

The Pilgrim Church - Part 8

by E.H. Broadbent

The sermon describes the struggle for the Church in the 14th century, highlighting the persecution of the brethren and the influence of the Pope and the Catholic Church.

Scripture: Matthew 5:10, John 15:18, Romans 8:35, 2 Timothy 3:12, Revelation 2:10

Topics: "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

Description

Walther of Cologne, Meister Eckart, and Johannes Tauler were influential figures in the 14th century, facing persecution for their teachings and beliefs. Tauler, in particular, stood firm in his faith, even in the face of opposition from the Emperor and the Pope. The spread of heresy and the subsequent persecution of believers led to a wave of executions and burnings across Europe. The 15th-century Renaissance brought about a transformation in Europe, with the rediscovery of Greek literature, the invention of printing, and the study of the New Testament challenging the corrupt practices of the Roman Church. Erasmus played a significant role in advocating for reform through the dissemination of the Greek New Testament and exposing the shortcomings of the clergy.

Transcript

[Walther of Cologne c. 1322]

Strassburg and Cologne were, for centuries, chief centres of the brethren; the churches of God there were large, and influenced many beyond their own circles. A chronicle relates that in 1322 a certain Walther came to Cologne from Mainz. He was

"a leader of the Brethren and a dangerous heresiarch, who for many years had remained hidden and had involved many in his dangerous errors, he was seized near Cologne and by court of justice given over to the fire and burnt. He was a man full of the Devil, more able than any other, constant in his error, clever in his answers, corrupt in faith, and no promises, no threats, not even the most terrible tortures could bring him to betray his fellow culprits, of whom there were many. This Lollard, Walther, of Netherland origin, had little knowledge of the Latin language, and wrote the numerous works of his false faith in the German tongue, as he could not do it in the Roman speech, and distributed them very secretly to those whom he had deceived and led astray. As he refused all repentance and recantation, and defended his error most steadfastly, not to say obstinately, he was thrown into the fire and left nothing but his ashes behind."

The writings of Thomas Aquinas had proved effective in establishing the doctrine that since all power in heaven and on earth was given to Christ, His representative, the Pope, had the same authority. Alvarus Pelagius, a Spanish Franciscan, supported the same view in writings which gained him great consideration. "The Pope", he wrote, "seems to those who view him with the spiritual eye, to be, not a man but a God. There are no bounds to his authority. He can declare to be right what he will and can take away from any their rights as he sees fit. To doubt this universal power leads to being shut out from salvation. The great enemies of the Church are the heretics, who will not wear the yoke of true obedience. These are extremely numerous in Italy and Germany, and in Provence, where they are called Beghards and Beghines. Some call them 'Brethren', others 'the Poor in Life', others 'Apostles'".

"The Apostles and Beghards", he continues, "have no fixed dwelling, take nothing with them on their journeys, never beg, and do no work. This is the worse in their case because they were formerly builders, smiths, etc."

Another writer (1317) says that heresy had spread so much among the priests and monks that all Alsace was full of it.

Special efforts were made to destroy heretical literature. In 1374 an edict was published in Strassburg condemning all such works as well as their authors, and ordering that all who possessed any should give them up within 14 days, that they might be burnt. Later, the Emperor Charles IV (1369) instructed inquisitors to examine the books both of laymen and clergy because the laity are not allowed to use books about the Holy Scripture in the German language, lest they should fall into the heresies in which the Beghards and Boghines live. This led to much destruction of such literature.

[Meister Eckart 1260-1327]

In 1307 the Vice-General of the Dominican Order in Saxony was the celebrated Master Eckart who, when at the University of Paris, had gained the reputation of being the most learned man of his day. His enlightened preaching and teaching led to the loss of his dignities, but after a period of seclusion he was found again in Strassburg, where his powers as a preacher soon gathered a large following around him. Eckart's writings were made so much use of by the Beghards in Strassburg that he himself came under suspicion and moved to Cologne, where, after he had preached for some years, he was cited to appear before the Archbishop upon a charge of heresy. The matter was brought before the Pope and Eckart's writings were condemned and forbidden, but in spite of this his teaching continued to prevail because of his holiness of life and high character. Suso was one who found peace through him, and in Cologne he met and influenced Tauler when he was still a young man.

