

The Cause and Results of the Reformation

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Reformation Men and Theology, Lesson 2 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Reformation was the greatest religious movement for Christ since the early church. It was a revival of Biblical and New Testament theology.
- B. The Reformation officially began in 1517 when Martin Luther challenged the Roman Church on the matter of Indulgences. While Luther had no idea of the impact this would make on the German society and the world, this event changed the course of history.

“The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, next to the introduction of Christianity, the greatest event in history. It marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. Starting from religion, it gave, directly or indirectly, a mighty impulse to every forward movement, and made Protestantism the chief propelling force in the history of modern civilization” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*).

II. THE CAUSE OF THE REFORMATION

- A. There had been numerous attempts to reform the Roman Church before the 16th century, but they had always been

squelched by the Inquisition. There were also groups outside the Roman Church, such as the Albigenses and Waldenses. They opposed the Roman Church and their blood flowed like water in martyrdom. Men such as John Wycliffe (1320-1384), John Huss (1360-1415), and Gerolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) spoke out against the papacy, auricular confession, purgatory, pilgrimages, worship of saints, relics, etc. Huss and Savonarola were burned at the stake as heretics. Rome herself made some halfhearted attempts to reform at the Councils of Pisa (1409), Constance (1414-1418) and Basel (1431), but these were not successful. There was a group within the Roman Church called *The Brethren of the Common Life* that came into existence around 1350 for the specific purpose of bringing reform. Some famous men who belonged to this group were John of Wessel, Erasmus and Thomas à Kempis.

- B. God appointed the 16th century to be the time of reformation, and had prepared the Church in many ways for this reformation. Religious, economic and political factors that had been brewing for centuries set the stage for the Reformation. The papacy was corrupt; monasticism and scholastic theology had declined; mysticism was on the upswing; there was a revival of the Greek and Roman classics; men with a spirit of inquiry and independence were discovering the new world; the printing press had been invented, and the Greek New Testament republished. The Renaissance was also a factor in that it challenged men to use their minds — but the Renaissance was purely secular, not religious. The Renaissance brought humanism, but the Reformation brought true Christianity. These things were all part of God's plan to bring about the greatest religious revival since the first three centuries of the Church.

- C. Some men have wrongly called the Protestant Reformation a Protestant revolution because much of the Reformation was political and economic. Men forget that because the Roman Church controlled everything, it was necessary for the Reformation to include political and economic elements. If Protestants were to survive, they had to have political and economic power to hold off Rome. Also, it was common for a prince and his whole province to turn Protestant. Later, even kings and whole countries embraced the Protestant faith. Providence forced the Reformers to participate in politics and economics. While some secular rulers used the Reformation for their own greed, many more threw in their lot with the Reformers from a deep religious conviction of serving the one true God through Christ.

“For the Reformation was neither a revolution nor a restoration, though including elements of both. It was negative and destructive towards error, positive and constructive towards truth; it was conservative as well as progressive; it built up new institutions in the place of those which it pulled down; and for this reason and to this extent it has succeeded” (Schaff).

“There are two leading aspects in which the Reformation, viewed as a whole, may be regarded; the one more external and negative, and the other more intrinsic and positive. In the first aspect it was a great revolt against the see of Rome, and against the authority of the church and of churchmen in religious matters, combined with an assertion of the exclusive authority of the Bible, and of the right of all men to examine and interpret it for

themselves. In the second and more important and positive aspect, the Reformation was the proclamation and inculcation, upon the alleged authority of Scripture, of certain views in regard to the substance of Christianity or the way of salvation, and in regard to the organization and ordinances of the Christian church” (William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*).

III. THE MEN OF THE REFORMATION

- A. The Reformers, while not free from fault, were men with pure motives and high aims. They were unique in the history of the church as men of intellectual ability and passion for Jesus Christ. Most of what they wrote is still as relevant today as when it was written, for most of the same issues prevail at this very hour. The Reformers set forth the Bible and opposed all false religious systems. What the Reformers maintained was in the main truth — God’s own truth as revealed in the Scriptures.
- B. It should be remembered that the Reformers were all born, baptized, confirmed and educated in the Roman Catholic Church, and most of them had served as priests at her altars with the solemn vow of obedience to the pope on their conscience.

“But it holds true universally, that God has never given to any uninspired man, or body of men, to rise altogether above the influence of the circumstances in which they were placed, in the formation and expression of their opinions upon religious subjects. And even the greatest admirers of the Reformers readily admit that they, all of

them, though not in the main features of their theological system, yielded more or less to the various sources of error which prevail among men, and more particularly, that they exhibited, on the one hand, traces that they had not wholly escaped from the corrupting influence of the system in which they had been educated, and on the other hand, what is equally natural, that they were sometimes in danger in avoiding one extreme of falling into the opposite one” (Cunningham).

- C. The Reformers did not always agree with one another in their doctrine. While they agreed over the essential matters of the gospel, they disagreed over church polity, the Lord’s Table, and the relationship of the church to the state. It would be impossible to get a group of men to agree on all things all the time. Still, there was more unity among the Reformers than there has been among any Protestants since the Reformation.

