

Essential Church History

7

Truth on the March

The Church had been born with “a sound like the blowing of a violent wind” that had come from heaven filling the whole place where they were (**Acts 2:1-3**). With the wind had come “tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.” Later, they had experienced the “shaking” of God (**Acts 4:31**).

We saw in the last lesson the rumblings of discontent that were beginning to rise across Christendom. With that discontent was also rising a cry from the hearts of individuals. As with the children of Israel before them (see **Exodus 3:9-10**), this cry was to bring a response from God. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, a mighty wind of God was about to sweep across the face of Europe.

Flames of fire were about to come upon individuals like Martin Luther. The Church was about to experience the shaking of God’s Spirit.

The Incredible Spread of the Gospel

The Living Church

The Seeds of Decline

Leaven, Leaders and the Word

The Dark Ages

The New Dawn

▶ **Truth on the March** ◀

Waves of Awakenings

To the Ends of the Earth

The Church of the 21st Century

The Wild Boar

In 1520, in Germany, a special document was circulated throughout the country. It began with a startling statement:

“Arise, O Lord, and judge Thy cause. A wild boar hath invaded Thy vineyard.”¹

The “wild boar” was Martin Luther. The document threatened him, condemning his teachings as “heretical, or scandalous, or false, or offensive to pious ears, or seductive of simple minds, or repugnant to Catholic truth.”²

Martin Luther was given sixty days to repent. He waited until that period was over and then he gave his answer. Surrounded by a crowd from the town and enthusiastic students from the local university, he lit a bonfire outside Wittenburg.

He publicly flung copies of the Canon Law, the forged decretals, and the writings of some theologians into the fire. He also threw in the document that had condemned him. “They have burned my books,” he said, “I burn theirs.”

The flames that raged that day were symbolic of the spiritual flames that were raging throughout Germany at that time. And it had all begun with the hungry heart of one man.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in 1483. The son of a miner, his plans to become a lawyer were brought to a halt in 1505 by a dramatic event. While walking one day, he was caught in a thunderstorm and a bolt of lightning knocked him to the ground. Terrified, he cried out to the Catholic patron saint of miners, “St Anne, save me! And I’ll become a monk.”

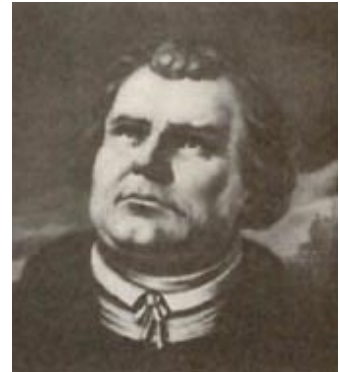
Luther was true to his vow and entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. He was a dedicated monk but was obsessed with guilt. “I kept the rule so strictly,” he recalled years later, “that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his sheer monkery, it was I. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.”³

Luther had entered the monastery hoping to gain an inner peace, but had not found it. He was so aware of how far short he fell from God’s standard of holiness. To him, God was not a loving Father but a terrifying Judge and he felt the constant need to confess his sins.

The Church’s teaching was that sins could be dealt with by the sacrament of penance, by confession and absolution, but Luther realized that man’s nature is corrupt so it was impossible for sins to be cleared one by one. His superiors were wearied by his constant confessions and penance. Bruce Shelley describes his condition:

“Luther pushed his body to health-cracking rigors of austerity. He sometimes fasted for three days and slept without a blanket in freezing winter. He was driven by a profound sense of his own sinfulness and of God’s unutterable majesty. In the midst of his first Mass, said Luther, ‘I was utterly stupefied and terrorstricken. I thought to myself, ‘Who am I that I should lift up my eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal and true God.’ No amount of penance, no soothing advice from his superiors could still Luther’s conviction that he was a miserable, doomed sinner. Although his confessor counseled him to love God, Luther one day burst out, ‘I do not love God! I hate him!’”⁴

Then came the glorious moment of revelation. One day, as he read **Romans 1:17** out of the Latin *Vulgate*, he came across these life-changing words, as translated into English by the *King James Version*: “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, *The just shall live by faith.*”



Martin Luther (1483-1546), the father of the Reformation.

