

A Study in Pursuit of Reconciliation within the Body and Bride of Christ



*And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of
many generations; you shall be called
the repairer of the breach, the restorer
of streets to dwell in. - Isaiah 58:12*

I. WHERE AND HOW DO WE BEGIN?

The Reformation did not begin in isolation, nor was it a spontaneous event, but was a fire that was lit upon the tinder of the previous centuries. It is important to ask the question of where do we begin, or even more importantly, how do we begin?

- A. **Identification**— This is not a Catholic versus Protestant history, but the history of the Western Church. In looking at the grievances of what developed within the medieval period, it is important to address it with the view of solidarity. This period belongs to both groups, the divergence comes only in the 16th century and that in regard to how it was to be dealt with.
- B. **Paradox** – Medieval Europe must be understood as a period of paradox. At the center of its history was paradox itself, Christendom. This is found in the blending of the temporal and eternal into an attempted synthesis that expressed its coherence in its central symbol, the Holy Roman Empire.

II. BACKDROP

Over the past five centuries the divided framework of a splintered Christianity has become the norm and makes it difficult to imagine anything but what is presently experienced in the Body of Christ. It is necessary to recognize that the issue that the reformers engaged were formed over centuries of development.

- A. **Sacrum Imperium** – In 800AD, the Frankish king, Charlemagne, was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. This pivotal moment shaped Western Christianity and European society for nearly 8 centuries in establishing the *Sacrum Romanum Imperium*, otherwise known as the Holy Roman Empire. The centerpiece of this period was its dual heads, that of the emperor and the pope.
- B. **Concentration of Papal Power** – Following the Barbarian invasions and the collapse of the Roman Empire the papacy began to increase in prestige and power. With Pope Gregory the Great the papacy became autonomous in terms of pastoral care from the eastern Byzantine empire. In the 8th century the papacy began looking west to the Franks for protection from the Lombard's resulting in the Holy Roman Empire, which saw the papacy rise in political power in its ability to crown emperors.

In the following centuries the papacy suffered from significant immorality leading to the reform movement of Cluny, the pinnacle of which was the papacy of Gregory VII. Gregory used excommunication as a tool to wrestle power from the emperor, Henry IV, in the investiture controversy (see appendix). He also made bishops swear allegiance to the papacy and made

celibacy for clergy dogma. This increase in political power would reach its apex with Innocent III who claimed supremacy over all of Europe's kings.

- C. **Rationalism and Nominalist Theology** – In the 12th century with the reintroduction of Aristotelian naturalism a greater emphasis on rationalism and empirical knowledge developed in western thought. The bridge that held the intellectual world of this period together was the church. The extreme application of this framework, nominalism, placed knowledge solely in the realm of facts through reason and the senses. The result of nominalism was that God became increasingly distant and the only way to know him was through the church, both in its teachings and sacraments.

III. CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION

The central issue when evaluating both the backdrop to the Reformation and the movement itself, is the question of authority. Too often our perception of this period of history is rooted in ideas of it being both archaic and static. The opposite is true. This was an age in significant transition. The Holy Roman Empire was itself coming apart at the seams and the foundations of modern Europe were beginning to burst forth.

