

## HISTORY of CHRISTIANITY

### Part III – The Reformation: Division and Renewal

#### Between Medieval and Modern Times (A.D. 1483 - 1564)

Written and Present by Dr. Timothy George, © 2000, Timothy George

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

#### MARTIN LUTHER

These are the opening lines from Charles Dickens' famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, describing the spirit of the age on the eve of the French Revolution in the 18th century. But they also describe the mood and events on the eve of the Protestant Reformation (1517) in the 16th century. Seldom, if ever, has there been an age more similar to our own than the world into which Martin Luther was born in 1483.

It was the best of times! It was an age of exploration and discovery. Martin Luther was only nine years old when Christopher Columbus set sail for India and stumbled onto a new hemisphere. Back in Germany, the printing press had just been invented, making literacy and learning available to common people. In art and architecture, the glory of the Renaissance cast its spell over all of Europe. It was the age of Raphael (1483-1520) and Michelangelo (1475-1564) and Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519). It was the age of Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Galileo (1564-1642), whose invention of the telescope opened the heavens to the human eye.

But it was also the worst of times, for it was an age of violence and death, an age of great anxiety about the very meaning of life itself. What AIDS and cancer are to us, the Bubonic Plague or "Black Death" was to the world of the Reformation, a devastating disease without a cure. Peasants revolting against their lords, kings against the emperor, thousands of so-called "witches" put to death in a frenzy of persecution.

The "Dance of Death" was a prominent motif in church painting and architecture of the period. The skeleton-figure of death, often laughing, is shown leading a parade of nobles, peasants, artisans, and clerics to a common grave.

As William Shakespeare (1564-1616) described it,

What raging of the sea! Shaking of earth! Commotion in the winds!  
Frights, changes, horrors, divert and crack, rend and deracinate the  
unity and married calm of states quite from their fix- ture. Oh, when  
degree is shaped, which is the ladder of all high designs, the  
enterprise is sick.

And right in the middle of it all sat the Church. The Church of Jesus Christ, against which, he had said, the gates of hell would never prevail. ("And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it " [Matthew 16:18, NIV].) But the Church had become corrupt in many ways and beset by sexual immorality extending even to the papacy. Alexander VI (1492-1503), one of the most notorious of the Renaissance popes, boasted numerous illegitimate children, some of whom he had elevated to high offices in the church.

## DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

One of those who protested against such abuses in the church was a scholar from Holland named Desiderius Erasmus, himself the illegitimate son of a Dutch priest. Erasmus was a moral reformer. He saw little value in external religious rites such as pilgrimages or the rosary or relics.

"Oh," he said, "the folly of those who revere a bone of the Apostle Paul enshrined in glass and feel not the glow of his spirit enshrined in his epistles!"

Erasmus' solution was to go back to the sources of classical and Biblical antiquity, especially the New Testament. In 1516, he published the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament. It was this very volume that Martin Luther would use to develop his own far more penetrating critique of the Medieval Church.

### 1. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

The Reformation began on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. He was protesting the religious "hucksterism" of a Dominican friar named Tetzel who had come into his territory hawking indulgences on behalf of the pope. Through the purchase of an indulgence, one could receive great spiritual benefits including release time from purgatory.

Luther was incensed.

If the pope had so much control over purgatory, he said, why doesn't he just open the door and let everybody out? The true treasure of the church, he said, is not the accumulated merits of the saints, but rather the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And when Jesus said, "Repent," He did not mean (as the Latin Vulgate [the Latin translation of the Bible]) had translated it, "Do penance," but rather (as Erasmus' Greek New Testament had shown), he called for a change of heart and mind. He meant for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Luther was protesting against "cheap grace." He fought the church, not because it demanded too much, but because it demanded too little.

But how did Luther come to this insight?

"I did not learn my theology at once," he said. "I had to follow where my temptations led me. It is not by reading or writing or speculating that one becomes a theologian. It is rather by living, dying, and being damned that makes one a theologian."

