

Relevant Reformation; An Article for the Swiss Church London Newsletter in October 2017

This year we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation – a spiritual, intellectual and political earthquake that shook the foundations of Europe, led to new churches and new forms of government all over the world and still affects the way we think and what we value today.

On October 31st, 1517, the day before All Saints' Day, a professor-monk in Wittenberg, Germany attached a paper with 95 theses to the door of the church. Thanks to the newly invented printing press, those new ideas spread like wildfire. What was so revolutionary about them? Up until then, the Roman Catholic Church had monopolized all aspects of life, decided what was true and false, and determined what would happen to you after you died. Church officials were generally corrupt and took advantage of their power to enrich themselves. In order to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Pope Leo X started the business of selling letters of indulgence. For money you could have your sins forgiven and shorten your time in purgatory before entering heaven. Martin Luther saw through it. While reading Romans he came across Paul's claim that we are not saved by our works, but by faith in Jesus Christ. We have direct access to God's grace, just by believing. What a relief! But not for the Pope, who threatened to excommunicate Luther for ruining his business. While in hiding Luther translated the New Testament into the language of the people. The combination of Bible translation and printing press was dynamite. Commoners and lords alike felt empowered to break away from the authority of the Church as it was.

At the same time Ulrich Zwingli, an intelligent and musical country boy from the Swiss Alps, who had received a Humanist education from Europe's best universities and become a priest and military chaplain, came to similar conclusions. But Zwingli was also concerned about social justice. He witnessed the senseless butchery of Swiss mercenary soldiers on both sides of a war and realized how the system was making the rich richer and the poor poorer. He began speaking out against the mercenary system, the selling of indulgences and the business with relics that was placing such a heavy tax burden on the people. For just that reason he was called to Zürich. He started explaining the Bible in Swiss German, and was good at applying it to the corruptions of his day. The republican city-state of Zürich encouraged him, pleased with the idea of more independence from Pope and Bishop. During Lent some of his friends ate sausage, breaking the Church's rules on fasting. That episode really got things rolling. Zürich's Council reformed the Church, doing away with celibacy, relics, statues and altar paintings, the mass and everything that wasn't scriptural. They even cut the music out of worship. Understanding the Bible, living justly and contributing to society were important. The first Bible in German translated from the original manuscripts was printed in 1531 in Zurich. The first social welfare system was set up in Zurich, and public schools were established for boys and girls.

But some in Zurich wanted to go even further. They wanted a full separation of church and state. They refused to take an oath, bear arms or have their infants baptized, because it contradicted their reading of Scripture. The Anabaptists were persecuted. Zwingli was in a dilemma. Luther was having problems, too. When peasants in their newfound self-confidence insisted on tax cuts and more rights, he encouraged the lords not to give in, but to use force. Luther also ranted against Jews and even against Zwingli, who respected Luther and his work. They met in Marburg to try and come to an agreement on doctrine. Luther couldn't accept Zwingli's modern concept of Christ being present with us "only" in Spirit and not physically, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. That's why the Lutherans and the Reformed went their separate ways.

John Calvin was a generation younger than Zwingli. He came as a refugee to Geneva, since the Protestants were being so mercilessly persecuted in France. He developed a new Presbyterian form of church government that could survive without the help of the state. During the reign of "Bloody Mary" in England, many "Marian exiles" were in Zurich and Geneva. So the teachings of Calvin and Bullinger, who had followed Zwingli in Zurich, were brought back to England under Elizabethan rule.

Calvinist puritans in England wanted bottom-up self-government in the congregations – no top-down bishops. In order to practice their faith freely, they had to migrate to Holland and then on to the New World. The Pilgrims, who landed in Plymouth Bay in 1620, signed the first social contract in history.

Democratic governments with their separation of powers, checks and balances and guarantee of religious freedom owe a lot to the Reformation, especially the one in Switzerland. Who would have thought these principles would become so jeopardized in our day? This anniversary has arrived just in time.

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