later, Martin Luther emerged, and sing he did! His song of justification by faith alone would rock the world for centuries to come.

Reeves goes on to tell of the cry, ‘Ad fonts!’ (to the sources!) which was a battle cry against the ignorance of their day. Erasmus, going back to the sources published a Greek edition of the New Testament, and his work would unwittingly become one of the chief cornerstones of the Reformation—for it was Sola Scriptura that was the main driving force of the reformers and their passion for the Word that provided endless source of fuel for their fire.12 For us today, as the work of reformation continues, it is ever as important that we make Scriptures the focus—to constantly call the church back to the true faith and bringing our practice in line with the Word.

The Shoulders of Giants

Reeves continues with chapters on “God’s Volcano”—Martin Luther, “Soldiers, Sausages and Revolution”—Ulrich Zwingli, and “After Darkness, Light”—John Calvin. If the titles don’t already give it away, Reeves is a creative and interesting writer. He presents these men in a compelling light, highlighting various important points in their lives and theology. They aren’t presented as stained glass saints though, as Reeves does a good job of showing their humanity as well—they were ordinary men, but were used by an extraordinary God. It harkens me to James 5:17, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours…” yet God used him to do extraordinary work, because in the end the glory is to the Lord. Reeves does not write as to make these men heroes in their own might, but rather consistent with the Reformation cry “Soli Deo Gloria” (to God alone be the glory), as shining trophies of God’s grace to His glory. I don’t want to spoil the book by divulging too much, so short snippets will follow to give you an appetizer to titillate your curiosity.

Martin Luther – God’s Volcano

Of Luther you’ll learn of his immense struggle with the weight of guilt of his own sins and the worry which wrecked him within the Catholic sacramental system. But he would come to realize that “the problem is in our hearts: self-love shapes the very grain of our desires.

11 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 31.
12 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 33.
As a result, our ‘best’ can be nothing more than self-love.”

After Luther discovered the Gospel of justification by faith alone he wrote that, “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

He discovered a God who didn’t want our goodness, but our trust—and so his chains fell off, his heart was free! His anxiety replaced by massive confidence in the grace of God which transformed a once cowering monk in a thunderstorm into a thundering preacher of God’s great grace who faced the wrath of the emperor, pope, burning at the stake and hell if he was wrong. The title Reeves chooses for him as “God’s Volcano” is quite apt to Luther’s fiery personality. It is a testimony to the transforming power of the Gospel!

However, do not be mistaken that Luther somehow thought himself to be the hero of this revolution. “Luther never believed that he should devise any great programme for spreading the Reformation. He simply wanted to unleash the word of God, and let that do all the work.”

To be sure, Luther was full of his own defects in character and behaviour. However, “his personality seems fit for the gospel he uncovered: he inspires no moral self-improvement in would-be disciples; instead, his evident humanity testifies to a sinner’s absolute need for God’s grace.”

Ulrich Zwingli – God’s Mercenary

Zwingli is sometimes the lesser known of the ‘big’ names of the Reformation—however his contribution is invaluable. He was another one who was affected by the newly available Greek New Testament by Erasmus. In fact, “he was so excited he copied out most of Paul’s letters and memorized almost the entire New Testament in Greek.” A lot of these reformers were no fly-by-night hack job preacher, but were top class scholars and thinkers. It is one of the things which defines the Reformation for me, as driven by a life of the mind instead of empty hype and emotionalism. In contrast to Luther, Zwingli was cautious in his temperament.

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13 Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 46.
15 Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 53.
16 Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 57.
17 Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 65.
18 Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 69.
He took his pulpit at thirty-five and in contradiction to the tradition of the time announced that he would preach through Matthew’s Gospel verse by verse and continue to go through the rest of the New Testament. “God’s word would go out to all the people, undiluted, unadulterated, constantly; this was what Zwingli would be all about and this was how Zurich would be reformed.”19 The results were not fast, but they had a durability which lasted well beyond his death. Zwingli was also an immense intellect, unbeatable in debate as was shown in his complete triumph over his adversaries in a public debate in Zurich in 1523. He so emphatically won that it was immediately ruled that only biblical preaching would be legal in Zurich!20 In his martyrdom on the battlefield, Zwingli would live up to his title of “God’s mercenary.”

