

CHAPTER NINE

The Protestant Reformation, 1517

A true revival means nothing less than a revolution, casting out the spirit of worldliness, making God's love triumph in the heart.

Andrew Murray

When Europe entered the Dark Ages, the church's five major centers of Christianity were Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Rome. By 1500 four of these centers were controlled by Islam, which had conquered North Africa, the Near East, and parts of Eastern Europe. The light of Christianity was dimmed in some of these areas and extinguished in others. Of the ancient Christian centers, only Rome was left. But even the Christianity of the Eternal City was obscured by corruption and political intrigue.

The medieval order held that everyone was governed by God's will. All people had their respective places in the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious worlds. God determined who would be a king or a peasant by birth, and it was the church that ruled them all.

The Renaissance, beginning in Italy, motivated a few individuals to grow intellectually in logic, reason, mathematics, the humanities, and the arts. Intellectual individualism was stirring. Wealth was no longer controlled by feudalistic landowners-that

is, the royalty and the church. A new wealth grew in trade centers, creating a middle class of bankers, traders, merchants, industrialists, and some workers' guilds. Thus economic individualism was also stirring.

Martin Luther

Religious individuals had already stirred Europe, reformers such as Wycliffe, Hus, and Savonarola. However, one individual would break upon the scene—protected by political powers—to challenge the religious control of the Catholic Church over the Christian world. Martin Luther wanted freedom of the individual conscience before God, and he boldly proclaimed his position to Rome. Meanwhile, the state rulers saw in Luther an occasion to free themselves from the oppressive economic and political control of Rome.

At the same time, there were other forces concerned not with political power but with knowing God: the Swiss Brethren, the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands, the Brethren of the Common Life in Germany, and the Pietists in many places. The Huguenot Revival in France could be added to this list, but they were concerned with both knowing God and political power.

Other Reformers

After Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the castle door in Wittenburg, other reformers appeared on the scene, preaching against the same abuses in the Catholic Church and calling for a newly established church.

In Zurich, Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli, a young priest, followed the example of Luther, but went further in reform. Luther hadn't changed the church's local form of government because he supported an episcopal form of government ruled by bishops. Zwingli established a Reformed church in Switzerland by making substantial changes in worship, which was not an interest of Luther. Zwingli stripped away every form of the former church's practice that he believed couldn't be supported by Scripture.

John Calvin brought complete church reforms to Geneva, Switzerland, in 1541, organizing the religious life of the city around his concepts (later known as Calvinism) with a view of turning Geneva into a model Christian city (a theocracy) which was to be a "New Jerusalem." One strength of the Catholic Church was in its commitment to feudalism and the agrarian way of life. Zwingli and Calvin were urban leaders, and from the cities they gained strength for the Reformation.

Henry VIII allowed the Protestant Reformation to get a toehold in England by channeling Rome's authority, but not because of his religious commitments. Henry wanted to divorce his wife and to get his hands on the vast wealth of the Catholic Church, which included extensive property, buildings, and labor. He wanted the wealth of England to stay in the country, not to be funneled to Rome. From 1547 to 1558 England shifted back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism. It was Queen Elizabeth I who finally stabilized England in the Protestant fold.

Before the Protestant Reformation, considerable political power as well as religious authority was concentrated at Rome. The temptation to abuse such power was great, and many church leaders had become morally corrupt. For a new foundation of the church and freedom of the conscience before God, Martin Luther was raised up as a symbolic leader who changed the face of European civilization.

Martin Luther (1517)

Martin Luther didn't intend to become an international reformer in 1517 when he posted ninety-five theses on the door of Wittenburg Castle. Rome was selling indulgences for the forgiveness of sins to finance the lavish building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther's theses didn't challenge the entire fabric of the Catholic Church; he simply gave theological reasons for opposing the sale of indulgences.

