

No Other Foundation: A History of the Church, part 3

After Darkness, Light! - The Reformation and its Impact, 1500-1700

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I begin with two scenes, one from the Reformation era, the other from the early 18th century, the first depicting a young woman of sixteen, the second an elderly man in his late seventies--but both are scenes shortly before the deaths of the central figures.

In the first scene it is the morning of February 12, the year 1554. We are in a room in the Tower of London, where the Lady Jane Grey, who had been Queen of England for nine days, is imprisoned. It is only a few hours before her execution at the behest of Mary I, the so-called "Bloody Mary", persecutor of the English Protestants. Jane is writing in her prayer-book, which she will give to her jailer, Sir John Brydges, before she is taken out to the execution block. As we peer over her shoulder to see what she is writing, we read these words:

If justice be done with my body, my soul will find mercy with God. Death will give pain to my body for its sins, but the soul will be justified before God. ...God ...will show me favour.

Our second scene is quite different in many ways, the bedroom of an old Baptist by the name of Thomas Guy (c. 1645-1724). He had been an extremely successful bookseller and printer of bibles. And he had also been a prominent philanthropist in the city of London. For instance, he endowed what has become known as Guy's Hospital with a gift of £219,000! As he draws up his last will and testament, he can look back over a lifetime of good works and faithful service. But his gaze is elsewhere. As he sets about writing his will, he begins with these opening lines:

I commit my Soul to Almighty God, in hopes, through his mercy, and the merits of my Saviour Jesus Christ, to enjoy eternal Rest. [1]

Now, neither of these scenes would have taken place without the life and work of number of other individuals who had laboured at the beginning of the sixteenth century to restore biblical Christianity, men like Lefèvre d'Étaples (c. 1455-1536), Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536) and, above all, Martin Luther (1483-1546), who may be rightly called the pathfinder of the Reformation.

Martin Luther

When historians write of the Reformation, Martin Luther and his rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone rightly take centre stage. Humanly speaking, if it had not been for Luther, this doctrine, which permeates both of the scenes we began with, might well have remained in obscurity, and Jane and Thomas may well have looked to their good works and faithfulness as evidence of God's grace and acceptance of them. As it was, they trusted in Christ alone for their salvation. And that because, in part, of the work of Luther.

But when we say Luther "rediscovered" this doctrine, we are implying that the doctrine had been lost or obscured between the New Testament era and Luther's day. Luther rightly viewed the loss of this key doctrine as having had detrimental effects on the health of the church. For Luther, justification by faith alone is "the principal doctrine of Christianity" and its opposite, the idea that one can be approved by God on the basis of one's own good works, the "fundamental principle" of the world and the devil. [2] As he said more than twenty years after his experience of rediscovering the truth of justification by faith alone: "if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands, if it falls, the church falls." [3]

Luther was born in Saxony in 1483, the eldest son of a fairly successful businessman, Hans Luther,

who was the owner of several mine shafts and copper smelts . Hans wanted a better life for his son than he had had, so he sent him, when he was of age, to Erfurt University , where Martin graduated with a M.A. in 1505. His father encouraged him to go on to get a master's degree in law, but on July 2, 1505 , Martin had an experience that changed the entire course of not only his history, but also the history of the Church.

He had been home for the summer and was returning to Erfurt on foot, when, about half a mile from the city gates of Erfurt a storm broke.

Thunder clouds had built up, and suddenly the lightning flashed, a bolt striking right beside Martin who was knocked to the ground, though unhurt, in terror he shouted out: 'Beloved St Anne! I will become a monk.' St. Anne was the patron saint of miners; Martin had heard prayers to her throughout his childhood perhaps more than to any other saint. ...In later years he described himself at the moment when the lightning struck as 'walled around with the terror and horror of sudden death.' [4]

Twelve days later, on July 17, 1505 , Luther knocked at the gate of the Augustinian order in Erfurt and asked to be accepted into their monastic ranks. When he later told his father of his decision, his father was quite angry that his son was not continuing with his studies. He asked Martin, "Do you not know that it is commanded to honour father and mother?" Luther's response was that his terror in the thunderstorm had led him to become a monk. "I hope it was not the devil," his father replied. [5]

