

Reformation and Revival: The Results of the Protestant Reformation

This is the last lesson dealing with the history of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. The book of Psalms had long been a centerpiece in the monastic spirituality of the church. The monks would regularly pray through and sing through the Psalms. In the sixteenth century, the book of Psalms became central to the piety of the Protestant congregations. Particularly in the Reformed tradition, but also in the Lutheran tradition, the Psalms brought the Reformed congregations together in words of prayer to the Lord. The Psalms also became important to Protestants in public life, as Protestants were often brought before judges and tried for their faith. Many times they were executed in places like France. The Psalms were a testimony that Protestants used to the grace and glory of God. It has been said that all over France, as Huguenots were in prison, the jailers became familiar with the Psalms, because those prisoners sang the Psalms day and night.

I will begin this lesson with Psalm 79, which is a prayer, as the Psalms are generally prayers. As we prepare to consider the results of the Protestant Reformation, we will pray in the words of Psalm 79.

*“Remember not, O God, the sins of long ago;
In tender mercy visit us, distressed and humbled low.
O Lord, our Savior, help, and glorify Thy name;
Deliver us from all our sins, and take away our shame.
In Thy compassion hear Thy prisoners’ plaintive sigh,
And in the greatness of Thy power, save those about to die.
Then, safe within Thy fold, we will exalt Thy name;
Our thankful hearts with songs of joy Thy goodness will proclaim.” Amen.*

As I review the history of the sixteenth century, I will use three words. The first is division, or conflict. The second is reformation. The third is revival. Those words form the three main points in my presentation of this lesson.

The first point is division. The sixteenth century marked the breaking apart of Christendom. It was not the first division in the history of the church. That had already taken place 500 years earlier, between the Eastern church and the Western church. In the sixteenth century, however, there was another division, which was not east and west, but it was geographically largely north and south. The Catholic territory was to the south, and the Protestant territory was to the north.

Not only did the church divide into a Protestant part and a Catholic part, but the Protestant church also divided into a number of different traditions. There were three major divisions: Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican. There were many other smaller groups, particularly groups that made up the tradition that we call the Radical Reformation. As many as 90% of all Protestants, however, were Lutheran, Reformed, or Anglican. Only 10% made up everything else, with the Anabaptists being the largest group within the Radical Reformation.

Some people very much deplored this division. Philip Melanchthon was constantly trying to find ways to bring the church back together again, even Protestants and Catholics. For a while, John Calvin joined with him in that effort. Calvin soon became disillusioned that Catholics and Protestants could be joined, but he maintained his zeal to see the Protestant church united. Yet Philip Melanchthon never gave up his longing to see the church in the West reunited as one church. He prayed, “O God, we do not desire new contentions and discord. We pray only that the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us and

rose from the grave, will guide us, that all of us who are in many churches and many communions may be one church and one communion and one in Him.” God did not see fit to answer that prayer in the sixteenth century, and still that prayer has not been answered today. Yet Christian people long for the church to be united. There were very momentous issues that divided the church in the sixteenth century, and many of those issues are still dividing the church today.

As the church divided in Europe, it meant that countries needed to deal with a new problem, which was religious pluralism. It would take a long time for that problem to be solved in any sense. In the sixteenth century it was a foreign idea. The divisions of the Reformation led to conflict and to national solutions. Some of those solutions were temporary, and some lasted even into the next century. Some countries remained largely one faith. Spain, for instance, had very few Protestants. Italy had some Protestants, but they generally did not stay very long in Italy. England and Scotland were largely Protestant, and even though there were Catholics there, they were in hiding.

In other countries, however, there were both Catholics and Protestants. Some of the sharp religious struggles led to some temporary national solutions. I will talk first about Germany, or the Holy Roman Empire, as we should refer to it in that time. The Religious Peace of Augsburg was drawn up in 1555. That document tried to bring some solution to the rising warfare between Protestants and Catholics. The document was agreed upon based on the principle that whatever the king or ruler of a territory was, that is what their territory would be. The empire was made up of dozens, even hundreds, of small cities and kingdoms. The solution was that if the ruler was Catholic, then the people would be Catholic and the church would be Catholic in an area. If the ruler was Protestant, then the church could be Protestant. It was mainly a choice between Catholicism and Lutheranism. There were not really other religious traditions that were included in the Religious Peace of Augsburg. The Latin expression for this temporary solution was *cuius regio, eius religio*, which means “whose the rule, his the religion.” That would bring to the empire, at least for some time, an uneasy peace. It did not last, because in the next century was the Thirty Years’ War, and there was no permanent peace until the end of that war.

