

AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Episode 4: The Early Modern Church

WAR AND INTOLERANCE

Germany

The Peace of Augsburg (1555) extended tolerance to Lutherans but not Calvinists. In 1608 the Protestants formed the Evangelical Union for protection. The Catholics responded by forming the Catholic League. In Bohemia King Ferdinand persecuted the Protestants. In 1618 two of the Kings advisors were thrown from a window in Prague, marking the beginning of the Thirty Years War. Under the terms of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) Calvinists enjoyed equal rights with Lutherans and Catholics.

France

In 1598 Henry IV granted the Huguenots tolerance under the Edict of Nantes. Louis XIV sought to stamp out Protestantism and revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1684. The Huguenots fled abroad.

England

The Puritans pressed for further reform of the church. Disputes during the reign of Elizabeth concerned the wearing of vestments by clergy and the holding of 'prophesyings' - informal meetings for the study of the scriptures and preaching. Elizabeth sought to suppress such meetings. During the reign of James I the power of the Puritans grew. They wanted:

- sober life guided by commandments of Scripture
- strict observance of the Sabbath
- simple rather than elaborate worship
- critical of drunkenness & against the theatre - because involved immorality and duplicity (i.e. acting)
- opposed to rule of Bishops (episcopacy) in favour of Presbyterianism or Independency (Congregationalism)

During the reign of Charles I, Willam Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, persecuted the Puritans. Conflicts between King and Parliament led to Civil War. Laud was executed in 1644. The King was defeated and executed on January 30th 1649. Cromwell sought to reform church and state. He was tolerant of different strands of Protestantism (Presbyterian,

Baptist, Independent) and passed legislation to enforce Sabbath observance. The monarchy was restored in 1660 after his death.

Charles II reacted against the Puritans. The Episcopacy was restored. In 1662 the Act of Uniformity required all clergy to give 'their unfeigned consent and assent' to everything in the Book of Common Prayer. 2,000 left their living and became Non-conformists/Dissenters. The Conventicle Act (1664) forbade religious meetings in which the Prayer Book was not used, and the Five Mile Act (1665) forbade ejected clergymen coming within five miles of a city or corporate town. Bunyan was imprisoned in Bedford jail 12 years for preaching the gospel. In Scotland the Covenantors refused to accept episcopacy and the interference of the Crown in the church, which led to severe persecutions.

Charles was succeeded by James II who wished to restore Catholicism. The English rebelled and invited William of Orange and his wife Mary (James's daughter) to take the throne. Religious tolerance was granted in 1689 to anyone who would subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles and swear loyalty to the sovereign. Those who would not swear were granted tolerance provided that they did not conspire against the sovereign.

America

Virginia was initially founded on puritan principles, with laws requiring attendance at worship twice a day, strict observance of the Sabbath, and providing stern punishment for profanity and immodest dress. Puritan influence waned after James I placed the colony under his direct rule in 1624. The colonies of New England were more thoroughly Puritan. Rhode Island was more tolerant, and a centre for Baptists who had been forced out of the other colonies. Pennsylvania was founded on principles of religious tolerance.

DOCTRINE AND DISAGREEMENT

Once the future of Protestantism was secure there internal divisions and disagreements emerged as doctrine was further clarified.

Lutheranism

Luther was succeeded by Phillip Melancthon, who had a higher view of human reason. He came to speak of a collaboration between the Spirit,

the Word and the human will. He was opposed by strict Lutherans, who emphasised the corruption of human nature by sin, and who also rejected Calvin's view of the presence of Christ in Communion. The Formula of Concord (1577) adopted an intermediate position on most issues, but adopted the strict Lutheran view of communion. Subsequent Lutheran theologians sought to produce a systematic theology reconciling the views of Luther and Melancthon. This gave rise to Protestant Scholasticism, which was academic rather than pastoral in focus, and based in the Universities.

