

MBC Equipping Hour 2019

Church History

Week 4: Reformation Time and the Catholic Response

Introduction

With the Holy Roman Empire attempting to maintain control, the Word was out, and the common people were reading it. When the general population began to read and understand Scripture, they started to change. People were not trying to start a new movement or religion, but simply live out what they had read for themselves in the Bible.

The time was ripe for something to explode, and it did. Martin Luther generally gets the credit for the Reformation. There is no doubt that he was in the forefront of all the Lord was planning on doing, but what took place on October 31st, 1517 not even Luther could comprehend. As he nailed his 95 Theses to the door at of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, the church would never be the same.

What was happening around Luther's time?

Martin Luther was born 1483 in Eisleben, Germany. Europe was changing quickly, in nearly 10 years after Luther's birth, Columbus would sail from Spain (though he himself was Italian) looking for India (by sailing West) but instead end up discovering America. The king and queen of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, were devout Catholics (along with Columbus) and desired to not only gain tremendous wealth but export the Catholic faith to the heathens. Columbus would set the tone for many future endeavors across the oceans by dozens of men. Portugal, France and the Dutch would also play important roles in exporting their belief systems as well as looking for wealth and trade routes.

The means that the Catholic religion (and later beliefs) was being exported around the globe before Luther's time. But so was the English version of the Bible. This was an exciting time in the world, as countries were out exploring they were also exporting the Scriptures. "William Carey did not launch the modern Protestant missionary movement until 275 years after the Reformation began. Virtually no Protestant missionary activity took place between 1517 and 1792. Yet those years constituted the golden age of Roman Catholic missions. The Roman Catholic Church was sending missionaries all over the world, whereas Protestants were sending almost none."¹

This is one of the reasons why Calvinism or the Doctrines of Grace gets put down, missions was not top on their list. But why? Luther, Calvin and the other reformers were

¹ Mulholland, *From Luther to Carey: Pietism and the Modern Missionary Movement*

fighting the Holy Roman Empire, almost on their own. Constantly under the threat of death, moving from city to city and at times just trying to stay alive. They were rewriting church doctrine and did not have the luxury of a stable church as William Carey did. But, as we will see, this is not as factual as some would have us believe.

Forty years before Luther's birth, Guttenberg invents the printing press in Germany. This would be pivotal for Luther's Reformation, though he was not the one to send his writings to the press. The press would forever change mass communication in Luther's time and throughout history. Luther's words against the practices of the Holy Roman Empire (not necessarily against the church itself) would travel farther than he could ever imagine.

What happened with Luther 1517?

I do not want to spend too much time on Luther, but there are some things that I want to point out. It was at the Diet (formal assembly) of Worms that most people can picture Luther standing against the teachings of the RCC. Luther was 37 years old, a monk for the past 15 years and now standing before a 21-year-old, newly elected king of Spain *and* Germany's Holy Roman Emperor. The first issue they had to overcome was language. The emperor understood Latin, but his first language was French. Because this Diet was in Germany, most everything was in German. Therefore, anything said or written in German had to be translated verbally into Latin for the emperor.

Luther came before the high counsel and was commanded to recant or face the consequences. He said "Therefore, I ask by the mercy of God, may your most serene majesty, most illustrious lordships, or anyone at all who is able, either high or low, bear witness, expose my errors, overthrowing them by the writings of the prophets and the evangelists. Once I have been taught I shall be quite ready to renounce every error, and I shall be the first to cast my books into the fire."²

After this answer, it appears that they imperial court did not fully grasp what Luther was saying and asked him again to recant. This time he laid it out plainly, saying "Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."³ Thus, with this, Protestantism was born in Worms, Germany. Protestants would be forever known as those who would obey the words of Scripture before any counsel, church leader, historical fact or any other so-called authority.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

I want to end this section with a little known, but astonishing fact about that interaction. Luther was rebuked sternly by the secretary of the imperial court for one simple phrase that he said. He said that he was *bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.* The imperial secretary said, “In this you are completely mad. For what purpose does it serve to raise a new dispute about matters condemned through so many centuries by church and council? Unless perhaps a reason must be given to just anyone about anything whatsoever. But if it were granted that whoever contradicts the councils and the common understanding of the church must be overcome by Scripture passages, we will have nothing in Christianity that is certain or decided.”⁴

Luther’s conscience was captive to the Word of God. But the imperial court was quick to ask a discerning question, *what if everyone simply followed his or her own conscience?* The result was obvious that *we will have nothing certain.* Essentially this is exactly what happened, but not because men and women left the nest of the RCC. But because they left the Word of God and followed their own thoughts and hearts. If any movement today, whether Charismatic, Pentecostal, Reformed, etc. would put all their beliefs under the Bible’s microscope and not their own conscience, they may see a different outcome. This is why we need to always be recalibrating our beliefs, not the Bible, to make sure we are going straight.

