

The Reformation

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The reformation was a religious revolution aimed to correct many doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The reformation produced several important outcomes that have greatly influenced the world. The most immediate outcome was the protestant movement which led to a number of new Christian sects. Protestantism was one of several factors that led to the colonization of America. It was in America that the most important outcome of the reformation was experienced - the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

The Reformation in Context

Europe in the early 1500's was a world full of change. Though the political wranglings and uncertainties of the previous centuries still existed, the Renaissance, which began about 1350, effected all of Europe in a positive way. Many Europeans experienced a revival of learning focusing on history, grammar, rhetoric (the art of speaking), poetry, and the sciences. Artwork became prominent with Renaissance art producing some of the greatest art of all times. Further, one of the most important inventions of human history was made during this time, the movable-type printing press invented by Johann Gutenberg (c. 1450).

Though Europeans were experiencing an age of enlightenment, much of the darkness of the previous centuries still prevailed among the populace of Europe. In large part, this was due to the Catholic Church which stood squarely at the center of life and society. The Catholic Church owned much of the land, controlled or influenced politics, education, and the legal systems of the various states. Also, the principles that regulated government and societal norms were derived from the Catholic Church. But more importantly, the Catholic Church maintained that the eternal salvation of mankind lay within it's hands.

During the centuries after Christ, there developed within the Catholic Church several non-biblical doctrines and practices that were at the heart of the reformation. The following are some:

- **Monasticism** - The church encouraged many to withdraw from society believing that in so doing they would be alone with God; men who practiced monasticism were called monks and woman were called nuns.

- **Celibacy** - Monks, nuns, and priests believed they should not be married.
- **Praying to Mary or saints** (deceased persons who were officially recognized by the church as holy) - They believed that Mary or the saints could stand before God on behalf of sinners.
- **Penance** - Punishments which a repentant sinner had to undergo to show their sorrow for their sins.
- **Purgatory** - The place after death where repentant sinners completed the portion of punishment for sins not completed while living.
- **Indulgences** - A waiver from the pope that excused the sinner from doing penance and shortened the time one had to stay in purgatory.
- **Transubstantiation** - The belief that elements of the Sacrament actually became the body and blood of Christ.
- **Infant baptism** - The belief that infants must be baptized to overcome original sin.
- **Pilgrimages** - Those who visited the Holy Land or visited holy churches with select religious relics were able to shorten their time in purgatory.

Forerunners to the Reformation

The traditional date for the beginning of the reformation is October 31, 1517, the day Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. However, prior to Martin Luther several men openly attacked what they felt were abuses of the Catholic Church. They also questioned many theological points. Chief among these was John Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384), an English theologian and priest. He attacked several theological doctrines held by the Catholic Church. One of his main disagreements was with transubstantiation. He also believed that the Bible was superior to the pope. Because of this he translated the Bible into English so that people could read the Bible for themselves. This was one of his greatest achievements.

Wycliffe's actions so infuriated the Catholic Church that even though he died in 1384, in 1415 the Council of Constance in Switzerland condemned Wycliffe for over 200 crimes and ordered his writings burned. Further, anyone who read Wycliffe's translation of the Bible could have his land, cattle, goods, and even life taken from him. Finally, in 1428, the pope commanded the

Wycliffe's bones to be dug up and burned.

Another forerunner to the reformation was John Huss (c. 1374-1450), rector of the University of Prague and a theologian living in Bohemia (now part of the Czech republic). Huss was greatly affected by the writings of John Wycliffe. He, like Wycliffe, denounced many theological points of the Church including the selling of indulgences. In 1415, Huss was invited to the Council of Constance to defend his beliefs. However, along with condemning the deceased Wycliffe, the Council condemned Huss and burned him at the stake. Huss' death however did not stop his followers. The Hussite movement was too strong to be stamped out by the Catholic Church. By 1500, the Hussite movement helped Bohemia achieve a surprising degree of political freedom from the Catholic Church.