Calvinism and Arminianism

In Holland Jacob Arminius argued that predestination was based on God's foreknowledge of those who would have faith in Jesus. This led to a division amongst Dutch Calvinists. The followers of Arminius published the Remonstrance in 1610. They were opposed by the followers of Francis Gomarus, who argued for strict predestination. The Dutch Parliament convened the Synod of Dort in 1619. The Synod rejected the Remonstrance and adopted what have become known as the 'five-points of Calvinism':

- Total Depravity - human nature is corrupted by the fall
- Unconditional Election - predestination based on God's sovereign choice and not foreknowledge
- Limited Atonement - Christ died for the elect and not all of humanity
- Irresistible Grace - The elect will be brought to belief and cannot reject god
- Perseverance of the Saints - Elect will not fall from grace

In England the Westminster Assembly produced the most comprehensive statement of Calvinist Doctrine in the Westminster Confession of 1648. It was Presbyterian and paedo-baptist. The substance of the Confession was adopted by the Independents (Congregationalists) in the Savoy Declaration (1658) and by the Baptists in the Baptist Confession (1689).

Pietism

This was a German movement which reacted against the growing coldness of the establish Protestant church in Germany. It stressed the importance of personal faith and obedience to the word of god rather than doctrine.

RATIONALISM AND SECULARISM

During the 17th Century the philosophical foundations were laid for a turn of western culture away from religion to reason, science and secularism.

Reason

René Decartes (1596-1650), a religious philosopher, unwittingly brought about a fundamental change of attitude amongst western intellectuals. He suggested that true knowledge could be derived by reason from the starting point that man thinks (or doubts) - 'I think, therefore I am'. This made man, rather than God, the source of knowledge and truth.

Empiricism

John Locke argued that all knowledge is obtained by experience through the senses. Empiricism relied on the observance of cause and effect. In contrast to knowledge gained in this way, knowledge gained by faith in revelation can never be certain but only highly probable.

Deism

Deism was a rational version of Christianity. God was a remote creator who had set the world going in accordance with the laws of nature. It discounted the significance of Jesus.

REVIVAL AND REVOLUTION

The Great Awakening in America

Jonathan Edwards was a Calvinist minister in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1734 people began to respond to his sermons which called for a personal experience of conversion. The movement swept the area and lasted for about three years. The revival met with opposition on the grounds that it was marked by emotional outpourings.

Revival in England and Wales

In 1729 a group of students at Oxford formed a Society to promote personal piety. They studied the Bible and diligently pursued good works, but they had not grasped the grace of the gospel. They included two men who would become leaders of religious revival: George Whitefield and John Wesley.

Whitefield was converted in 1535 and ordained in 1736. He was a Calvinist. He pioneered open-air preaching to reach ordinary people. He preached to crowds of miners in Bristol, often numbering 10,000 people. He was involved in the Scottish revival at Cambuslang (1742) and was an associate of leading Welsh ministers Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland. He visited America seven times. He died in 1770 at the age of 55.

Wesley visited Georgia as a missionary in 1734, but was not converted until 1738. He went on to become a wandering itinerant preacher for 50 years, preaching on about 40,000 occasions. He remained an Anglican minister. He was Arminian rather than Calvinist. His followers were abusively termed 'Methodists'. Methodist Churches were only formed independently of Anglicanism after Wesley's death in 1791.

Revolution in America and France

The 18th Century ended with two revolutions which had profound effects on the church. The American Colonies declared their Independence from Britain in 1776. The American Constitution enshrined a division between church and state. The absolute monarchy of Louis XVI in France was overthrown by the Revolution which began in 1789. The revolution was inspired by rationalist philosophies. The leaders of the revolution sought to abolish religion in favour of a new age of science and reason. They established a 'Cult of Reason' and devised secular ceremonies to take the place of religious festivals. Temples to reason were built and a new list of saints issued, including Jesus, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius and Rousseau. Some 2,500 priests were guillotined. The French Revolution was a precursor of what lay ahead, since the major conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries would be between the Church and secularism.



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