Bible Study 101

Wednesday November 8, 2023

The History of the Episcopal Church

You cannot begin to tell the history of the Episcopal Church without first relating the history of the Anglican Church of England beginning in 1554. You cannot begin to describe the history of the church of England without reference to Martin Luther and the Reformation of 1517.

Pre-1517 there was only one church in Western Europe, the Roman Catholic Church. Europe was divided into Countries and Dioceses, but the ultimate Authority rested with Rome. The Eastern Orthodox Churches of Greece, Russia, Ukraine had broken off from Rome around the year 989ad.

By 1517 the church was in a sad state. Clergy were poorly educated; all liturgy was in Latin and Rome-soaked parishes and dioceses for taxes. There was massive corruption in Rome where Popes, Cardinals, Bishops consecrated to celibacy, often had mistresses and wives. The only saving factor was the work of the monasteries and the monks and friars, who provided, education, farming, hospitals and cared for the poor. These included Augustinians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites and a splattering of Celtic Monasteries.

The First sign of change or reform began with the invention of the printing press, in 1436 in Gutenberg Germany. It was significant because it quickened the spread of knowledge and would in time hasten the Renaissance. The Printing Press was a revolution because it brought books, mass produced into the hands of everyone.

The Gutenberg Bible allowed the common man to read the words of scripture and in their own language. They could produce some 3600 pages of print per day. By the year 1500ad the Printing Press had spread to two hundred European Cities. They produced some twenty million volumes in books. Immediately, communication went out by way of books, leaflets, newspapers and flyers and became instantly available to all.

The immediate effect was to threaten the power of political and religious authorities. Literacy boomed, and broke the monopoly of the ruling elite. People, ordinary people, were able to read for the first time the words of scripture. Biblical awareness and knowledge began to grow, ignorant priests were challenged and nationalism spread across Europe as the Bible was translated into every language.

A series of English translations were smuggled into England and were initially banned. But nothing could stop the flow of new knowledge or the Bibles that arrived in their thousands. It had a big influence on Christians in Germany.

Martin Luther was born 14 November 1483. He came from a middle-class family and was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. Martin was a devout and prayerful man and taught as a Professor at the University of Wittenberg teaching theology. Around 1517 he confronted the church’s teaching on ‘Indulgences’.

An Augustinian Monk had come through Wittenberg teaching and preaching in the churches and public square. He was one of many sent by Pope Julien II raising funds for the building of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The thrust of his appeal was that: “For every brick you buy, a soul flies out of Purgatory to his salvation in heaven. “---An ‘Indulgence ‘ is a get out of Purgatory card leading to salvation and you can obtain it with your donation.

Martin Luther saw this as heresy. “Salvation can only come from faith in Jesus Christ; and through his death on the cross.” Christians are justified by Faith and not by deeds. Martin sat down and wrote a thesis outlining the correct Christian doctrine. It became famous as the Ninety-Five Thesis. He nailed it to the door of the Wittenberg church. “With the first blow of his hammer,” scholars would later say, “he started the Protestant Reformation.

Others like John Huss had tried reform in previous years and had been burnt at the stake. In 1520 Luther was called before a Council of Bishops and scholars at Worms in Germany to defend his position. There he rejected the church’s teaching on Indulgences and would not recant. He ended with is famous statement: “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

To be continued…. Fr. Bill