The Reformation Begins

Those who began the reformation were men who were looking for the truth about salvation. The Catholic Church mediated salvation through penances, indulgences, viewing relics, and the like. Yet for men like Martin Luther (c.1483-1546), a German monk who is often credited for beginning the reformation, the Catholic traditions did not free them from the guilt of sin. Luther was driven by an overwhelming fear of God's judgments against the sinner. Though he confessed his sins, engaged in harsh penance, and practiced good works, he still felt guilt and unforgiven. In the summer of 1505, Luther was caught in a thunderstorm. Upon being nearly struck by lightning, he cried out, "St. Anne, help me; I will become a monk." Abandoning his plans of becoming a lawyer, Luther threw himself into monasticism in an attempt to draw closer to God. At the monastery in Erfurt, Germany, as part of penance for sin he often went for days without food or stayed awake all night praying. Yet he never felt love or forgiveness from God. During his days as a monk Luther came to hate God, viewing him as an angry being who harshly judged sinners.

To help him overcome this, Luther was encouraged to read the Bible. In 1508, he left the monastery and enrolled at Wittenberg University. By 1512 he received his doctorate and soon became a professor at the university. During these years, Luther made a serious study of the Bible. He discovered God was different than he thought. As he studied Romans, he realized that God was a friend to sinners, forgiving those who come unto him. He learned that the works men do cannot save them from their sins. It is through the atonement of Jesus Christ that men are saved; therefore, "The just shall live

by faith" (Romans 1:17). Luther believed that all people had to do to receive God's saving power was to claim the salvation God offered. He viewed the source of authority for salvation as the Bible. It was through faith in the Scripture that man could claim the saving grace of the atonement and not the priesthood and works offered through the Catholic Church.

Luther began to attack the selling of indulgences as well as other practices and doctrines of the Catholic Church. In an attempt to open a dialogue on what he felt were inconsistencies between Catholic practices and doctrine and the Scriptures, Luther drew up a document listing 95 theses which covered the issues which bothered him. On October 31, 1517, he nailed the list on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg - the door served as the town bulletin board where announcements and topics for debate were frequently listed.

By attacking the selling of indulgences, Luther was attacking the fiscal interests of the Catholic papacy. The Catholic Church attacked back! Though there was initially direct exchange between Cardinal Cajetan and Luther, there was no resolve of the issues that bothered Luther. Eventually, in 1520, the papal bull (a bull is a serious written papal mandate) *Exsurge Domine* condemned 41 of his statements as heretical and gave Luther 60 days to recant. Instead of recanting Luther led a group of students and faculty to the gates of Wittenberg and tossed a copy of the bull into a bonfire. The Catholic Church excommunicated Luther in January 1521.

The Reformation Spreads

The controversy began by Martin Luther now turned into a full fledged movement by his followers. Luther had been hidden in the Wittenberg Castle by the elector, Frederick, to protect him from the Catholic Church who wanted his death. While in hiding (many thought Luther was dead), his followers continued to spread the message begun by Luther. By 1525 the Reformation message was firmly entrenched in Germany. The Reformation was also spreading throughout Europe.

Zwingli However, not all reformers agreed on the same theological positions. Their differences led to many divisions. In Zurich, Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli questioned many aspects of the Catholic Mass. His disputation led to the abolishment of Mass in Zurich in 1525. He then differed with Luther in the interpretation of the Lord's supper which replaced the Roman Catholic Mass in Protestant traditions. Luther felt Christ's real presence was in the elements of bread and wine while Zwingli felt it was only a spiritual presence. The

controversy divided the Reformation into two camps.

Anabaptists Zwingli's followers were not tolerant of opposing positions. In fact, they persecuted other reformers who viewed Christianity differently. One such group was the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists believed that a person should not be baptized at infancy as taught by the Catholics and other reformers, but rather in adulthood when an individual could choose for himself. The Anabaptist movement spread throughout Austria and Germany. There congregations were small, numerous, and diverse. One group was led by a former Dutch priest named Menno Simons. He eventually founded the Mennonite denomination which included many groups in northern Germany and Holland. They removed themselves from the turbulent political arena of Europe into their own quiet villages where they choose to live apart from worldly traditions. Later, in the late 1600's, even the Mennonites split when Jakob Amman, a Mennonite bishop, disagreed with the less conservative Mennonites regarding various practices and ideologies. His followers have become known as the Amish.