Upon this one sentence – “The just shall live by faith” – all of history turned, and a new era dawned upon the Church. Luther himself wrote of this momentous event:

“I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to be inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...”⁵

And so the phrase “justification by faith” became the slogan of the Reformation.

The catalyst – the selling of “indulgences”

Luther’s revelation highlighted the discrepancy between justification by faith and the Church’s practice of selling “indulgences.” Indulgences were pieces of paper that claimed to entitle the purchaser to the pardon of his sins and release from purgatory. They became a lucrative means of raising money for the building of cathedrals, hospitals and even bridges. The system was further abused by unscrupulous preachers who taught that an indulgence possessed a magical quality whereby one could in effect take out a mortgage on heaven. A popular German jingle at the time was:

*Sobald das Geld im
Kasten klingt, Die Seele
aus dem Fegfeuer
springt!*

Or, translated into English:

*As soon as the coin in
the coffer rings
The soul from purga-
tory springs!*

Pope Leo X, needing money for the completion of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome, proclaimed an indulgence to all who contributed. Prince Albert of



The scandal that launched the Reformation: Clergymen and bankers’ agents could collect money in return for absolving the purchaser of his personal sins, or the sins of a third party who had died. The banner shown represents the authorization of the pope.

Hohenzollern, who would also benefit financially since part of the money was to go towards the vast charge that had been levied on him when he first became Archbishop of Mainz, issued what was called his *Instructions* to the vendors of indulgences, offering not only remission of the penalties of sins but also of guilt, as well as preferential treatment for sins not yet committed.

For us today, with our modern sensibilities, the practice of selling indulgences seems outrageous, but we need to understand that the rationale behind this practice was based upon ten centuries of steady development in Roman ecclesiastical doctrine. For a church that proclaimed itself the universal authority of God on earth, headed by a bishop regarded as the infallible representative of Christ, the practice of selling indulgences was not scandalous; it was viewed as a natural extension of papal authority. This practice thus revealed just how far the theology of the Roman church had fallen from its biblical roots, and provoked Martin Luther to post his *Ninety-Five Theses*.*

The posting of the Ninety-Five Theses

On October 31, 1517, in the German town of Wittenberg, Martin Luther nailed a long, hand-written document to the door of the Castle Church. This event marked the beginning of the Reformation and was the first step that profoundly changed the history of the Church and led to the rise of Protestantism.†

When Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the church door, he had no intention of dividing the Church. He had acted in accordance with the academic custom of the day, posting his *Theses* as an invitation to public debate. The *Theses* caused an uproar, and were copied and widely distributed. The reaction to these *Theses* was sharp, for they made a radical departure from the thinking of the Church at the time by asserting that there is absolutely nothing that man can do to constitute a claim on God.

Luther made a spirited defence and further developed his position through public university debates. He wrote and published several treatises, but nothing was more revolutionary than his statement of faith:

“A Christian man is free from all things; he needs no work in order to be justified and saved, but receives these gifts in abundance from his faith alone.”⁶

Luther excommunicated

On January 3, 1521, a papal bull declared Luther’s excommunication. Luther was summoned to appear before the Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, and ordered to recant his views, which he refused to do. He responded with the words:

“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”⁷

* You can read Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* for yourself at <http://www.online-bible-college.com/articles/95theses.htm>.

† The word “Protestant” simply means “Protesters” – those who protested against the abuses and heresies within the Roman Church.

Luther was then placed under the ban of the Empire, but he was hidden away by Frederick the Wise in the Castle of the Wartburg. He used this time to continue his work and begin his translation of the Bible into German, completing the translation of the New Testament in just three months. Luther considered the translation into the language of the people as fundamentally important, since the Bible was the Word of God himself.