[Johannes Tauler c. 1291-1361]

In the struggle between the Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria and the Pope, the well known Dominican, Dr. Johannes Tauler, boldly took the side of the Emperor. Not only was he greatly esteemed and loved in Strassburg, where his sermons drew large numbers, but his fame as a preacher and teacher spread into other countries. When (1338), on account of the Interdict, most of the clergy left Strassburg, Tauler remained, finding in the greater need of the city greater opportunity of service. He also visited other places which were suffering in the same way as Strassburg, spending some time in Basle and in Cologne. Ten years later the plague devastated Strassburg and again Tauler stood to his post and with two friars, one an Augustinian and the other a Carthusian monk served the suffering and terrified people. These three published letters, in which they justified their ministries to those who lay under the ban, arguing that, since

Christ died for all, the Pope could not close the way of salvation to any because they denied his authority and were loyal to their rightful King. For this the three friends were driven from Strassburg and retiring to the neighbouring convent of which the Carthusian was Prior, from there continued to send out their writings. Afterwards Tauler lived in Cologne, preaching in the church of St. Gertrude, but was able later to return to Strassburg, where he died (1361), at seventy years of age, after a painful illness, during which he was cared for by his sister in the convent of which she was a nun.

In his own lifetime Tauler was accused of belonging to the "sects" and defended himself, taking the place of belonging to the "Friends of God." He said: "The Prince of this world has nowadays been sowing weeds among the roses, insomuch that the roses are often choked, or sorely torn by the brambles. Children, there must needs be a flight or a distinction; some sort of a separation, whether within the cloisters or without, and it does not make them into a sect, that the 'Friends of God' profess to be unlike the world's friends."

When his teaching was called Beghard teaching, he replied by warning the "cold and sleepy people" whose trust was their having done all "that the Holy Church had commanded," that "when they had done all this, they would have no peace in their hearts for ever unless the uncreated, eternal Word of the Heavenly Father should inwardly renew them and really make a new creature of them. Instead of this they rock themselves in a false security and say, 'We belong to a holy order and have the holy fellowship and pray and read'. These blind people think that the precious sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ and His costly blood may thus be played with and remain without fruit. No, children, no, it cannot be so ... and if someone comes and warns them as to the dreadful danger in which they live and that they will die in fear, they mock him and say 'That is the way the Beghards talk'. This they do to those who cannot bear to see the miseries of their neighbours, and so point out to them the right way."

He said it is the clergy, who think everything of themselves and consider their own ways as being necessarily perfection, who are the "Pharisees", and it is they who destroy the "Friends of God".

The General of the Jesuits ordered (1576) that the books of Tauler should not be read, and (1590) Pope Sixtus V placed his sermons on the Index of prohibited books. Those writings of Tauler that were considered to be especially heretical were destroyed, and what remain have been altered. On the other hand writings have been attributed both to Eckart and to Tauler which evidently were not written by them. Owing to the circumstances of persecution that prevailed, the true authorship of many books was concealed. What we possess of Tauler's teaching shows his intimate sympathy with the brethren and the Christian churches.

["Nine Rocks"]

The book which, under the title of "History of Tauler's Conversion" has always been attached to his sermons, has been shown not to have been written by him nor of him, but it is one which well deserves the wide circulation it has had. It recounts the conversion of a priest and eminent preacher through the counsels of a godly layman. It has connections with another book of unknown authorship called the "Nine Rocks" which had a great influence. This latter was long supposed to have been written by Suso, but his edition was taken from a copy made by the wealthy Strassburg citizen Rulman Merswin, one of Tauler's most intimate friends.

Suso omits a passage which would have offended Roman Catholic susceptibilities, but was characteristic of the teaching of the brethren. It runs as follows:

"I tell thee thou art right when thou prayest God to have mercy upon poor Christendom; for know that for many hundred years Christendom has never been so poor or so wicked as in these times; but I tell thee, whereas thou sayest that the wicked Jews and heathen are all lost, that is not true. I tell thee, in these days, there is a portion of the heathen and the Jews whom God preferreth greatly to many who bear the Christian name and yet live contrary to all Christian order ... where a Jew or heathen, in any part of the world, hath a good, God-fearing mind in him, in simplicity and honesty, and in his reason and judgement knoweth no better faith than that in which he was born, but were minded and willing to cast that off if he were given to know any other faith that were more acceptable to God, and would obey God, if he ventured body and goods therefor; I tell thee, where there is a Jew or heathen thus earnest in this life, say, ought he not to be much dearer to God than the evil, false Christian men who have received baptism, and act contrary to God, knowing that they do so?"

Suso also alters a passage where the persecution of the Jews is attributed to the covetousness of the Christians, and makes it the covetousness of the Jews, a change agreeable to his general readers.

