Class: TH605 History of Christianity

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Research Topic: Reformation History

Introduction

According to church historians, the Reformation period started in 1453-1648. This is a critical period, and it falls between the Medieval and the Modern church period. The outline and events of the Medieval period are given in *The Story of the Christian Church*. In that period, the world of the church witnessed the rise of papal power, the rise of Mohammedan power, the separation of the Latin and Greek churches, the wars of the crusades, the development of Monasticism, the fall of Constantinople, and the beginning of religious reform, which was maybe the inspiration for the Reformation movement.[1] The Medieval period seems to be dark in the history of the church. It was a time of numerous false doctrines, a mixture of secular and spiritual power, inquisitions, and sinful indulgences, producing a syncretistic religion associated with vigorous persecution. The Reformation period represented a rival of the doctrines of Jesus Christ and the apostles, and the Bible once more stood as the final authority. In this paper I will look at the reformation period, the heroes of the reformation, the accomplishments, the challenges, and the summary.

The Reformation

If this period of church history were to be given a human face, it would be Martin Luther, a German scholar who was a monk. And if there were a verse of Scripture as the rallying cry, it

[1] Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,1970), 82-110.

would be, "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."[2] Luther published his theses on the Eve of All Saints, and their impact was such that that exact date, October 31, 1517, is often said to mark the beginning of the protestant Reformation. Printers soon spread copies of the ninety- five theses throughout Germany.[3] If a flame spread like a fire, it was the nailing of the ninety-five theses on the door of the Church in Wittenberg. These are synoptic of some of the theses:

- The Pope cannot remit guilt save by declaring and confirming that it has been remitted by God or, to be sure, by forgiving the cases reserved for himself. If he neglected to observe these limitations, the guilt would remain.
- Those priests who, in the case of dying, reserve canonical penances for purgatory act ignorantly and unjustly.
- Therefore, those preachers of indulgences are in error who allege that through the indulgences of the Pope, a man is freed from every penalty.
- Those who assert that a soul straightway flies out of purgatory as a coin tinkle in the collection box preach an invention of man.[4]

The invention of the printing press significantly assisted him. No doubt, this created a sensation in the Vatican, and they were challenged severely and robustly in all that they believed. James Atkinson, in his commentary on Luther in Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity stated Luther protested the dealings in indulgences, which was called the Holy trade. Luther saw the trade in indulgences was unwarranted by Scripture, reason, or tradition. As a

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[2] Romans 1:17, ESV.

[3] Justo L. Gonzalez. *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: NY, HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 28.

[4] Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 2011), 198-199.

priest, he was excommunicated and outlawed by Emperor Charles v. at Worms in 1521. He translated the Bible, which enabled people to see the truth of his argument.[5] In *Documents of the Christian Church* the authors quoted Luther's statement made at the Diet of Worms, where he was excommunicated; "Your illustrious Lordship, I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scriptures, I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or councils. They have often erred and contradicted themselves. I stand convicted by Scripture to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's Word. I cannot and will not recant. On this, I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."[6]

The Reformation brought light out of the darkness from the perspective of Christian and biblical truth. He stood like a true champion for God in times of great danger. He demonstrated what it is like to stand up for what we believe and know to be correct and never compromise the faith that was delivered to us. Bettenson and Maunder cited that Luther stood up against one of the most foundational teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. "Luther denies that Peter was the chief of the apostles; he declares that ecclesial obedience is not based on divine right, but that it was introduced by the ordinance of men or of the emperor. He denies the church was built upon Peter. Christ only is the foundation of the church, for other foundation can no man lay."[7]

In *A History of Christianity*, the authors in commenting on Luther stated, Luther held that the Roman Church had built up three walls in its defense from which Christendom had suffered. *First*, he declared the superiority of Popes, Bishops, Priests, and monks over laity-princes, lords, artisans, and peasants invalid since all Christians are declared priests. *Second*, the Papal claimed to have an exclusive right to interpret scriptures. Many popes have been unbelievers and,

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[5] Dowley Tim, John H. Y. Briggs, Robert D. Linder, and David F. Wright, eds. *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 360-361.
[6] Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian*, 214.
[7] Ibid., 204.

therefore, incapable of understanding the scriptures. *Third*, the claim that only the Pope could summon a council and confirm its acts. He pointed out the most famous council was of Nicea, and it was not summoned by a Pope but by Emperor Constantine.[8] The effects of Luther's teaching can be traced to numerous areas in Europe and the Scandinavian countries where churches were established, and some governments broke off their relationship with Rome; Kenneth Scott Latourette gave a detailed outline about the Lutherans; "In Iceland, Finland, in Denmark the church was powerful and wealthy, the university was established. Norway, in Sweden, Lutherans spread onto the East course of the Baltic and into central Europe." [9] The reformation was built on five principles. The first is that true religion is founded upon the Scriptures. Religion should be rational and intelligent. It should be personal and it should be spiritual as against a formal religion. Finally, a national church as distinct from one universal.[10]

Heroes of the Reformation

In *The Story of the Christian Church*, Jesse Lyman Hurlbut gave an outline of those who stood and contributed to this movement.

