

Why did the
reformation matter to
ecclesiology?



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This presentation is to be delivered to our weekly Youth Group in our village hall. This is a group of young people aged 16-18. They have poor attention and love film especially Star Wars! So; the opening slide is to grab their attention, but there is no attempt to equate Star Wars with the Christian faith.

The purpose of the presentation is to help them understand the significance of the Reformation and the impact it had on the Anglican church to which they belong. Also, to help them understand why the reformation is not a relic of the past but that the faith we share is dynamic, constantly reforming, and is as important today as it was then.

There is often a misconception, especially amongst young people who have just studied Tudor history in school, that the reformation was all about Henry VIII wanting to divorce and remarry. They erroneously believe that he was responsible for the split of the Protestant movement from the Catholic church in Rome.

As far back as the 5th century Augustine in his book *The City Of God* had declared that Man's commitment wasn't to Rome but to Jesus Christ. However the British monk Pelagius, while reading Augustine's autobiography, was struck by this prayer: " Grant what Thou commandest, and then command what Thou wilt." In other words, fallen man is utterly dependent upon God's grace for salvation. No one, for example, can practice the self-control God commands unless God gives him grace to do so. These

words made Pelagius uncomfortable. He believed human beings could be saved by their own efforts.

This great theological controversy engulfed the church. To refute Pelagianism, Augustine turned to the great Pauline doctrines of grace, such as original sin, fallen man's total depravity and inability to save himself, the efficacy of the atoning death of Christ, and the necessity of faith in Him for salvation. The enormous biblical learning and perseverance of Augustine won the day against Pelagius's teaching in the church.

In the hundreds of years that followed, the Christian faith took many twists and turns, with Rome rising and falling in its domination, and Papal power being established. However the influence of the seventh century figure Pope Gregory who endeavoured to bring the whole world into the Christian faith and succeeded in bringing Kings and Rulers to the church, was weakened by the fact that the type of Christian faith that was produced was very superficial. A kind of faith that the church still struggles with today.

The Synod of Whitby 648 was a gathering of bishops preoccupied with the "significant" issues of the day such as the shape and style of vestments worn by clergy and the date of Easter. This historical example showed how sometimes the church can completely forget its mission.

Disagreements over the use of icons during the next century began to split east and west, coming to a great climax in 787 when the Iconoclastic controversy hit the second council of Nicaea. Although the church eventually allowed the use of icons, it was only under the insistence that they were not worshipped but used for instruction only. However, over the years this line

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again became blurred and images were given an even more important place in public worship.

Whilst empires began to crumble, power was shifting towards the church, and this power was often achieved by corrupt means. Educational standards were falling; often the clergy were more ignorant of God's word than those they were preaching to and standards of spiritual direction fell. The influence of Eastern traditions and beliefs isolated the Western church, and the popes of Rome were now able to take more power, unchallenged as they were by any degree of accountability to a higher power on earth. They began to acquire land and used the revenues from them to dominate the wider church with their corruptions.

Many began to recognize the corruption between state and church and this led to disagreement over who should be able to elect clergy, the state or the church? More and more of the higher offices of clergy seeing the need to gain power began to raise funds with which to grow their dynasty and spiritual wellbeing gave way to fundraising and the selling of indulgences.

It was in this climate that many began to voice their concerns, and the reformation movement really began to gather momentum.

Whilst this is very important to the deeper understanding of the roots of the reformation, for the needs of the target group of my presentation, I have begun in the 14th century with the introduction of Wycliffe and his translation of the bible into English. Whilst a brief introduction that sets the scene is necessary, the amount of preceding information would be too much for the group to take in at one go, and may require a separate session.

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However, such in-depth detail may only be needed by those wishing to continue studying reformation history, rather than just a basic understanding of where this fits in to the development of the faith of the Anglican church.

I decided by way of brief introduction to discuss the discontent with Rome and the political power wielded by the papacy, the use of Latin in both the Catholic Mass and the Bible as a way of controlling the information the populations were given, and the selling of indulgences by the clergy as a supposed way of gaining forgiveness and a sure way to enter heaven.

To help the students understand just how early this discontent began, two slides about Wycliffe and Hus have been included, with the link to Luther coming from the slide about Hus' prophecy regarding another man 100 years on, who would be proclaiming the same discontent and proposed reforms. Whilst I have maintained a little of the Star Wars theme, I did not wish this to become confused with the focus of the presentation and so after using a little picture to retain their interest I then left this until the last slide to finish the theme.

Luther is introduced, with a brief history of his life and how he came to disagree with the traditional Catholic biblical teachings and the corruption of Rome. Then follows an explanation of his 95 theses and the controversy its publication caused.

I believe that the importance of the printing press on the spread of the ideals of the reformers should not be underestimated. It is often debated that without it perhaps Luther's influence would not have been so far reaching.

The students need to understand this and so the slide regarding this was introduced.

The following information regarding the main concerns of Luther has been simplified as much as possible to aid students understanding of a very complex topic which contains a lot of historical information. It is important though that the main facts and chronology are established.

Luther's theses that expressed his concerns about certain Church practices – largely the sale of indulgences, and his deeper concerns with Church doctrine are explained. And how Luther could not reconcile this practice with his beliefs.

When Pope Leo X began allowing indulgences to be sold it was to raise money for the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Johann Tetzel, a monk began selling them not far from Wittenberg, where Luther was Professor of Theology. Luther could not find any scriptural evidence that this practice was of God.

The students are now shown how Martin Luther's personal faith journey evolved from being a devout Catholic to hating the vengeful God he found in the bible. He concluded that no matter how "good" he tried to be, he could never earn his way to heaven. Luther re-read St. Paul, who wrote "The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1: 17). Luther had a eureka moment and began to understand that those who go to heaven will get there by faith alone – not by doing good works. In other words, God's grace is something freely given to human beings, not something we can earn. This belief was not shared by the Catholic Church.

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Luther and other reformers also disagreed regarding the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. Luther thereby challenged one of the central sacraments of the Catholic Church, one of its central miracles, and thereby one of the ways that human beings can achieve grace with God, or salvation.

Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X when he refused to recant his theses and other works at the diet of Worms.

There needs to be balance in any teaching session and it is important to look at the church's response; which was called the Counter-Reformation.

The slides include information about the 1545 Council of Trent and its discussions to deal with the issues raised by Luther. This is important as it shows that the Catholic church attempted reconciliation and although many of its former practices and traditions were upheld, there was some attempt to stamp out the corruption that had in many ways led to the reformation. This and the later values of the Oxford movement are discussed.

It is only then that the involvement of Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth are brought into the session. The influence of religion upon the political world and the wars and persecution that happened then; and is still happening today, are addressed. The Reformation was a very violent period in Europe. Each side, both Catholics and Protestants, were certain that they were in the right.

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