

The History of the Church in 3 Parts #2 Reformation and Revolution

Mark 4:30-32 Jesus said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

Luke 13:20, 21 Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Jesus had said *"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Last week we heard how the church was led by the Holy Spirit to expand and fulfil its commission. **It was chaotic, unplanned, poorly executed and done by amateurs with no formal training, just an awful lot of courage, a willingness to say yes to what God was doing, and of course the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace and sovereignty of God running like a divine thread through the very human stories.**

We heard how in 318 Constantine adopted Christianity as the religion of the Empire, and began to thrash out exactly what people believed in a series of councils, the most famous of which was the Council of Nicea – where we get the Nicene Creed.

You would have thought that getting professional would have been good for the church – they shifted from marginal, small congregations working in the background to the very centre of power, rich, well-trained and influential. What's not to like? Don't you sometimes want Christians to be the ones in charge, making politics, using the nation's resources for their purposes? Calling the shots?

Well it didn't work out that way then – and it wouldn't work now. One more reason why knowing your church history helps you get perspective on the current situation.

C. S. Lewis said of history: 'History isn't just the story of bad people doing bad things. It's quite as much a story of people trying to do good things. But somehow, something goes wrong.'

So we are left with the church split between East and West. At this point our history comes from the point of view of the west. I am sure that if I were Greek Orthodox priest things would be told differently, and the focus would be on the Orthodox side of things.

As it is we are Western-centric and also leaning very much towards telling a story that fits with our little corner of church – how did we the Plymouth Vineyard get to where we are? You will see that more in week 3 as we look at the development of first the Pentecostal church and then the charismatics – terms that will be fully explained as we go.

So up until 1054 there is one 'catholic' church. The emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit used in witness and worship, and the care for the poor and the sick, this was already beginning to change, and worship became more about a shared act together in a church building than what happened when you left the building and engaged with the world.

This was something that became even more established as the Roman Catholic Church became the thing.

We saw the following shifts taking place:

1. More of an emphasis on God than Jesus, and more emphasis on the divinity of Jesus rather than the humanity of Jesus. Also God = far away, humanity = lower view of mankind, people = less valuable.
2. Greater emphasis on the next life
3. Decline in literacy and rise in liturgy without comprehension
4. Association of miracles with 'special saints'
5. Separation of clergy and congregation
6. Increased corruption
7. Growth of monasticism
8. Increase in nominalism
9. Decline in personal evangelism
10. A dependence on clergy for doctrine

Today we will hear how one man got so fed up with the corruption of the church that he went back to his bible and questioned everything he had been taught to believe, and challenged what he saw as the corruption and error present in the church.

"At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open."

He was a monk, very devout, who became a professor of the university in Wittenberg, where on 31st October 1517 he pinned his 95 theses – 95 statements of belief that contradicted the theology or practices of the RC church to which he belonged (and continued to belong until being excommunicated in 1521).

At the time it was very divisive – half the church thought he was a "demon in the appearance of a man." To quote one catholic priest. The other half thought he was right and to be listened to. Now, 500 years later, catholics and protestants alike agree with most of what he was proposing.

He translated the Bible into German so normal people could understand it, and he summed up his beliefs in 5 solas:

The Five Solas are:

Sola Scriptura ("Scripture alone"): The Bible alone is our highest authority.

Sola Fide ("faith alone"): We are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Sola Gratia ("grace alone"): We are saved by the grace of God alone.

Solus Christus ("Christ alone"): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Saviour, and King.

Soli Deo Gloria ("to the glory of God alone"): We live for the glory of God alone.

Protestantism replaced the authority of the Pope with the authority of Scripture. Now each person was empowered to interpret the Bible as they saw fit.

Since then the Protestant church has experienced over 300,000 splits, which is interesting, but much of the error and corruption of the Roman Catholic church was halted and the church worldwide transformed by this simple, flawed man.