[Friend of God from the Oberland]

Among the most interesting of the many godly people with whom Tauler was in touch was one whose name is not known, but who is called the Friend of God from the Oberland.[45] He is first heard of in 1340, when he was already one of those 'Apostles' hidden from the world on account of persecution, yet exercising an extraordinary influence and authority. He spoke Italian and German, visited the brethren in Italy and Hungary, and, about 1350, came to Strassburg, and two years later repeated the visit. Here he met Rulman Merswin and gave him the "Book of the Nine Rocks" to copy.

In 1356, after an earthquake in Basle, he wrote a Letter to Christendom, commending the following of Christ as the only remedy for all evils. After this he and some companions established themselves in a remote place in the mountains, and from there corresponded with the brethren in various parts. The Friend of God from the Oberland had been a man in a good position, but when he decided to forsake the world he gave up all his possessions. He did not at once distribute all his money, but for a time used it as borrowed from God, and gradually applied it all to godly purposes. He remained unmarried. Writing to a "House of God" founded by Rulman Merswin near Strassburg, he describes the little settlement in the mountains as one of "simple, good, modest Christian brethren", and says they were all persuaded that God was about to do something that was as yet hidden, and that until it was revealed they were to remain where they were, but then they would have to separate to the ends of Christendom. He asks their prayers, for, he says, "the Friends of God are somewhat in distress".

Writing of being dead to the world, he explains:

"Our meaning is, not that a man should go out of the world and become a monk, our meaning is that he should stay in the world, but that he should not consume his heart and feelings on friends and earthly honours. Acknowledging that when he was in that way of life he sought his own things and his own honour more than God's, let him give up this worldly honour and seek God's honour in all his doings, as God Himself has so often counselled him; then I am sure, God in His Divine wisdom will enlighten him, and with this wisdom he will know better in an hour how to give good counsel than formerly in a year."

Consulted by Merswin as to the use of his money, he said: "Would it not be better to help the poor than to build a convent?" In 1380 thirteen of the Friends of God met in the hidden place in the mountains. Among them was a brother from Milan and one from Genoa, a merchant who had given up all his wealth for

Christ's sake, also two from Hungary. After long-continued prayer they took the Lord's Supper together. Then they began to consult as to what was best to be done in the circumstances of renewed persecution that had come upon the believers, and afterwards they sent out their recommendations to the secret Friends in different lands; such as Merswin in Strassburg, and others. Eventually they dispersed, going their different ways, and, as far as they can be traced, suffered death for their testimony.

[Another Wave of Persecution]

The death of the Emperor Ludwig[46] and the election of Charles IV (1348) brought about a disastrous change in the circumstances of the Christian congregations. The new Emperor was entirely under the influence of the Pope and his party, and advantage of this was taken to make a more determined effort than before to crush all dissent. During the former half of the 14th century the churches of believers had increased abundantly and the influence of their teaching had profoundly affected many people who did not formally attach themselves to them; but from the middle of that century fiery trial tested them. Inquisitors were sent in increasing numbers into the Empire, and the Emperor gave them all the power the Popes desired.

The greater part of Europe became the scene of the cruel execution of many of its best citizens. Records of burnings abound. In 1391, 400 persons were brought before the courts in Pomerania and Brandenburg accused of heresy; in 1393, 280 were imprisoned in Augsburg; in 1395, about 1000 persons were "converted" to the Catholic faith in Thuringia, Bohemia, and Moravia; the same year 36 were burnt in Mainz; in 1397, in Steier, about 100 men and women were burnt; two years later 6 women and one man were burnt in Nüremberg.

The Swiss cities suffered similar atrocities. During this time Pope Boniface IX issued an edict ordering that all suitable means should be used to destroy the plan of heretical wickedness. He quotes from a report in which those whom he calls his "beloved sons the inquisitors" in Germany, describe the Beghards, Lollards and Schwestrionen, who call themselves "the Poor" and "Brethren" and say that for more than 100 years this heresy has been forbidden under the same forms, and that in different towns several of this obstinate sect have been burnt almost every year. In 1395 an inquisitor, Peter Pilichdorf, boasted that it had been possible to master these heretics. Bohemia and England were places of refuge for many who fled to them, the teaching of Wycliff in England and of Jerome and Huss in Bohemia having powerfully influenced those countries.