- In Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli attacked the remission of sins through pilgrimages to a shrine.
- The preaching of Jacques Lefevre about Justification by Faith became popular in France.
- John Tyndale was one of the heroes of the English who translated the Bible into English.
- Thomas Cramer was known to be the one who was able to move England toward Protestantism.

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[8] Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 2, *Reformation to the Present* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2007),711.
[9] Ibid., 733-739.
[10] Hurlbut, *The Story*, 126-128.

- John Knox and his resistless energy and determination in Scotland against anything Romanist.
- John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion became the standard of protestant doctrine. His teaching on God transcends all human thought, the orderliness of God's creation, stars and the symmetry, beauty, and use of the human body, and his strong stand on the doctrine of the Trinity.[11]

Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his commentary on the contribution of Calvin to the Reformation, stated Calvin went on to say to effect man's redemption, God of His great love and mercy gave the law to keep the hope of salvation until Christ returns. From the beginning of the world, this had been in God's plan. Although God hated the sin in man, He found in man that which claimed His love.[12]

One of the most significant contributing factors to the ideals of the Reformation was not a person but the printing press. "A completely new dimension in the history of books, scholarships, and education opened because of the invention of printing. It was Germany's contribution to the Renaissance. Literature was printed and disseminated far and wide, the anonymous work *Beneficio Di Christo* that teach justification by faith sold more than 40,000 copies."[13] Literature was produced by Luther, Calvin, Wycliff, and Tyndale. One of the great classics from this period was the writing by Thomas A. Kempis, "The Imitation of Christ." "What can the world offer you without Jesus? To be without Jesus is hell most grievous. To be with Jesus is knowing Heaven's sweetness. If Jesus is with you, no enemy can harm you."[14]

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[11] Hurlbut, *The Story*, 122-123.
[12] Latourette, *A History,* 754.
[13] Dowley Tim, John H. Y. Briggs, Robert D. Linder, and David F. Wright, *Eerdmans' Handbook, 352-453.*
[14] Ibid., 356.

Reformation Accomplishments

The Reformation brought an awareness of religious freedom, schools, libraries, new technology, music arts, and increased world travel. “The upper classes, rulers, and merchants were beginning to be educated. The presses were working. The printers were multiplying, and the libraries, though still tiny by later standards, were adding to the number and range of books. The press made possible methods of study in embryo in the days of manuscripts.”[15]

The Reformation period saw the rise of modern science, the Christian scholars replaced a man-centered view of the world with a God-centered view. A group of scientists replaced the universe centered on the Earth with one centered on the Sun. The Royal science society of London was predominantly Christian. This was also the fact in France. The Puritans promoted learning in England.[16] The church was purified with an awakening for truth, and as Christianity spread during the Church of the Apostles period there was a spiritual awareness in new places. The fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith sprung up to life. The Bible and Christ became foremost the priority of the Church. The challenge of evil caused the gospel to spread as it was done at the early Church, causing them to move out of Jerusalem. “As it came closer to the end of this period of Church history and the maps of Europe and the Scandinavian countries were drawn, Protestantism dominated the vast number of territories worldwide, including the Americas."[17]

The Reformation has achieved what no human being ever dreamed of prior. "At the opening of the sixteenth century, the only church in Western Europe was the Roman Catholic, apparently secure in the loyalty to every Kingdom. Before the end of that century, every land in Northern Europe west of Russia had broken away from Rome and had established its national

[15] Owen Chadwick, *The Penguin History of the Church, vol. 3, The Transformation(*London: Penguin Books, 1990), 29.
[16] Dowley Tim, John H. Y. Briggs, Robert D. Linder, and David F. Wright, *Eerdmans' Handbook*, 42-43.
[17] Owen Chadwick, *The Penguin*, 366.