IV. THE DOCTRINAL UNITY OF THE REFORMERS

A. Doctrine

1. **Bible Only** (*Sola Scriptura*): The Reformers declared the Bible to be the only rule of faith and practice. They believed that God had made a revelation in written form to men in the Bible. They taught that the Bible was inspired by God and authoritative, and that it took precedence over the declarations of popes, church tradition and church councils. They asserted that men, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, are to study the Bible to learn about God, Christ, salvation, and church government and practices. They encouraged Christians to

read and study their Bibles in a scholarly way so as to form a biblical theology based on the authority of the Scriptures alone. The Bible, hitherto written in Latin and read only by the clergy, was translated anew into the vernacular tongues of Europe and made a book of the people.

2. **Christ Only** (*Solo Christo*): Salvation is located not in the church, an organization, but in the person Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ actually secured and procured the salvation of all who are saved by grace through faith in Christ.
3. **Grace Only** (*Sola Gratia*): The Reformers believed that salvation was caused totally by God's grace. Man is not saved by works but by God's grace in Christ. No man deserves salvation, and if he is saved it is because of God's unconditional grace.
4. **Faith Only** (*Sola Fide*): Faith alone is consistent with God's grace in calling to salvation. Thus the Reformers taught that salvation was appropriated by faith alone. Good works could not save but only Christ can save those who believe in Him. Every and any person who trusts the Saviour will be saved, but even a person's faith is a gift from God.
5. **God's Glory Only** (*Soli Deo Gloria*): The underlying, foundational doctrine of the Reformers was that God's glory was the ultimate purpose of all things. They held tenaciously to the doctrines of God's sovereignty in election, predestination and the efficacious call of God in

salvation, and saw how these contributed ultimately to God's glory rather than to man's or to the church's. The Reformers taught supernaturalism and the necessity of a new birth from God.

B. Attitude Towards Rome

1. The Reformers did not believe that Roman Catholicism and Protestantism were just two different forms of Christianity. They believed and taught that Roman Catholicism was heretical and apostate. Roman Catholicism was a religion of works, but Protestantism was the true Christian religion based on God's grace appropriated by faith. The Reformers were not tolerant of Rome, for they sincerely believed that Rome was holding souls in bondage with no hope of salvation. NOTE: There can be no fellowship between grace-based salvation and law-based salvation, between faith-based salvation and works-based salvation, just as there can be no fellowship between light and darkness. Roman Catholicism is a legal religion, but Protestantism is evangelical Christianity. Catholicism is ruled by the principle of human authority, but Protestantism by the principle of freedom in Christ. Catholicism leads to bondage, but Protestantism to the true gospel and spiritual freedom.
2. The Reformers would not go so far to say that there were no Christians in the Roman Church, but they distinguished between saved people in the Roman Church and the Roman Church as an unbiblical and corrupt system.

“Therefore, while we are unwilling simply to concede the name of Church to the Papists, we do not deny that there are churches among them. The question we raise only relates to the true and legitimate constitution of the Church, implying communion in sacred rites, which are the signs of profession and especially in doctrine. . . . We do not at all deny that churches remain under his (Anti-Christ’s) tyranny; churches, however, which by sacrilegious impiety he has profaned, by cruel domination has oppressed, by evil and deadly doctrines like poisoned potions has corrupted and almost slain; churches where Christ lies half-buried, the Gospel is suppressed, piety is put to flight, and the worship of God almost abolished; where, in short, all things are in such disorder as to present the appearance of Babylon rather than the holy city of God. In one word, I call them churches, inasmuch as the Lord there wondrously preserves some remains of His people, though miserably torn and scattered, and inasmuch as some symbols of the Church still remain — symbols especially whose efficacy neither the craft of the devil nor human depravity can destroy. But as, on the other hand, those marks to which we ought especially to have respect in this discussion are effaced, I say that the whole body, as well as every single assembly, want the form of a legitimate Church” (John Calvin, *Institutes*).

V. THE RESULTS OF THE REFORMATION

- A. It is impossible to understand modern history apart from the Reformation. We cannot understand the history of Europe, England or America without studying the Reformation. For example, in America there would never have been Pilgrim Fathers if there had not first been a Protestant Reformation.
- B. The Reformation has profoundly affected the modern view of politics and law. Prior to the Reformation the Church governed politics; she controlled emperors and kings and governed the law of lands.
- C. The meaning of much western literature is really quite meaningless apart from an understanding of the Reformation. Moreover, for all practical purposes Martin Luther stabilized the German language.
- D. In the realm of science, it is generally granted by modern historians that there never would have been modern science were it not for the Reformation. All scientific investigation and endeavor prior to that had been controlled by the church. Only through sheer ignorance of history do many modern scientists believe that Protestantism, the true evangelical faith, opposes true science.
- E. The Reformation laid down once and for all the right and obligation of the individual conscience, and the right to follow the dictates of that individual conscience. Many men who talk lightly and glibly about “liberty” neither know nor realize that they owe their liberty to this event.