A year later he returned to Wittenberg, trusting God's protection rather than man's, to bring leadership and restore order to the Reform movement. He wrote sermons to be used as models for his preachers, as well as two catechisms of Christian teaching (one for adults and one for children.) He wrote biblical commentaries, and even compiled a hymn book, himself composing such well known hymns as "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "Away in a Manger." And so his ideas spread rapidly.

Three Foundational Truths of the Reformation

Luther's principal revelation was a rediscovery of the believer's personal relationship with Christ, based on the finished work of the Cross. From this came the three truths that were the foundation of the Reformation:

The authority of God's Word

Just as the first-century Jews had added the Oral Law as equal authority to the Word of God, so the Roman church had added church tradition and papal authority as equal the authority of the Bible. As *The History of Christianity* expresses it:

"The Roman church, too, accepted the authority of Scripture, but in practice claimed that both the Bible *and* tradition were sources and rules of faith. The Roman church also made tradition, as it was expressed in the decrees of popes and councils, the only permissible, legitimate and infallible interpreter of the Bible...The Bible was hardly ever read...Hardly anybody knew what the Bible really said or meant."⁸

The Reformers stood strongly on the ground of the Word of God. Any doctrine or ceremony which had no clear basis in Scripture was rejected. The list of what they rejected is recorded in *The History of Christianity*:

"[T]he Reformers rejected the authority of the pope, the merit of good works, indulgences, the mediation of the Virgin Mary and the saints, and all sacraments which had not been instituted by Christ. They rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation (the teaching that the bread and wine of communion became the body and blood of Christ when the priest consecrated them), the view of the mass as a sacrifice, purgatory and prayers for the dead, private confession of sin to a priest, celibacy of the clergy, and the use of Latin in the services. They also rejected all the paraphernalia that expressed these ideas – such as holy water, shrines, chantries, wonder-working images, rosaries, paternoster stones, images and candles."⁹

This tenet of faith is captured in the Protestant slogan: *sola scriptura*, a Latin phrase which means "only by Scripture."

Justification by faith alone

The Reformers stood strongly for the truth found in the Word that salvation was by the free and undeserved grace of God (**Ephesians 2:8-10**) and that faith in what God had done, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, brought the believer out of their sin into a new life in Christ. Good works were the evidence of this new life, not the means by which that new life was attained. It was the new life, they declared, that produced the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 2:22-23**).

This tenet of Protestantism is captured in the slogan: *sola fide* – “only by faith.”

The priesthood of every believer

The third truth the Reformers stood for was the “priesthood of all believers” (see **1 Peter 2:5,9**). The Reformers maintained that nowhere in Scripture, or expressed in the early Church, could be found a human mediator-priest (note **1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 9:15**).

“This meant that there were no longer two levels of Christian, spiritual and lay. There was one gospel, one justification by faith, one status before God common to all men and women, clergy and laity. Protestants opposed the idea that authority rested in an exclusive priesthood.”¹⁰

This revoking of the separation between clergy and laity was a mainstay of Protestant reform.

“The Reformers held that God called people to different occupations – father or farmer, scholar or pastor, servant or soldier. In and through his or her calling, the Christian served God. The Reformation demanded much from every Christian. Believers had both the right and the duty to read the newly-translated Bible. Every lay person was expected to take a responsible part in the government and public affairs of both church and society. Such thinking eventually helped give rise to the democratic states of Europe and North America.”¹¹

Bruce Shelley summarizes the three main truths of the Reformation in the answers given by Martin Luther himself:

“[Luther] took four basic Catholic concerns and offered invigorating new answers. To the question how is a person saved, Luther replied; not by works but by faith alone. To the question where does religious authority lie, he answered: not in the visible institution called the Roman church but in the Word of God found in the Bible. To the question – what is the church? – he responded: the whole community of Christian believers, since all are priests before God. And to the question – what is the essence of Christian living? – he replied: serving God in any useful calling, whether ordained or lay. To this day any classical description of Protestantism must echo those central truths.”¹²

The Reformation in Switzerland

The surge of Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* in Germany, soon spread to neighboring Switzerland.