Luther had a long pilgrimage to true faith. He had a deep sense of guilt and personal condemnation. He studied the apostle Paul's books of Galatians and Romans, realizing the message of grace and forgiveness through simple faith in Jesus Christ not by the religious demands of the church. He understood justification, that is, that a man was declared righteous before God, not by works or indulgences. But the underlying foundation of this reformation was the appeal to "conscience," not to the leaders of the church. It was the individual's study of Scripture that introduced the Protestant Reformation.

Luther had no idea where his challenge of papal authority would go, but when this unknown German priest stood up to the pope, German rulers took note. It was an opportunity to free themselves of the political and economic burdens of Rome.

Frederick, imperial elector of Germany, gave Luther protection so the pope couldn't touch him. In several debates against papal representatives, Luther triumphed. By 1520 Luther was no longer trying to reform his mother church, Rome; he had totally abandoned it. He called Rome the antichrist and publicly burned a papal edict requiring him to submit to Rome. Luther had most of Germany on his side.

Luther was excommunicated but was more popular than ever. He was still under the protection of Frederick. Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire called Luther to a council at Worms and gave him a position while there. Because Luther was given an imperial guarantee of safety, he attended.

At this meeting, Luther voiced the well-known phrase, "Here I stand, I can do no other." He based his stand on his conscience and an understanding of Holy Scriptures. Luther left Worms before the council could revoke the guarantee of safety given him. (Earlier, John Hus had been given the same guarantee, but was burned at the stake.)

Before this time, most people didn't have direct access to the Word of God; their Bible was the Latin Vulgate translation. Since few of the people or the priests knew Latin, the light of God's Word was in many ways hidden. Frederick had Luther secluded in a castle, where the reformer translated the Bible into the German language.

Ulrich Zwingli (1522)

In 1522 the Swiss preacher Ulrich Zwingli opposed the traditional fast during Lent because it didn't have a scriptural foundation. The Zurich, Switzerland, civil government supported Zwingli's position. When the Catholic bishop of Constance tried to suppress Zwingli, Zwingli saw it as an opportunity to take control of religious practices in its domain.

Because Zwingli advocated the Scriptures as the sole religious authority, he supported the government of Zurich, claiming that civil government was under the leadership of Christ, as directed by Scripture. The reformation of Zwingli spread to other cities—Basel, Constance, Bern, and Strasbourg—establishing in each a Reformed government, based on the model of Zurich. Luther did not embrace this position, focusing his reformation more narrowly on personal justification; he wasn't interested in reforming the worship practices of the church, or its government. Luther felt the church should remain under the authority of the bishops, possibly because of his loyalty to the nobles who had supported his break with Rome.

Zwingli had a more humanist background than Luther, and Zwingli sought the Greek and Hebrew origins of the church. He felt that Rome had departed from the original purity of the church and had perverted its nature.

Zwingli thought the celebration of the Lord's Supper was only symbolic, while Luther taught that the real presence of Christ was in the elements. Some in the two parties tried to bring them together, but the gap between their positions was unbridgeable. Lutheranism and the Reformed Church remained permanently separated.

Many rural areas of Switzerland remained loyal to the Catholic Church, while the cities embraced the Reformed Church (a prevalent trend in Europe). The leaders of the rural Swiss cantons bitterly opposed Zwinglian reforms, and war broke out between the two camps. Zwingli was killed in a battle in 1531. If he had lived, the Reformed Church might have made greater strides.

John Calvin (1541)

John Calvin was a young French law clerk who tried to persuade King Francis I to sympathize with the quarrelling Protestant movement in France. As a young man, he wrote and published in 1536 his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a theological treatise that would be the foundation of the movement known as Calvinism.

Not only did Calvin fail to convince the king; the treatise identified him as a religious radical. He was forced to flee France for his life, and went to Geneva, Switzerland. The reformer William Farel invited Calvin to help organize a Reformed government in Geneva, but Calvin was too highly disciplined and demanding for the rebellious city of Geneva. In 1538 he and Farel were banned from the city, and he went to the reform-minded city of Strasbourg.

