

(Christian History) 16. the Counter-Reformation & Thirty Years' War

by David Guzik

The Counter-Reformation and the Thirty Years' War were significant events in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation, shaping the course of European history.

Scripture: Matthew 5:10, Matthew 16:18, Romans 3:28

Topics: "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the Protestant Reformation and its impact on the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation led to a decline in the spiritual power of the Catholic Church, with many priests being unconverted and dishonorable. The document mentioned in the sermon criticized the papal office, cardinals, and bishops for their worldliness and lack of concern for spiritual matters. The sermon also mentions the Thirty Years War, which was fought between Catholic and Protestant forces in an attempt to establish a Roman Catholic Europe.

Transcript

With this lecture we want to consider what the response was to the Reformation, especially on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. This brings up the topic of what is commonly called the Counter-Reformation. The Counter-Reformation, or sometimes called the Roman Catholic Reformation, was a strong reaffirmation of the doctrine and the structure of the Roman Catholic Church.

It climaxed at what was known as the Council of Trent, partly in reaction, mostly in reaction, to the growth of Protestantism. You see, even before the posting of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, there was a lot of evidence of the need and some movements towards internal reform within the Roman Catholic Church. The crisis of the Reformation made them take on this challenge of reform, but they were concerned to do it on their own terms, not to look like they were forced to do it by Luther or any of the other Protestants.

In one way, the Roman Catholic Reformation, or the Counter-Reformation, was a retaliation to Protestantism. It was trying to win back some or all of those who were lost to the Protestant cause. In another way, the Roman Catholic Reformation was a true reform of the Church.

It was trying to correct obvious problems within the Church. Now, it sort of begins with the story of what happened with the Pope who was Pope during Luther's Reformation. That would have been Pope Leo X, who ruled from 1513 to 1521.

Leo X was a classic Renaissance Pope. He was elegant, worldly, sophisticated, intelligent, and consumed with political and family ambition. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Renaissance art and ideals.

He spent a lot of money on the arts, and he spent a lot of money on gambling. It's said that when Leo X first saw a copy of Luther's 95 Theses in 1518, he made two comments. First, he said, Luther is a drunken German.

He'll feel different when he's sober. Second, he said, Friar Martin is a brilliant fellow, but the whole argument is due to an argument among monks. You see, generally, that's how we regarded it.

It was just another example of a monk from the Augustinian order feuding with a monk from the Dominican order. And the Pope and the administration of the Vatican, they didn't really think very much of the Germans. And so they didn't think that the whole deal with Luther was a significant matter.

But obviously, it became a significant matter. It became a huge blow to the prestige, to the income, to the honor, to the organization, to just about everything of the Roman Catholic Church. I mean, this was an absolute earthquake that happened in the Roman Catholic Church to change it from being the only church anywhere to being now what it was, was partners with a different, perceived to be by most people equally legitimate religious movement or Christian movement there on the European continent.

And so some of the results of the Catholic Reformation or the Counter-Reformation were, first of all, they established an organization called the Oratory of Divine Love. This was a society of influential Roman Catholic leaders who were committed to improving the spiritual condition of the church. One of the important leaders of the group was a man named Gasparo Contrarni.

Gasparo worked hard to reform the Roman Catholic Church from within and to heal the division with Protestants. He was a delegate at different papal groups to try to sort out things and make things better between them and the Protestants. For a long time, for several decades, people held out the hope that there could actually be a reconciliation between Protestant and Catholics, and Gasparo was one of those who believed it.

But yet it didn't work. It didn't work because there was problems on both sides. Luther refused to accept any kind of a compromise formula, and when Contrarni returned to Italy, he was accused of heresy and associating with enemies of the church.

The failure of Contrarni and other reforming Roman Catholics to reach these agreements opened up the door for a more strict and militant Roman Catholics to respond to the reformers. But the desire of spiritual life promoted by the Oratory of Divine Love still had a positive effect among Roman Catholics. Well, secondly, a second factor we can attribute here is the reform of the papacy.