Ulrich Zwingli (Swiss Reformer 1484-1531)⁵

Ulrich Zwingli was born in Wildhaus, Switzerland, in 1484. Educated in the best universities and ordained a priest, Zwingli seemed destined to serve his life in the priesthood. But through theological inquiry and personal struggle, he came to saving faith in 1516. By 1523 he was leading the Reformation in Zurich. In 1526 his teaching and preaching convinced the city council to permit clergy to marry, abolish the mass, ban Catholic images and statues, dissolve the monasteries, and sever all ties with Rome. Additionally, the Zurich reformers published their vernacular New Testament in 1524 and the entire Bible in 1530, four years before Luther’s translation became available.

How did he differ with Luther? Two main points: communion and church/state relationship. He and Luther fought regarding communion through writings and met just one time. Though both rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, Luther held to the belief that Jesus was *in, with and under* the elements (from the Augsburg Confession) and that the believer was literally strengthened by taking communion. Zwingli, on the other hand, held to the belief that it was all symbolic and the communion elements merely represented Christ. It was to be done as a memorial. Zwingli thought Luther was trying to compromise with the RCC and Luther thought Zwingli was not interpreting Jesus’ words in Luke 22:19 “...this is my body...” properly.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ James Eckman *Exploring Church History*

The second belief they differed on was that of the church/state relationship. “Zwingli believed the state and church should reinforce one another in the work of God; there should be no separation. Therefore, the Reformation became increasingly political and split Switzerland into Catholic and Protestant cantons (or states). Warfare resulted. At the battle of Cappel (1531), a coalition of five Catholic cantons defeated Zurich. Zwingli, the chaplain for the Zurich forces, was killed during the battle. When his enemies discovered his body, they quartered and burned it. His ardor for reform had cost him his life.”

The two never got along and there were no alliances between them. The one time they met was at the Marburg Castle in Germany in October of 1529. They agreed on all points of the Reformation, in an attempt to unite all of Europe, except the body and blood of Christ. Because this was a no-go for both men, there was never a united front and thus there were two reformations happening at the same time but never unified.

John Calvin (French Reformer 1509-1564)⁶

At the death of Zwingli, the Swiss reformers were in need of someone to fill that gap; enter John Calvin. “Calvin was born in France on July 10, 1509 and studied theology at the University of Paris and law at the University of Orleans. Sometime during the 1520s he trusted Christ and joined the young Protestant cause. An explosion of anti-Protestant fury forced Calvin to flee Paris. For three years he was on the run in France, Switzerland, and Italy.”

By the time Calvin was 27 years old, he had finished his first edition of the *Institutes*. It would go through five revisions before he finished with four books of eighty chapters. It would be *the* systematic theology of the Reformation.

In 1536, Calvin decided to move to Strasbourg, in southwest Germany, to further his studies as a quiet scholar. But a war between Francis I and Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor, prevented him from taking the most direct route. Calvin was forced to detour to Geneva, where he intended to spend only one night. But when he entered the city, he was immediately recognized as the young author of the *Institutes*. Those sympathetic to the Reformation took him to meet William Farel, who had led the Protestant movement in Geneva for ten years. Geneva had recently voted to leave the Roman Catholic Church and become a Reformation city, but it was in dire need of a teacher who could articulate Reformed truths. The fiery Farel challenged Calvin to take up the task; when Calvin hesitated, Farel resorted to an imprecatory threat. Calvin reports it this way:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to

⁶ Ibid

*give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.*⁷

Calvin took over as a lecturer then also a pastor. His focus was to bring life and Christ back to the center of the church. One of the practices that he brought back to the church was that of church discipline. In Calvin's day, taking communion was of the utmost importance as it showed that you were in good standing with the church and with God. When Calvin took over the church in Geneva, they were allowing anyone to take communion, regardless of their spiritual state.

This did not sit well with prominent Geneva citizens, many of whom were living sinful lives. This crisis reached the boiling point on Easter Sunday, April 23, 1538, when Calvin refused to administer Communion to certain leading people who were living in open sin. The tensions grew so great that Calvin and Farel were forced to leave Geneva.

After spending three wonderful years of teaching and writing in Strasbourg, Calvin returned to Geneva at the behest of the church leaders. Calvin, to show the importance of verse by verse teaching through a book of the Bible, continued teaching the next verse of from where he had left off. He also did this to show the importance of the Word and its central place in the church.