Things changed in Geneva within the next three years, and in 1541 Calvin was invited to return there. Reluctantly he accepted the invitation, but he told the city council it

would be on his terms. He reorganized the religious life of the city around ordinances he wrote, with a view to making Geneva a model Christian city. The Reformed city was quite a contrast to the opulent but corrupt city of Rome.

The feudal order of the medieval religious way of life was crumbling. Calvin directed his energies toward building a new urban order of purified Christianity. Eventually, he tried to influence not only religious life but every area of public life. He gave a theological basis to the new European trade cities for governing themselves under the direct authority of God, without the intermediate authority of Rome. Thus Calvin sought to establish a Christian socioeconomic and political way of life and government.

Calvin had no rebellious intent in his teaching; he advocated that each was to be a good citizen, to be submissive to proper government, and to pay taxes. The rulers of the cities went along with Calvin when they saw that the “Protestants” were obedient citizens who were productive in their private lives.

John Knox (1560)

Educated at Glasgow University, John Knox was ordained into the priesthood in 1539. Throughout his life he played many roles: he was a minister at St. Andrew’s; he was captured and became a galley slave in French bondage; he was a writer and chaplain to King Edward VI of England. But most importantly, he brought the Reformation to Scotland.

When Mary Tudor came to the English throne, Knox went into exile, primarily in Geneva, where he was taught by John Calvin. He returned briefly to an all-Catholic Scotland in August 1555, and his preaching won many to the Reformed faith. Because of Catholic opposition, he couldn’t remain in Scotland; he left after suffering many attempts on his life.

In his absence, the queen proclaimed him an outlaw, and Knox was condemned to death. Because of the Reformation in England and Scotland, the French (motivated by Rome) rushed in soldiers to keep Scotland Catholic. Queen Elizabeth (who disliked Knox) refused to intervene. Still, Knox’s preaching kept alive the hope of Protestants in Scotland. Knox wrote the Book of Common Order, the Scot’s Confession of Faith, and the First Book of Discipline. In July 1560 the alliance with France was revoked, and the English army came to Scotland to help the Protestants.

When the English army arrived, Knox hoped that the wealth of the Catholic Church would come to the Protestant Church, but that hope was shattered by politicians. Most of the finances went elsewhere.

Knox became sole minister of St. Giles Church in Edinburgh, preaching twice every Sunday and three times during the week, to more than a thousand each time. Knox prayed, “Give me Scotland or I die,” and due to his influence Scotland has a strong Reformed heritage to this day.

The Communion Revival at Shotts (1630)

Early in the turbulent 1600s, the Protestant Reformation was just beginning to take root in Scotland. When the hardy Scots quickly embraced the Reformed faith, there weren't enough ordained clergy to go around. As a result, churches gathered together during special seasons to observe certain ordinances of the church. As Christians looked forward to the beginning of summer, they also anticipated the coming of what they called "the Communion Season." Thousands would gather in the village of Shotts to celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

During their days together, there were several preaching services, and the preaching would be shared by several of the ministers present. It was always an honor to be asked to address such a gathering, an honor usually reserved for the older and better-known pastors. But when the people gathered in 1630, there was an exception.

Among those asked to speak was a relatively unknown young man named John Livingstone. No one was more surprised than Livingstone himself when he received this invitation. While he recognized it as an honor, he felt himself unworthy of the trust that had been placed in him.

The young pastor pleaded with his elders to allow him to decline, claiming that he wasn't capable of rising to the challenge. His elders, however, apparently disagreed. Livingstone eventually realized that he wasn't about to change their stubborn Scottish minds. Reluctantly, he consented to prepare and preach the requested sermon.

As the day of his sermon grew closer, the conviction grew stronger in Livingstone that he'd been called on to perform a task well beyond his natural ability. The evening before he was to speak, he couldn't sleep. Instead, he cried out to God in prayer. Yet, the longer he prayed, the stronger became his "overwhelming sense of utter weakness."