We are basically protestant in our theology, but in our practices the picture is actually more nuanced. You know what is important when you walk into a church: in a catholic church it would be the altar and eucharist front and centre, with lots of colour, gold and beauty. For them it's all about worship, centred around communion. A protestant church would have the pulpit and a lot of simplicity. For them it is all about preaching the word.

What about us? Well we have both. Worship is a huge priority, and we give over half the service to preaching from the bible. Same in LGs.

And you may wonder about the Anglican church.

That came about because Henry VIII wanted to get rid of his wife Catherine of Aragon (the Spanish Queen). The pope wouldn't allow it. It was about the time of the reformation, so he split from Rome and set up a new church with him at the head. So it was protestant, but retained many catholic elements, including the church buildings.

The book of common prayer was published in 1549. *It is also worth noting that in 1456 Gutenberg produced the first printed Bible and the printing press had an enormous influence on the release of God's word into the hands of every believer – something we all think is a good thing now but was very controversial then.*

The next couple of hundred years of church history is told through small groups having some sort of revival and breaking off from mainstream Christianity because they felt it had gone off track.

1620

Pilgrims coming to America sign the Mayflower Compact and commit themselves to seek the public good, uphold group solidarity and forsake self-seeking.

1648

George Fox founds the Society of Friends, more commonly known as "Quakers." Seeking to live simple lives, opposed to warfare and avoiding formal worship, they had an influence far exceeding their numbers.

1675

German Lutheran minister Philip Jacob Spener publishes Pia Desideria which becomes a manifesto for "Pietism."

1678

John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress is published. It becomes second in international circulation, exceeded only by the Bible.

1727

Awakening at Herrnhut launches Moravian Brethren as the forerunner of modern Protestant missionary movements.

1735

Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards stirs the American colonies with many conversions and individual returns to heartfelt faith.

1738

John Wesley's conversion eventually leads to the founding of a branch of the Methodist Church although he had no intention of forming a separate denomination.

Methodism – came out of the question – having been saved how then should we live?

- Logic and reasoning important to Methodists
- Christians should strive to achieve holiness in life
- Saved through a personal decision to follow Jesus
- Good works and mission important for all followers
- Small groups are important tools for growth

– holiness movement – belief that salvation happened but there was an additional work of the Spirit and a new emphasis.

There was also an expectation that God was about to do something big – a work of the HS, and people began to pray expectantly for this move of God.

In England this had a huge impact. Elsewhere in Europe there were revolutions. Most well-remembered was the French Revolution. All revolutions had at their core a growing dissatisfaction from a majority of

poor, oppressed by a minority ruling power – they had all the money and power and didn't want to lose it. The industrial revolution brought people together in cities, increased their hardship, increased the wealth of the ruling class, and the gap between rich and poor, both in terms of wealth and also condition of life, was becoming unsustainable. Something had to give.

All over Europe it led to violence and revolution – and guess what? It turns out that it wasn't the ruling classes who were the problem – it was the evil, greed, brokenness and lust for power in men's heart. That was the problem. In France they replaced the monarchy for Robespierre and his bloody guillotine. In Russia we replaced the Tsars with the Soviet dictatorship and Stalin.

So what about the UK?

Well I think the HS got there first. There were a number of separate bubblings which are talked about above. And then what we see is a joining together moving it from renewal to revival to awakening.

Key to it all is John Wesley and Methodism.

Wesley attended Oxford, was then ordained as an Anglican vicar. At Oxford, he joined a society (founded by his brother Charles) whose members took vows to lead holy lives, take Communion once a week, pray daily, and visit prisons regularly. In addition, they spent three hours every afternoon studying the Bible and other devotional material.

From this "holy club", Wesley sailed to Georgia to pastor. His experience proved to be a failure. A woman he courted in Savannah married another man. When he tried to enforce the disciplines of the "holy club" on his church, the congregation rebelled. A bitter Wesley returned to England.