In France the situation was different. There was a determined Calvinist minority spread throughout France. There was also a very strong Catholic monarchy. In the sixteenth century, therefore, there was bitter, although sporadic, persecution of the Huguenots, as the Protestants were called, by the Catholic rulers. The Protestants in France were encouraged and strengthened by John Calvin’s Geneva. Calvin was a Frenchman, and he had great concern for training French people and sending them back into France to establish churches and preach the Gospel. Many of those French students trained under Calvin and others in Geneva went back to France to face death. We have the wonderful letters that Calvin wrote to the five prisoners of Lyons, as he tried to encourage those five young men who were sentenced to die for preaching the Reformed faith in France. In one of those letters Calvin said, “Since it pleases God to employ you to the death in maintaining His quarrel, He will strengthen your hand in the fight and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain.” A few days later those five young men went to the stake singing the Psalms.

Calvin believed that the French Protestants should learn to suffer and not to fight. His way of saying it was, “Tears and prayers are our weapons.” Eventually, however, there were people in France, like John Knox in Scotland, who believed that it was right and necessary for Protestants to defend themselves. New Protestant theories of government were developed, including resistance if necessary. The aftermath of that was warfare in France between Protestants and Catholics, leading up to the infamous massacre on Saint Bartholomew’s Day, when hundreds of thousands of Protestants were killed in one day in Paris and throughout France. It was August 23, 1572.

Toward the end of the century, in 1598, was the Edict of Nantes. Henry of Navarre was a Protestant who became king in 1589, but he realized that he would not be able to serve effectively as king of Catholic France until he became a Catholic. Thus in 1593 Henry of Navarre converted to the Catholic faith in order to be king. He said, "Paris is worth a Mass." He abandoned his earlier faith for Catholicism, but Henry had concern for his Protestant friends whom he had left behind. The Edict of Nantes in 1598 stated that Protestants were to be tolerated in France.

The Edict of Nantes could be described as creating a state within a state. There were serious limitations that were imposed on Protestants, who were not as free as Catholics were. The Protestants could not be persecuted as long as they lived in certain areas and observed the limitations that were placed on them. That edict lasted almost 100 years, but it was finally revoked in 1685, and persecution broke out once again. Many of the Huguenots at that time had to flee.

In the empire, whatever the king was, that is what the people had to be. If they did not like it, they could move. They could emigrate to another place. There was in that policy just the beginning of a hint of religious liberty. In France, Protestants were tolerated, but they faced grave restrictions. In the Netherlands, the Low Countries, this division brought war with Spain. Spain controlled the Low Countries during this time. As many people in the Netherlands became Protestant, they not only wanted to worship freely, but they also wanted to throw off the Spanish control in order to be able to worship freely. In that struggle arose one of the great Dutch heroes, who is usually referred to as "William the Silent." He is called William the Silent not because he did not talk much—apparently he talked quite a bit—but because he kept his own counsel. He did not share with people what he was thinking or planning in order to be able to carry out his purpose of freeing the Dutch from Spanish control. He was a far-seeing, fair-minded, gifted, wise, and patient ruler.

Finally in 1581, the northern provinces of the Netherlands declared their independence. War dragged on until there was a truce in 1607, which divided the area into a Protestant north—Holland—and a Catholic south—Belgium. The Reformed church came to dominate the religious life in the north. Even though Holland did not have 50% of its population on the Reformed side until 1650, by that time Holland was a strong Dutch Protestant Reformed country. In Holland, there was greater religious liberty than anywhere else in Europe until the founding of Rhode Island in America in 1636. The great Dutch theologian and Prime Minister, Abraham Kuyper, said about the history of religious pluralism in the Netherlands, "In the Calvinistic Netherlands [...], all those who were persecuted for religion's sake found a harbor of refuge. There the Jews were hospitably received; there the Lutherans were in honor; there the Mennonites flourished; and even the Arminians and Roman Catholics were permitted the free exercise of their religion at home and in secluded churches."

I have shown how the word "conflict," or "division," serves to describe the history of the century. Different countries tried to come to terms with the new situation of having both Protestant and Catholic people in their lands. Next I will focus on the word "reformation." The century can be considered carefully with the question, "What really happened when the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe?"

