

# Reformation ... How it affected people

## 4. Dying

12.11.2006

Have you ever wondered why some Christian cultures tend to spend a lot of time visiting cemeteries and make a great deal out of remembering their deceased family, whereas other cultures seem to almost ignore their dead relatives? Part of that difference in attitude to death flows from the reformation of the 1500s, because a massive change occurred in the way people think about the deceased.

In the late 1400s and early 1500s, death and the spiritual world dominated the Western world's view of life. This was intricately entwined with their view of forgiveness, which I spoke on a few weeks ago.

When a person received absolution after confession or had the last rites, it was believed that eternal punishment in hell was avoided. But before entering heaven, the sinner had to face the full temporal punishment for their sins. Penance might start on earth, but finished in purgatory.

However, the church declared that a very small percentage of people who had lived an exemplary life of suffering and worth, had passed through purgatory without suffering, entering heaven directly. These special ones were called by a Biblical term meant for all who believe... they were called saints. Being in heaven with God, saints could be called on by living Christians to ask Christ for favours. God was terrifying to most Christians. He was sinless and pure, and cannot bear to have sinners near him. The confessionals hammered home that Christians were worthless sinners. So instead of praying to God, most people asked saints to ask for help.

Most people did not think purgatory would be a picnic, or just for a short stay. The fear of suffering had gripped the average person in church prior to the reformation. They were also taught that their deceased relatives were languishing there right now. So people looked for ways to lessen the sufferings.

**Religious industries** built itself up around this. One was the relic industry. A relic was a fragment or piece of someone or something religious. Eg a splinter from the cross of Jesus, or a tooth from John the Baptist. It was believed that by purchasing a relic or even by going on a pilgrimage to a castle where famous relics were housed, that the sentence in purgatory could be cut.

A boom trade of relics existed throughout Europe. And it is believed that the Castle church in Wittenburg, where Martin Luther nailed the theses on the door, contained enough relics to earn 1,902,202 yrs and 270 days off purgatory. The collection of 19,000 items included things such as a piece of burning bush, a sample of Mary's milk, and stable straw.

It is still possible to buy pieces of wood in Jerusalem, purported to have come from the cross of Christ, and to see relics in European cathedrals.

The masses for the dead industry developed in the 1400s. The grieving caring living relative would employ a priest to offer a mass on behalf of the departed relative on their anniversaries. By having an army of mass priests, people spent vast sums of money trying to achieve relief of suffering for their relatives and for themselves.

To give an idea of how many masses were being performed, in Wittenberg in the year 1520, almost 10,000 private masses were celebrated by 83 resident clerics. With 5,000 people, Zurich had 200 priests prior to the reformation, and 1 preacher after it.

A third religious industry concerning relief from suffering after death was the papal indulgence. Indulgences first began in 1033 when some French bishops promised partial remittance of penance as a reward for some particularly pious works. In 1063, a full remission was granted for any who fought in the crusades. By 1187 a full indulgence was granted to anyone who paid the cost of a crusader. In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII promised a full pardon if someone went to Rome

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and visited the graves of the apostles once a day for 15 days. In 1343, Pope Clement VI proclaimed the existence of a treasury of merit in heaven, waiting to be given as rewards for people who did good deeds. Roman pilgrim indulgences became more frequent through the 1300s. Then they could simply be bought. In 1476, Pope Sixtus IV permitted them to apply to help the deceased in purgatory.

Now the person in church could choose relics, masses and indulgences to relieve the anxiety and suffering of deceased loved ones.

As I spoke of a few weeks ago, this encouraged the view that forgiveness could be bought and earned, not graciously given by God when asked for.

So how did things change with the reformation?

First, a better understanding of the Bible's view of forgiveness was taught. This reduced anxiety and fear. When someone was near death, the reformers focused not on divine wrath, hell or penitent remembrance of sins past (like the medieval priests), but rather on life, grace and heaven.

Secondly, people discovered purgatory was a man-made myth. It is not a Biblical truth. So people were freed from the bondage of punishment before they could enter heaven. When God forgave, he forgave.

He did not say "you are forgiven, but I will make you suffer for it." And the reason he does not make us suffer, is that Jesus suffered for us. So they taught that the treasury of merit in heaven is open to all who believe, and we are free in Christ. We face consequences for sin now, but not after death if we are in Christ.

Thirdly, the sacrifice of the mass was seen to be a distortion of the Lord's Supper, and does not reduce mythical punishments in a mythical state after death. Mass priests were no longer required. Nor were relics, most of which, if not all, were fakes.

Unfortunately, one major drawback from the reformation was that death was treated as simply a transferral from one state of being to another, from living here in the flesh, to living there with the Lord. That is true, but through history it led to a denial of the reality of death. Christians became afraid to mourn and grieve for departed Christians, because it was seen as a sign of weak faith.

And the British culture picked this up especially. That is why many protestant traditions tend to almost ignore their dead, while traditions influenced by Catholicism over-emphasise grief.

Our beliefs about forgiveness, and our view of the world affect our behaviour. Keep reflecting on our actions in light of the what the Bible has revealed. For history has shown it can be so easy to drift and think we are doing what God wants, only to find out we may be far from the truth that the apostles handed on to us.