On the boat back there were some Moravians. The weather was bad – Wesley was terrified but was supposed to be the chaplain of the boat. The Moravians seemed calm. Wesley went away thinking he wasn't saved at all despite all his hard work.

Then On May 24, 1738, he had an experience that changed everything. He described the event in his journal: "In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Meanwhile, another former member of the "holy club," George Whitefield, was having a lot of success as a preacher, especially in Bristol. Hundreds of working-class poor, oppressed by industrializing England and neglected by the church, were experiencing emotional conversions under his fiery preaching. So many were responding that Whitefield desperately needed help. Wesley accepted Whitefield's plea hesitantly. It wasn't his style – outdoor preaching, quite emotional and dramatic delivery, but it got results and Wesley quickly became the new leader of the movement because he was good at organising.

Wesley's followers first met in private home "societies." When these societies became too large for members to care for one another, Wesley organized "classes," each with 11 members and a leader. Classes met weekly to pray, read the Bible, discuss their spiritual lives, and to collect money for charity. Men and women met separately, but anyone could become a class leader.

They got called methodists as an insult and the name stuck. He got kicked out of the Anglican church and the organisation grew and spread because it was well organised: when Wesley died he had 294 preachers, 71,668 British members and 43,265 American members with 198 preachers. Today Methodists number about 30 million worldwide. Wesley, during his ministry travelled over 4,000 miles annually, preaching some 40,000 sermons in his lifetime.

So with the church being a single universal (catholic) body for a 1000 years, then dividing between east and west for 500 years, then with the reformation having the protestant branch created, after that having various denominations – Lutheran, calvinist, baptist, pietist, moravians, quakers and then methodists, and we begin to see the nation being impacted, and over the pond in America as well with what was known as the Great Awakening.

1807 The British Parliament votes to abolish the slave trade. Its decision is owing in large part to the tireless efforts of the Christian politician William Wilberforce.

1817 Elizabeth Fry begins ministry to women in prison and becomes model for social compassion and involvement.

1830 Charles G. Finney's urban revivals begin and introduce techniques that decisively affect later mass evangelism in America.

1854 Charles Haddon Spurgeon becomes pastor in London and will go on to be one of the most influential pastors ever.

1855 Dwight L. Moody is converted. He goes on to become one of the most effective American evangelists.

1865 William Booth founds the Salvation Army, vowing to bring the gospel into the streets to the most desperate and needy.

In 'Doing Church' Alexander Venter makes a distinction between renewal, revival and awakenings (p40).

Renewal – refreshing and reviving the church

Revival – spilling out from the church to significantly impact the world with healings, salvation and some social change.

Awakenings – when the whole nation is impacted – affecting its conscience and ethics, resulting in social and economic change and altering its destiny.

What we saw in England and possibly America was an awakening that significantly impacted the country and changed the course of history. In a way that revolution, politics or anything else we can come up with humanly has never had any power to do.

So if you are worried about Brexit, Boris or the Donald, if you lose sleep over Britain's moral compass or the influence of the internet, or inequality or addiction or hatred in our society, I'm not sure we have any other solution than to mobilise the church, pray for God's spirit to fall and then get on with extending the Kingdom through doing the stuff that Jesus taught us to do.

I think that there are bubblings up in our day, as well as mounting uncertainty and disruption in politics and society, and a growing gap between rich and poor that is bringing tensions.

I also celebrate the origins of Methodism that was able to take the fire of the spirit and steward it so well that entire nations were impacted. At the heart were these small groups and a bit of organisation.

And once again it became the untrained amateurs with only their willingness to be used by God and their commitment to the gospel, their submission to Jesus and a fair bit of courage to do it despite hardship, persecution and opposition – both from outside the church and inside it too.

Next week how a one-eyed black man in North America changed the worldwide church forever. Remember what I said about **It was chaotic, unplanned, poorly executed and done by amateurs with no formal training, just an awful lot of courage, a willingness to say yes to what God was doing, and of course the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace and sovereignty of God running like a divine thread through the very human stories.**

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” St Augustine