

Sunday, September 25, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—Church History: A Tale of Two Churches—Lesson 38 The Catholic Counter Reformation

Introduction

- “The Catholic Church was facing one of the biggest crises in its history. Even as the Protestant churches were breaking away, one of the most stalwart Catholic countries was itself lost to Europe. In 1526 the Ottoman Empire – which had already absorbed the southern half of the Orthodox world – defeated Louis Jagellion of Hungary, thereby conquering that country and marching into the Catholic heartlands.” (Hill, 259)
- “In reality, this was to be the last great advance of the Muslim world into Christendom, but to the Catholic Church at the time it seemed as if the true faith was facing enemies on all sides to an unprecedented degree.” (Hill, 259)
- “How did the Church of Rome respond to the Protestant challenge? It didn’t, not immediately. But when it finally realized the seriousness of the revolt, it called upon its spiritual warriors; it convened a new, militant council; and it reformed the machinery of the papal office. Faced by the rebellion of almost half of Europe, Catholicism rolled back the tide of Protestantism until by the end of the sixteenth century Protestantism was limited roughly to the northern third of Europe, as it is today.” (Shelley, 272)
- “Inevitably, as the result of some nations adopting Protestantism, that Catholic Church in the West increased its crusading fervor. Yet there was a sense in which it also encouraged its own form of reformation (sometimes known as the Counter-Reformation) to remedy the fact that for centuries some areas of the Catholic Church had lacked well-educated, well-trained, and moral priests and bishops.” (Price and Collins, 146)
- “Some historians have interpreted the Catholic Reformation as a counter-attack against Protestantism; others have described it as a genuine revival of Catholic piety with few thoughts of Protestantism. The truth is the movement was both a Counter Reformation, as Protestants insist, and a Catholic Reformation, as Catholics argue. Its roots run back to forces before Luther’s time, but the form it took was largely determined by Protestant attack.” (Shelley, 272)
- Important leaders of the Catholic Reform Movement were Ignatius Loyola, who founded the Jesuits, and Popes Paul III and Paul IV who took actions to reform and renew the Church from within. (Beck, 498)

Early Calls for Reform

- “Strange as it may seem, the mystical experience was a large part of Catholicism’s recovery. . . Even before Luther posted his theses on the church door, a distinguished and aristocratic group at Rome had formed a pious brotherhood called the Oratory of Divine Love. Their guiding belief was that the reformation of the church and society begin within the individual soul.” (Shelley, 272)
- “The Oratory was never large in number, perhaps 50, yet it had enormous influence. It stimulated reform in the older monastic orders and contributed leaders to the Church of Rome as it laid plans for a general council to deal with internal reform and the Protestant

heresy. Among the members of the Oratory who later emerged as significant figures were Jacopo Sadolete, who debated Calvin; Reginald Pole, who tried under Bloody Mary to turn England back to Rome; and Gian Pietro Caraffa, who became Pope Paul IV.” (Shelley, 272)

- “Throughout the 1520s and 1530s, however, the Church of Rome took no significant steps toward reform. The question is why? Why was she so slow to respond to the Protestant challenge?” (Shelley, 272)
- “One simple answer is politics. The Emperor Charles V and the pope fought a running battle over the calling of a general council that stretched over two decades. Luther had called for a council of the church as early as 1518. The idea gained the support of the German princes and the emperor, but the popes had fears of such an assembly. . . Equally important, the popes in the 1520s and 1530s were preoccupied with secular and political affairs. . . No serious reform came until Pope Paul III (1534-1549) ascended to the papal throne. . . Paul, then, appointed nine of the new cardinals to a reform commission. . . After a wide-ranging study of conditions in the Church of Rome, the commission issued in 1537 a formal report, *Advice . . . Concerning Reform of the Church*. Disorder in the church, the report said, could be traced directly to the need for reform. The papal office was too secular. Both popes and cardinals needed to give more attention to spiritual matters and stop flirting with the world. Bribery in high places, abuses of indulgences, evasions of church law, prostitution in Rome, these and other offenses must cease.” (Shelley, 273-274)

The Founding of the Jesuits

- The Jesuit order, first called the Society of Jesus, founded in 1534 and six companions that had the greatest impact upon the Catholic Church. (Price and Collins, 146)
- “Ignatius grew up in his father's castle in Loyola, Spain. The great turning point in his life came in 1521 when he was injured in war. While recovering, he thought about his past sins and about the life of Jesus. His daily devotions, he believed, cleansed his soul. In 1522, Ignatius began writing a book called *Spiritual Exercises* that laid out a day-by-day plan of meditation, prayer, and study.” (Beck, 498-499)
- Before founding the order, Loyola had lived an austere lifestyle of self-denial, yet, like Luther he was unable to find inner peace. Instead he chose to obey the leaders of the church and thus, in addition to taking the usual three vows of chastity, obedience and poverty, Jesuits also vowed obedience to the pope and to carry out whatever task the pope might deem necessary. (Price and Collins, 146-147)
- “The idea was not to create a new monastic order. As a former soldier, Loyola naturally formed his society along military lines. The principal virtue for his members – who all were priests – was obedience, to the general order and the pope. . . The members did not have a particular rule to follow, but they did have the Spiritual exercises that Ignatius wrote as a guide to disciplined meditation. They were also rigorously selected and trained: novices would train for two years before becoming formal scholastics, a stage which could last for up to fifteen years before becoming full members. It was only after completing this arduous training that the new member would make the vow of total, uncompromising obedience to the pope.” (Hill, 262)