In fact, Luther had no intention of becoming a theologian when he started his academic career. His father had wanted him to be a lawyer. Luther had taken up this discipline at the University of Erfurt. Returning home on spring break, he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm. And he cried out, "Saint Anna, help me, I will become a monk!" So against the wishes of his father and his friends, Luther joined the order of the Augustinian Monks.

In the monastery, he sought to find an answer to the question which plagued his soul day and night: "How can I find a gracious God? How can I know that God is for me, not against me? What can I do to please God, to satisfy God, to constitute some claim upon God?"

Luther was not just a regular monk, but a scrupulous one. The earliest woodcuts we have of him show his face

emaciated, his cheeks protruding. "If ever a monk got to heaven because of his monkery, it was I," Luther later recalled. He would go without food and water for days on end. In the winter-time, he would sleep on the stone floor of his monastic cell without a blanket until he shivered to the bone. But he was always asking himself, "Am I hungry enough? Am I cold enough? Have I suffered enough? Is there ever any 'enough' to satisfy God?"

Martin Luther would go to confession, time and again, pouring out all of his sins, but still there was no relief. He even began to doubt the goodness and mercy of God.

"Man," said his confessor, "you're making it too hard. All you have to do is just love God."  
"Love God?!" retorted Luther. "I hate Him!"

Luther found his way through this dark night of the soul by turning to the scriptures. Day and night he would pour over the text of the Bible. In reading through the Psalter, he came to this verse in Psalms 22: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1, KJV). Luther realized, of course, that these were the very words Jesus had quoted on the cross (Matt. 27:46). Forsaken. Jesus forsaken.

"That's exactly the way I feel," thought Luther. "And I thought that I was the only one! How could it be that Jesus, the sinless son of God, felt Himself estranged from His Father, on our side, crying out in the darkness the very question that I have asked a thousand times, 'My God, my God, why?'"

Luther then came to Romans 1, where Saint Paul quoted the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk: "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith (Romans 1:17, NIV). Luther had always understood that verse to refer to the righteousness by which God punishes the unrighteous. He thought of Christ, as Michelangelo had painted Him on the Cistine Chapel, the Judge sitting on the rainbow, consigning men and women, sheep and goats, to His right and His left. It was this God whom Luther could not love, but rather hated and murmured against in his heart.

But as Luther studied that expression, "the righteousness of God," he came to see that it refers to the righteousness by which God, because of Jesus Christ, accounts the sinner acceptable in His sight. Justification by faith, "*allein*," as Luther said in German, "alone," apart from good works and self-earned merits.

When I realized this, Luther said, I felt as if the gates of paradise had opened and I had entered in. It was as though I had gone from the darkest mid-night into the brilliance of the noonday sun. I felt as if I had been born again.

The entire Reformation grew out of Luther's fundamental insight into the gracious character of God. Luther had come to this insight through his study of the Bible.

"Everyone," he said, "should be able to take the Word of God in their hands and read it with their eyes. The farm boy at his plow, the milkmaid at her pail, as well as the learned clerics and scholars in the university."

Perhaps Luther's single greatest contribution to the Reformation was his translation of the Bible into his native German tongue. In 1519, Luther was drawn into a public debate with the Roman Catholic theologian John Eck, the relative authority of scripture and tradition. Luther had great respect for the writings of the early church fathers and the decisions made at early church councils. But all of these, he believed, should be subordinated to the authority of God's written Word in Holy Scripture.

"The Bible is God's Word clad in human words, just as Christ, the eternal Word of God, is incarnate in the garment of His humanity. Christ lies in the crib of the Scriptures," Luther says, "wrapped in swaddling clothes."

So alongside the doctrine of justification by faith alone, we place a second principle of the Reformation: the sufficiency of God's revelation in Holy Scripture alone.

## 2. THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

The last thing in the world Luther wanted to do was to start a new church. To the end of his life he saw himself as a faithful servant of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

But in 1521, Luther was brought before the emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms and was asked by the emissary of the pope to recant what he had written.