By morning, Livingstone was a wreck. As the hour approached when he was to step into the pulpit, he could think of nothing else to do but run, so he did. As he ran through the fields, he looked back and could barely see the church building in the distance. Then something strange happened.

Although he knew he was alone, he heard a voice as if it came from heaven, saying, "Have I been a wilderness to Israel, Or a land of darkness?" (Jer. 2:31). The verse stung deeply. Suddenly he realized that the opportunity to preach had come not by the invitation of the elders but by the appointment of God. He thus turned back to the village to keep his appointment.

During the Communion Season, the crowd always swelled beyond the capacity of the village kirk (church). John Livingstone rose to address the large crowd, reading from Ezekiel: "Therefore say to them, `Thus says the Lord God: "You eat meat with blood, you lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood. Should you then possess the land? You rely on your sword, you commit abominations, and you defile one another's wives. Should you then possess the land?" (Ezek. 33:25-26).

The young preacher challenged the congregation to "examine themselves" before partaking of the ordinance. He then directed the crowd's attention to the promises of God

recorded only a few chapters later: “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:25-26).

As Livingstone continued preaching, it began to rain lightly. When the first few drops of rain fell, people began to move away and take cover where they could find it. Even as they began moving, the preacher cried out, “If a few drops of rain so easily upset you, then what will you do in the Day of Judgment when God rains down fire and brimstone upon the Christ rejectors?” He urged people to “flee to Christ, the City of Refuge.”

The sermon he’d been so reluctant to preach would never be finished. Suddenly, “the power of God came down upon the multitude.” One report describes people falling under that power as though they’d been “slain as in the field of battle.” Hundreds of people began crying out to God in deep agony of their souls. By the end of the day, 500 people had been converted to Christ.

Little else is remembered of the ministry of John Livingstone of the Kirk of Shotts. Little else needs to be known. The impact on the community was profound that day, but the impact on the nation would be greater in the generations to come. Throughout history, revivals have been widely reported throughout Scotland, but no revival story has been more often repeated in the Land of Heather than the story of Livingstone of Shotts and the divine visitation experienced by the Kirk of Shotts on June 21, 1630.

A Summary of the Protestant Reformation

In one sense the Protestant Reformation was not primarily a revival as judged by the technical definition used in this volume. It was primarily a protest to the Catholic Church that had implications in political, social, and economic areas, with the redrawing of geographical boundary lines. As such, the Protestant Reformation—like a revival—influenced almost every area of life it touched.

Yet there is also a sense in which the Protestant Reformation was a revival or an awakening. When the people were given access to the Word of God through preaching and teaching, they became a “revived” people in their walk with God. While the spiritual aspects of the Protestant Reformation were not the dominant thrust, these factors cannot be dismissed. Because of this tension between spiritual renewal and doctrinal protest, the authors ranked this era lower in revival influence than other awakenings.

The Protestant Reformation produced historical greats, but we should keep in mind their limitations. Martin Luther, for example, raged about the terrible tyranny of Rome, but if the Catholic Church had really been as powerful as he insisted it was, the Protestant Reformation could never have happened. John Calvin was an academic genius who wanted Geneva to be the “heavenly city” on earth that Rome never was, and the influence of his “reformed theology” has been lasting. Yet, in his passion for individual conscience to interpret Scripture, he was as tyrannical over private lives as Rome had ever been. He had the religious dissenter Michael Servetus arrested, tortured, and burned at the

stake for following his religious convictions. Zwingli also led toward religious freedom, but he, too, with the cooperation of the Council of Zurich, executed one of the Anabaptist leaders by drowning. These reformers—not revivalists—were usually associated with the state's program of reformation, which at times clouded the purity of any revival movement that flowed in their wake.

Still, despite all they failed to do in revival, and all they did in compromise, the greatness of these leaders shines like a burning star in the blackest night. If they had not reformed, we would not live as we do today in our Protestant churches.

1-1-2000

The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever: from Pentecost to the Present

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