

Lesson No. 24

A Brief History of the Christian Church from the Death of the Apostles to the Present Time

The Persecutions, Internal Conflicts, Rise to Power, and Deformation of the Church. (About 100 to 1517 A.D.)

The apostles are dead, but the Church of Jesus Christ marches on. Faithful pastors, Some of them disciples of the Twelve, continue the work already begun in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and Spain. Zealous missionaries carry the banner of the Cross to new parts, such as Arabia, Egypt, North Africa, Southern France, and the region along the Danube. Consecrated Christians everywhere bear witness to the Savior, and many souls are won for Him. To stem and stop the marvelous growth of Christianity, the devil looses the fury of heathendom upon the Church. Beginning with the torture and slaughter of Roman Christians by Emperor Nero in 64 A.D., we count no less than ten bloody persecutions in two and a half centuries. Untold numbers of loyal confessors are beheaded, crucified, sawn asunder, thrown before wild beasts, or coated with pitch and burned as living torches. But all the cruel power of heathendom cannot crush the Church of Christ. The courage, and even joy, with which the Christians suffer and die for their Savior makes a deep impression upon others, and many are converted. Thus the blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the Church. Finally, in 313 A.D., Emperor Constantine himself embraces the faith, and not long thereafter Christianity becomes the religion of the state.

BLOOD

Having been unsuccessful in destroying Christianity by persecutions from without, the devil next raises false teachers within the Church. Arius denies the deity of Christ by teaching that the Son of God is not eternal and equal with the Father, but that He is the first and a perfect creature. The Council of Nicaea, held in 325 A.D., rejects this heresy and adopts the Nicene Creed which declares that Jesus Christ is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father.” The foremost defender of the faith at this time is Athanasius, after whom the great Trinitarian confession of the sixth century, the Athanasian Creed, is later named. (The best known of all Christian confessions, the Apostles’ Creed, appeared as early as the first or second century.) In the fifth century Pelagius attacks the doctrine of original sin and teaches that man can convert and save himself. Now it is Augustine who takes the lead in the battle for the truth and insists that we are by nature altogether incapable of good and owe our salvation solely to the grace of God. About this time the Gospel is brought to Ireland, in succeeding centuries to Scotland, England, Germany, Denmark, and France, and still later to Russia and Norway. Thus, in spite of bitter conflicts within, the Church of Christ continues its conquering march through the world.

CONFLICT

Foiled again, the devil tries still another mode of attack. Already under Constantine, when Christianity became the favored religion, a lust after power made itself noticeable among the clergy. Some ministers were raised above others and called “bishops,” or overseers. Gradually the bishops in larger cities begin to exercise more influence than other bishops. Then the bishops of Rome and Constantinople become the most powerful bishops. And when both want to be supreme, a split occurs in the Church and Christendom is divided into the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. (1054 A.D.) The bishop of Rome calls himself “pope,” meaning father, and declares himself the successor

POWER

of Peter (who was neither pope nor bishop), the representative of Christ, and the visible head of the Church. He forbids the priests to marry, maintains that he himself is not subject to any ruler, and even claims the authority to appoint and remove emperors. Monasteries, in existence since about the third century, increase greatly in number and wealth and become the breeding places of much immorality.

With the rise of the papacy, the light of the Gospel is hid under an ever-growing mass of false doctrines, and a deep darkness settles upon the Church. The Bible is relegated to the background by tradition, the decrees of councils, and especially the pronouncements of the pope. The people are directed to rely for their salvation not only on the grace of God in Christ, but also on their own works. Jesus is pictured to them not as a loving Savior, but as a stern Judge who must be approached through the Virgin Mary and other saints. Purgatory, the unbloody sacrifice of the mass, communion under one kind, and the sale of indulgences creep into the Church. In short, it seems as if the devil has succeeded in bringing about the final ruin of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

DARKNESS

Martin Luther and the Reformation. The Evangelical Lutheran Church. (1517 to about 1760 A.D.)