A document of the year 1404, preserved in Strassburg, though written by an adversary, contains a quotation from one of the brethren, who says:

"for 200 years our fellowship has enjoyed good times and the brethren became so numerous that in their councils 700 and more persons were present. God did great things for the fellowship. Then severe persecution broke over the servants of Christ, they were driven from land to land, and to the present time this cruelty continues. But, since the Church of Christ was founded, the true Christians have never been so far reduced that in the world, or at least in some countries, some of the saints have not been found. Also our brethren, on account of persecution, have at times crossed the sea, and in a certain district have found brethren, but because they did not understand the language of the country, intercourse with them was difficult and they have returned. The face of the Church changes like the phases of the moon. Often the Church blossoms on account of the number of the saints and is strong on this earth, and again she seems to fall and to pass away entirely. But if she disappears in one place we know that she is to be seen

in other lands, even if the saints are only few who lead a good life and remain in the holy fellowship. And we believe that the Church will be raised up again in greater numbers and strength. The founder of our covenant is Christ and the Head of our Church is Jesus the Son of God."

[Seven Points of the Faith]

The same document accuses the brethren of destroying the unity of the Church by teaching that a man who lives virtuously will yet only obtain salvation by his faith; blames them that they condemn such men as Augustine and Jerome; also that they have no written prayers, but that an elder among them will begin to pray and continue for a longer or shorter time as it may seem suitable to him; also that they have the Holy Scriptures in their mother tongue in their memories and repeat it in this language in their meetings. It is further stated in this document that the brethren confessed seven points of the Holy Christian faith: (1) the Triune God; (2) that this God is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible; (3) that He gave the Law of Moses; (4) that He let His Son become man; (5) that He has chosen for Himself a spotless Church; (6) that there is a resurrection; (7) that He will come to judge the living and the dead.

These seven points reappear, but in German instead of Latin (they are in Latin in the Strassburg document) in a well-worn 14th century book found in the abbey at Tepl, near the mountainous district of the Böhmerwald, so long a refuge of persecuted brethren. This is a production of the brethren themselves, and was evidently used by one or more of them. Passages of Scripture for reading on Sundays and some other days are arranged, from which it is evident that the Roman Catholic feasts, with few exceptions, were not observed. The importance of regular reading of the Scriptures is pointed out, and also that each father of a family should be a priest in his own household.

The chief part of the book, however, consists of a German translation of the New Testament. This translation differs considerably from the Vulgate, used by the Roman Church, and resembles the German translations in use from the introduction of printing to the making of Luther's translation, which latter shows many signs of its influence, as does still more a later translation again, used for about a century by those then called Anabaptists and Mennonites.

The troubles of the times in which these people lived, and the persecutions suffered, led to no little fanaticism. Some, calling themselves brethren and sisters of the Free Spirit, acted on the assumption that their own feelings were the leadings of the Holy Spirit and gave themselves over to outrageous folly and sin. Some good people carried ascetic practices to extremes and some driven into isolation by persecution, became narrow in outlook and developed views on equality which made them suspicious of learning and disposed to consider ignorance as a virtue.

[The 15th Century Renaissance]

About the middle of the 15th century a series of events began which transformed Europe.

The capture of Constantinople by the Turks (1453) caused the flight of learned Greeks to the West. These carried with them priceless manuscripts containing the old Greek literature long forgotten in the darkened West. Soon Greek Professors were teaching in the Universities of Italy the language which gave the key to these treasures of knowledge, and from there to Oxford the study of Greek spread rapidly. From this arose such a reviving of literature as deserved the name given to it of these Renaissance, New Birth, or New Learning, but the restoration amid publication of the text of the Greek New Testament had more powerful results than were produced by the recovery of any other of the restored literature.

[Printing from Moveable Type]

At the same time the invention of printing provided the means by which the new knowledge could be disseminated, and it was in printing the Bible that the first printing presses were chiefly occupied. The discovery of America by Columbus, and the discovery of the Solar System by Copernicus also gave great enlargement to men's minds and activities.

The study of the New Testament in countless circles showed the absolute contrast between Christ and His teaching on the one hand and an utterly corrupt Christendom on the other. By the end of the 15th century 98 complete editions of the Latin Bible had been printed and much larger numbers of Portions. The Archbishop of Mainz renewed the edicts forbidding the use of German Bibles, but in about 12 years 14 editions of the German Bible had been printed and 4 editions of the Dutch Bible and large numbers of Portions. These were all taken from the same text as the Testament found in the abbey at Tepl.

Among the students of Greek in Florence was John Colet, who afterwards lectured on the New Testament in Oxford; he seemed to his hearers like one inspired, as, discarding accepted religion, he revealed Christ to the students, and expounded the Epistles of Paul. Reuchlin, a Jew, did equally valuable work in reviving the study of the Hebrew language in Germany.