- A. **Issues in the Church** – The 14th and 15th centuries in the church were periods that were turbulent and filled with upheaval.
 - a. **The Corruption of the Papacy** - From the onset of Christendom in the Holy Roman Empire, the papacy struggled with issues of corruption and at times immorality. The 9th and 10th century were considerably impacted as the papacy transitioned from a position of humility to one of power. Throughout the medieval period issues of nepotism, a preference for those within one's family or friendships regardless of merit, simony, the selling of ecclesial posts, and greed came to the forefront. The pinnacle of this corruption can be seen in the 15th century when Renaissance influences shaped the papacy and clergy at all levels, manifesting in sexual immorality, violence, and a general ignorance of church teaching and dogma.
 - b. **The Failure of the Conciliar Movement** - As the papacy proved increasingly incapable of maintaining the tension of the Holy Roman Empire, many began looking to another model of ecclesial authority to overcome issues with the church, the council. This movement proved futile itself in bringing about the necessary changes that many sought from it.
- B. **New Model of Authority** – As the Renaissance began to respond to scholastic thought, a greater emphasis on antiquity developed with source text being held in higher regard. This new emphasis began to challenge the place of tradition in Western Christianity. The fall of Constantinople to the Islamic Turks in 1453 pushed many eastern Christians westward along with their scholars and texts. This influx from the east brought teachers and sources which held no allegiance to the pope. The resulting impact in terms of how authority came to be viewed can be summed in the phrase *ad fontes*, meaning back to the sources.

- C. **Rising Nationalism** – Feudalism began to be restructured in England and France giving greater support to the monarchy, rather than to nobility. Following the black plague (ca. 1350AD), a period of instability created a desire for greater political steadiness and national union. A union was realized through the alignment of a growing middle class loyal to the monarch. This led to an ability of the monarch to develop military powers focused on protecting the interest and stability of the people.

IV. REFORMATION

It is important to remember that the Reformation arose out of the medieval period to which it belonged. It was both shaped by the prior centuries of development, and was significant in shaping the centuries that followed.

- A. **The Forerunners** – Martin Luther was not the first to confront the rising challenges within Christendom. It is worth noting that others attempted to do so earlier, often at the expense of their own lives. Groups such as the Waldensians challenged the authoritarian model of the papacy and in 1211 AD, 80 followers were burned at the stake. John Wycliffe saw the church not in the pope and sought to place the scriptures both in the vernacular and the hands of the people. In Bohemia, Jan Hus challenged corruption in the clergy and questioned papal authority when it was self serving, thus emphasizing scriptures as a final authority. While the movement that began with him never fully unified, his ideas were wrapped in Czech nationalism and the first tangible division within Christendom occurred.
- B. **Luther's Challenge** – In 1517 the Augustinian monk, priest, and professor, Martin Luther produced his 95 Theses, articulating his views on the indulgences, purgatory, and translation, especially the notion of penance versus repentance. Legend has Luther nailing the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle (University) Church on 31 October 1517, but the most reliable sources confirm only that he sent the Theses to Albrecht, Bishop of Mainz. Luther challenged the prevailing view of authority and revealed a new authority, conscience and scripture. Rooted in the five *solas* (*scriptura, fide, gratia, Christus, Deo gloria*) he emphasized the priesthood of all believers by supporting equality among lay and clergy alike, as well as the ability of all people to read and understand scriptures themselves.

The foundation of Luther's system was the text of the Bible, which he believed should be in the vernacular. Where the church was the center in the medieval world, Luther placed the individual there and saw the church as accountable to those who comprised it. He democratized the debate by publishing several works in German and a rising German nationalism provided fertile ground for his attempted reform and renewal of the church.

- C. **Zwingli and the Anabaptist** – A former soldier turned priest, Huldrych Zwingli, began a reform movement in the Zurich. Zwingli's vision was similar to Luther's in that he sought continuity with the past, but was unique in its emphasis on its locus of reform, focusing it institutionally and morally. Taking a more antagonistic approach than that of Luther, Zwingli was killed in 1531 in a dispute with Swiss cantons who remained Catholic.

Zurich proved to be fertile ground for further reform as the Anabaptist movement began there as well. Breaking from what is now called the 'magisterial' reformers, Anabaptists pushed sola scriptura to its full conclusion and saw no authority inherent within tradition itself. Being extreme Biblicist rooted in literal interpretations, the Anabaptists emphasized discontinuity with the past. Receiving their name for their views against infant baptism, they also saw civil authority as a contamination of church with the fallen world.