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

In 1522, just five years after Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Ulrich Zwingli, the priest at the Gross Münster (“Great Cathedral”) in Zurich, had an experience where he was “overwhelmed with a sense of God’s mercy and majesty.”¹³ In his words, “religion took its rise when God called a runaway man back to himself; otherwise that man would have been a desert forever.”¹⁴

Zwingli launched the reformation in Switzerland not by posting theses on the church door but by preaching biblical sermons from the pulpit. His preaching had an amazing effect, despite the fact that he was soft spoken and not a gifted orator. His messages created quite a stir in Zurich. One of his listeners, a young man named Thomas Platter, said that when he heard the Bible explained in such a straightforward manner, he felt as if Zwingli were lifting him by the hair of his head.

In one respect Zwingli followed the Bible even more stringently than did his German counterpart. Luther allowed whatever the Bible did not prohibit; Zwingli rejected whatever the Bible did not prescribe. For this reason, the Reformation in Zurich tended to strip away more traditional symbols of the Roman church: candles, statues, music, and pictures. Later, in England, men called this reformed approach “puritanism.”

In 1523, Zwingli published his *Sixty-Seven Theses*, which summarized his doctrines and presented his case for Reform before the Council of Zurich. Later, he would also publicly oppose many other accepted Church practices and doctrines – including transubstantiation, the authority of the pope, the worship of saints, pilgrimages, purgatory and the mass.

Zwingli encountered much opposition for his stance and came to a sad end: his body was cut into four pieces and thrown into a fire. However, he was the most influential Reformer among the German speaking Swiss. His preaching had a powerful effect on the society and nation in which he lived.

The Anabaptists

Two supporters of Zwingli’s initial reforms were Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz. As they studied the Bible, they were struck by the obvious differences between the description of the churches in the New Testament and those of their own day. The most striking feature to them was the baptism of believers. In the Christian world of their day, every newborn child was baptized and considered a member of the Church. This effectively made Church and State identical. Grebel and Manz saw that the New Testament Church was different. It was a Church free from the State; a Church composed of true believers committed to live and die for the Lord, and it was the baptism of believers that was the key to this.

And so grew a movement called, by their enemies, Anabaptism, which means “re-baptism.” Zwingli would not accept this doctrine and fought it vigorously.

On January 21, 1525, a historic baptism took place at the Manz house. Grebel, Manz, and their followers had counted the cost. Bruce Shelley describes what happened as a result:

“On 7 March 1526, [the Zurich Council] decided that anyone found rebaptizing would be put to death by drowning. Apparently their thought was, ‘If the heretics want water, let them have it.’ Within a year, on 5 January 1527, Felix Manz became the first Anabaptist martyr. The Zurich authorities drowned him in the Limmat, which flows through the city. Within four years the radical movement in and around Zurich was practically eradicated. Many of the persecuted fled to Germany and Austria, but their prospects were no brighter there. In 1529 the imperial Diet of Speyer proclaimed Anabaptism a heresy and every court in Christendom was obliged to condemn the heretics to death. During the Reformation years, between four and five thousand Anabaptists were executed by fire, water, and sword.”¹⁵

The belief and practice amongst the different Anabaptist groups was varied. Some rejected all civil authority. But generally speaking, they all rejected the idea of a State Church and they all expected the soon return of Christ.

John Calvin

Little is known about Calvin’s conversion. He studied law in Orleans and when he returned to Paris in 1532, he joined a group of Protestants studying the Scriptures. When he wrote an oration on ‘Christian Philosophy’ for his friend, Nicolas Cop, the Rector of Paris University, both of them were forced to flee Paris.

When King Francis I of France (who reigned from 1515 to 1547) decided to unleash persecution to solve the Protestant problem, Calvin realized he could no longer stay in France. In 1536, after staying one year in Basel as a refugee, a friend persuaded him to work for the Lord in Geneva, Switzerland.