Church."[18] The sixteenth century was a pivotal period in the entire history of Christianity. The turning points were set in motion in the previous century. Christianity organizes the worldwide mission of the Church. The Atlantic ceased to be a barrier to the expansion of Christianity. And in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Far East, Christianity was establishing strong footholds. And centuries later, these too would become centers of vitality and missions.[19]

The Challenges

The Reformation was positive throughout Europe, but it encountered resistance in some areas, "On August 24, 1572, there was the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre when thousands of Protestant Christians were killed in France. There were struggles in England and Scotland, Tyndale was martyred, Queen Mary was a bigoted Romanist, and Henry V111 was not friendly to the protestants."[20] There were challenges from the inside. With the freedom came doctrinal differences from inside and splinters from various organizations. One group named the radical Reformers was the Anabaptists, "they believed in gathered churches, not identical with the community at large, but made up of those who had received the new birth. They rejected infant baptism. They had little to do with the state. They were Pacificists. They sought perfection."[21] Maybe the most severe doctrinal threat to the Reformation was the group called the Socinians. They were Anti-Trinitarianism. They rejected the Deity of Jesus Christ. Once again, the old statute of heresy was re-established, "On February 4, 1555, the first of the protestants John Roberts was burnt at Smithfield, and in the next three years over three hundred people were

[18] Hurlbut, *The Story*, 125.
[19] Justo L. Gonzalez. *The Story*, 162.
[20] Hurlbut, *The Story*, 123-124.
[21] Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History*, 778-779.

burnt including Bishops like, Ferrar, Hooper, Ridley, Latimer, and Crammer. They all refused to recant their Lord and Savior."[22]

The Roman Church pretended to reform itself from within. They meet at the council of Trent. "By the council of Trent, the Roman Church stood in opposition to the scriptural doctrines of the reformers, which defined the many erroneous teachings of the church for hundreds of years. Especially apostolic purity, infallible authority, heresies and corruption, and the examination of the light of these teachings against the Word of God."[23] Thus, indeed higher education became crucial for the new churches—a fact soon noticed and answered by the Old Church. As ordered by the Council of Trent, the foundation of seminaries was meant to provide the Old Church with adequately qualified priests able to stand in comparison with Protestant ministers. And the rapidly spreading Jesuit colleges soon became the training ground of a new Catholic elite, who might continue their studies at one of the latest Catholic universities. In the Holy Roman Empire alone, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries established twelve Catholic Universities.[24]

The Roman Church never, in its so-called Reformation, addressed some of its anti-scriptural doctrines. "God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture. The teaching of Mary in the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of hope and grace, can be said to be consonant with the teachings of Scripture and common traditions. Mary has a continuing ministry that serves the ministry of Christ. Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church."[25]

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[22] Owen Chadwick, *The Penguin,* 125.
[23] William Cunningham, Historical Theology, vol. 1, A Review of the Principal Doctrinal Discussions in the Christian Church Since the Apostolic Age (Edinburgh: Murray and Gibb, 1863), 461.
[24] Wolfgang Reinhard, "Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State a Reassessment," *The Catholic Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (1989): 396. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25023084.
[25] Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian,* 502.

Summary

The significance of this period of church History should be pleasing to most of us as Christians. From the day of Pentecost, and that period of church history with the apostles, when the doctrine was pure and potent, everything was centered on Jesus, the activities of the Book of Acts highlight these facts. Everywhere they went, they preached Jesus. Lives changed, people were healed, and philosophers and philosophies of a pagan worldview were challenged, whether in the Temple, on Mars Hill, or with Simon, the sorcerer. The Reformation period brought the Scripture and the teachings of Jesus back to life and changed the world in a positive, godly manner. The ignorance, the sinfulness, the abuse of people spiritually and socially, the inquisitions by the church, the power and money that possessed the authorities of the church, and the selling of salvation in life or death, was beyond comprehension. Those who stood up and the thousands who died for the purity of the Christian faith, their day of reward is coming.

My appreciation for this period of church history is stated eloquently in the phrases used at the time—seeds of renewal. “Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works”—Martin Luther. “If God spares my life, I will cause a boy who drives the plough to know the Scripture more than you”—William Tyndale. “Wherever we find the word of God indeed preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there it is not to be doubted, is a Church of God”—John Calvin. “No one can honestly know Christ except he follows him in life”—Anabaptist publications. “Let everyone understand that God's real love does not consist of tear shedding”—Teresa of Avilla. “If we are guided by divine Scripture, we shall not be able to err, for he who speaks in it is the Holy Spirit”—John of the Cross.

The importance of this period of church history has been demonstrated if we are to learn from the past. Then we are given numerous lessons about courage and faith. We should appreciate the tremendous sacrifice of the many lives lost so that we can understand the Scriptures in a language we can understand and know it is God's word to us from through the ages of time.

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