In terms of ministry, there was a new type of person—the pastor and preacher. There had been pastors in the church for a long time, but the Catholic Church leader was a priest, whose central place in ministry was the altar and the confessional. The sacramental system was the system of religious faith. With the coming of the Protestant Reformation, there was for the first time a church leader who was a pastor and a preacher. His place was the study and the pulpit, not the altar and the confessional. His own home was also a central place for ministry, since for the first time there was such a thing as a pastor's home with a

wife and children. Another place of ministry was the homes of his parishioners, as the pastor would be out visiting and helping people in his congregation.

In 1523 Zwingli, a pastor in Switzerland, began to wear the scholar's gown. It was not the kind of dress that pastors had worn before that time. When Zwingli began to wear the scholar's gown, which eventually became the standard Protestant pulpit dress, it symbolized that he was a scholar. He was a student who was studying the Bible. As he came forward to speak, he would do it as someone who had studied Scripture. He was willing, ready, and able to set Scripture forth for the people.

Theology also changed as the Protestant Reformation moved through Europe. In the previous lesson I described the summarization of Roman Catholic theology in the Council of Trent. There were several major Protestant confessions. The Schleitheim Confession of the Anabaptists in 1527 could be on the list, but the Schleitheim Confession is not a full confession. It simply gives some of the distinctives of the Anabaptist faith. The Lutheran confession is called the Augsburg Confession. It was written in 1530 by Philip Melancthon. After Luther died about 16 years later, there was great theological controversy in the Lutheran Church between the followers of Melancthon and the old Lutherans, the followers of Luther. The controversy arose because people saw Melancthon changing his mind. He was getting closer to Erasmus on the doctrine of free will and closer to Calvin on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. It was a very bitter time in Lutheran history. The theological controversy ended finally with the Formula of Concord, which was published in 1580, on the 50th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. This is why Lutherans love the name "Concordia." Presbyterians like the words "covenant" or "Westminster." Lutherans like to use "Augsburg" and especially "Concordia." In that time, the Book of Concord united Lutherans. It was more toward the old Lutheran direction. Lutherans largely rejected Melancthon's synergism, and they also rejected his openness to the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. With the Formula of Concord was the establishment, the stabilization, of Lutheran theology.

The Catholics had one basic document, from the Council of Trent. The Lutherans had one, the Formula of Concord, which includes the Augsburg Confession. The Reformed, however, have a number of theological confessions. On the Reformed side of things, each national area of the church tended to develop its own confession. The confessions are very similar, but as we study Reformed confessions we must consider a wide range of confessions and compare them. The Gallican Confession (or the French Confession) was written largely by Calvin. The Scots Confession was written by John Knox. The Belgic Confession was written by Guido de Bres, who was from the southern Netherlands and was executed by the Spanish. The Belgic Confession draws on the Gallican Confession of Calvin, but it is about twice as long. It was eventually translated into Dutch as the Dutch Confession. The Second Helvetic Confession (or the Swiss Confession) was by Heinrich Bullinger. It was a private confession that he wrote to express his own faith, but it was so well done that it became accepted by many of the Reformed groups. The Heidelberg Confession came out of the German Reformed community of the Palatinate, which was the most significant center of Calvinism in Germany during the sixteenth century. It was written by Ursinus and Olevianus. It is a wonderful confession and catechism, with its outline of guilt, grace, and gratitude. The Thirty-Nine Articles from the Church of England was reduced from the earlier forty-two articles during the reign of Elizabeth I. The articles were Reformed in their orientation.

I also want to talk about the arts, along with ministry and theology. Let me begin with the visual arts. People recognize that there was some destruction of art, including religious art in churches, during the sixteenth century. Crucifixes were torn down and smashed. Pictures were destroyed as Protestants, objecting to Catholic abuses of the religious pictures, attempted to purify the churches and get rid of that which they believed was wrong and misleading. There was a certain amount of iconoclasm in the time, but perhaps not as much as some people think. We do not see all Protestants trying to find every picture

they can and destroying those pictures. Much of the religious art of the period has lived on. We can see it still in churches and museums of Europe today. Sometimes the destruction of a religious picture in a church was ordered by the donor of that picture, someone who had paid for it. That was not always the case. Yet sometimes the person who had actually put the picture in a place, as a good work, was converted to the Protestant faith and wanted it taken down. That happened more often than we recognize. Certain destruction, however, did take place, and some of it was unfortunate that the art was not preserved outside of the church. That may have been asking too much of the people who lived at that time.

It took Protestants some time to find a style of art, particularly religious art, for themselves. They found it later, particularly in the work of Rembrandt. I will describe Rembrandt's life and contribution in a later lesson. Even to the present, there is some discomfort among Protestants with art, particularly religious art. We struggle with how to use it and whether we can use it without violating the second commandment.