You see, after Leo X, there came three popes who were very interested in changing the way that things were done in the papal office, and they had to. I mean, Clement VII, who became pope in 1523, let's face it, I mean, he had to reckon with the fact that the whole religious landscape of Europe was very, very different. And they had many difficult questions to deal with.

What were they going to do about the Protestants? What did they do about the complicated political situation in Europe? For example, a fellow Roman Catholic might be a king over a generally Protestant place. Also, the pope himself was like a king over the papal states. What was going to happen with that? And then they also had the question of what were they going to do about the genuine problem of corruption in the church, especially because, honestly, there were very, very many people benefiting by that corruption, and therefore they were resistant to the changes.

Well, Clement VII didn't do very much. He was sort of caught between two kings. He was caught between Charles V, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and King Francis I of France, who each wanted the pope to side with him against the other.

You know, if you want to get a feel for the political dynamics going on in that day, when Henry VIII of England asked for the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon in 1527, the request came to Pope Clement when Rome was surrounded by the armies of Charles V, who was the nephew of Catherine of Aragon. So the first thing on the pope's mind was, I can't do anything to make this man mad. His armies are right outside of my city.

And so that was sort of the whole going forth political complexity and backstabbing game that was going on. The guy who succeeded Clement, Paul III, was an energetic and effective reformer. He mostly made administrative changes and called councils and had reform-minded cardinals make recommendations.

They brought an official report to the pope in 1537 that analyzed the causes of low spiritual condition in the church and recommended immediate action to correct the worst offenses and remove the worst offenders. Let's face it. The Roman Catholic Church at this time was very, very low in its spiritual power.

The common Roman Catholic priest or minister was basically, not only was he unconverted, he was just dishonorable. I mean, it was a shameful state of the clergy and the church itself recognized that they needed to change it. The language of the document was very painfully blunt and it accused the papal office, the cardinals and the bishops of all being too worldly and unconcerned with spiritual things.

It recommended that they take action against bribery in high places, against abuses of papal power, against the evasion of church law by people and clergy alike, against the abuse of indulgences, and against the large number of prostitutes working in Rome. The most important thing that Paul III did was that he called the Council of Trent. Trent was the most important council of the Roman Catholic Church in between the time of Nicaea in 325 and Vatican II in 1962.

Now Protestants were invited to attend the Council of Trent. You see, it's kind of awkward. The Roman Catholic Church in its history had been famous for what they called their ecumenical councils.

Councils where all Christianity was to get together and discuss some great issue. Well, how do you have a council without inviting the Protestants? So they did invite the Protestants but they were not allowed to speak. They were not allowed to have a vote.

And so the Council of Trent re-established or established many important things for the Roman Catholic Church. First of all, they re-established the idea of salvation by faith and works. And they said very pointedly, if any man says that salvation comes by faith alone, let him be accursed.

And they said very plainly, salvation comes by faith and works. Secondly, they re-established the doctrine of transubstantiation, which again was being greatly cursed by Protestants. Third, they re-established the

mass just as it was understood by the medieval church.

They re-established the seven sacraments, the celibacy of the clergy, and the existence of purgatory and the doctrine of indulgences. You see what basically they did at the Council of Trent? They dug in their heels doctrinally. They refused to change a thing.

The basic attitude of the Roman Catholics and the Counter-Reformation was, yes, we've got problems. There's corruption here and there. There's some lazy and immoral priests and bishops.

We'll get them out of the way. But there's nothing wrong with our fundamental doctrines. That's exactly what they believed.

And that's exactly how they acted at the Council of Trent. Basically, the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent clarified and reasserted most of the doctrines of the late medieval Roman Catholic Church. In addition, the Pope left the Council of Trent with even more power because he was given the authority to enforce the decrees of the Council and because church officials had to promise the Pope personal obedience.

You see, the Council of Trent not only affirmed all these doctrines and practices, but it explicitly pronounced curses and anathema on anyone who disagreed with them. Protestants were bitterly disappointed by this, but they weren't surprised. The next important thing in the progress of the Counter-Reformation was the founding of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits.