Calvin returned to much persecution. Some from prominent families who sought control over the church and the pastorate. His greatest criticism from them was that he was a foreigner in their country. There were also the Libertines, named by Calvin because they were devoid of most moral principles and restraint. They rejected a church run society and thought Geneva should be free of all Biblical influence. They called for the massacre of all the French but eventually died out.

The greatest strike most people hold against Calvin was how he handled Michael Servetus in 1553. The Reformation era was much like the book of Acts, it was a transitional time where the church was finding her feet but still steeped in the Middle Ages. Servetus wrote and spoke out against the Trinity (calling it a three headed monster, among other things) and stated that Jesus was not the Son of God. These two things were not only punishable by death, but it was required. Though Spanish, Servetus found himself in Geneva, sitting in Calvin's church listening to him preach. He was found out, tried and sentenced to death. Though Calvin sought a more humane death by sword, he would be burned at the stake. Calvin spent many hours before his execution trying to convince him to recant, but he continued to call Calvin the anti-Christ and welcomed death.

⁷ <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/theologian-ages-john-calvin/>

Geneva was a Protestant city run by Protestant believers. The rest of the Reformation cities around Europe were not happy with the execution or with Calvin for supporting it. This is when the church began to move out of the Middle Ages rule and search the Scriptures more for how the church was to be run.

The English Reformation (mid-1500's)⁸

As a nation, England was ripe for reformation. The work of Wycliffe and his followers, the Lollards, had prepared the way. The writings of Luther circulated through the land. But the catalyst for the break with Rome came with the marital problems of the English king, Henry VIII. Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon had produced no sons; however, Henry's affair with Anne Boleyn resulted in her pregnancy. When Henry sought an annulment of his marriage, the pope refused. In 1534 Henry, therefore, removed England from the pope's jurisdiction and made himself head of the English church (now called the Anglican church). Henry also confiscated Catholic land. As Protestant and Catholic forces in England struggled for control, confusion and crisis reigned for the next decade. But when Elizabeth I, Henry's daughter, came to the throne, she chose a middle road built upon national unity and not theological considerations. The core of her solution was that the Anglican church would be Protestant in its theology and Catholic in its ritual. She therefore neutralized Catholicism in England but did not satisfy her most vocal critics, the Puritans.

John Knox (Scottish Reformer 1513-1572)⁹

Frequently shifting its allegiance between France and England, Scotland was caught in the vice of geopolitical conflict. The Reformation fed this instability. At the center of this conflict was John Knox (1514–1572).

Fearing the spreading Reformation, the Catholics in control of Scotland appealed to France for help. Therefore, on July 31, 1547, the French navy arrived at St. Andrews, seized the stronghold, and took all the occupants back to France. Among those seized was Knox. Efforts to propagandize him with Catholic doctrine failed. His enslavement became the watershed event of his life. He became a revolutionary for the cause of Christ.

Released from slavery after nineteen months, Knox fled to England where he joined the Reformation forces committed to Thomas Cranmer. For more than two years, he became an itinerant evangelist, proclaiming the Reformation gospel in Berwick and Newcastle. But the "Boy-King," Edward VI (a devout Protestant and enamored with Knox), died in 1553, making Mary Tudor (a steadfast Catholic) queen. She became known as "Bloody Mary," and her reign centered on the systematic and ruthless persecution of Protestants. Hence, Knox fled to Germany.

⁸ James Eckman *Exploring Church History*

⁹ Ibid

During his exile in Europe (1554–1559), Knox pastored a church of exiles in Frankfurt, Germany, and developed a close relationship with John Calvin and other reformers. Knox's pastorate in Geneva was his most productive, for he helped translate the critical Geneva Bible, one of the first true study Bibles that included notes, maps, and prayers.

With the country on the verge of civil war, he returned to Scotland in May 1559 to lead the Protestant cause. As a result of complicated political moves on many fronts, the war did break out and soon drew in England and France. Knox was the heart and soul of the Protestant forces—as enlistment officer and even as a spy for the English behind French lines. The war ended in 1560, and the Treaty of Edinburgh recognized Presbyterianism. The new Parliament adopted the First Scottish Confession, written by Knox and others, as the theological confession of Scotland. It remained so until the famous Westminster Confession of 1647.

The Puritans (16th – 17th centuries)

Puritanism was a complex movement that primarily yearned for the purification of the Anglican church. Puritans wanted to complete the Reformation in England. They claimed that Elizabeth had not gone far enough in her reforms. Congregational in church government and Calvinist in theology, the Puritans would later be expelled from the Anglican church. This, in turn, led to the emigration of many to North America

The Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation (1540's)

There were three areas that the RCC focused on for countering what was taking place in the Protestant Reformation. Firstly, the Jesuits were founded by the Spaniard Ignatius Loyola.¹⁰ Patterned after the military, the Jesuit organization responded efficiently and rapidly to the challenges and opportunities of the Roman Catholic Church.

