

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#17. Summary of The Church in the Sixteenth Century

Church history in the 1500s revolves around Martin Luther and The Reformation.

Many historians believe this era is the beginning of the “Modern Age” in regard to science and scholasticism. In regard to the Church, the event known as the Reformation was arguably the greatest revival since the first generation of Christians. I personally believe we may still be in Reformation mode today. In later lessons, we will discuss more about the Reformation in depth, but today I will point to a few highlights and meet the man God used as the catalyst.

The Reformation is almost never discussed apart from Martin Luther, who was a Catholic priest born in northern Germany in 1483. Luther was a typical product of the European Christian world of his time. His life was heavy on the judgment of God, works that must be done in order to avert that wrath (penance), and receiving the Sacraments. With his theological emphasis revolving around works, most Christians of Luther's day lived in perpetual uncertainty regarding personal salvation. Traumatic events (an accident on horseback, a severe storm, etc.) drove him deeper into doubt. His response was to become a monk. When studying the Book of Romans, he began to discover the “righteousness of God revealed from Heaven” was not only a warning about divine judgment, but also an offer of forgiveness and righteousness through Jesus Christ.

During this time, there was a campaign to raise money for the construction of a new basilica in Rome. This was done primarily by the “Sale of Indulgences” (pardons that could be purchased and made available for the benefit of deceased loved ones in purgatory). At least in Luther's region, the sales were particularly egregious as a Dominican Monk named Johan Tetzel energetically merchandised the campaign, often using musical jingles to prompt purchases (one reported version was “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs!”).

On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg. These 95 objections to the church practices was intended only for discussion among scholars and clerics at the university, but was soon translated into almost every language in Europe.

Like wildfire, the message of justification by faith alone, the authority of Scripture alone, and the Priesthood of Believer spread throughout Christendom. Christians were accepting three truths: (1) the teaching of Scripture was the only authority that was binding for salvation. Church teaching had a place, they said, but that place was not on equal footing with the Bible. (2) The church was not the mediator of a person's salvation. Though the church was initiated by Christ and was designed to be the family of the faithful, the church should not manipulate, intimidate, or control people through excommunication or execution. (3) Trust in Christ, without the needed approval of any external group, was the basis for Assurance of Salvation. These views were not a renunciation of the Church, but rather a call for the Church to return to her original identity. The establishment of the Lutheran Church is thought by many to be an afterthought, not the intention of Luther's work.

Though Luther was protected by friends for years, he was still put on trial, condemned as a heretic, and excommunicated. Yet it was the work of Luther that most often was the catalyst for Reformation throughout the continent. He died in 1546 after several years of poor health.

Other prominent figures of the Reformation (to be studied in later chapters) were John Calvin in France and Switzerland, Philip Melancthon in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, Thomas Cranmer in England, and John Knox in Scotland.

As we move from the Reformation for the time being, we must realize that all of these Reformers were far from perfect. Though true men of God, each had their own faults and failures. Also, we mustn't think the Catholic Church was devoid of spirituality. God's work of refining overlaps in so many ways, and we do well to remember that the one who began the good work in each of us will be faithful to bring His plans and purposes to maturity (Philippians 1:6).