“Unless I am persuaded by reason and by conscience,” he said, “I cannot and I will not recant. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”

From this time on there was little hope that the division in the church could be patched over. Luther’s movement could not be stopped. Soon the cry for reformation was being heard all over Europe.

### HULDRYCH ZWINGLI

In Switzerland, a parallel and yet distinctive movement for reform was led by a powerful preacher named Huldrych Zwingli. Zwingli had been deeply influenced by Erasmus as well as Luther. He committed to memory all of Paul’s letters in the original Greek! On January 1, 1519, Zwingli was called to be the pastor of the famous Great Minster Church in Zurich. He entered the pulpit, opened his Bible to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter one, and began a series of expository sermons from the New Testament. Four years later, on January 29, 1523, some 600 citizens crowded into the Zurich town hall to hear a public disputation between Zwingli and John Fabri, a representative of the local bishop. Zwingli brought his Greek New Testament and Hebrew Old Testament to which he referred again and again during the debate. At the end of the day, the city council agreed that Zwingli could continue to preach God’s Word and to lead the church to abandon those traditional practices which had no foundation in Scripture.

In 1529, Zwingli and Luther came face to face for the only time in their lives. They met in the city of Marburg, Germany, to discuss their differing views of the Lord’s Supper. Luther, for all his dislike of the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, still believed that Christ was bodily present in the sacrament of the altar “in, with, and under” the elements of bread and wine.

Zwingli, on the other hand, saw the Lord’s Supper as a memorial feast. The same concerns which had led Zwingli to oppose images and to remove the organ from the church in Zurich also prompted him to oppose Luther on this point.

Salvation was by Christ alone, through faith alone, not through faith and bread, Zwingli said. The body of Christ is in heaven, at God’s right hand, not on the various altars of Christendom when Christians gather to celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

At the height of the debate, Luther took a piece of chalk and wrote on the table before him the Latin word *est*. This is my body, Jesus had said. To believe anything less was to deny the incarnation itself, Luther believed.

The two great leaders were never reconciled. As a consequence, the Protestant Reformation developed into two competing camps with different confessions: the Lutheran tradition and the Reformed tradition.

Today, the visitor to Zurich, Switzerland, is shown a statue of Zwingli near the Limmat River. Zwingli stands with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. In 1531, Zwingli was killed at the Battle of Kappel wielding such a sword. But the movement he had started soon spread to other Swiss cities, including Basel, Bern, and Geneva. From Geneva, the Reformed tradition was given a new impetus under the direction of John Calvin, a brilliant Frenchman trained in law at the University of Paris.

## JOHN CALVIN

We know very little about Calvin's conversion to the Protestant faith, which must have occurred sometime in the 1530's. He only referred to it once, and, then, in a very cryptic way:

"By a sudden conversion," he said, "God subdued my heart to teachability."

In 1536, Calvin found himself in the city of Basel, a refugee from religious persecution in France. Here he published a little book, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was a brilliant, systematic introduction to Protestant theology. Calvin said he hoped that it would be "a key to open a way for all children of God into a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture."

During the course of his life, Calvin revised and expanded *The Institutes* numerous times until the definitive edition of 1559. The basic outlines of *The Institutes* follows the order of the "Apostles' Creed." It is divided into four books, each of which deals with a cluster of key theological ideas.

### THE INSTITUTES:

- BOOK ONE is about the knowledge of God, His general revelation in creation, and His special revelation in the Bible along with the concern He shows for His people through His providential care.
- BOOK TWO focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ, His atoning death on the cross, which is God's remedy for the sin and guilt of lost humanity.
- BOOK THREE explores the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation, the life of prayer, the mystery of predestination, and the Christian hope in resurrection.
- BOOK FOUR is about the church. In one sense, Calvin explains, the church is invisible. It is the company of all God's redeemed ones throughout all the ages of time. We can never be absolutely sure who is a part of this invisible church because God's elect are known with certainty only to Himself. But in this life, we are also concerned with the visible church, the blueprint for which is found in the New Testament. Calvin had very clear ideas about the organization of the visible church, its officers, sacraments, and responsibilities in the world. Calvin saw the church as a dynamic presence in the world, responsible not only for religious activities but for giving shape and direction to every aspect of culture and life. "The world," Calvin said, "is the theater of God's glory."

