

Chapter Seven

THE ROMAN CONQUEST OF THE CHURCH

Is the Reformation Unfinished?

***“My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you
as my priests; because you have ignored the law of
your God, I also will ignore your children.
The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they
exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful”*** (Hosea 4:6,7).

Ever since the stoning of Stephen, Christians had been counting the high cost of following Christ. Living for God as disciples of Christ had brought ever-increasing persecution from both the Jews and the Romans. From his throne in Rome, Nero had sought scapegoats for the military and economic distresses of his empire. Christians became easy targets for the burnings and crucifixions which followed. Under the Roman Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117), those accused of the crime of being Christian faced interrogation. Ones admitting “guilt” were executed. Those denying the charge were freed only after reciting a prayer to the Roman gods, worshiping the emperor’s statue, and cursing Christ. The faithful of the early Church understood what it meant to sacrifice self, dying daily to all that was of the flesh and willing even to offer up life itself for the sake of the Gospel.

By the fourth century few were willing to pay the price that faith had demanded of their spiritual ancestors. A pivotal moment for the church occurred when it entered into alliance with the Roman Empire. In AD 312 the Roman Emperor Constantine called on the Christian God for victory during a crucial battle with his opponent Maxentius for control of the Empire. Triumphant, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan the following year, ending the persecution of the church by the Empire. Endorsed from the throne, Christianity became the favored religion. In time it became so identified with the Roman Empire that everyone born in the Empire was automatically considered “Christian.”

With the dangers of persecution removed, membership in the church became attractive to growing numbers who entered for worldly reasons. These new churchgoers were readily accepted by their society, a far cry from the attitude toward the peculiar believers of the Hebraic first-century Church. The children of the Empire were counted as children of the church. Infant baptism became universal. The hierarchical structure of the church, which through syncretism was already a clone of the Empire, merged effortlessly with the political government. This consolidation was to culminate in the establishment of the papacy; the Roman Pontiff would replace Pontifex Maximus (Caesar) as supreme authority.

The merger of church and state represented the second major turning point for the church. The first turning point, the widespread influx of Gentiles and Hellenistic thought into the body, had resulted in the loss of the church's Hebraic roots and the rise of anti-Semitism. The period after the AD 313 Edict of Milan brought tremendous destruction to the faith as it had been practiced in the first century. With imperial approval the church embarked on achieving unity through stronger organization. Ecclesiastical hierarchy and authority formed the basis for religious cohesion rather than dependence on the Holy Spirit to unite and equip the body of believers.

In one form or another, the Roman model continues to represent the organizational structure of most denominations today. In any church affiliation where the will of God and spiritual guidance are removed from individual responsibility and are determined by and/or enforced by some form of intermediary, the Roman Empire still exists.

The history of the "organized" church during the centuries following Constantine is well-documented. Whether the church or the Roman Empire triumphed is perhaps debatable. The state-supported church consolidated its position until its dominion was practically absolute. Many revisionist writings appeared at this point, attempting to validate the hierarchical structure acquired from the Romans. For instance, ecclesiastical leadership crowned Peter and the other apostles with a hierarchical authority that neither the Bible nor the early Church writings substantiated. This state-church became so far removed from the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and so politically dominant, that it led into the corruption and ignorance of the Dark Ages.

The Roman church powers recognized that people's minds could be controlled if their education were controlled. Since all education was conducted in Latin, a language of which the masses were ignorant, then only the select few had access to reading materials. Since the printing press had not yet been invented, access to the Bible was exceedingly limited. The Roman church further forbade the printing of any Scriptural material in a language other than Latin. Therefore the populace at large was totally dependent upon the educated clergy for any religious instruction.

Sacerdotalism, the system of ordained priests who mediate between God and mankind, became firmly established. This practice emulated the pagan pattern of an elevated hierarchy of priests. Creating titles for and conferring authority to those who were hand-picked by the leadership, the religious establishment added ceremonies that outdid one another in solemn pomposity. The ecclesiastical authorities constructed massive cathedrals, filling them with statuary and art. Having lost sight of the kingdom of God, the established church schemed and persecuted but missed its prime directive: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

Many of the "visual images" seen in the church today—statuary, candles, feast days, sacraments, ceremonies, processions—were copied from the heathen and adapted for church use. One example is the celebration of Christmas on December 25th. That day was also the culmination of the Roman celebration for the god of agriculture. The pagan holiday was marked by partying, feasting, and gift-exchanging. Early believers, finding no basis for this in the Word, refused to participate. Rebuffed and affronted, their Roman

neighbors publicly maligned the Christians contemptuously, calling them “cannibals”. These accusations resulted in grave persecution of the believers. In time, however, that which had once seemed repulsive to Christians was adopted. Thus we have the widespread celebration of Christmas. (The irony is that today, in most cases, if you *don’t* celebrate Christmas with parties and gifts, you appear un-Christian.)