And so Luther became a monk, a member of the Order of Augustinian Eremites, one of the strictest monastic orders in Europe . He entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt to find spiritual peace and salvation. But for nearly ten years genuine peace eluded Luther. To find peace with God, Luther zealously confessed every sin he could think of. He would confess every day, sometimes up to six hours a day. In popular medieval thought, for every sin to be forgiven, there had to be confession. Luther had been taught that the moment the priest whispered in the confessional "I now absolve thee," all of his sins were forgiven. But Luther was never certain that he had been fully forgiven. Always present was the fear: have I confessed every sin? Then came a discovery even more startling and distressing to Luther--there are sins which people do that are not even known to them. But how could these be confessed if they were not known? Luther re-doubled his efforts and threw himself into all-night vigils, great bouts of fasting--all to find forgiveness and peace with God. As he once said:

I was indeed a pious monk and kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say: If ever a monk gained heaven through monkery, it should have been I. All my monastic brethren who knew me will testify to this. I would have martyred myself to death with fasting, praying, reading, and other good works had I remained a monk much longer." [6]

Luther sought to find peace with God through such works, but he was troubled by an overpowering fear of God's judgement. Again, listen to his words:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God... [7]

In plainer language Luther later stated of himself, "If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy." [8]

By 1514 Luther had obtained a doctorate and had been installed as professor of biblical theology at the relatively young University of Wittenberg . During that year, the academic year 1514-1515, [9] he was teaching a course on the Psalms. In his lectures and studies he came to Psalm 71, and was struck by the Psalmist's cry in verse 2, "Deliver me in your righteousness, and cause me to escape." Now, for Luther, the righteousness of God spoke of judgement, not deliverance. Mystified by the Psalmist's language,

Luther decided to study what the Scriptures have to say about this phrase, "the righteousness of God."

He was thus led, in God's providence, to Romans 1:16-17: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'." Again, let us listen to his testimony:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the...the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live' " [Romans 1:17]. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Now what was Luther's discovery? Namely this: that the righteousness of God in this Pauline text is not an attribute of God, but that righteousness which God imputes to the person who puts his or her trust (fiducia) in Christ. This was the decisive discovery of the Reformation. Prior to this experience Luther knew that he could never obtain the righteousness God that demanded in his law, and that one day he would be bound to face the withering wrath of God. By this experience, though, Luther realized that salvation was not at all a matter of his attaining the perfect standard of righteousness which God demanded, but simply, by faith, clinging to and relying upon Christ's righteousness. For Christ alone among men and women has never sinned, he alone has lived a life of perfect righteousness, and he alone has perfectly fulfilled the law and its righteous demands. [10]

Luther's discovery was that salvation from God's wrath was to be found by simple trust in Christ's death for sinners, that at the cross Christ takes all responsibility for the believer's sins--past, present, and future--and that to the one who truly believes God imputes, that is, reckons as the believer's own, Christ's righteousness.

Moreover, our works do not enter the picture at all when it comes to being made right with God. Thus "faith" itself is not to be considered "a work." The faith we exercise is itself a gift from God, a creation of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who enables sinners to accept God's justifying work on their behalf. [11]

Other Discoveries

While justification by faith alone is the central discovery made by Luther, there were other things emphasized by Luther and his fellow reformers. These include:

- Sola scriptura
- The deeply unbiblical nature of the papacy--little wonder that Luther and his fellow Reformers viewed the Papacy as the Antichrist.
- Christian marriage: for the Reformers and those who followed in their stead--like the Puritans of the seventeenth century and the Evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries--Christian marriage has an innate excellence, is vital for the development of Christian affection and friendship, and is one of God's major means for developing Christian character and spiritual maturity.

Children of the Reformation: The Puritans

On these discoveries was the Reformation built. Now, there were four main movements in the Reformation:

- The Lutheran movement spearheaded by Luther, and focused on Germany , and the Scandinavian

countries.

- The Reformed wing, of which Huldreich Zwingli is the first key figure--includes many others though, of whom the most famous is John Calvin (1509-1564), a second-generation Reformer. Focused on Switzerland , Southern Germany , Hungary , France , the Netherlands , and Scotland .
- The Anabaptists--a wide array of individuals from those who were essentially Christian to anti-Trinitarians and violent Revolutionaries--it is among these that Balthasar Hubmaier (d. 1528) is to be found--he was martyred by Roman Catholic authorities in Vienna. Opposed to predestination as taught by the Reformers, he nonetheless emphasized that man's only hope is "to be born again by the Spirit of God and his living Word."
- The Anglican Church, which while influenced strongly by Luther initially and then Reformed authors--one sees this in The Thirty-Nine Articles --sought to carve out a via media between Rome and Geneva, so to speak.