- D. **Calvin** - By the 1530's two major movements were taking shape among magisterial reformers. The first rooted in Luther's catechism was German in identity. The second was what would become known as the 'Reform' movement based in German and Swiss cities. A lawyer turned theologian by the name of John Calvin would give this movement a systematized foundation through his Institutes that proved a stable belief structure through scripture was possible.

While there is much more to be said about Calvin and his role in the Reformation, the significant impact of his Institutes was in breaking magisterial reform from patriotic and nationalistic bonds, giving rise to a movement that was no longer restricted by geographic or cultural boundaries.

- E. **The National Church: England** - In 1533 English monarch, Henry VIII, sought an annulment of his marriage which was subsequently denied by Pope Clement VII. Henry responded to this by asserting England's independence as a nation state and as a separate province of the church in the English Act of Supremacy of 1534. The allegiance of the bishops was then directed from the papacy to the monarchy.

While not initially identifying as protestant, a term more associated with German Lutheranism at this point in time, under Henry's son, Edward VI and the work of Thomas Cranmer, protestant theology began forming the national church of England. Edward VI was succeeded by Mary Tudor who pushed the church once more to Catholicism. After a 5 year reign she was then succeeded by Elizabeth who sought a middle way, the *via media*, holding to traditional catholic practices and symbols, only with a protestant theology that became more aligned with the reformed church than Lutheranism.

V. IMPACT

What held patristic Christianity together was its ability to maintain tension and diversity, focusing on the unifying message of the creed. In the Reformation divided movements emphasized not what they held in common, but what made them unique or different from another, thus emphasizing the dissimilarities. The unity of the creed gave way to the differentiation of the confession. This had an impact politically, religiously, and in regards to the Gospel itself.

- A. **The Undoing of Christendom** – The external bond of unity of Western Christianity was Christendom. With the Reformation came its fragmentation and the framework for the rising nation-state was laid. Ironically the reformers themselves continued the notion of Christendom, only now in regional and sectarian forms.

The pinnacle of this undoing manifested in the Thirty Years' War which began as an internecine conflict within the Holy Roman Empire between Protestants and Catholics, but evolved into a

continental battle for political supremacy. The result of the conflict was a significant loss of life in Europe and the foundations of modern Europe through the decentralizing of power, allowing for what would become secular nation-states.

- B. **Tridentine Catholicism** – The call for a council in the Catholic Church was initially not received as the debate between conciliary authority and the papacy continued. Eventually in 1545 a council was called in Trent that met in 3 sessions over an 18 year period. Ironically it was never once attended by a pope and mostly represented by Italian leadership.

Its aim was to lay out for the faithful an authoritative version of what it considered to be genuine Catholic teaching on all the controversial issues, many of which had been previously unclear. It was called under the premise of " the uprooting of heresy, the restoring of peace and unity, and the reformation of ecclesiastical discipline and morals." While some have labeled this the 'counter reformation' and have focused on its 'reactionary traditionalism, it must also be seen in light of its drive towards 'self reform.'

However one views the decrees and canons of the Council of Trent, it shaped Catholicism for the next 400 years. Giving articulation to many previously undefined tenants, it dealt with the issues of ignorance and immorality and gave way to a more missions oriented Catholicism. Not until the Second Vatican Council would the Catholic Church give a fuller response to the Protestant Reformation.

- C. **The Democratization of the Gospel** – With the promulgation of 'sola scriptura' and the rise of vernacular translations of scripture, came a democratizing of the Gospel. While challenging the received understanding of tradition, the test became whether the Bible itself could be the bridge to unity and the basis for Christian identity, especially when no one could agree on how it was to be understood.

The Reformation confronted the question of who has the authority to define its faith and the right to interpret its sacred text. It pitted institution and individuals against one another in answering those questions and its inability to articulate a cohesive response perpetuated the many divisions that have now arisen out of Protestantism. Whereby early Christians could find unity in the essentials of the creed, a growing confessionalism arose that defined Christians not by what they held in common, but by what defined them over and against another.