If the Protestant legacy on the side of visual art is somewhat mixed, then the Protestant legacy on the side of music is very beautiful and wonderful. Congregational singing became very much a part of the church for the first time in many centuries. On the Lutheran side, there were great hymns, marked by Luther's famous "A Mighty Fortress" and culminating in the eighteenth century with the greatest church musician of all, Bach. On the Reformed side, there were the Psalms. I mentioned the Psalms earlier, and they began to mark the life and piety of the Reformed churches quite early. There was a complete *Geneva Psalter* by 1562, which had every psalm translated into vernacular French for the singing of the people. It had tunes so lively that some people called them "Geneva jigs." There were people all over France, and wherever the Reformed church went, who were singing the Psalms. The Psalms particularly became identified with the church in Scotland. Some Scottish Presbyterians, even to the present, sing only the Psalms.

I will also say a word about economics. After Max Weber's book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, there has been the misguided idea that Protestantism invented capitalism. Capitalism was already in effect, potentially and in some places actually, from the time of the Renaissance. It was not that the Protestant movement invented a new economic system. Max Weber was unable to demonstrate in his book that Calvin or any other Reformed or Reformation theologian actually advocated anything resembling modern capitalism. The only person he even quotes is Benjamin Franklin, who is not well-known as a Calvinist. Protestantism and Calvinism were congenial with the system of capitalism. There were the emphases of discipline, hard work, thrift, and economy, all of which were used to create money that could be used in different ways. Yet Protestantism and Calvinism certainly did not create capitalism.

Against what many scholars say and many books teach, Calvin never taught that earthly prosperity is a sign of God's blessing. Much to my dismay, I have read many times in books that Calvin said that the way to know if one was elect was if the person was prosperous in terms of temporal things. Calvin never said anything remotely resembling that. He insisted that Christians must care for the poor because God is an advocate for the poor, the aliens, and the fugitives. The last point of Cranmer's sermon just before he died was that the rich should give generously to the poor. That was the last word that the great English Reformer had to say to the people of England. The *First Book of Discipline* of John Knox in Scotland attempted to create a national system to help the poor, which would have been more effective and more human than modern governmental social security systems. So Protestantism did not create capitalism.

There was a strong emphasis among the leaders of Protestantism that people share what they had generously, and there was no indication that a sign of God's blessing was how much a person had of this world's possessions. When the aged and wealthy widow of the mayor of Hamburg died and people read her will, they realized that in 1535 she had changed her will. That was not unusual in the sixteenth century, because as people converted from Catholicism to Protestantism they often changed their wills. The earlier will left her money to purchase vigils, Masses for her soul, and other good works to avoid Purgatory. In the revised will she left money for her family and for the sick, the poor, and the needy.

The third major word related to the sixteenth century is revival. There was war, bloodshed, and many sad and awful things that took place because of what was happening in the sixteenth century. There was also reformation. Was there revival? Or did people merely change their labels and then go on living in the same way? There were many defects and disappointments in the Protestant Reformation. We should not glamorize it and try to make it more than it really was. Luther was often disappointed and even chagrined at the behavior of Lutherans. At times he threatened to resign from being the pastor and leader of Lutheran people because he believed they were not living the way they ought to have lived. There were many failures.

Yet even the Catholics recognized that the Protestants were able to achieve something in terms of reform of morals and greater emphasis on personal holiness. Protestant spirituality focused on a number of important things. Among them were the Word of God, the Psalter, the celebration of the Lord's Day, and the Lord's Supper. Protestant spirituality was also in everyday life, with Christians living out their lives with their families, in the fields and workshops, or in the kitchens, so that the place of spirituality became public and known as people lived for God wherever they were.

I will close with a prayer that is the last stanza of a hymn written by the first Protestant woman hymn writer, whose name was Elizabeth Creutziger. She was a nun who came to the Evangelical faith. She married a Lutheran pastor, who served in Magdeburg and then Wittenburg. Her hymn, written in 1524, which was quite early, has the title "Lord Jesus, the One Son of God." The first two stanzas summarize the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement—Christ was born and Christ died for us. The third stanza represents our response. Here are her words:

*"O let us in Thy knowledge and in Thy love increase,
That we in faith be steadfast and know Thy Spirit's peace.
That Thy sweetness may be known to these cold hearts,
Teach them to thirst for Thee alone." Amen.*