Although Reformation had come to England during the reign of Henry VIII (r.1509-1547), it was not until the reign of his son Edward VI (r.1547-1553) and that of his daughter Elizabeth I (r.1559-1603) that it got a firm footing. In fact, after Elizabeth I ascended the throne there was no doubt that England was firmly in the Protestant orbit.

The question that arose, though, was to what extent the Elizabethan church would be reformed. It soon became clear that Elizabeth was content with a church that was "Calvinistic in theology, [but] Erastian in Church order and government [i.e. the state was ascendant over the church in these areas], and largely mediaeval in liturgy." [12] In response to this ecclesiastical "settledness," there arose the Puritan movement in the early 1560s, which sought to reform the Elizabethan church after the model of the churches in Protestant Switzerland, especially those in Geneva and Zürich.

Some Concerns of Elizabethan Puritanism

Initially Puritan concerns were centered on the reform of the Church's worship and liturgy. In the 1570s and 1580s, however, the ecclesiological positions known as Presbyterianism and Congregationalism were developed by Puritan authors, and the quarrel between the Puritans and those who were quite content with the Church of England as it was (later known by the term "Anglican") broadened to include matters relating to church government.

Most Puritans were Presbyterian in their understanding of church government, but during the 1580s and 1590s some radical Puritans, despairing of a full reformation within the Church of England, began to separate from the state church and organize their own Separatist congregations. This Separatist movement recognized the right of civil authorities to rule and to govern. However, they drew a distinct line between their powers in society at large and their power with regard to local churches. As citizens of the state the individual members of these churches were to be subject to civil authorities, but, the Separatists rightly emphasized, these authorities had no right "to compel religion, to plant Churches by power, and to force a submission to ecclesiastical government by laws and penalties." [13]

In other words, these Separatists conceived of the local church as a "gathered" church, that is, a company of Christians who had covenanted together to live under the rule of Christ, the Risen Lord, whose will was made known through his Word and his Spirit. These men and women had seen clearly that the kingdom of God cannot be brought about by the decrees of state authorities and that ultimately Christianity is "a matter of private conscience rather than public order, that the church is a fellowship of believers rather than an army of pressed men" and women. [14]

Moreover, as British historian B. R. White has noted: "For many it was but a short step from impatient Puritanism within the established Church to convinced Separatism outside it." [15] And it is from the

ranks of these Separatists that the early Baptists emerge. In other words, early Baptists come from the womb of Puritanism. And while they delighted in their Reformation and Puritan heritage, they also argued that God had more light to shed on his Word, especially regarding the subjects and nature of baptism.

The Church of England, though, was convinced that her form of Christianity was the only proper one for the nation and throughout the 17th century there were times of vicious persecution of any who disagreed with her polity. An initial one in the 1630s led to many crossing the Atlantic to New England to find religious freedom. In the 1640s this persecution of the Puritans led to civil war. And again between 1660 and 1688, there was persecution.

John and Elizabeth Bunyan

It is during this latter period that John Bunyan (1628-1688), rightly termed a Baptist, was imprisoned and it was in prison that Bunyan began work on his masterpiece, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan was one of the first Baptists arrested for preaching. On November 12, 1660, he was scheduled to speak to a small group at a farmhouse in the hamlet called Lower Samsell, near Harlington, Bedfordshire. Even though a warrant had been issued for his arrest, he decided to go ahead and preach, for he was convinced that in preaching he was doing nothing wrong. The state, though, thought otherwise, and he was arrested just after he had opened God's Word to read the text on which he was going to preach.

When Bunyan was put on trial, it was made clear to him that he would be released if he promised to desist from preaching. During his trial, Bunyan defended his right to preach by quoting 1 Peter 4:10-11. Those judging his case maintained that only those ordained by the Church of England could lawfully preach. Bunyan's disagreement was rooted in the fact that for him the ultimate authority in religious matters was not human tradition or human laws, but the Scriptures and their author, God.