- In the summer of 1539, Loyola filed a petition with Pope Paul III to officially recognize the Jesuits and establish a new religious order. On September 27, 1540, the pope issued a bull that formally established the Society of Jesus. The specification of the bull outlined clearly what sort of society the Jesuits would be:
 - Let all members know, and let it be not only at the beginning of their profession, but let them think over it daily as long as they live, that the society as a whole, and each of them, owes obedience to our most holy lord, the pope, and the other Roman pontiffs, his successors, and to fight with faithful obedience for *God*. And however much he may be learned in the Gospel, and however he may be taught in the orthodox faith, let all Christians profess themselves under the Roman pontiff as leader, and vicar of *Jesus Christ*. For the greater humility of our society, and toward the complete self-mortification of each one, and in order to aid the abnegation of our own wills to the greatest extent, let each one, besides that common obligation, be devoted to this by special vow. So that whatever the present or other Roman pontiffs order that concerns the saving of souls and the spread of the faith, and to whatever provinces he shall wish to send us, this let us strive to accomplish as far as in us lies, without any turning back or excuse; whether he shall send us to the Turks, or to any other infidels, even those living in the lands that are called the Indies; or to any heretics or schematics, or believers, whatever. (Noll, 198-201)
- The Jesuits focused on three main activities. First, they founded schools throughout Europe. . . The Jesuits second mission was to convert non-Christians to Catholicism. So they sent missionaries all over the world. Their third goal was to stop the spread of Protestantism. The zeal of the Jesuits overcame the drift toward Protestantism in Poland and Southern Germany. (Beck, 499)
- According to Mark A. Noll, author of *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, the founding of the Jesuits was significant for the following three reasons:
 - First, the Jesuits would be instrumental in winning Protestant regions back to Rome and solidifying the faith of those in Europe who wavered in their loyalty to the Catholic Church under Protestant influence.
 - Second, the Jesuits symbolized the strength of what would become traditional Roman Catholicism all the way from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.
 - Third, the missionary zeal of the Jesuits made them an extraordinarily potent force in the history of Christianity. (Noll, 201-202)

The Council of Trent

- As we alluded to earlier, Paul III was pope from 1534 to 1549. Paul took the following steps in an attempt to reform the Catholic Church:
 - Directed a council of cardinals to investigate indulgence selling and other abuses in the Church.
 - Approved the Jesuit order.

- Used the Inquisition to seek out heresy in papal territory.
 - Lastly, he called for a universal church council to address the Protestant challenge (Council of Trent). (Beck, 499)
- The Council of Trent met in three sessions (1545-47, 1551-52, 1562-63), and began with systematic rebuttals to main Protestant assertions, and thus may be seen as an engine of Counter-Reformation. (Noll, 206)
- “By its last sessions, however, the council had turned toward the future in drawing up policies and confirming principles that made possible a Catholic expansion more on the foundation of the church’s own internal resources than in reaction to Protestantism.” (Noll, 206)
- The Council of Trent reached the following conclusions:
 - The Church’s interpretation of the Bible was final. Any Christian who substituted his or her own interpretation was a heretic.
 - Christians needed faith and good works for salvation. They were not saved by faith alone, as Luther had argued.
 - The Bible and Church tradition were equally powerful authorities for guiding Christian life.
 - Indulgences were valid expressions of faith. But the false selling of indulgences was banned. (Beck, 499)
- “The last session of the council reaffirmed the counter-reforming canons and decrees of the first two sessions, but also began to chart a course for the Catholic Church oriented more toward its needs for the future than its quarrels with Protestants . . . reform under papal leadership went beyond a ‘Counter’ Reformation to positive and constructive efforts at building a more tightly organized, better instructed, and effectively controlled church than the old institution before 1563 had been.” (Noll, 209)
- “. . . it is possible to overstate the unity of Catholic doctrine and practice after the council, but comparatively speaking, Trent brought a higher degree of uniformity than had ever existed in the Western church. The council’s attention to the tasks of the bishops in overseeing the faithful, to the spiritual responsibilities of the pope, and to the production of uniform guides for liturgy and catechesis all were factors unifying as well as reforming the church.” (Noll, 212)
- Thus it set the normative standards for Catholicism until the twentieth century. It was only in the face of changes in geopolitics, intellectual life, population, commerce, and warfare, that the Catholic Church would take up the task of modifying the course charted by the Council of Trent. (Noll, 213)
- “The next Pope, Paul IV, vigorously carried out the council’s decrees. In 1559, he had officials draw up a list of books considered dangerous to the Catholic faith. This list was known as the Index of Forbidden Books. Catholic bishops throughout Europe were

ordered to gather up the offensive books (including Protestant Bibles) and burn them in bonfires. In Venice alone, followers burned 10,000 books in one day.” (Beck, 499)