During the following years, Calvin developed an adaptable model of church government in in Strassburg and Geneva, and for this reason has been called “the organizer of Protestantism.” He addressed four main questions:

- **Authority** – Calvin believed in theocracy and saw the church ministry as the answer to what would replace the authority of Rome. The church was to be governed by four offices – pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons.*
- **Discipline** – Church elders were to discipline heretics, absentee church members and moral offenders.
- **Theology** – Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was the first truly systematic exposition of Reformed theology. It is recognized even today as a Christian classic.
- **The sovereignty of God** – Calvin is best known for his teaching on this subject although he actually devoted more of his writing to other issues.

Bruce Shelley writes of the tremendous influence Calvin had on the Reformation:

“Enthusiastic students from all over Europe came to Geneva to see what John Knox called ‘the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the

* The modern pastoral model, used by most evangelical churches today, is based on Calvin’s original “presbyterian” model.

days of the Apostles.' They received Calvin's theology firsthand and obediently lived the city's rigorous lifestyle...When Calvin died in 1564, he left far more than a reformed Geneva. All over Europe [including Scotland, the most devoutly Calvinist country in the world] and soon in distant America, he had followers who were eager to continue [his reforming work]."¹⁶

Calvin's reformed model has had an impact far beyond the boundaries of the Church. The deteriorating social institutions that had once held medieval civilization together were replaced by new ones in the sixteenth century, and many of these new institutions were influenced by Calvin's model. Even much in modern democratic political theory can be traced back to the teachings of Calvin.

The Reformation in Europe

From Germany and Switzerland, the wave of Reformation began to wash against other nations within a Europe just emerging from feudalism.

France

In 1525, Jacques Lefevre translated the New Testament from Latin into French. By this time, Luther's writings were being circulated within France. Then, between 1555 and 1556, Calvin trained over 150 pastors in Geneva and sent them into France. He helped organize the Protestants in the midst of the severe persecution that began in 1538. The French Protestants became known as Huguenots after 1560, and endured a number of massacres by the ruling Catholic regime.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands quickly embraced Calvinism. When Philip II of Spain ascended the throne, however, he was determined to re-catholicize Holland, which was then still under Spanish dominion. Under his reign, the Inquisition was wielded as a tool to eradicate Protestantism from the Netherlands, and it became an offence even to read the Bible. The Dutch, however, fought for their freedom and in 1572, formed the Utrecht Union, comprising seven Protestant provinces.

Spain and Italy

Many Spanish and Italians accepted Luther's teaching, despite the constant threat of the Inquisition. Even bishops there were suspected of harboring Lutheran views. However, Protestantism in these countries was almost destroyed by the Inquisition between 1559 and 1560, with its torture, imprisonment, and death.

The Reformation in England

While the fires of Reformation were spreading across mainland Europe, Britain was slower to respond to the call of reform. All this changed in 1534 when Henry VIII broke England's ties with Rome and established the Church of England. "His quarrel with the pope was not on religious grounds, but merely on the selfish grounds that the pope would not sanction Henry's proposed divorce of Queen Catherine... Henry did destroy the power of the pope and end monasticism in England. But a

powerful religious movement towards reform among his people was going on at the same time.”¹⁷ Renwick and Harman explain the state of affairs at this time:

“At first the change in England could scarcely be called a Reformation. Matters remained virtually as before, except that now the king was Head of the Church, not the pope. At the same time, there were some very hopeful factors. There was a strong desire for reform latent in the hearts of the English people...From the days of Wycliffe not a few had read the Scriptures in their own language and were openly critical of the Roman Church...There was much private piety of an evangelical kind in the land even before Luther’s day...”¹⁸

The Reformation was reinforced during the reign of King Edward VI (1547-1553), however, under the leadership of Thomas Cranmer (the Archbishop of Canterbury), Nicholas Ridley (a scholar) and Hugh Latimer (a preacher). But the tide of the Reformation in England suddenly reversed under the reign of Queen Mary (1553-1558), who sought to restore the authority of the pope to Britain. 286 bishops, scholars and other reform leaders were burnt at the stake, apart from countless others who died of starvation in prison. Among those burnt at the stake were Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer.