***“Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth
in order to draw away disciples after them.
So be on your guard!” (Acts 20:30).***

From Constantine onward, the glory of the church was found not in intimate relationship with God but in its riches and forms. Church leaders were held in awe as great men on the earth; over the centuries even heads of nations bowed to them. Their power represented the authority of men, enforced, if need be, by the sword. But the imposing church organization, with all the might of its authority, still found itself powerless to exercise spiritual control over the hearts of sinful men. Rome could neither unite people in true worship nor guard the soundness of the faith that had been passed on to them.

Testifies Alexander Hay, “What the New Testament evangelists had accomplished in their material poverty and defenselessness through the weapons of faith, prayer and the Word of God, the humanly organized Church with its wealth and power was impotent to do.”¹ Grasping the sword of human power made it increasingly necessary to use that weapon even to the extremes of Inquisitional ruthlessness and cruelty in complete contradiction to the Spirit of Christ. Dependence on human wisdom excluded more and more the Spirit-revealed wisdom of God, resulting in ever-increasing darkness.

Following the traditions of contemporaneous pagan religions, Constantine built temples in which Christians could gather. Since public buildings were provided for worship by the emperor, believers moved from meeting in homes to congregating in structures designed to imitate the temples inspired by the writings of Plato. Stained glass windows, lofty steeples, and high vaulted church ceilings: Plato’s writings spoke of light and space that would point man upward as he strived to reach the presence of the “unknowable” God. The very edifice of worship was designed to draw the focus “up” toward some elusive spiritual truth just out of grasp.

Prior to Constantine, there had been no such thing as church buildings or “Christian” architecture. “The Christian faith was a living room movement, and was the first and only religion ever to exist that did not use special temples of worship; it is the only living room religion in human history”.² The early Hebraic Christians understood that God could be known; they had a relationship with Him directly. They saw no need for stained glass windows and steeples to point upward to a God beyond their reach. The high ceilings and vaulted windows conspired to induce an awe founded on tangible apparatus. (Is this why we so often whisper when we enter a church building?) So it was, that in AD 323, almost three hundred years after the birth of the Church, Christians began to meet in a building we now errantly call a “church.” These structures, named after New Testament believers (saints), paralleled the pagan temples named after their gods.

In the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great invented an order of worship, designating it the only one for all the churches in Christendom. For Roman Catholics, that “order of worship” has remained basically unchanged. (During the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin developed a pattern of worship that has remained the standard for most Protestant churches to this day: welcoming prayer, hymns, announcements, prayer, offertory, sermon, hymn, benediction.)

In the manner of pagan priests, a paid, professional clergy class evolved in Christianity, in time setting themselves apart from the daily lives of the people. The priesthood of all believers was forsaken. The church lost the intimacy its gatherings had exemplified in the synagogue model: openly worshiping God, candidly sharing with and edifying each other, and freely ministering service to others in the church and in the world. With the merging of Roman hierarchy and Greek thought, congregational gatherings voided themselves of expressive thanksgiving and worship of a relationally loving God Who interacted with His people. The needs of personal lives and daily concerns were replaced by ethereal messages about a remote and uninvolved deity. Christians fell into “spectator Christianity,” lulled into allowing the professional clergy, the sacerdotal, to approach the Almighty on their behalf. With the development of sacraments, the clergy found the key to absolute control over the people, since clergy alone were “ordained” to perform the rites.

The structured organization of ritualism and sacerdotalism necessarily meant the demise of the free exercise of spiritual gifts. Today many believers regard the general manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit as something peculiar to the early Church. Several denominations even have doctrinal statements to that effect. How far the church has strayed from the priesthood of believers equipped by the Holy Spirit to minister to one another.

During this period, as in the centuries to follow, the Lord was never without faithful witnesses. There has always been a remnant of believers striving to remain faithful to the teaching and practices of the early Church. As best as they could, they kept themselves from all compromise with the world, walking and serving in the wisdom and power of the Spirit. Many faced persecution and martyrdom, but as the centuries passed, the door to free expression of Truth began to crack open.

The Reformation Unfinished

***“I consider my life worth nothing to me,
if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—
the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).***

One of the persevering firebrands for the faith who refused to be silenced was John Wycliffe, a fourteenth century preacher and theologian. “His intolerance of Church abuses, begging friars, unlearned clergy, politically motivated bishops and inaccessibility of the Scriptures in the language of the common people, as well as the Church’s demands on the monarch and its involvement in civil law and order, resulted in his championing the separation of church and state.”³

One hundred and fifty years later William Tyndale would be so consumed with zeal to put the Word of God into the hands of his English countrymen that he would pay the ultimate price with his life. Once the Bible had been translated into the vernacular of the people, the Holy Spirit Himself could then breathe life into the sacred text for those earnestly seeking the truth.

