

## KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (9)

### The Reformation Church (1517-1648) – The Swan Begins to Sing

#### A. Introduction

##### 1. What is church history?

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

The command of making disciples, which Jesus gave to His followers, involved them taking the good news of Jesus to places where it was not known and teaching His followers to obey Him.

Church history is the story of how this has happened.

##### 2. Why bother with church history?

Three great reasons for studying church history.

Instruction – the difficulties and circumstances we face today are not new and we can look to the past to learn from where believers have acted wisely in these situations and where believers have acted foolishly.

“Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past.” (Deuteronomy 32:7)

Worship – when we see all God has done through His church it should lead us to praise Him for His faithfulness.

“Praise the LORD... Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.” (Psalm 150:1-2)

Confidence – Jesus is keeping His promise to build His church.

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

##### 3. Recapping the first three periods of church history.

The Early Church was the period of church history between the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 and the Edict of Milan in AD313.

This period was marked by rapid *growth* as Christians spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. But two dangers threatened to halt its growth, *persecution* and *false teaching*. In response to persecution came the rise of the apologist who defined and defended the faith strengthening the confidence believers had in the truth they professed. In response to false teaching was the formation of the canon of Scripture and creeds that summarised what Christians must believe. Responsibility for protecting the apostle’s teaching also transferred from the church to the bishop.

The Imperial Church was the period of church history between the Edict of Milan in AD313 and the Fall of Rome in AD476.

This period was marked by three big changes: *Formalism* (the church became shaped by the world around them and the services began to reflect the pomp of the civil ceremonies); *Nominalism* (everyone in the Empire was now a Christian and the church became a mixed community of believers and unbelievers); and *Hierarchicalism* (the structure of the church emulated Roman organisation and the church was under state control with the Emperor as the head of the church). But this did not stop a number of positive developments to take place in the areas of training church leaders, Bible translation, preaching, the education of children, as well as a right understanding of the Bible’s teaching about Jesus and His saving work in response to Arianism and Pelagianism.

The Medieval Church was the period of church history between the Fall of Rome in AD476 and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

Perhaps the best way of summarising what took place during a thousand years of church history is to look at three ways this period can be described.

It was a time of *deterioration*. The deterioration was really a continuation of a trajectory set by the Imperial Church. There was deterioration in the *leadership* of the church (abuse and corruption); the *beliefs* of the church (a number of serious errors became core beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church); the *mission* of the church (the opportunity to take the gospel beyond the borders of the Roman Empire was missed); and the *worship* of the church (a shift took place from the centrality of the pulpit and preaching to the table and the mass).

It was also time of *development*. Some of the positive developments that took place included the opening of universities, the rise of scholasticism, the rediscovery of the Greek New Testament, the rise of Nationalism, the discrediting of the Pope and the invention of the printing press.

And it was a time of *dissent*. Concerns about the corrupt practices and mistaken beliefs within the church became increasingly common and gradually people like Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe and Jan Huss began to speak out against them. The Roman Catholic Church wasn't too thrilled with these men and their followers and sought to silence them. The Waldensians were excommunicated by the church and persecuted. Wycliffe, though never excommunicated, did have his corpse dug up, burned and his ashes thrown into the River Swift, and Huss was burnt at the stake after refusing to recant his beliefs.

Yet two interesting comments were made concerning Wycliffe and Huss' deaths.

Thomas Fuller (1608-1661): *"They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into Swift, a neighboring brook running hard-by. Thus, this brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wicliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed the world over."*

Jan Huss: *"You can cook this goose [Huss] but within a century a swan shall arise who will prevail."*

Martin Luther would later see himself as the fulfilment of Huss' words: *"Holy Johannes Hus prophesied about me when he wrote from his Bohemian prison that they might now be roasting a goose [Hus], but in a hundred years they will hear a swan sing, which they will not be able to silence. And that is the way it will be, if God wills."*

4. By 1517 and the end of the period of church history known as the Medieval Church, there was one thing that was clearly needed, and that was, reform.

The stage was set for what took place when a German Monk took a mallet and hammered into the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, his "95 theses" and began the next period of church history known as the Reformation Church.

5. The Reformation Church was the period of church history between the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 and its end with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

This is one of the most important periods in church history for three reasons.

For its rediscovery and recovery of the gospel.

*"Though this biblical gospel was certainly taught before the sixteenth century, conflict over it came to a head in the early sixteenth century in a series of events peopled with larger-than-life characters and heart-stopping scenes. Studies, of course, are conducted in quiet places. But their fruits can have thundering implications. And none have been louder than the stories of the discoveries made by this German monk, this French humanist, this Swiss priest, and hundreds of others." (Mark Dever)*

For its explanation of the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and why there are so many Protestant denominations today.

For its continuing relevance, as nearly all the conflicts that took place during the Reformation are still ongoing.

6. But before we can look at how the reformation of the church, that began in Germany and spread all over Europe, took place, we need to look at two key moments which took place prior to 1517.

### **C. Luther's Conversion**

1. In 1505, a German man, studying law at the University of Erfurt, was caught in the middle of a thunderstorm.

Martin Luther knew that he was a sinner who needed to find a way to become right with God.