You see, present at the Council of Trent were two sharp members of a new monastic order that Pope Paul III had approved of in 1540. This was called the Society of Jesus, and they became popularly known as the Jesuits. The founder and leader of this movement was Ignatius of Loyola, who in some ways became the symbol of the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation.

Loyola was a soldier whose career was cut short by a serious wound. As he was convalescing from his serious wound, he reflected upon his life and he decided, you know, I can't be a soldier anymore, so I'm going to be a soldier of Jesus Christ. And he would dedicate himself to God like a medieval knight committed himself to his lord.

You know, the whole ceremonies and the whole seriousness and the whole vows and the bond that supposedly exists between a knight and his lord in the medieval thinking. Well, in that way of thinking, Loyola said, I'm going to be a knight for God. I'm going to be a soldier for God.

So Loyola emerged from his convalescence a curious mixture of soldier, mystic, and monk. He wrote all about it in a very influential book titled *The Spiritual Exercises*. He also gathered around him a group of men dedicated to the same vision, and he founded the Society of Jesus.

These people would be the spiritual elite of Roman Catholicism, fiercely devoted and loyal to the Pope with a military style of devotion and the idea that the end justified the means. Basically, these were like the special forces of Roman Catholicism, so to speak. The movement grew very quickly.

By the time Loyola died in 1556, there were members of the Society of Jesus in Japan, Brazil, Ethiopia, the coast of Central Africa, and nearly of every country of Europe. By 1556, his half-dozen followers had grown to more than 1,500 members. Next, we have the phenomenon of the rejuvenation and the reorganization of the Inquisition.

Basically, the Inquisition dealt with heresy as if it were a crime. Indeed, it considered it to be the foulest of crimes. And it commonly used torture and terror to obtain confessions, and if the victims were found guilty, they were turned over to the state for execution.

In the places where it had popular support, especially in Spain and Italy, the Inquisition never had much support in France and England. But in Spain and in Italy, the Inquisition was an effective tool against Protestantism. They would arrest people who were being unfaithful to the Roman Catholic Church, and they would use torture or terror to try to stamp out them and their movements.

And then finally, there was this idea of the Index of Forbidden Books. The Index of Forbidden Books was something that started in the Middle Ages, but the practice was strengthened and renewed under Pope Paul III, excuse me, Pope Paul IV, the third of these post-Luther popes. A second list of forbidden books made in 1564 effectively censored three quarters of the books printed in Europe at the time.

Won't you think about that? In 1564, three quarters of the books printed in Europe were forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church. Now, this Counter-Reformation, in a lot of ways, it was effective for the Roman Catholic Church. There was a flood of new enthusiasm.

There was a flood of new zeal. It's kind of like the feeling that your team has lost, a big loss, and a lot of your players are gone, right? I mean, the Protestant Reformation took a lot away from the Roman Catholic Church, but they kind of looked around at each other, and so to speak, I'm being metaphorical here, of course, they kind of said, look, guys, it's not all that bad. We can do something here.

Let's make something good of this instead. And so they worked very, very hard. And there was actually somewhat of a renewal of strength and vitality.

Part of it was because they had to address a lot of the obvious corruption in the Roman Catholic Church. And of course, that was a good thing for them to do. Now, the other dominant thing that we want to consider, other than the Counter-Reformation, was the Thirty Years' War.

The Thirty Years' War was a conflict fought between the years 1618 and 1648, principally on the territory of what is today Germany, but it also involved most of the major continental powers of Europe. It occurred for a number of reasons, but basically the Thirty Years' War started as an effort by Roman Catholic kings and princes to push back Protestantism by force. You see, you have to think this was an amazing thing.

It got to the point by 1618 that these Roman Catholic kings, these Roman Catholic princes, they had lived with the Reformation for almost 100 years. And finally, they said, enough of this. We're taking Europe back for Jesus Christ.