[Erasmus 1466-1536]

In all the groups of distinguished scholars and printers forming over Europe, Erasmus[47] became the best known scholar. He was born in Rotterdam and his early life, as an orphan, was a constant struggle against poverty, but his exceptional abilities could not be hidden and he came to be admired, not only in learned circles, but also in all the Courts, from London to Rome. His greatest work was the publication of the Greek Testament, with a new Latin translation, accompanied by many notes and paraphrases. Edition after edition was called for. In France alone 100,000 copies were sold in a short time. People were able to read the very words that had brought salvation into the world; Christ and the Apostles became known to them, and they saw that the religious tyranny and wickedness that had so long oppressed them had no resemblance to the revelation of God given in Christ. As in his notes Erasmus contrasted the teaching of the Scriptures with the practices of the Roman Church, indignation against the clergy became vocal. Sarcasms were freely published which expressed in unmeasured terms the contempt in which they were held.

Erasmus, writing of the mendicant friars, says: "Those wretches in the disguise of poverty are the tyrants of the Christian world;" of bishops, they "destroy the Gospel ... make laws at their will, tyrannize over the laity, and measure right and wrong with rules constructed by themselves ... who sit, not in the seat of the Gospel, but in the seat of Caiaphas and Simon Magus, prelates of evil."

Of priests, he wrote: "There are priests now in vast numbers, enormous herds of them, seculars and regulars, and it is notorious that very few of them are chaste"; of the Pope: "I saw with my own eyes Pope Julius II ... marching at the head of a triumphal procession as if he were Pompey or Caesar. St. Peter subdued the world with faith, not with arms or soldiers or military engines; St. Peter's successors would win as many victories as St. Peter won if they had Peter's spirit." Of the singing of choristers in the churches: "Modern Church music is so constructed that the congregation cannot hear one distinct word.... A set of creatures who ought to be lamenting their sins, fancy they can please God by gurgling in their throats".

In introducing his Greek New Testament Erasmus writes of Christ and the Scriptures:

"Were we to have seen Him with our eyes, we should not have so intimate a knowledge as they give us of Christ speaking, healing, dying, rising again, as it were, in our very presence." "If the footprints of Christ are shown us in any place, we kneel down and adore them. Why do we not rather venerate the living and breathing picture of Him in these books?" "I wish that even the weakest woman might read the Gospels and the Epistles of St. Paul. I wish that they were translated into all languages, so as to be read and understood, not only by Scots and Irishmen, but even by Saracens and Turks. But the first step to their being read is to make them intelligible to the reader. I long for the day when the husbandman shall sing portions of them to himself as he follows the plough, when the weaver shall hum them to the time of his shuttles, when the traveller shall while away with their stories the weariness of his journey."

Erasmus was one of many who hoped for a peaceful reformation of Christendom. Conditions seemed favourable. The sanguinary Pope Julius had been succeeded by Leo X of the famous Medici family, irreligious, but devoted to art and literature, who gave his approbation to the Greek New Testament of Erasmus. Francis I, King of France, had resisted all Europe rather than yield the liberties of France to Pope Julius. Henry VIII of England was enthusiastically in favour of reforms, and had surrounded himself with the best and most able men of the same mind, Colets, Sir Thomas More, Archbishop Warham, Dr. Fisher. The other rulers of Europe, in the Empire and in Spain, were favourable. But great institutions are not easily changed. They resent criticism and resist reform. There was never any real prospect that the Roman Court would be brought into line with the teaching and example of Christ.

Some new and powerful agency was needed to bring about reform, and this was being quietly prepared in the very midst of the monkish circles. The discovery was made by one considered as a leader of the movement of reform, Johann von Staupitz. He was Vicar General of the Augustinians, and (1505) on a journey of inspection of the houses of this Order, found in Erfurt a young monk, Martin Luther, deeply exercised as to his soul's salvation. Staupitz won his confidence, being genuinely concerned to help him, and advised him to study the Holy Scriptures and also to read Augustine and the writings of Tauler and the Mystics. As he followed this counsel the Light broke in upon him and the doctrine of justification by faith became the experience of his soul.

FOOTNOTES:

[44]"Die Reformation und die älteren Reformparteien" Dr. Ludwig Keller.

[45]"Nicolaus von Basel Leben und Ausgewählte Schriften" Dr. Karl Schmidt. (Wien 1866)

[46]"Die Reformation und die älteren Reformparteien" Dr. Ludwig Keller.

[47]"Life and Letters of Erasmus" J. A. Froude.

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