

CHAPTER SEVEN: REFORMING THE CHURCH

As the Renaissance took place in southern Europe, northern Europe experienced a major religious awakening called the Reformation. While the Renaissance focused upon Italy and spilled over the nearby countries, the Reformation centered upon Germany and influenced nearby countries, (there was a northern Renaissance as well).

Luther's Protest

John Wycliffe and John Huss had begun the feelings of religious discontent earlier, but they achieved little because of persecution. They emphasized the Bible as the final authority rather than the Bible plus church tradition, salvation through Christ alone rather than just the clergy, and translating the Bible into the language of the people. With increased social ferment in northern Europe, centering on distrust of the pope's power, the atmosphere was conducive to dramatic change. When the pope began to sell "indulgences," (pardons which required neither confession or repentance), the ferment broke into open reaction.

In 1517, Martin Luther posted a document on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, a document detailing ninety-five disagreements (thus the "ninety-five theses") he had with the church, including the selling of indulgences. This in itself was rather unremarkable, since posting on church doors was the customary manner of showing disagreement among scholars. What changed the course of history, however, was that the document was translated from the language of scholars (Latin) into the language of the people (German), and then distributed widely by means of the newly invented printing press.

As a result, Luther became the leader of opposition to the Roman church. As he stated before a political body, "Here I stand, I can do no other,": indicating that he would not go along

with the pope nor anyone else unless what they said was either scriptural or at least reasonable. Central to Luther's opposition to the Roman church were the concerns of Wycliffe and Huss, as well as a belief that only two sacraments (baptism and communion) were to be practiced, rather than the seven required by the pope.

In 1525, a war between peasants and nobility broke out, and Luther ended up being blamed by both sides for the atrocities, although he wrote tracts against both sides.ⁱ Modern Lutherans believe that he was attempting to be impartial in the bloody war, and it would be stretching things to say it was a religious war at all.

Zwingli and Calvin

In Zurich (now in Switzerland), Zwingli went even further in his reaction to the Roman church.ⁱⁱ He did away with the mass, images, use of relics, stained glass windows, and organs, emphasizing instead the value of simplicity. He changed Zurich into a theocracy, a city ruled by theologians. Unfortunately the theologians went to extremes in their ruling, drowning those who did not agree with them. They may have meant well in their zeal, but they used very poor judgment.

At about the same time, John Calvin began a reform movement in Geneva, Switzerland, which proved to be the basis for a number of denominations which still exist. Like Zwingli, Calvin set up a theocracy and tried to legislate Christianity in Geneva. Also like Zwingli, the idea got out of hand and extremes occurred.

One of Calvin's most tragic blunders was the condemning of a brilliant doctor, Servetus, who had discovered the circulation of the blood. The problem was that the doctor's theology was what we would call Unitarian; he believed that everyone would eventually be saved. As a result

he was roasted alive over an open fire for two hours. While Marxists have made much of this story,ⁱⁱⁱ there is evidence that Calvin demanded Servetus not be punished so harshly, but the city council passed the death sentence anyway.^{iv}

Calvin preached what people already believed, a sure way to success in our world. His great work of theology, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* spread Calvinism throughout northern Europe and was blamed for a great deal of violence at the time,^v although it would be unfair to blame it all on Calvin's ideas. Most of us would agree that the moral code in Calvin's Geneva was too severe, which prohibited laughing in church and stained glass windows.

Calvin emphasized the value of hard work, later called "the Protestant work ethic," as well as the need for social concern. He preached that while we should work hard and get ahead, we should also share the wealth with those who are needy. He also emphasized the "calling," our God-given vocation, as did Luther.^{vi}

To be fair, the Roman church eventually eliminated indulgences and made great strides in eliminating corruption.^{vii} And perhaps we should admit that some Protestants have extended the justification by faith idea to the point that practicing faith is nearly forgotten. In contrast, the book of James (which Luther considered "straw") properly balances the two; salvation is by faith alone, but if one is really saved good works will follow. As the Bible says elsewhere, "By the fruits of their labor shall you know them."

Products of the Reformation

The Reformation not only produced doctrinal changes, but also exquisite art and music. Bach and Handel proclaimed many Reformation themes in their compositions. The lifelike paintings and drawings of Durer revealed a love and appreciation for nature, while Rembrandt's

classics powerfully reveal a theology shaped by biblical content. While some of the reformers did destroy beautiful statues because of supposed idolatry, other statues and art work were preserved.

Francis Schaeffer^{viii} states that Rembrandt was a true Christian, though he was flawed. The precise nature of his “flaw” was living many years with a woman he failed to marry. He did this because his first wife died and in her will she stipulated that he would lose his inheritance should he remarry.^{ix} One might say he then entered a “common law” marriage with his second wife, but his failure to obtain proper legal and social sanction is indeed troublesome.