Religious Wars and the Close of the Reformation

- As we have already studied, the religious wars in Germany temporarily ended in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg. Catholics and Protestants had agreed that the faith of each prince would determine the religion of his subjects. Churches in Germany could be either Lutheran or Catholic, but not Calvinist. As one might expect, the peace would not last. (Beck, 603)
- “Both Lutheran and the Catholic princes tried to gain followers. In addition, both sides felt threatened by Calvinism, which was spreading in Germany and gaining many followers. As tensions mounted, the Lutherans joined together in the Protestant Union in 1608. The following year, the Catholic princes formed the Catholic League. Now, it would take only a spark to set off a war.” (Beck, 603)
- “The spark came in 1618. The future Holy Roman emperor, Ferdinand II, was head of the Hapsburg family. As such, he ruled the Czech kingdom of Bohemia. The Protestants in Bohemia did not trust Ferdinand, who was a foreigner and a Catholic. When he closed some Protestant churches, the Protestants revolted. Ferdinand sent an army into Bohemia to crush the revolt. Several German Protestant princes took this chance to challenge their Catholic emperor.” (Beck, 603)
- Thus began the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), a conflict over religion and territory and for power among European ruling families. The war can be divided into two phases:
 - Hapsburg Triumphs (1618-1630)—Hapsburg armies from Austria and Spain crush the troops hired by Protestant princes.
 - Hapsburg Defeats (1630-1648)—the Protestant king of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus entered the war and turned its tide in favor of the Protestants. Positioned between Hapsburg Spain and Austria, in 1635 Cardinal Richelieu sent French troops to fight on the side of the Protestants.
- The Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended the war. The treaty had these important consequences:
 - Weakened the Hapsburg states of Spain and Austria;
 - Strengthened France by awarding it German territory;
 - Made German princes independent of the Holy Roman Emperor
 - Ended religious wars in Europe
 - Abandoned the ideas of the Catholic empire that would rule most of Europe. Therefore, it recognized Europe as a group of equal independent states, marking the beginning of the modern state system.
- I believe that the Peace of Westphalia marks the official end of the Protestant Revolution. When we began our discussion of the Protestant Revolution we used the following definition from Jacques Barzun, “the violent transfer of power and property in the name of an idea.” (Barzun, 3)

- In modern times, Western society uses the term revolutionary too loosely. Whenever a new technology, gadget, or practice hits the market that changes our domestic habits or makes life a little easier, the culture screams revolutionary! Unfortunately, this liberal use of the word has detracted from its true meaning. When something is truly revolutionary it changes more than our personal habits or a widespread practice. True revolutions give culture a new face. (Barzun, 3)
- According to Barzun, it is incorrect to view the Protestant Revolution as merely religious in nature,
 - “To call the first of the four revolutions religious is also inadequate. It did indeed cause millions to change the forms of their worships and the conception of their destiny. But it did much besides. It posed the issue of diversity of opinion as well as faith. It fostered new feelings of nationhood. It raised the status of the vernacular languages. It changed attitudes toward work, art, and human failing. It deprived the West of its ancestral sense of unity and common descent. Lastly but less immediately, by emigration to the new world overseas, it brought an extraordinary enlargement of the means of the West and the power of its civilization.” (Barzun, 4)
- Protestant theology provided the philosophical justification for the formation of new political structures that would break with Roman Catholicism and assert their own autonomy. The new religious ideas that were being articulated by Martin Luther and others gave the German princes an ideological justification for breaking with the Roman Catholics and increasing their own power. The net effect of these changes was that, as advertised by Barzun, the cultural and political landscape of Europe was permanently altered.
- “Regionalism, nationalism, tumultuous new patterns in economic and social life, as well as broad intellectual upheaval were all well advanced before the appearance of Protestantism. . . In the larger sphere of European history, Protestantism acted as an accelerator for forces or developments that were already well underway by 1517 and Martin Luther’s posting of the Ninety-Five Theses.”
 - Political—Protestantism would require local rulers or urban councils with the ability to act self-confidently and with a fair measure of independence.
 - Nationalism—concentrations of power around a central monarchical house—also took place in lands that would remain substantially Catholic . . . although patterns of centralized national authority differed radically among the European nations, the general trend in each of these areas was toward greater concentration of political power pointing toward the modern nation-state.
 - Economic—forces at work in European economic life were also moving toward greater local vitality and less automatic deference to a central religious authority. . . The main economic point that needs to be stressed is not any simple equation between an increase of trade and the rise of Protestantism. Rather, it is that Europe’s economic recovery created new centers of financial power, new situations for potential friction, and new opportunities for fiscal resentment. Those new situations were stirring the pot of traditional European allegiances, in

both church and state, well before the potent ingredient of Protestant theology was added to the brew. (Noll, 179-181)

Works Cited

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