

AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Episode 3: The Reformation

THE BACKGROUND TO THE REFORMATION

The Renaissance - New ideas and thinking which challenged the assumptions of the old order. Greek text of the New Testament rediscovered.

Rise of the bourgeoisie - New merchant class no longer wanted to remain subservient to the old order. Growth of nationalism and desire to escape the power of the Pope/Holy Roman Emperor.

Early Reformers *John Wycliffe* (c. 1329-1384) argued that true authority was vested in the Bible not the Pope and denied transubstantiation. *John Huss* argued that the Pope was subject to the authority of the Bible and was burnt as a heretic on July 6th 1415. Savonarola sought reform of abuses in Florence and was burnt in 1498.

THE REFORMATION IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE

Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was a monk who taught theology at the University of Wittenberg. In 1515, while preparing lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans, he suddenly grasped that God gives his righteousness to those who live by faith. This brought him the spiritual comfort he was seeking:

'I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture gained a new meaning. And from that point on the phrase "the justice of God" no longer filled me with hatred, but rather became unspeakably sweet by virtue of a great love.'

Luther did not set out to start a new church. On October 31st 1517 he protested against the sale of indulgences by nailing his *95 Thesis* to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. He was protected by the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. He burnt the Pope's Bull threatening excommunication. In 1521 he refused to recant before Charles V at the Diet of Worms:

'Unless I am proved wrong by Scriptures or by evident reason, then I am a prisoner in conscience to the Word of God. I cannot retract and I will not retract . To go against the conscience is neither safe nor right . God help me. Amen.'

The main reforms he introduced were:

- **Scripture final authority in all matters (i.e not church tradition or Pope)**
- **Justification by faith and not by works - Distinction between “law” and “gospel”**
- **Translating the Bible into German & church services in vernacular**
- **Abolition of the Mass & only two sacraments (Baptism & Communion)**
- **People able to partake of communion in both kinds (i.e. both bread and wine)**
- **Priesthood of all believers**
- **Abolition of priestly celibacy**
- **Jesus Christ the only mediator between man and God (i.e. no role for priests or saints to intercede on behalf of Christians)**
- **No Purgatory and no prayers for the dead**
- **Rejection of monasticism and sanctification of ordinary life**
- **Distinction between Church and state (cf. following Augustine)**

Several German Principalities became Protestant. In 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg the Protestant Princes refused to recant. Under the Peace of Nuremberg of 1532 Protestants were allowed to remain in their faith but could not seek to extend it to other territories. Lutheranism was strong in Germany, Scandinavia and Iceland.

Despite his great achievements, Luther also had failings:

- **Devalued the Epistle of James as a ‘right strawy Epistle’**
- **Doctrine of ‘consubstantiation’ - bread and wine are literally the body and blood of Christ**
- **Permitted Phillip of Hesse to take a second wife in secret**
- **Anti-Semitic attitudes**

Calvin (1509-1559)

Calvin was born in France and published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536. In the same year he helped to reform the church in Geneva, was banned from the city, and returned in 1541. Calvin’s distinctive contributions to the Reformation were:

- **Writing a systematic theology and commentaries on most of the Books of the Bible**
- **Emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation by election/predestination**
- **Presence of Christ in Communion is only spiritual (‘real presence’)**
- **Developing a fuller doctrine of sanctification to complement Luther’s doctrine of justification**
- **Presbyterian form of church leadership**
- **State to enforce conformity with teaching of the church**

Those who followed Calvin’s teaching were termed ‘reformed.’ Reformed Christianity was strong in Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Scotland and England (in a watered down form).