The Inquisition

At this time the Roman church was quite repressive; anything like heresy was punished usually by burning at the stake. The Spanish branch of the Roman church was the primary persecutor, not so much the pope. And we must admit that the Protestants also did their share, even persecuting other varieties of Protestants. Most everyone was quite intolerant at the time.

Philip II, king of Spain, led the persecution. He was particularly cruel to the Dutch, having killed thousands by burning at the stake, burying people alive, using the gallows, and other means. Torture and starvation were also common.^x

The Protestant Dutch people reacted, led curiously enough by another Roman Catholic, William the Silent.^{xi} His courageous leadership led to eventual assassination, the ultimate cost for a fearless Catholic protecting his Protestant brethren.

Another battle in the same general area was lost because of a disastrous economic decision.^{xii} As Antwerp was under siege, government officials declared a “price freeze” at very low prices for goods. The intention was to keep people from hoarding food, but everyone ate

heartily and they soon ran out of food. Near starvation, they surrendered to the Spanish. One can recall that Nixon's wage and price freeze in 1971 preceded the gasoline shortage in 1973; price controls are often related to shortages.

Spain Under Philip

Philip tried to make all of the decision himself, a practice which he should have realized doesn't work (as Moses' father-in-law Jethro pointed out in Genesis). Philip took the idea of separation to its extremes, not allowing his subjects to go to foreign universities and even feeling Spanish Catholics were more pure than other Catholics.^{xiii}

He selfishly exploited millions of Indians in New Spain (located in what is now Central America and parts of North and South America). While Philip lived in luxury, he died leaving his country bankrupt several times over. Spain also declined because of restriction upon trade, heavy taxation, a powerful sheep-herding guild,^{xiv} and expelling Jews and Moors (the most skilled citizens in the country).

Spain's self-destruction was the result of powerful groups that pressured government to advance their interests at the expense of the majority. They got what they wanted in the short run, but lost everything in the long run. Today we face the same thing, with the hundreds of special interests being represented in Washington D.C. As these groups receive favors from the politicians they fund, more government influence and money go to the selfish interests of a few. We might suggest a "law of greed": the general welfare of the people decreases as the greed of pressure groups increases. Actually this is only a variation of Lord Acton's formula.

A Free Holland

Holland, during the Reformation, had some peculiar problems, difficulties that remain to

this day. Holland is a very crowded country, with twice the population per square mile of India. What acreage is available is generally unfit for agriculture, due to the many lakes and bogs. In many respects they are much worse off than India, and they lack the Soviet and American foreign aid India receives. With these problems, one would expect the country to be in far worse shape economically than India.

Quite the reverse is true. The Dutch have fifteen times the per capita income of India and are still one of the leading nations of the world in productiveness. Why the difference? Holland's prosperity can be traced to at least three influences: a relatively free economy, a lack of trade restrictions, and the work ethic, a product of its Protestant religion. In contrast, India lacks all of these and has a population which is largely devoted to Buddhism, which emphasizes the quest for Nirvana, a state of separation from the world and doing nothing.

Yes, Holland had guilds, but they were very small and weak, as most of the people did not belong to them. They were also a very close society; in some areas people called everyone "aunt" and "uncle." The lifestyle among poor and rich alike was plain, simple and frugal. Yet they encouraged the growth of science, indicating that science and Christianity are not intrinsically opposed.^{xv}

As time went by, however, more of the Dutch became wealthy and the focus turned to luxury and wealth rather than Christianity. They still have some prosperity due to their previous freedom and faith (the Bible claims a carryover "to the third and fourth generations"), but their spiritual abandonment of Christianity and economic sins (increased taxes, regulation of trade, and socialism) have caused considerable decline, much like the United States and England.

Francis Schaeffer makes a case for greater political freedom coming to Europe through

the influence of the Reformation.^{xvi} Certainly the emphasis upon a higher law, held by both the Hebrews and ancient Greeks, was an important concept resurrected by the Reformers. The increased dependence upon what the Bible states also gave a more sufficient basis for freedom within the bounds of Christian morality. The Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers implied a fundamental equality of everyone, king, clergy or peasant, under God.

The rediscovery of the doctrine of the fall was also an important factor in the move toward greater political freedom; a doctrine that implied a need for separation of powers in government and thus more freedom to the common person. One can also point to the distrust of tradition, common to both the Renaissance and Reformation, which paved the way to freer political experiments as well as questioning the extensive power of pope and king.

Protestantism in England

Henry, king of England, began his career writing against Luther, but he soon fell from grace in the pope's eyes for wanting to annul his marriage to an aunt of the king of Spain). When the pope refused to grant the annulment, Henry quickly broke with Rome (and also went through a quick succession of wives). But England was more religious than its king, and Protestant doctrine was enthusiastically embraced.