But the Lord of the Church has said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." God still has His own in the midst of the darkness of popery, and their cry for deliverance is heard. Other attempts to reform the Church have failed. The enemies of the truth have silenced Huss by burning him and Savonarola by hanging him. But they are quite helpless over against a little monk, who, on the 31st day of October, 1517, nails ninety-five theses to a church door-sentences which immediately begin to scatter the rubbish of man-made doctrines that the Gospel may shine forth again in all its saving splendor.

LIGHT

Martin Luther was born at Eisleben, Germany, on November 10, 1483, nine years before the discovery of America by Columbus. For nearly thirty years he sought peace of heart in the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, and found it not. He went to school, high school, university, and finally in sheer despair into a monastery. He prayed, slaved, and fasted until he wasted away to little more than skin and bones, and yet he moaned, "Oh, when will you be pious and do enough that God will be merciful to you?" One day he found a Latin Bible. He read it eagerly. Then an old monk, who knew more than his Church, advised him to trust in Christ for his salvation. This shed a small ray of light into Luther's soul. There-upon, as a priest and later as a doctor of divinity, he made an intensive study of the Scriptures. And in these, while delving into the Epistle to the Romans, he found the truth which made him free, and millions through him: "Man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law." "Then," Luther writes later, "the whole Scripture was opened to me and also heaven itself. Immediately I felt as if born anew, as if I had found the open gate of paradise."

LUTHER

While teaching and preaching the newly found truth at Wittenberg, Luther became greatly disturbed over the way the people acted after they had bought indulgences, or letters of pardon, from a traveling monk by the name of Tetzl. This man, who had been sent by the pope to raise money for St. Peter's Church in Rome, led the people to believe that they could purchase the forgiveness of sins and did not need to repent. It was this that moved Luther to publish ninety-five theses against the sale of indulgences. In taking this step, he had no idea of starting a reformation. He considered himself a faithful son of the Church, and thought he was doing the pope a favor by standing for the truth of the Bible. But "God moves in a mysterious way

REFORMATION

His wonders to perform.” Hardly have Luther's theses been posted when they are also printed (the printing press was invented in 1456 A.D.), and in four weeks they are distributed, read, and discussed over all Christendom. Thousands hail them with delight, while the pope becomes uneasy and tries to silence the Monk of Wittenberg with promises and then with threats. But Luther sees the light with ever greater clearness, and when, in 1521, he is ordered to appear before the Diet at Worms, he disregards the advice of his friends, who fear for his life, and says, “God is with me, and I will go even if there are as many devils at Worms as there are shingles on the roofs of the houses.” Standing before the emperor, the leaders of the state and Church, Luther is given no opportunity to show that his teachings are those of the Bible and the early Christian Church, but is simply told to recant, or take back, all he has said and written. His answer is—and millions thank God for it—“Unless I am convinced by testimonies of the Scriptures, I cannot and will not recant. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen.”

Luther is now declared an outlaw, but powerful friends hide him in a castle, called the Wartburg. Here he begins his monumental translation of the Bible into the language of his people. Returning to Wittenberg at the risk of his life, he spreads the pure Gospel by many sermons and books. Students flock to him to hear his fearless preaching and to be prepared by him and his learned co-worker, Melancthon, as faithful ministers of the Word of God. In 1529, Luther publishes his Small Catechism for the instruction of the children and the common people, a booklet which is rightly called “the gem of the Reformation.” He also composes many hymns, among them the great battle hymn of the Reformation, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Then he issues a hymnbook, and soon the restored Gospel is everywhere singing itself into the hearts of people, and the Lutheran Church becomes known as the “Singing Church,” a reputation which it enjoys to this day.

BOOKS

Meanwhile the emperor is doing his utmost to suppress the preaching of the Gospel. At the Diet of Spires in 1529 the “Lutherans,” so nicknamed by their opponents, stoutly protest against his acts; hence the name “Protestants.” Then, in 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg, they present a confession of their “Evangelical” (true to the Gospel) belief, known as the Augsburg Confession. Fifty years later the Book of Concord, containing all the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, is published and signed by 51 princes, 35 cities, and 9000 theologians. It includes the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, Luther's two Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord. About this time Lutheranism spreads mightily, finding a welcome in Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Lapland, and the Baltic Provinces, and exercising a most beneficial influence upon the people of Scotland and England.