Calvin also had flaws, both as a man and as a theologian:

- **Expecting the state to serve the interests of the church**
- **Instigated the burning of Servetus in 1553**
- **Undue place for the Law in the Christian community**

The Anabaptists

The Anabaptists were the radicals of the Reformation. They insisted on a distinction between the church and the world, and rejected infant baptism on the basis that becoming a Christian requires an act of personal faith. They taught that the Sermon on the Mount must be practised literally. Some considered pacifism essential. Thomas Muntzer claimed that revelations of the Spirit were more important than the Bible and led a 'Peasants Revolt' in Germany in 1524. Luther forced him out of Saxony and called on the Princes to suppress the rebellion. More than 100,000 peasants were killed. Anabaptists were severely persecuted by Catholics and Protestants. One extreme group of Anabaptists conducted an armed revolution and said that the New Jerusalem would be established at Munster. The city was besieged and captured and the leaders executed.

THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND

England

Henry VIII (1509-1547) opposed Lutheranism, writing an apologetic work which earned him the title *Defender of the Faith* from the Pope. Henry broke with Rome because the Church would not grant him a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. In 1534 Parliament declared Henry 'supreme head of the Church of England'. The monasteries were dissolved and their land sold to raise money for the Crown. Henry created a church which was Catholic in theology but independent of the Pope. The Act of Six Articles of 1539 decreed drastic penalties for the denial of transubstantiation, private masses, private confession, and clerical celibacy. The Church of England only began to be reformed during the reign of Edward VI (1547-53). The Act of Articles was repealed. Cranmer's English prayer book was issued in 1549, and a more 'reformed' version was adopted in 1552. When Edward died Mary (1553-8) sought to re-establish Catholicism. Some 300 people were burned for heresy, including Cranmer and other leading bishops. This encouraged popular support for Protestantism. Elizabeth I (1558-1603) sought to unite the country under a moderate form of Protestantism.

An amended version of the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* was brought into use in 1559. The *Thirty-nine Articles* were adopted in 1562.

Scotland

The reformation in Scotland was more radical than its counterpart in England. It was led by the Scottish nobility against the French Catholic Regent, Mary of Guise, and Queen Mary Stuart. The leading figure was John Knox, who organised the Reformed Church of Scotland. Mary was forced to abdicate in favour of her infant son James VI and fled to England. James Stuart, Earl of Moray, a Protestant, became Regent.

THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO THE REFORMATION

The Reformation forced the Roman Catholic church to address its own abuses. However it defended traditional doctrines against the Protestants. Pope Paul III convoked the Council of Trent, which completed its work in 1563. The decrees of the Council of Trent remained the definitive statement of Catholic belief and practice until Vatican II in the 1960's.

Decrees of Council of Trent reforming the practices of the Catholic Church:

- **Absenteeism & Pluralism condemned**
- **Obligations of the clergy defined**
- **Use of relics and indulgences regulated**
- **Study of Thomas Aquinas promoted**

Decrees of Council of Trent reasserting traditional doctrines:

- **Vulgate (Latin translation of Bible) authoritative in matters of doctrine**
- **Tradition has equal authority to Scripture**
- **Seven sacraments**
- **The Mass is a true propitiatory sacrifice of Christ than can be offered for the dead**
- **Communion in both kinds (i.e. bread & wine) not necessary**
- **Justification is based on good works done through collaboration between grace and the believer**

THE CENTRAL ISSUES OF THE REFORMATION

Scripture alone

The central issue in the Reformation was that of *authority*. The Reformers claimed that ultimate authority was to be found only in Scripture, and that the Pope and the Church were subject to the authority of the word of God.

The Catholics claimed that the Pope and the Church - through tradition - enjoyed equal authority with Scripture, so that they could add new doctrines or declare how the Scriptures should be interpreted.

Christ alone

The Reformers claimed that only Christ was redeemer and mediator between God and man. The Catholic church claimed that the Church enjoyed a mediatorial role exercised by priests administering the sacraments.

Grace alone

The Reformers claimed that salvation was only possible through the free gift of God. No human contribution could be made to salvation. The Catholics claimed that Christians contributed to salvation by doing good works.

Faith alone

The Reformers claimed that salvation was received solely by trusting the gracious promise of God. The Catholics believed that salvation could only be received through the Church by undertaking the works which the church required.