The Protestant influence in the British Isles can also be seen in the relationship between John Knox and Mary, Queen of Scots. Knox confronted Mary time and again for her worldliness, she would answer with a bitter response and then concluded with crying.^{xvii} In the pattern of the prophet Nathan before King David, he refused to let the sin of a public official be ignored.

Another indication of the Protestant influence in England was the government sponsored

translation of the King James Bible in 1611 under James I. Things were not perfect for everyone, however, and less than ten years later the Pilgrims set sail for America seeking freedom.

When they arrived, the Pilgrims conducted an experiment in utopian collective ownership in Plymouth. The result was confusion and lack of individual incentive to work, which in turn resulted in near starvation for the daring Pilgrims. They could have saved themselves the struggle by examining the first century Jerusalem church's experiment in "holding all things in common." It too resulted in collective poverty and starvation (how many mission churches must support the sending church?).

The Pilgrims fortunately learned their lesson, and the governor declared that every family would raise their own food. This dose of free enterprise resulted in a mass move to the fields (even mothers went, with babies tied to their backs), and the Plymouth settlement became a thriving success. People have tried utopian communes many times over the centuries, but they almost always fail because people do not realize the basic nature of the human condition, that even Christians are still fallen creatures.

In 1642, civil war between the British king and his subjects broke out, spurred in part by excessive taxation. During the five years of fighting that ensued, Oliver Cromwell created an army of Puritan farmers, extremists we would call fanatics. They were men of deep conviction--only the fully dedicated make a real difference in history. Cromwell spent his fortune developing the farmers into an army, an unusual army that prayed before going into battle and then charged the enemy reciting Psalms!^{xviii}

For ten years (1648-1658) the Puritans ruled England. They overdid things a bit, much as the earlier reformers did, and often tried to find everything in the Bible^{xix} (in contrast to Aquinas'

suggestion that both general and special revelation were helpful). What the Puritans did not seem to comprehend was that while the Bible gives us many helpful principles, the specifics are often left to reason and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Clearly the Bible mentions things it doesn't advocate (for example communal living in Acts, Rahab's harlotry).

While the Puritans were often extreme, we must credit them with eliminating nearly all of their social problems. Their social concern was practical, in contrast with too many Christians today who huddle in their expensive houses of worship, fearful of attacking the social evils of our world. The Puritans felt they were a covenant people, much like the Old Testament Jews, and thus God would bless them for their obedience. The general public were not quite so sure, and when Cromwell died an exiled successor to the previous king was welcomed; the age of reform had ended.

The Reformation Ends

Ten years earlier (1648) the horrendous Thirty Year's War had ended in Germany, which also marked the end of an era. The war had killed one-third to one-half of the German population (more than World War II percentage-wise). As in the peasant wars, both sides of the conflict blamed Luther for the conflict. The war was presumed to be religious in nature, and since the people became sick of war they also became sick of religion. At the treaty to end the war, the chancellor of Sweden told his son "You will see, my son, with what little wisdom this world is governed."

The after effects of persecution by Roman Catholics against Protestants, Protestants against Catholics, and Protestants against Protestants are still with us. An obvious example is the continued violence in northern Ireland, as well as other animosity between Protestants and

Catholics. The important theological clarifications of the Reformation are somewhat muted by the intolerance and cruelty that accompanied them. Oh that God would help us to love one another, and when we cannot agree to go our separate ways in peace, as did Paul and Barnabas.

Chapter Seven

-
- i. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 281.
 - ii. F. Roy Willis, *Western Civilization*, vol. 1, pp. 378-379.
 - iii. David Benson, *Christianity, Communism and Survival*, p. 159.
 - iv. Stickelberger, *Calvin* (trans. D. G. Galzer), p. 110.
 - v. R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 91.
 - vi. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 79-92.
 - vii. Willis, op cit, pp. 403-405.
 - viii. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*.
 - ix. Paul Nemo, *Rembrandt Drawings*, p. 49.
 - x. John Motley, *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, vol. II, pp. 156-157.
 - xi. Ibid, vol. I, pp. iv-v.
 - xii. John Fiske, "How to Lose a War," *The Freeman*, Dec. 1964, pp. 17-19.
 - xiii. Willis, op cit, pp. 435-436.
 - xiv. Julius Klein, *The Mesta*, pp. 325-330.
 - xv. Willis, op cit, pp. 463-467.
 - xvi. Schaeffer, op.cit.
 - xvii. B. Carradine, pp. 58-65.
 - xviii. Willis West and Ruth West, *The Story of Modern Progress*, p. 202.

-
- xix. Palfrey, "History of New England," in Verna Hall, ed., *Christian History of the Constitution*, vol. 1, p. 48.