By the early sixteenth century, the church establishment had approached what we today would consider insanity in persecuting those clinging to faith rather than religion. A case in point: In 1517 in Coventry, England, five men and two women were burned at the stake for the heresy of teaching their children the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English. At great risk to many lives was birthed the great spiritual awakening, the “Reformation”. Yet, as history has proved, the sacrifices of men and women obedient to their God were used by Him to rekindle faith in Christ’s ultimate sacrifice. As T.S. Eliot expressed in *Murder in the Cathedral*, “Martyrdom is no accident. A martyr is always made by the design of God for his love of men, to warn them, and to lead them back to his ways.”⁴

The Reformation period saw the restoration of much that had been lost for centuries, especially a focus on the relationship between God and man. Because of the continuing powerful influence of the writings of Origen and Clement, however, the simplicity of the early Church order and practice failed to materialize. The right of all believers to take part in ministry through the gifts of the Spirit was minimally regained at best since there was still an ongoing distinction between clergy and laity. Laity were permitted to hold certain positions of authority, *i.e.*, “elder”, in some denominations, but even the great reformer, Martin Luther, felt that the illiterate laymen of his time were ill-prepared to minister. This became his impetus to translate the New Testament into the German vernacular of his people in order that they could be trained up to study the Word of God for themselves.

The Reformation awakened a zeal for learning and for exploration but failed to restore spiritual unity in the church. The various faith communities that were organized continued to depend primarily on human forms of government. Protestant clergy were simply replacements for the Roman Catholic priesthood. The churches that emerged, so far as their clergy structure was concerned, were reformed Roman Catholic churches rather than fully participative, Spirit-led churches. Some of the reformers understood the early Church pattern but deemed it impossible to return to. Vested interest once more kept this from happening. Once again the “ambulance was placed at the bottom of the cliff.”

The reformed Church had not only lost the (enforced) union which the Church of Rome's human organization had provided; it had also failed to regain the true spiritual unity of the Hebraic early Church. The unity of the Church of Rome had been derived from its centralized, autocratic, totalitarian organization with the Pope at its head.⁵ The Protestant Church, lacking such authoritarian structure, paved the way for the factions and denominational splits that plague it to this day.

During the period of the Protestant Reformation, some signs of the re-Judaization of the Christian faith began to surface as certain Hebraic biblical principles were rediscovered. The Reformers, for example, put great stress on the precept of *sola scriptura*, Scripture as the sole and final authority for the Christian—a view firmly rooted in Hebraic soil.

An important point to consider: Armed with the well-documented history of the Reformation, whose participants attempted in great earnest to change the church, we in the twentieth century can now see that any attempt at reform without a full return to the Hebraic foundations of the early Church will miss the mark. The early Church determined to equip believers in relationship with one another to serve and disciple and evangelize. The reformed church feared to depend entirely upon God, upon the leadership of the Lord, and on the power of the Spirit to change individuals, families, and societies as did the early Church. Everyone who attempts to regain the interrelational dependency on God and fellow believers that characterized the early Church will encounter the same opposing forces.

Concluding Comments

The church that has emerged structurally and spiritually over the centuries has few points of similarity to the Church founded by the apostles. In seminaries today, revisionist writings strive to prove that the church as it stands is the form given by the Lord and the apostles. It is interesting to note what happened to the five basic ministries given by the Lord to the Church for its function and witness: apostle, prophet, evangelist, teacher, pastor (see Ephesians 4:12,13). The apostolic foundation became buried under a human structure that ruled by ecclesiastical force and decree, lording it over the people. The servant leadership of the apostles was forfeited for power and prestige. Although several denominations today claim "apostolic lineage," their method of leadership defies the admonition of Jesus to the Twelve: "*The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves*" (Luke 22:25,26).

The ministry of the evangelist or church planter, in its full sense, was lost as the pastoral function absorbed the ministries of preacher and teacher. The elders became "clergy," and the other members of the church, "laymen." As a result, the gifts of preaching and teaching to be distributed by the Holy Spirit as He determined (see 1 Corinthians 12:11) became prerogatives of the clergy. The rest of the church, deprived of its priestly privilege, has been (and continues to be) largely silenced.

It is a sad history. Instead of returning to the place of surrender and faith and free access to the Spirit's power, the church sought strength and protection by solidifying human organization as it conferred power on human leaders. Paul and the other New Testament evangelists had used spiritual weapons of prayer, faith, and holiness to overthrow the strongholds of human reasoning. Tragically these spiritual weapons have been laid aside.

"They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers"

(Nehemiah 9:2).

Whatever the denomination represented by the reader, we need to honestly examine the history of the church and consider if this is truly what God wanted: churches paralleling the institutions of the world (some with pastors functioning as CEO's), compromising in order to avoid persecution and martyrdom, blending in with the culture to make worship palatable and entertaining. This needs to be the generation that repents for both ourselves and our forefathers for having embraced the Greek and Roman influences. We have failed to exercise the courage to return to the Church established by Jesus and the apostles.

Daniel confessed the ancestral sins that had brought defeat and captivity to the Jews. Turning to God in earnest prayer, as followers of Christ need to do today, he confessed the sins of the whole nation for generations as if they were his own iniquities.⁶ Daniel recognized that the *"good hand of the Lord"* would not be with his people until those sins were confessed and their effect was repudiated.

In the same way today, believers must repent for the centuries-long sins of the church for turning away from the theocracy of Jesus. With His forgiveness and grace, we may then fully cooperate with Him in fulfilling His words: *"I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH"* (see Matthew 16:18).