Calvinism After Zwingli's death in 1531, Zwingli's ideas continued to spread throughout Switzerland, Germany, and France. A few years later, another reformer came to Switzerland from France who would become the Swiss movement's greatest leader. His name was John Calvin. In 1533, while in Paris, Calvin experienced a religious conversion that convinced him of both the glory of God and the sinfulness of man. Feeling that he was called to reform the church, Calvin immediately took up the cause of the Reformation which caused him to flee France. He went to Basel, Switzerland where he published a book entitled, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, espousing the Protestant ideas. By 1559, the book expanded to four volumes. It is one of the main sources for the theology of Protestantism.

Calvin taught the absolute sovereignty of God - nothing happens without God's direct involvement. Therefore, the good and bad that man does is willed by God. As a result of this, Calvin believed strongly in predestination. He believed that God had chosen some to be saved and others to be damned. Those predestined to be saved were known as the *elect*. The main function of the Holy Ghost was to produce faith in the elect. Calvin believed that there were two churches: the visible and the invisible church. The *visible church* was apparent to all and included both the elect and non-elect. The *invisible church* was the real church and contained only the elect. However, it was impossible for man to tell the difference between the two and one would never know if he were

part of the elect until he had died.

Calvin became pastor of the French Protestant church in Strassburg from 1539 to 1541. Then in 1541, the town council of Geneva invited him to help them in preventing Geneva from returning to Catholicism. Under his influence, the town government severely persecuted any who opposed Calvinistic theology and practices. There was to be no pleasure including dancing and games. Eventually, from 1555 until his death in 1564, Calvin was the absolute ruler of Geneva. During this time, Calvinism extended throughout many places in Europe and England.

Arminianism

Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) was a Dutch theologian who early in life followed Calvinism. He entered the University of Leiden at the age of 15 where his intellectual brilliance became widely known. Because of his intellect, he was able to study in Geneva under the tutelage of the eminent Calvinist Theodore de Beze. After Geneva, he lived in Rome. He finally returned to Holland where he became the pastor of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam.

On one occasion, Arminius was asked to defend Calvin's theory of predestination. After a careful study, Arminius found the doctrine revolting and changed his theological view. He eventually became a professor at Leiden University where he often clashed in open debate with a fellow professor, Franciscus Gomarus, a strict Calvinist. Arminius died on Oct. 19, 1609.

After Arminius' death, some his followers codified Arminius' beliefs in a document called the *Remonstrances*. In it, five major doctrines are discussed:

- All who believe in Christ can be saved.
- Atonement is universal, making it possible for all to be saved.
- Man cannot be saved without the grace of God.
- God's grace is not irresistible.

Though they believed that all men could be saved through the grace of God, they were unsure if it was possible that grace, once granted, could be lost or not.

Synod of Dort

The Arminian beliefs struck at the very foundation of Calvinism. This attack would not go unquestioned by the Calvinists. In the Synod (assembly) of Dort (Dordrecht, Holland), held between November 1618 and May 1619, 154 meetings were held debating Calvinism and Arminianism. The Synod, organized by Calvinists

of the Reformed Church, and attended by delegates from Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, and Holland, rejected Arminianism. The Synod further spelled out the Calvinists doctrines which have become the heart of Calvinistic Orthodoxy. The doctrines have become known as the TULIP doctrines after the first letter of each doctrine.

- T Total depravity of man
- U Unconditional election of those saved
- L Limited atonement for only the elect
- I Irresistible grace for the elect
- P Perseverance of those saved (not possible to fall from grace)

Though the Synod of Dort denounced Arminianism, Arminianism continued to effect the believes of many Protestants throughout Europe. The greatest impact was upon the Methodists and certain Baptist groups.

