

The Battle for the Church: 1517– 1644 Constantine to Christ

Introduction

Explain title. Christ's *ekklēsia*. The corruption produced by the Fathers. Attempted recovery before the Reformation. The Reformation and the aftermath.

The Corruption

Fathers' Corruption? 2nd to 5th centuries. Going to the old covenant. Hierarchy. Clergy/Laity. Sacraments and sacramentalism. Sacerdotalism. The withering of the priesthood of all believers. Infant baptism and baptismal regeneration. The fusion of church and State. Enforced uniformity. Political councils. Christendom. See, for instance, my *The Pastor: Does He Exist?*; *The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*; *Infant Baptism Tested*; *Battle for the Church: 1517–1644*; *Letting Loose a Gadfly: Edward Miall Speaks Today*.

During the next 1000 years, triumph of Rome in the West, sacral society, popery, the mass, Mary worship *etc.*

Protest

Ambrose of Milan in the 4th century; in the 6th century, Laurentius of Milan; in the 7th century, Mansuetus of Milan; Claude of Turin (who died in 827); the Waldensians of the 11th century and beyond; Arnold of Brescia (1110-1155); the followers of the French priest, Peter of Bruys, who lived in the 12th century; the Albigenses, who were crushed in the early 13th century; William Sawtre (who was martyred in 1401); John Wycliffe and the Lollards, John Huss (14th century); and John Colet (1466/7-1519); and many, many more. See my *John Colet: A Preacher to be Reckoned With*; 'The Long Night'.

The Reformation and Beyond

1509-1547 HENRY VIII

- 1517 Martin Luther nails his theses to the door at Wittenberg
- 1521 Henry burns Luther's works
- 1525 First Anabaptist church formed in Zurich
- 1526 William Tyndale's New Testament reaches England
- 1527 Felix Manz the first Anabaptist martyr
- 1534 Henry's Act of Supremacy
- 1535 First Anabaptist executed in England
- 1536 John Calvin settles in Geneva
- 1539 Henry's Act of Six Articles

1547-1553 EDWARD VI

- 1549 The First Act of Uniformity
- 1550-1551 John Hooper argues against vestments
- 1552 The Second Act of Uniformity

1553-1558 MARY

- 1553-1558 Many Christians executed
- c1555 Two separated conventicles discovered

1558-1603 ELIZABETH I

- 1559 The Third Act of Uniformity
- 1560 The Geneva Bible
- 1563 Puritans defeated at Convocation

- 1567 Secret church at Plumber's Hall
- 1567 Secret church at White-chapel Street with Richard Fitz as pastor
- 1570 Thomas Cartwright lectures on Acts at Cambridge
- 1571 Presbyterian congregation at Northampton
- 1572 Wandsworth Presbytery
- c1580 First Congregational church formed at Norwich with Robert Browne as pastor
- 1588-1589 The Marprelate Tracts
- 1590s William Perkins at Cambridge
- 1592 The Ancient church formed in London with Francis Johnson as pastor
- 1593 Henry Barrowe, John Greenwood and John Penry hanged
- 1593 The Ancient church emigrates to Amsterdam
- c1602 Congregational church formed at Gainsborough
- 1603-1625 JAMES I**
- 1603 The Millenary Petition
- 1604 Hampton Court Conference
- 1604 Three hundred Puritans ejected from the Church of England
- c1604 Gainsborough church divides into two, one at Scrooby
- 1604 John Robinson joins Scrooby church and becomes teacher
- 1606 John Smyth joins church at Gainsborough and

- becomes pastor
- 1606-1607 Gainsborough church emigrates to Amsterdam
- 1608 Scrooby church emigrates to Amsterdam
- 1609 Scrooby church moves to Leyden. John Robinson becomes pastor
- 1609 First General Baptist church formed in Amsterdam with John Smyth as pastor
- 1611 The Authorised King James Version of the Bible
- 1611-1612 First General Baptist church formed in England with Thomas Helwys as pastor
- 1616 First Independent church formed at Southwark with Henry Jacob as pastor
- 1620 Leyden (Scrooby) church emigrates to New World

1625-1649 CHARLES I

- 1633-1641 Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury
- 1633-1638 First Particular Baptist church formed
- 1640 Long Parliament begins
- 1642 First Particular Baptist church formed with baptism by immersion. Richard Blunt as pastor
- 1642 First Civil War starts
- 1643-1649 The Westminster Assembly
- 1644 First Particular Baptist Confession of Faith

The Gains

- Scripture was the sole authority in their churches in 1644, not the Fathers, tradition and the pope, as it had been in the one Catholic Church in 1517.
- Christ was King in their churches, whereas the pope had been the Supreme Pontiff over all the Church in 1517. The Particular Baptists were firm advocates of Christ's unique right to rule his people by his Spirit through his word.
- The New Testament was the pattern, the rule and order of their churches and the way they saw the advance of the gospel in the world – not the theories based on Constantine. I do not say they perfectly attained their goal, but the New Testament, and only the New Testament, was their pattern.
- Their churches were free of State control in 1644, whereas the Church and State were one in 1517.
- They preached the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace, not salvation by works and merits through man's free will.
- They baptised believers only, and that by immersion, in place of the almost universal practice of the baptismal regeneration of infants by sprinkling in 1517. And they accepted as members of their churches none but baptised believers who lived consistently with their profession.
- The simple, symbolic remembrance of Christ in his Supper had replaced the abomination of the Mass.
- Religion was a voluntary matter for them, not something to be enforced by kings and parliaments and magistrates and armies. Spiritual discipline was a church matter and the concern of the church alone. The means to be used were spiritual; not carnal, such as prison, the sword and the stake.
- Instead of one all-embracing Church, their churches were separate and independent.

Can we not learn from this history before it is too late? What lessons should stay with us? If we choose not to remember, we shall forget; if we forget, we shall lose what was won for us, we shall lose our gospel liberty. And if we lose that, we shall have to fight the battle all over again.

First, the Bible tells us plainly that God is sovereign in all things, over all men, and in all affairs.

Secondly, though God is sovereign, we still have to do our part.

Thirdly, the Bible tells us that the way of Christ is the way of suffering.

Fourthly, let us remember the emphasis which Scripture puts upon the *ekklēsia*.

Fifthly, another very important lesson we have learned is that Constantine was a disaster.

Sixthly, we have been reminded, surely, that men are but fallible mortals.

Seventhly, we must always bear in mind that what we do affects the generations following on behind us – for good or ill.

Eighthly, and finally, the *ekklēsia* is God's *ekklēsia*.

Last Word

Let us never forget that, being open to the Spirit and holding an open Bible, we must always be reforming. So many, alas, stop at 1647 or 1689. Let us never forget – nor fail to act on – John Robinson's word on the 21st July, 1620, to the departing believers at Delft Haven:

I am confident the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word. I bewail the state and condition of the Reformed churches, who have come to a full-stop in religion, and will go no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn beyond what Luther saw; the Calvinists, they stick where Calvin left them.

This is a misery much to be lamented; for though they were shining lights in their times, yet God did not reveal his whole will unto them, and if they were alive today they would be as ready to and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received. Keep in mind our church covenant, our promise and covenant with God and one another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written word. But take heed what you receive for truth – examine it well and compare it and weigh it with other scriptures of truth before you receive it. It is not possible that the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-Christian darkness, and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.¹

To close with Scripture:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 11:32 – 12:2).

¹ See my ‘A Thanksgiving Day Thought’.