Further insight into Bunyan's convictions comes from the record of an appeal that his wife--his second wife, Elizabeth Bunyan (d.1692), whom he married in 1659 and who showed tremendous reserves of courage during her husband's imprisonment --made on his behalf in August, 1661. It is a text that also tells us much about her own spiritual stature. There were at least three judges present who heard Elizabeth's appeal: Matthew Hale, a Christian who clearly sympathized with Elizabeth, but who disagreed with her husband's dogged determination to preach; Thomas Twisden, a harsh man; and Henry Chester.

Justice Chester : My Lord, Bunyan is a pestilent fellow; there is not another such fellow in the country.

Judge Twisden (to Elizabeth) : What! will your husband leave preaching? If he will do so, then send for him.

Elizabeth : My lord, he dares not leave preaching so long as he can speak.

Judge Twisden : See here! what should we talk any more about such a fellow! Must he do what he lists? He is a breaker of the peace.

Elizabeth : He desires to live peaceably and to follow his calling, that his family may be maintained. Moreover, my Lord, I have four small children that cannot help themselves, one of which is blind, and we have nothing to live upon but the charity of good people.

Judge Hale : Hast thou four children? thou art but a young woman to have four children.

Elizabeth : I am but mother-in-law to them, having not been married to my husband yet full two years. Indeed I was with child when my husband was first apprehended; but being young and unaccustomed to such things, I being swayed [i.e. dismayed] at the news, fell into labour, and so continued for eight days, and then was delivered, but my child died.

Judge Hale : Alas! poor woman!

Judge Twisden : You make poverty your cloak. I understand that your husband is maintained better by running up and down a-preaching than by following his calling.

Judge Hale : What is his calling?

A stander-by : A tinker, my lord.

Elizabeth : Yes, and because he is a tinker and a poor man, therefore he is despised and cannot have justice.

Judge Hale : I tell thee, woman, seeing it is so that they have taken what thy husband said for a conviction, thou must either apply thyself to the king, or sue out his pardon, or get a writ of error.

Justice Chester : My lord, he will preach and do what he lists.

Elizabeth : He preacheth nothing but the Word of God.

Judge Twisden : He preach the Word of God! He runneth up and down, and doeth harm.

Elizabeth : No, my lord, no! it is not so; God hath owned him, and done much good by him.

Judge Twisden (with an oath): His doctrine is the doctrine of the Devil.

Elizabeth : My lord, when the righteous Judge shall appear, it will be known that his doctrine is not the doctrine of the Devil. [16]

All told Bunyan spent twelve long years in prison. "Oft I was as if I was on the Ladder, with the rope about my neck," [17] Bunyan later recalled fears about his possible demise by hanging as he sat in prison during the 1660s. He was not set at full liberty until 1672.

In these incidents we see the strength of not only John and Elizabeth Bunyan's Christian character but also that of other Puritans and Baptists of that day. They were rightly confident that they had a higher loyalty than obedience to an earthly monarch--obedience to King Jesus. They had to obey their God, otherwise on the day of judgement they would be counted traitors to the King of the universe.

Notes:

[1] A Copy of the Last Will and Testament of Thomas Guy Esq (London : John Osborn, 1725), 5-6. For his story, see Sydney Clark, "A generous miser", Baptist Times (February 24, 1994), 11.

[2] Stephen Westerholm, Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1988), 4.

[3] Cited Philip H. Eveson, The Great Exchange: Justification by faith alone in the light of recent thought (Bromley, Kent: Day One Publications, 1996), 174.

[4] John M. Todd, Luther. A Life (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), 25-26.

[5] Hans J. Hillerbrand, The Reformation. A narrative history related by contemporary observers and

participants (Repr. Grand Rapids : Baker Book House, 1978), 24.

[6] Hillerbrand, *Reformation* , 24.

[7] Hillerbrand, *Reformation* , 27.

[8] Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* , trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 315.

[9] There are some scholars who date this discovery a few years later.

[10] See, for instance, 2 Corinthians 5:21.

[11] G. W. Bromley, "The Doctrine of Justification in Luther", *The Evangelical Quarterly* , 24 (1952), 98-99.

[12] Robert C. Walton, *The Gathered Community* (London: Carey Press, 1946), 59.

[13] B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition from the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 59.

[14] White, *English Separatist Tradition* , 34.

[15] White, *English Separatist Tradition* , 84.

[16] " Elizabeth Bunyan pleads with Judge Matthew Hale", *The Bible League Quarterly* 342 (July-September 1985), 345-346.

[17] *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* 335.