CONFESSIONS

Returning to the time when Luther is preaching and teaching at Wittenberg, we note to our deep regret that some who accepted the restored Gospel truth begin to intermingle it with error. The Anabaptist sect arises which rejects infant Baptism and rebaptizes (hence the name) such as join their communion, maintaining that this sacrament is not valid unless administered by immersion and to people who are able to give an account of their faith. These doctrines are held by the Baptists and others to the present time. Then two Swiss reformers, Zwingli and Calvin, disturb the Church with false teachings, especially with regard to the Lord's Supper. At a meeting between Luther and Zwingli, held at Marburg in 1529, Zwingli, following the guidance of reason, insists that Christ's body and blood cannot be truly present in the Sacrament, and that the words of Christ, “This is My body,” must be interpreted to mean, “This represents My body.” Over against this, Luther maintains the Scriptural doctrine of the real presence, declaring that when Christ said, “This IS My body,” He meant what He said, and that no one has the right

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to twist God's Word to suit his fancy. Zwingli continues in his error and, together with Calvin, becomes the father of the many and various Reformed churches of our time. Knox of Scotland perpetuates the false teachings of Calvin in the Presbyterian Church; Cranmer of England brings about the formation of the Church of England, or Episcopal Church; and later John Wesley, also of England, organizes the Methodist Church (The King James, or Authorized Version of the Bible, by far the best English translation of the Scriptures to this day, appeared in 1611).

In spite of the departure of these and other false brethren, the Lutheran Church continues to teach God's Word in all its purity. Luther dies on February 15, 1546, confessing his Savior unto the end. The Romanists at the Council of Trent (1546-63) pronounce the curse upon the teachings of Luther; but God continues to bless the preaching of His truth. The Thirty Years' War (1618-48) threatens the very existence of Protestantism; but the Lord of the Church sends the great Swedish and Lutheran king, Gustavus Adolphus, the "Lion of the North," to the rescue. In the midst of the deepest sorrows, the Lutheran Church learns to sing some of her greatest hymns composed by Paul Gerhardt. Later Johann Sebastian Bach, the master musician of all times, gives her the richest choral treasures; while George Haendel, another Lutheran, inspires her and others with his matchless "Messiah" and "Hallelujah Chorus." About this time the Lutheran Church begins to do mission work in India, and Hans Egede, also a Lutheran, becomes the first to carry the Gospel to Greenland.

FAITHFUL

Beginning with the early part of the seventeenth century, many and various groups of Lutherans come to America. Danes, Dutch, Swedes, Germans, Norwegians, and others settle here, seeking religious freedom or other blessings which this country has to offer. The first Lutheran service on American soil is conducted on Hudson Bay by the Rev. Rasmus Jensen in 1619. The first Lutheran church is erected in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1638. The first book to be translated into an American Indian language is Luther's Small Catechism, done by Campanius in 1646. Slow at first, the immigration of Lutherans gradually increases until, after 1800, thousands come each year to make their homes in many states of our nation. Self-sacrificing pastors and missionaries gather the scattered Lutherans and others who are brought to faith into congregations; and congregations unite into synods and sometimes into federations of synods.

GROWTH

The Lutheran Church is not a new church; **it is the old, original Christian Church, which came into existence on the day of Pentecost.**

Luther did not invent a new religion, but restored to its purity the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To be a Lutheran doctrine, a doctrine must be a Bible doctrine; and **every Bible doctrine is a Lutheran doctrine.**

When ridiculed because of his Lutheran faith, a famous man said:

"If I be asked whether with heart and lips I confess that faith which God had restored to us by Luther as His instrument, I have no scruple, nor have I a disposition to shrink from the name Lutheran. Thus understood, I am, and shall to my dying hour remain, a Lutheran."

***God's Word is our Great Heritage, and shall be ours forever,
To spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way, in death it is our stay.
Lord, grant while worlds endure, we keep its teachings pure,
Throughout all generations! Amen.***