

27 The Reformation 1 - A Brief History I

The early church went through a great deal of persecution and torment as it grew and developed. Nearly all of those close to Jesus died terrible deaths:

Peter	crucified head down at Rome
Matthew	slain with sword in Ethiopia
James	thrown from a temple in Jerusalem (son of Alpheas)
James	beheaded in Jerusalem (son of Zebedee)
Philip	hanged in Phrygia
Bartholomew	tortured to death by a barbarous king
Andrew	crucified on an X-shaped cross in Achaia
Thomas	shot through with arrows while at prayer
Jude	shot to death in Persia
Simon	the zealot — crucified in Persia
Paul	beheaded by Nero at Rome
Mark	dragged through the streets of Alexandria until dead
Luke	hanged from an olive tree in Greece
Barnabas	stoned to death
John	natural death @ Ephesus, (had been put in boiling oil in Rome)

Yet... the early church grew through the letters written by Paul, Peter, Luke, and others which were used by God to help establish His Holy Word to His people.

The period from about 475 to about 1000 bc was what we know as "*The Dark Ages*" or "*Middle Ages*." And with the collapse of the Roman Empire, Christianity became the standard-bearer of Western civilization.

The office of the Pope gained in secular authority but corruption and religious zeal became a religious military power.

The Crusades were a period of military expeditions undertaken by European Christians in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims. There were more than a dozen Crusades to achieve this. There is nothing new with what we are seeing today in the Middle East & Israel. In fact a treaty was signed in 1244 with Damascus which restored Palestine to the Christians, but in the same year the Egyptian Muslims took Jerusalem and routed the Christians at Gaza. All very familiar places and terms in our 21st Century world.

The Inquisitions were used by Bishops in the Catholic church who had been instructed to hold numerous tribunals directed at suppressing what they referred to as the "heresies" they were facing in the growing movement. They taught that only the spiritual was good and anything material was evil as intimidation grew as the Catholic church was getting more and more heavy-handed in the lives of the new "Christians." Faith was slowly becoming more and more based on works as the Catholic church was feeling the growing movement.

By the early 1500s the body of Christ was yearning for the fresh wind of God's Spirit on His people.

October 31st in the year 1517—more than 500 years ago—was the day that marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. At the time Martin Luther was a professor of biblical studies at the university at Wittenberg in Germany. In his study of the Scriptures Luther began to question the Catholic teaching he had received. He realized that salvation was by God's grace alone and was in no way dependent on our works. Not being able to go against his conscience he wrote out his now famous *95 Theses* and nailed them to the door of the Wittenberg Church. Not willing to retract what he had written, the Pope promptly declared Luther a heretic—and the Protestant movement began.

This was a blow that spurred the Catholic church to issue an excommunication against Luther which he abruptly, and publicly burned. Very simply Luther offered his foundational belief that,— justification (salvation) is by faith alone not of sacrament, good works, or efforts by clergy... and that,—God's people were meant to be in direct communication with God Himself—the priesthood of the believer.

Luther's challenge spread quickly throughout Europe, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway who became firmly Protestant during the first 15 years. Certainly the introduction of the printing press took on a major role to hasten the Reformation.

In 1534 a man in Geneva named John Calvin developed a systemized approach to Christianity and in 1536 published his own writings—called *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—which differed from Luther on some doctrines. But Calvin, still considered one of the greatest theologians of Protestantism, was advancing his views that...

- God had absolute sovereignty in the affairs of man
- only those specifically elected by God are saved
- that this election is irresistible
- that an individual can do nothing to effect this salvation

Calvinism swept through France, the Netherlands, across Scotland and took root in Hungary, Poland, and parts of Germany. Attempts were made to reconcile the Calvinist, Lutheran, and other doctrinal views but... with no great success.

In 1588 a man named Jacob Harmensen became a pastor in Amsterdam and initially undertook to defend Calvin's views but in the process he changed his views... and changed his name to Jacobus Arminius. He felt Calvin needed some moderation, because he felt man's free will could not be reconciled to an absolute sovereignty or an irresistible grace. His views—Arminianism—ultimately were picked up by Charles and John Wesley who founded the Methodist churches, and were later adopted by the Baptists & Lutherans. Many Baptists today, who say they are anti-Calvinists, are unaware that their most famous preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a five-point Calvinist. Spurgeon said: *The old truth that Calvin preached, that Augustine preached, that Paul preached, is the truth that I must preach today, or else be false to my conscience and my God. I cannot shape the truth. I know of no such thing as paring off the rough edges of a doctrine. John Knox's gospel is my gospel. That which thundered through Scotland must thunder through England again.*

Calvinism ultimately influenced the Puritans of England and led to the New England (the Americas), and the theology of Jonathan Edwards whose original sermons and writings in the mid-1700s stimulated the Great Awakening in America.

Interestingly, the general doctrinal disagreements in today's church relating to salvation, evangelism, and security continue to be the same differing views first offered by Calvin and Arminius.

Note: Arminius was only 4 years old when Calvin died (1564) and it wasn't until several years after the death of Arminius that his full views were formulated.

When the Arminius disagreements with Calvin were finally pulled together... they were boiled down to five main points which came to be known as "*The Five Points of Arminianism*."

In 1618 a National Synod of the Church was convened in the city of Dort in the Netherlands to examine the teachings of Arminius in the light of Scripture. The Synod lasted 154 sessions...over a period of seven months and they concluded that *The Five Points of Arminianism* were contrary to Scripture and heretical.

At the same time theologians of the new Church reaffirmed the position of the Reformers and formulated what is now known as *The Five Points of Calvinism* in honor of John Calvin.

Since these continue as major points of doctrinal disagreement in the church today, I think it is important that we look at their differences to help us each determine what we believe to be the truth of the Scriptures to which we faithfully hold.

• • •

This concludes the first in our series of what will be seven Musings on this important topic. I will make them as brief as possible (two to three pages). I think it is important that God's people know some of the history of our Christian beliefs and why there are denominations and churches that hold and teach different views of what began as the five truths that separated Arminius and Calvin. To make it easy for the readers, I will send you the seven parts over the many weeks to come.

In Part 2, I will send you a brief addition to this history. That then, will be followed by five Musings, each to cover one of the five points that Calvin and Arminius disagreed on, that are still divisive in our modern-day churches.