Calvin sought to extend the lordship of Christ into every area of life. In the 19th century, the great Calvinist prime minister of Holland put it, "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is Mine! This belongs to Me!'"

Unlike Lutheranism, which remained largely contained within Germany and the Scandinavian countries, Calvinism was an international movement of great political and social significance. From Hungary and Poland in the east, to the Netherlands, Scotland, and eventually New England in the west, Calvinism sought to give form and shape to an emerging new world. While the Anabaptists rejected the world as the domain of darkness and evil, and while Luther accepted the world as a necessary evil with which the Christian had to co-exist, Calvin sought to overcome the world, to transform and re-form the world on the basis of the Word of God and His providential purpose in creation and redemption.

The popular stereotype of Calvin as a "cold-blooded tyrant ruling Geneva with an iron fist" does not fit the facts of history. Calvin was, as Luther declared all Christians to be, at one and the same time both a sinner and a saint. Neither Luther nor Calvin was interested in promoting a personality cult. Luther was upset when some of his followers started calling themselves "Lutherans."

"Who am I," he asked, "poor, stinking bag of maggots that I am that the servants of Christ should be called after my evil name?"

Calvin died on May 27, 1564, and at his own request, he was buried in an unmarked grave. His life's goal was to be a faithful servant of the Word of God. No doubt, he would have agreed with one of his spiritual decedents, John Robinson, (1576-1625) the pastor of the pilgrim fathers: "I have followed Calvin no further than he has followed Christ. For the Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth from His Holy Word."

## A MIGHTY FORTRESS

Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were men of great courage and conviction whose legacy lives on in our own faith today. Every time we stand to sing, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"; every time we reach for our Bible and open it to read a certain passage; every time we hear the preaching of God's Word or gather as a community of believers in a church meeting, we are bearing witness to the abiding validity of the Reformation. The torch lighted by these reformers was carried forward by others, sometimes in ways that no one could have predicted.

Who would have thought in 1525, when Pope Clement VII awarded the title "Defender of the Faith" to King Henry VIII for having written a lusty treatise against Luther, that within another generation, England would become, by royal edict, a Protestant commonwealth, with the worship of the church forever enriched by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's liturgical masterpiece, *The Book of Common Prayer*?

Who could have predicted in 1520, when Luther published his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*, that some of his erstwhile followers, the Radicals and Anabaptists, would interpret freedom in a vastly different way, leading them to abandon infant baptism and to organize congregational churches for believers only?

Who, in 1536, could have foreseen the revolutionary consequences of Calvin's Reformation? Zwingli once compared the Word of God to the Rhine River: "One can perhaps dam it up for a while," he said, "but it is impossible to stop it."

Looking back on the Reformation, we can give thanks for the great achievements of that age:

- the recovery of the gospel,
- the translation and distribution of the Bible among the common people,
- the great doctrines of justification by faith alone,
- the priesthood of all believers,
- the lordship of Christ over all of life.

The Reformation was not an event which happened once and for all in the 16th century, for the church faces always anew the decision for faith or for unbelief, for obedience or for stagnation. And thus the reformers have bequeathed to us the concept of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the Church always reforming and ever in need of further reformation. And so, in spite of their foibles, blind spots, and sins, we continue to build on the good foundation laid by these reformers. As the Swiss-born philosopher, Ernst Bloch (1880-1959), has written: "Despite their suffering, their fear and trembling, in all these souls there glows the spark from beyond, and it ignites the tarrying kingdom."