It was very much, or I should say, not for Jesus Christ, for the Roman Catholic Church, we're taking Europe for the Pope. They said, we've had enough of this nonsense from these Protestant people and these Protestant princes, we're going to defeat the Protestants and re-establish a truly Roman Catholic Europe. Now, that's how the war basically started.

But, as you can imagine, with any war fought in such a complex context over 30 years, it became extremely complicated, extremely difficult to know, side, platoon, side, and king, and prince, and principality, off-principality, the same city would be conquered over and over again. It was very confusing. It was very brutal.

Mercenary armies would be hired by this prince and then that prince. It went over and over again. It was a confusing, terrible, terrible time for Europe, the Thirty Years' War.

Especially in Germany. The war left Germany culturally, politically, economically, and spiritually devastated. You know, it was determined that maybe basically one third, anywhere from 20 to 33 percent of Germans died in the Thirty Years' War.

It was an absolutely devastating period of time, and it was the largest religious war ever fought in Europe. Now, religious tensions were growing all throughout this period of the second half of the 16th century. The peace, the agreements that they had made before was starting to unravel, and then it had all these different characteristics.

There was the Bohemian Revolt period. There was the Danish intervention. There was the Swedish intervention.

And then finally, there was the Swedish and French intervention. That ended with the end of the war. It was absolutely a terrifying and depressing time to be in Europe.

Really, if there was any hero that came forth from the Thirty Years' War, there was at least one, the Swedish king Gustaf Adolphus of Sweden, also known as Gustav Adolph the Great. He was an amazing military leader, and one of the major players here in the Thirty Years' War. He landed with his army in Germany, and then he came over and fought battle after battle, and he decisively defeated the Roman Catholic forces again and again until he tragically died in a battle.

But you could say that this was very much the man who saved Protestant Europe, at least from a military perspective. Because of Gustav Adolphus' brilliant generalmanship in the whole Thirty Years' War, he turned the tide back for the Protestants and prevented a Roman Catholic defeat of the Protestant forces. Basically, they ended up with what you might call a stalemate.

You see, the very sad occasion was the Peace of Augsburg, which was in effect before the Thirty Years' War, basically established this, that the religion of the prince or the king of a region would determine what church would dominate in that region. So if it was a Protestant king, then the state church would be Protestant. If it was a Roman Catholic king, then the state church within his domain would be Roman Catholic.

That was the arrangement of the Thirty Years' War. So they fought this horrible, devastating, ugly, brutal war for 30 years all over Europe, but especially in Germany. And at the end of it all, they settled on this agreement, that the faith of the prince would determine what kind of church was in his lands.

I mean, basically it ended in a stalemate. Now you might say, well, then did anything good come from the Thirty Years' War? Well, not much. I'll tell you what the few good things that came from the Thirty Years' War was, number one, this made religious wars a thing of the past in Europe.

There were still religious conflicts from time to time, no doubt, but no more full-scale war of religion in Europe. After the Thirty Years' War, people were sick of war in Europe because they had lived with it. Thirty years of devastating war that seemed to accomplish nothing.

People were absolutely sick of it. The other aspect of it, too, is because they were sick of it, they also were willing to allow groups like the Anabaptists to finally live in peace, and they were willing to let them live

without killing them. But the second thing to understand is that the misuse of mercenary armies in the Thirty Years' War also had a huge result, too.

But before that time, it was very customary for nations and kings to hire mercenary armies to fight on their behalf. But Europe soured on the idea of mercenary armies because they were the ones responsible for so much of the devastation, so much of the destruction over all of the Thirty Years' War, and therefore, for that reason, it moved to the trend of having truly national armies instead of mercenary armies that one would hire. This whole effect after the Reformation basically solidified Europe into a divided continent religiously, right? Now you had Protestant and Catholic together, and they were going to sort it out over the ages.

They would continue to fight, but now their fighting would be intellectual, it would be in the field of debate, it wouldn't be on the battlefield. This was a critical turning point, and in a lot of ways, it marks the end of the Reformation. From then on, you enter into a whole new world, what you might call the modern world, and that's where we pick it up with our next lecture, Considering the Modern World.

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