The mission of the Jesuits was threefold—education, fighting heresy, and missions. Through its teaching and preaching, the Jesuits regained control of parts of Germany and central Europe for the Catholic church. Francis Xavier (1506–1552) was the outstanding Jesuit missionary, ministering in Japan, the Far East, the East Indies, and parts of North America. Jesuit missionaries baptized thousands into the Roman Catholic faith.

Jesuit attacks against heresy meant attacks against Protestantism. Jesuits utilized two weapons—the Index of Prohibited Books and the Inquisition. By publishing a list of books Catholics were not permitted to read, the Index controlled the minds of the faithful. The Inquisition, a church court originally established in 1490, rarely followed due process and often utilized torture. Its major objective was to obtain a confession and the retraction of heretical beliefs from the accused heretic. If found guilty, the accused faced imprisonment or execution.

¹⁰ Loyola University is in Chicago and was originally named St. Ignatius College in 1870. Also Boston College, Georgetown, Gonzaga, University of Detroit Mercy and many more are Jesuit colleges.

The Inquisitor's court rarely showed mercy. In Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Belgium the Inquisition successfully eradicated any Protestant threat.¹¹

The second important thing was the pope, Paul III, who served from 1534 to 1549. A mysterious man, who seemed to trust astrology more than Catholic theology. Like other popes of the Renaissance period, he was immoral and endeavored to make Rome a glorious city of wealth and prestige. But he was also a reformer. He recognized the Jesuits as a legal church order in 1540, appointed dedicated men as cardinals of the church and organized a committee of nine to investigate abuses in the church and to recommend reforms. But most importantly, he called the Council of Trent in 1545.

That is the third important thing, the Council of Trent. The council conceded that Protestantism resulted from the "ambition, avarice, and cupidity" of Catholic bishops. It also ordered the systematic education and training of the clergy in established Catholic seminaries. In the seminaries, the church promoted the study of Thomas Aquinas, making him the dominant Catholic theologian. In a direct response to the Lutherans, the council likewise abolished indulgence sellers, listed and defined clergy obligations, regulated the use of relics, and ordered the restructuring of bishops within the church.

The doctrinal work of Trent is summarized in the Tridentine Profession of Faith, which championed Roman Catholic dogma and provided the major theological response to the Protestants. Trent rejected justification by faith alone and promoted the necessity of meritorious works as necessary in the dynamic of salvation. It also reaffirmed the seven grace-conveying sacraments instituted by Christ—baptism, confirmation, communion, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage—as needed for sanctification. Trent also reaffirmed transubstantiation and the sacrificial nature of the mass, clearly rejecting all Protestant positions on the Lord's Table. Finally, it declared the Vulgate Bible alone as acceptable for church use and maintained that church tradition was equal in authority with Scripture. Clearly, the Tridentine statement made reconciliation with Protestantism impossible.¹²

The Spread of the Gospel

While I said at the beginning that not much was happening in the way of missions and that most people criticize Calvin and the reformers in this area. But, "he established the Geneva Academy in 1559, based on the example he had seen in Strasbourg. The academy had a private school for elementary instruction and a public school offering more advanced studies in biblical languages and theology to train ministers, lawyers, and doctors. Calvin dispatched French-speaking pastors, whom he had trained for the gospel ministry, from Geneva to other French-speaking provinces in Europe. Most went to France, where the Reformed movement grew to encompass about one-tenth of the population. Eventually, thirteen hundred Geneva-trained missionaries went to France. By 1560, more than a hundred underground churches had been

¹¹ James Eckman *Exploring Church History*

¹² Ibid

planted in France by men sent out from Geneva. By 1562, the number of churches had multiplied to as many as 2,150, with more than 3 million members. The membership of some of the churches numbered in the thousands. This growth produced a Huguenot church that almost overcame the Catholic Counter-Reformation in France. Further, Geneva-trained missionaries planted churches in Italy, Hungary, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and the Rhineland—even Brazil.”¹³

The Churches of the Reformation

As the dust settled, the Protestant churches around Europe came to realize they had all gone against the Catholic Church, but they did not all land on the same place. Some of the churches disagreed on predestination, others on adult/infant baptism and others on the authority of Scripture. The authority was not about the highest authority, but the only authority. Men like Luther and the Anglicans taught that if the church’s practices did not violate Scripture, then it was fine. Others like Zwingli, Calvin and the other Reformed churches held to Scripture as the *only* authority.

¹³ <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/theologian-ages-john-calvin/>