

Did God Divide the Church 500 Years Ago?

As a student of church history (I am not a church historian) and one who has tried to dig deep into my Christian roots so I am best able to position myself and the congregations I influence, I have a strong connection to both the ancient and future church—since the height of the tree is limited by the depth of the roots!

As part of my journey, I have often wondered if the Protestant Reformation was worth it. In other words, did the Reformation do more harm than good regarding the health of the church and the influence of the kingdom of God? I ask myself if the Reformation was something that could have been avoided since it dissolved Christendom into mere Christianity. This is something many on the Anabaptist, pietistic side welcome, while those working for a kingdom witness and reconstruction of the nations are working hard to recapture. Some of us fall between these polar-opposite positions.

One of the unsung heroes of church history was the Catholic theologian Erasmus. He represented a third option besides the positions of the Roman Catholics and Protestant pioneer provocateur Martin Luther. Erasmus wanted to reform the church, return the church to its biblical roots, and rid it of internal abuses; but was not willing to break the ecclesial unity of the church. Often I have wished that Erasmus won the day instead of Luther. But unfortunately, the popes of his day did not heed his warnings, resulting in a third schism.

Besides the first schism of East and West in the 11th century, this was the most devastating schism of the church. It wasn't until Vatican II of the early 1960s, almost 450 years too late, that the Catholic Church finally started coming toward Erasmus! I have also wondered if there was biblical precedent

for the Reformation. I have come to the conclusion that the Scriptures are clear: God honors His name above all else and He does not tolerate abuses in His name by any faith community, whether Israel of the past or the church of the past and present!

Our primary historic case study is the nation of Israel. As much as God values unity among His people (as prayed by Jesus in John 17:20-23), He judged the 12 tribes of Israel by dividing their kingdom because of the apostasy of King Solomon.

First Kings 11:9-11 says: "The Lord was angry with Solomon because he turned his heart away from the Lord God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had warned him about this, that he should not follow other gods, but he was disobedient to the Lord's command. Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, 'Since you have done this and have not kept My covenant and statutes, which I commanded you, I will surely take the kingdom from you and give it to your servant.'"

Later, the writer of 1 Kings 11:29-34 says: "At that time, when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him along the way, and he had dressed himself in a new garment, and the two *of them* were alone in the field. Ahijah took off the new garment that he wore and tore it into twelve pieces, and he said to Jeroboam: Take ten pieces, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "See, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and will give ten tribes to you (but he shall have one tribe for My servant David's sake and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel), because they have forsaken Me and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Molek the god of the children of Ammon and have not walked in My ways and have not done that which is right in My eyes, to keep My statutes and judgments, as his father David had done. 'However, I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, but I will make him

prince all the days of his life for David My servant's sake, whom I chose, because he kept My commandments and My statutes.'"

In the very next chapter we see this prophecy fulfilled when the tribes of Israel broke away from Solomon's son, King Rehoboam, which left him as the ruler of Judah only.

Then, to take it a step further, when both of the kings of Israel and Judah continued to turn away from the law of the Lord, God scattered all of His people among the nations. They didn't return again as one nation until the post-exilic period during the days of Nehemiah and Ezra. We see this during the days of Jeremiah when God was already planning to divide and scatter His people because every facet of leadership representing the religious, social, judicial and political spheres committed apostasy by turning away from the word of God!

Jeremiah 2:8-9 says: "The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' And those who handle the law did not know Me; the shepherds also transgressed against Me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal and walked after things that do not profit. Therefore I will yet contend with you, says the Lord, and with your sons' sons I will contend."

Jeremiah also declared that God would scatter His people by using the pagan nation of Babylon (the nation from the north) to judge His people, which eventually led to them being taken captive to Babylon and disinherited.

Jeremiah 1:14-15 says: "Then the Lord said to me: Out of the north calamity will break forth on all the inhabitants of the land. For I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord. And they will come and they will set each one his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all the walls all around, and against all the cities of Judah."

Thus God bypassed His religious and political hierarchy—the entire institution of leadership—and chose Jeremiah as the only one to be His oracle!

Also, we see this principle during the days of Elijah several hundred years before they were scattered. At that time there was so much syncretism (King Ahab worshipped both Baal and Yahweh) that God used a remnant of 7,000 prophets preserved from the school of prophets set up by the prophet Samuel (many years before) as a sub-culture preserving the holy remnant who kept the word of the Lord and faith in Yahweh until a king arose who would restore the nation back to God (1 Kings 17-21)! But even godly kings like Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah were not enough to prevent the eventual disinheritance witnessed by Jeremiah.

Furthermore, we see God operating powerfully through the scattered remnant in Babylon. Daniel was used by God to transform the entire nation of Babylon (Dan. 1-6)! This shows us that God doesn't need all the political, social and ecclesial accoutrements to transform culture and promote His kingdom! He will even bypass the unity of His church and faith community if necessary to accomplish His purposes if His people forsake His law and compromise their faith by worshipping and serving God and manmade traditions!

Finally, by the time of John the Baptist, we see God totally bypassing the religious hierarchy of the restored nation of Israel which was then under Roman rule, including the Scribes and Pharisees, by revealing the birth of Messiah to the lowly shepherds at night (marketplace leaders). God was making a statement by bypassing the priests and religious leaders with this sacred announcement!

Also, we see St. Luke accentuating this point by mentioning all the priestly and political leaders before announcing that the word of God had bypassed them and instead came to an unknown person named John the Baptist in the wilderness

(wilderness in this context represents that he was outside their context and power base).

Luke 3:1-4: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Caesar Tiberius, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Traconitis, and Lysanias was the tetrarch of Abilene. Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He came into the region surrounding the Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight."'"

Of course, John was the forerunner of Jesus who, as a carpenter, was outside the priestly clan of Aaron and was not a member of the Sanhedrin nor a political leader. Yet He suddenly appeared on the scene as a herald of Good News (Luke 4:18).

John 7:15 says Jesus was not a man of letters (He wasn't officially trained in the Scriptures by the accepted system of education run by the religious leadership) but was God the Son who came to bring the way, the truth and the life to the world (outside of the ecclesiastical or religious structure of His day). One of the most profound things Jesus ever said was that the religious traditions of men make the Word of God of no effect (Mark 7:13)!

Of course, I am still a proponent of church unity and understand it is something the Scriptures teach us to strive toward so we can function with the maximum amount of power and purpose! The body of Christ needs each part as shown in 1 Corinthians 12; Jesus prayed for His followers to be united in John 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10 teaches us not to be divided in the church; and Acts 2:44-47 and Acts 4:32-34 show that one of the primary reasons for the power of the early church was

their love and unity. However, it is clear from the aforementioned narratives that God honors His name more than superficial and idolatrous unity.

Consequently, if the Protestant Reformation was a catalyst for the church to embrace the Scriptures as its highest standard of faith and life (2 Tim. 3:15,16); if the Reformation helped purge the church of religious idolatry (John 14:6, Acts 4:12); if the Reformation highlighted the gospel truth that salvation is through grace alone and not by individual works (Eph. 2:8,9); if the Reformation helped restore the biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:8, 9) and if the Reformation ultimately helps restore the body of Christ (including Roman Catholicism, Eastern orthodox, Anglican and beyond) back to the way of Christ and His apostles—then, in my opinion, it was worth it!

Next week I will deal with the advantages and disadvantages of the Protestant Reformation.