“As the fire was being lighted, Latimer said, ‘Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as I trust shall never be put out.’”¹⁹

Even though this severe persecution earned Queen Mary the nickname “Bloody Mary,” she could not reverse the tide of Protestantism. In fact, her gross ignorance of the popular groundswell behind Protestantism eventually worked against her, and she was deposed. In her place, Elizabeth I restored and permanently established the Reformation in England during her long reign (1558-1603).

The Reformation, however, began to exceed Elizabeth’s own goals. A popular movement was in full swing, and those who worked to further purify and reform the Church of England were called “Puritans.”

“On her attitude to the Puritans...Queen Elizabeth set herself sternly to repress what were called ‘prophesyings.’ These were gatherings of ministers and godly people to study the Scriptures, and already they had been greatly blessed. They were cordially supported by the good Archbishop Grindal. He refused to carry out the queen’s command to suppress them, and as a result was suspended and imprisoned in his own house...Puritanism was exceedingly strong at Cambridge, a fact which greatly displeased the queen.”²⁰

As we shall see in a moment, however, Puritanism would have a long-lasting effect, not only upon England, but also upon the colonies that would later become the United States of America. This combination of Elizabethan reform and popular Puritanism brought about profound changes within England. In the words of a nineteenth century historian:

“They made England independent of an Italian priest-prince. They freed the land from monks and monkery. They abolished that most fruitful source of

immorality, the celibacy of the clergy, and made laymen and ecclesiastics alike subject to the civil courts. They exploded the doctrine of purgatory – that richest mine of priestly wealth and popular superstition. They removed from between the soul and God the crowd of priests and saintly mediators, and taught men to go to Christ rather than to the Blessed Virgin or the glorified dead.”²¹

The Reformation in Scotland

As Renwick and Harman declare:

“In no other country in the world was the Reformation so complete or so thorough as in Scotland.”²²

The story began with a young aristocrat by the name of Patrick Hamilton, who traveled Scotland during 1527-1528, fearlessly preaching the Gospel of God’s grace. He was invited under false pretences by Archbishop Beaton to a conference, where he was charged with heresy and burnt at the stake. His death made a deep impression on the country.

Eighteen years later, history would repeat itself when another Reformation preacher, George Wishart, would meet an identical fate at the hands of the now promoted Cardinal Beaton. “The spirit of the nation was deeply stirred by this shameless proceeding. Many felt the time for resistance had come.”²³

Scotland found a rallying point in the person of John Knox. When the people heard Knox’s first sermon, they declared: “Other men [sawed] the branches of the Papistry. This man lays his ax to the trunk of the tree.”

As Roland Bainton observes:

“Knox brought Calvinism to full-fledged Presbyterianism. For the first time on a national scale Calvinism was able to deploy with a system of ascending representative assemblies. The General Assembly [of the Presbyterian Church] was to rival in importance the Scottish Parliament.”²⁴

The Counter-Reformation

At first, the Church of Rome did not respond to the challenge of the Protestant Reformation, except to try to exterminate it. But when Rome finally recognized that Protestantism was not going to go away, it convened a special council and initiated a Counter-Reformation within its ranks. This Counter-Reformation did much to defuse the discontent within Europe, and the advance of Protestantism was halted. “Faced by the rebellion of almost half of Europe, Catholicism rolled back the tide of Protestantism until by the end of the sixteenth century Protestantism was limited roughly to the northern third of Europe, as it is today.”²⁵

This Counter-Reformation was not, however, merely a token reformation. “Pope Paul III [was] the most sincere reformer to mount the papal throne in the sixteenth century. Under Paul III many positive steps were taken to correct abuses and bring about needed change. Perhaps the most outstanding of these were his

appointment of reformers to the College of Cardinals, the setting up of a papal reform commission, and the calling of the Council of Trent in 1545.”²⁶

Paul III took far-reaching steps to eradicate a number of the blatant problems within the Roman Church. He reformed the papal bureaucracy, ended the trade of selling indulgences (although indulgences themselves were still allowed), and forbade the buying and selling of church appointments.