But though he sought to follow the teachings of the church, he still lacked the assurance that he was.

As a lightning bolt struck the ground near him, he was terrified by prospect of dying without making a final confession to a priest, so cried out, "*St Anne, save me! And I'll become a monk.*"

Luther kept his word, and to the fury of his father for wasting the expensive education he had been given, he entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.

2. Now at the time, the church taught that a person was saved by faith in Christ and by receiving the sacraments of the church.

With the sacraments being the means through which a person received the righteousness of Christ that they needed to be holy enough to enter heaven.

One of these sacraments was penance where a sinner would confess their sins to God through the priest and the priest on behalf of God would pardon them. Often the sinner would have to do various acts to stop them repeating the sin and give them the desire to live a more holy life.

The problem was that very few people died righteous enough to go to heaven.

Fortunately, there was purgatory. This was an intermediate state where those destined for heaven are purified, in order to achieve the holiness necessary to enter heaven. This was the place where any sins for which penance had not be performed were dealt with.

Not only that, there were also saints who been so good that not only did they die righteous enough to go to heaven straightaway, they also had more than they needed, and this spare was kept in a treasury from which the Pope could give.

A gift of merit (an indulgence) could exempt someone from doing penance or reduce the time they or someone they loved would need to spend in purgatory.

3. Luther was a dedicated monk.

He fulfilled his duties, he was dedicated in prayer, confession, and penance.

*"I kept the rule so strictly, that I may say that if ever a monk go 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."*

Yet the more he did this, the more troubled he became. He lacked the assurance that enough righteousness had been imparted to him to enter heaven.

4. In 1511 he was transferred to the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg.

There he taught first, philosophy, and then the Bible.

In 1513 he began to expound the Psalms.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" (Psalm 22:1)

Luther was comforted by the fact that Christ Himself had felt this sense of alienation from God, that he knew.

He moved on to teach the book of Romans in 1515.

"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:17)

These words struck fear in Luther's heart because it was the righteousness of God that drove sinners (like Luther) from His presence.

Yet as he pondered the verse further, a light dawned.

*"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 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 me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven."*

Luther had thought that the 'righteousness of God' referred only to an attribute of God. Now he had discovered that it could also be a gift of God to sinners so they could be declared or considered righteous in God's sight.

Unlike the church that taught that righteousness was imparted via the sacraments, Luther discovered that the Bible taught that righteousness was imputed.

This gave Luther the assurance he was looking for, because salvation did not depend on whether he had done enough, but wholly on what Christ had done.

Luther had discovered the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

#### **D. Luther's Complaint**

1. While Luther was searching the Scriptures, the Pope was searching for funds.

Pope Leo X needed money to finance the rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica.

To raise funds for this he allowed indulgences to be sold.

Previously he had offered indulgences from sin and from purgatory for those who fought in the crusades.

By allowing indulgences to be bought, it wasn't too long before people thought they could buy their way into heaven.

Yet that didn't matter to the Pope because if people were buying the indulgences, it meant that he was getting the money he desperately needed.

2. The Pope's leading salesman when it came to the sale of indulgences was a man called Johann Tetzel.

He had a persuasive sales pitch that went like this: "*Consider the salvation of your souls and those of your departed loved ones... Visit the holy cross erected before you... Listen to the voice of your dear dead relatives and friends beseeching you and saying, "Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance." Do you not wish to? Open your ears. Hear the father saying to his son, the mother to her daughter, "We bore you, nourished you, brought you up, left you*

*our fortunes, and you are so cruel and hard that now you are not willing for so little to set us free. Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory?"*

Then followed a jingle: *"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, another soul from purgatory springs."*

An alternative one went like this: *"Place your penny on the drum, the pearly gates open and in strolls mum."*

### 3. Tetzal and the Pope's indulgences however were not allowed to be sold in Wittenberg.

Frederick the Wise ruled over this part of Germany and did not like his people's money being used to finance building projects in Italy.

He had his own indulgences available due to the large number of relics of saints that he had collected which were stored in Castle Church. Viewing those relics and making a stipulated contribution, could reduce a believer's stay in purgatory whilst providing support for Castle Church and the University of Wittenberg.

But the people of Wittenberg were travelling to buy those Tetzal was selling.

Luther was not impressed.

His big issue was not with indulgences per se, but with the way they were being abused by Tetzal because he was giving people a false sense of security by offering those who bought the indulgence, full pardon for sins committed (past, present, and future) and release from purgatory without any need of sorrow for sin and confession of sin.

He also complained that *"the revenues of all Christendom being sucked into this insatiable basilica"* when they were other and much greater needs.

### 4. On 31 October 1517 a swan arises as Luther makes his complaints about the sale of indulgences public.

## **D. What lessons can we learn for today?**

#### 1. How wonderful the gospel is compared to the exhausting nature of Roman Catholicism.

We don't have to strive to gain enough righteousness to get into heaven because we can be sure Jesus has given us the righteousness that we need.

*"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

#### 2. How wonderful the gospel is compared to the lack of assurance given by Roman Catholicism.

We don't have to worry about whether we've done enough to get into heaven because we can be sure that Jesus has done enough.

*"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:13-14)*

*"And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:9-10)*