The Reformation in England

Though there were earlier grumblings against the Catholic Church in England (as witnessed by the actions of John Wycliffe), the English reformation may be said to have started with Henry VIII (1491-1547). However, unlike the reformation movement on the continent which was essentially based on theological differences (although politics played a role!), the English reformation was at first political. It began when Henry and his first wife, Catherine, were not able to produce a male heir to the throne. He ask the pope to annul the marriage however the pope refused Henry's request.

In 1533, Henry put away Catherine and married Anne Boleyn. At the same time, he seized control of the church in England forcing all English clergy to submit to his rule. In 1534, the English Parliament passed the Supremacy Act making Henry the head of the English church. Henry did little to change the theology of the English church from the Catholic. However, reform ideas began to be promulgated throughout the British Isles. Those who disagreed with Henry's new church were severely persecuted and in some cases put to death.

Anne Boleyn failed to produce a male heir. However she did give birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. Eventually Anne fell out of favor with Henry and was beheaded. Jane Seymour, one of Henry's four other wives, eventually produced a son, Edward VI. Upon Henry's death in 1547, Edward became king of England (1547-1553). He was nine years old and ruled for only six years before he died of ill-health. During his years, reform ideas continued to take hold throughout England.

Upon Edward's death, Mary Tudor, daughter of Catherine, Henry VIII's first wife, ruled England. Mary was very Catholic and during her reign (1553-1558) she returned the obedience of church in England to the pope. She persecuted any Protestant who objected; in fact, she had three hundred Protestant leaders burned at the stake. She became known as "Bloody Mary."

When Mary died in 1558, Elizabeth I, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, became queen of England (1558-1603). Elizabeth was Protestant and therefore she overturned the policies of Mary. Her religious policies were middle way between Catholic and Protestant. She condemned many Catholic teachings and practices but also was against extreme Protestant views. In 1563, a formal theological statement was adopted by Elizabeth which became the basis of the Church of England. The statement could be interpreted either in a Catholic or Protestant way. Elizabeth's policies have become known as the Elizabethan Settlement.

Puritansim

There were many who felt that the Elizabethan Settlement did not go far enough in rejecting Catholic theology and practices. They wanted to reject the settlement and purify the church of all Catholic elements. This group became known as the Puritans. As a result of their beliefs, the Puritans played a major role in the colonization of America.

The Puritans were not an organized group but united in a common ideology. The Puritans were Calvinists and held strictly to Calvinist traditions. Initially, Puritans wanted to reform the church in a way that Calvin had done in Geneva. They further held the Bible to be the sole authority in matters of faith. They believed the church should be restored to its original form as taught in scripture. They also wanted a society that was more disciplined; they opposed dancing, frivolous games, and heavy drinking. Like Calvin, they strongly believed in predestination; God had already selected a few to be saved. Unlike Calvin, they believed that one could know if they were part of the elect if they had had a religious experience or awakening.

Though they rejected Catholic ecclesiastical structure, they could not agree on what church structure ought to be in place. Some believed in a *presbyter* or elder led congregation. The Presbyterians had congregations with a minister assisted by lay elders. Other Puritans followed a congregational system where the local congregation had final authority in religious matters.

The religious differences between the Puritans and

the Church of England were felt during the reign of Elizabeth. However, during the days of King James (1603-1625) the tension between the two increased dramatically. James persecuted the Puritans trying to force their reconciliation with the Church of England. Many Puritans separated themselves from the church forming their own congregations. They became known as the **Separatists**. One group left England in 1609 to live in Leyden, Holland. Eventually, they left Holland and returned to England in 1620 where they boarded a

ship called the Mayflower and sailed to America to make a new home for themselves. They settled in little colony they called Plimouth.

Other Puritans who chose to remain in England continued to feel the suppressing hand of King James. Eventually, it became clear that the Puritans were not going to be able to purify the Church of England. In 1630, many Puritans began to flee England for America where they settled in Massachusetts.