However, the medieval orthodoxy of the Roman Church, which had up till then not been codified, was re-affirmed – doctrines that included transubstantiation, justification by faith *and* works, the celibacy of the clergy, and the existence of purgatory. “In short, the council clarified and reasserted most of the doctrines of the late medieval Roman church. In addition, papal power generally was increased by giving the pope the authority to enforce the decrees of the council and by again requiring that church officials had to promise him obedience.”²⁷

Some Protestant reformers held hopes that the Church of Rome would embrace reform, but they were soon disappointed. Most reformers, however, shared Luther’s scepticism concerning the “irreformability of the [Roman] church.”

“The council ruled out any possibility of Christian reconciliation in the immediate future. The scholastic-style definitions, with the accompanying curses on anyone who did not agree with them, killed any lingering Protestant hopes of restored unity. But by elevating the papacy once more, by improving church organization, by dealing with the most flagrant of the abuses pointed out by the Protestant Reformers, and by clarifying doctrine and dogma, the Council of Trent gave the church of Rome a clear position to uphold in the next four centuries.”²⁸

The English Church in the Stuart Period

Although Queen Elizabeth had strengthened and established the Church of England during her reign, its level of reform was moderate and unsatisfactory to the more extreme Protestants, who desired to see a fully reformed Church along the lines of Calvin’s model at Geneva. These Puritans continued to lobby for a purification and reform of the Church of England.

The first Puritans

The aim of the Elizabethan Puritans was the abolition of religious ceremonies that they saw to be vestigial remains of Roman Catholicism – the use of the cross in baptism, the surplice,* and kneeling at communion. “Many of the Puritans questioned whether there was any biblical authority for bishops. They wanted the Reformed pattern of church government, by elders and synods, with stricter discipline.”²⁹

Elizabeth refused to submit to Puritan pressure, and King James I, who followed Elizabeth, was equally resistant to Puritan reform. “I will make them conform themselves,” he threatened, “or I will harry them out of the land, or else do worse.”

* A surplice is a white ecclesiastical outer garment, like a smock, with wide, often flared sleeves.

The Separatists

In the face of such opposition, a small separatist movement grew up within the Puritan ranks.

“The Separatist Puritans were led by Robert Browne (about 1550-1633) and Robert Harrison (died about 1585). These Separatists no longer regarded the Church of England as a true church, and in 1581 with their followers (often called Brownists) they formed an independent congregation at Norwich. Browne acted as pastor and Harrison as teacher of the church. They withdrew completely from the Anglican church, which they believed to be polluted and false, and set up their own congregation, based on a church covenant. This step marked the beginnings of the English Independent or Congregationalist movement. The English government and bishops lost all patience, and severely repressed the Brownists by imprisonment, harassment, and by driving them abroad.”³⁰

As we have noted throughout **Module 113**, history has been repeatedly shaped by the reaction of one part of the Church to another. And so we see here that, even as English authorities sought to repress the Puritan movement, the Puritan believers were forced to find refuge abroad. One group, calling themselves “Pilgrims,” were led by John Robinson in one of the longest emigrations in Church history – from England to New England, where the “Pilgrim Fathers” (as they came to be known) saw the potential of setting up, without hindrance or persecution, a Christian community based on a truly reformed model.

And so, in 1620, a ship called *Mayflower* carried a band of Puritan Separatists across the Atlantic to the New World. And as they set out on this epic journey, John Robinson spoke to his fellow-visionaries these words:

“The Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of his holy Word.”³¹

- ¹ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.237.
- ² Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.237.
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