

# Reformation ... How it affected people

## 5. Clergy

19.11.2006

There have been times through history when clergy have been highly esteemed and trusted... but not always.

In the late 1400s and early 1500's, many of the priests, monks and nuns were disliked. They were supposed to be the paragons of morality, the best examples of what people should strive to be, yet they abused the privileges they had. The privileges included immunity from state law, exemption from citizenship in any state. As non citizens, they were exempt from paying any taxes.

Abuses were many. In spite of their vows of celibacy and inability to marry, it was not uncommon for clergy to have permanent girlfriends and children. Some were accused of killing the children they fathered, yet they were immune from the secular law, and often only reprimanded by their bishop.

Being loyal to the pope, they were not loyal to their local towns and often abused the trust of the confessional. Not paying taxes, they used the church's laws to become rich.

The higher clergy were educated, but many priests, monks and nuns were poorly educated, so they unquestionably obeyed the religious leaders, even when most people would say it was wrong.

In spite of the abuses, only the well educated spurned church. The average person still brought their children for baptism, and called for the priest when they were dying. There was still a grudging respect of their office, based on fear of God. They believed that people could be right with God only through the ministry of the church.

At the same time as disquiet about the morals and ethics of the clergy grew, there was also a spiritual resurgence. Lay people were looking for ways to become godly. Ironically, often it was by making lay people more like the clergy, because they believed the clergy were the elite in whom God was pleased.

A popular lay catechism called "Mirror of the Christian Man" by Dietrich Coelde explained the signs of God's favour in terms that a monk or nun would experience.

Monastic rules required frequent confessions to the abbot, insisted on obedience even when you thought it was wrong, exalted regular attendance at masses, and meditation on sins and prayer.

So the lay person was encouraged to be eager to confess, be absolutely obedient to the father-confessor, desire to attend church at least daily, earnestly contemplate their sinfulness, and to sincerely keep praying for the forgiveness of forgotten sins and preservation from unwitting sins.

Life was changing rapidly in the late 1400s. The population exploded. More and more people crowded in and around the villages, and princes of the larger towns replaced the feudal lords of earlier medieval times.

The balance between church and state changed. Princes began to exercise more control over the church than ever before. Princes, town-councils and the rich could now pay for and appoint preachers, who were not mass priests. People were yearning to be taught, not just have rituals. This appointing of preachers began to break the pope's stranglehold.

The rise of nationalism and a weak papacy in the 1400s, also meant that the pope held less political sway. Princes, kings, and burghers were not as afraid of the pope's loyal armies.

With all of this weakening of the power of the church, the reformation could occur, as local authorities would protect the reformers.

Many other changes to clergy occurred. In reading the Bible with fresh eyes, it was soon realised that much of Medieval Catholicism was not Biblical. Ministers began to get married. They also became citizens, having to pay taxes and coming under secular laws.

# Reformation ... How it affected people

## 5. Clergy

19.11.2006

The morality of the ministers improved, as they began to practice what they preached.

The reformers taught that the clergy for too long had treated lay people as children. I wrote that the new authority of Scripture has rendered the threats and bullying of the clergy as frightening as the hiss of a goose.

The need for expressing your piety through monasticism diminished. Martin Luther emphasised that all honest work is godly. God accepts lay people as much as he accepts clergy. People felt a new honour in their daily work. They realised God wanted labourers, farmers, blacksmiths and mothers, just as much as he wanted clergy.

Yet very soon the reformers had to apply the brakes by calling for spiritual discipline, not just equality. People were going too far and causing anarchy. As more preachers and lay people were swept up in the changes, even the basics were threatened.

The baby was being tossed out with the bathwater. Within twenty years of Luther's theses being nailed on the door, Lutheran teachers had to argue against the radicals who had thrown out truths such as the Trinity, that Jesus was both Man and God, and that we are saved by faith.

The role and function of church leaders, and how people understood their role was changing extremely fast. In many places, the bishops opposed the reformation, so the reformers used different models of leadership also drawn from the New Testament. Instead of bishops, priests and deacons, they had elders, pastors or ministers, with a council of elders for leadership between churches.

In England, as the reformation was brought in through the archbishop of Canterbury, England resisted most moves to remove the structure of Bishops, priests and deacons. The English compromise was supposed to keep the names, but change the meaning of the office. So an

English priest did not make a sacrifice of the mass, but was a teaching elder or presbyter, using the Latin word for elder, which was priest.

The compromise did not work, and many lay people still thought of their priest in the Roman Catholic meaning. This aggravated the more protestant ministers so much that they rarely refer to themselves as priests. That is why many Sydney Anglican ministers refuse to be called priests.

The reformation brought in sweeping changes for the clergy, which affected people in church enormously.

This is the last in the current series on how the reformation affected people in church. I am grateful to God that I live on this side of the reformation, and for the many advances that the reformers brought in for all people.

We no longer live in those times, and society has benefited enormously through the changes that were enabled because of it.

Yet I often wonder, if Jesus does not return for a while, how people will look back on our times and assess what is happening in our age. Will they say we were faithful to God or that we were blind to so much and needed a new reformation?