John Calvin – Post tenebras lux (After darkness, light)

Calvin and Luther were probably could not be more different in temperaments, even more so than with Zwingli. One of my favourite lines by Reeves is found in this chapter where he says, “where Luther would fire off books like a semi-automatic in a street fight, Calvin would spend years polishing and repolishing his pièce de resistance.”21 He called himself a ‘timid scholar’ and seemed to be quite disposed to be left alone with his books. However, this, as it turned out, would not be what God would have for him. Though he was born a lamb, he’d become a lion for the Lord who saved him.22 At just twenty-six he completed the first edition of what would become his life’s work, The Institutes of the Christian Religion.23

These days Calvin’s name seems to be automatically associated by many with what is commonly passed off as ‘Calvinism.’ It often turns out to be a caricatured reduction of the Doctrines of Grace or the Five Points of Calvinism. However, this is a very unfair reduction to represent Calvin’s work. Many see him as a wild-eyed theologian always harping on predestination and election. But, of the 1,521 pages of his Institutes, only 67 of them deal with the topic of election.24 Probably the most distinct feature about Calvin was that he was a brilliant expositor of the Word, with his commentaries born out of teaching the Word to his students and still widely used even today. They are a marvel of Gospel-centered teaching and faithful exposition.

19 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 70.
20 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 76.
21 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 93.
22 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 94.
23 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 98.
24 Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 116-118.
Granted not only to believe, but also to suffer (Phil 1:29)

All of these men, though used greatly by God, also suffered greatly. It holds true what the apostle Paul penned in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10, that those who follow after Christ often find themselves afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down—carrying about in them the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus might also be manifested. Martin Luther struggled all his life with doubt and would literally battle out loud with his 'demons' of doubt hurling Scriptures at them and holding out God’s promises—demanding that He keep them. He lost both his daughters, one of them dying in his arms, yet holding on to hope that she will one day rise again.\(^{25}\) The Gospel had borne an uncanny resilience in him.

Zwingli would end up dying on the battlefield attempting to defend Zurich from invading Catholic armies. When captured, he refused to pray to the Virgin Mary and so was stabbed to death, quartered and burned then his ashes were mixed with dung. Before he was cut down he cried out, “You may kill the body but you cannot kill the soul!”\(^{26}\)

Calvin faced numerous imprisonments and exile for his preaching. He also suffered from frequent illness with his wife as well. His son, Jacques, was born prematurely and died after two weeks, and his wife struggled to regain her health and died slowly leaving Calvin heartbroken to care for their two children.\(^{27}\) Calvin himself passed away in pain, struggling with various painful health problems. His parting words were to implore those pastors visiting him from Geneva, “Brethren, after I am dead, persist in this work, and be not dispirited.” Because he did not want any fame or to be made an idol, Calvin requested that he be buried in an unmarked grave with no glamour or glory to his own name.\(^{28}\)

I could say more, but go read the book!

At this point I have to force myself to stop, because there are not enough good things I can say about this book and if I continue I shall end up telling the whole story. Michael Reeves goes on in the other chapters to talk about the Reformation in Britain and the Puritans—all illustrated in vivid story which captivates the reader. He recounts the history of the spread of the Reformation in Britain which has immense ties to the shape of Protestantism in North America as it was brought over by the Puritans. Also it helps us to

\(^{25}\) Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 59.
\(^{26}\) Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 79.
\(^{27}\) Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 107.
\(^{28}\) Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*, 120.
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understand Anglicanism in England and the relations between the various Protestant churches throughout Europe. He ends off with a chapter that asks the question, “Is the Reformation over?” and seeks to show the relevance of the reformation for us today. He does so well pointing out that our culture also struggles with guilt in subtler ways—bombarded by media with the message that we will be more loved when we make ourselves more attractive—we still need this Gospel of grace as much as ever before! And so, because it is about the Gospel, the Reformation is that fire which all the world shall never quench.²⁹

The book is short, and as such skips over quite a lot which more versed students of the Reformation may not like. However, he does touch on some difficult topics such as Calvin’s bout with Servetus and Luther’s anti-Semitism. Considering the size of the book though, and the scope of what it is covering, it is not meant to be a comprehensive account of every detail of the Reformation. Also, Reeves writes unapologetically as a Protestant—so there is perhaps less time dealing with Catholic rebuttals than what some catholics may like to see. However, I believe this book will bless many who are wanting an introduction to the history and theology of the Reformation, or just want to understand their own Protestant roots more. It does what it sets out to do very well, and that is to put forward a clear, concise and compelling Protestant position on the Reformation and the spirit which drove it. The hope is that this taste will compel people to read more into the topic and dig deeper. It is a pleasure to read, inspiring and engaging. For the more seasoned student of the Reformation, this is still a great addition to your library and its fresh tone is a breath of fresh air—plus it makes for a great recommended read to your friends! Thanks and God bless!

Soli Deo Gloria!

Get your copy here: Christian Book or Amazon.

²⁹ Reeves, The Unquenchable Flame, 191.