

Presbyterian Church in the
THE U.S.A.

Protestant Reformation and Its Influence

1517-1917

Addresses Delivered in Connection with the One Hundred and
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THE SERVICE IN THE FIRST BAPTIST
CHURCH, REV. GEORGE M.
TRUETT, PASTOR

REV. Frank Chalmers McKean, D.D., pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church of Des Moines, and a member of the Assembly's Committee on the Celebration of the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation, presided.

The Scripture lesson was read by Rev. George O. Nichols, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Guthrie, Oklahoma, and the prayer was offered by Rev. Hugh B. McCrone, D.D., pastor of the Wakefield Presbyterian Church, Germantown, Pennsylvania.

The addresses were delivered by Rev. J. Ross Stevenson, D.D., LL.D., President of Princeton Theological Seminary, and Rev. William Henry Roberts, D.D., LL.D., Stated Clerk of the General Assembly.

In introducing Dr. Stevenson, Dr. McKean said:

We meet to-night to celebrate in advance the anniversary of one of the world's mightiest movements, for the influence of which the world owes a debt—the Protestant Reformation. Carlyle aptly said, "All heroes are intrinsically of the same material, but their outward shape depends upon the environment in which they find themselves." Great characters, therefore, are the outgrowth of their conditions. They stand out prominently as products of their age. The sixteenth

century was not one of kid-gloved diplomacy. Like John the Baptist, the personalities of Luther, Calvin, and Knox, laid the ax to the root of the trees. In the history of nations we find no men who displayed a grander faith in God, a more dauntless courage, or a more uncompromising attitude toward the evils of their day, than those personalities whose lives and deeds are indelibly stamped upon Europe and the world. We love them and revere their memories because of the principles they advocated.

In introducing Dr. Roberts, Dr. McKean said:

It frequently happens that the age in which a man lives does not appreciate his worth. The modern world has a higher opinion of Socrates than had those who pressed the hemlock to his lips. If Jesus were sent to the cross in this age he would have more followers about him than a handful of women and a few ignorant fishermen. The ultimate verdict of history upon the life of any individual may always be determined by his attitude toward the progressive movements of the age in which he lives. We can better judge the men of the Reformation who attacked error in its own fortified citadel than they could be judged when the sea of Europe's religious life was lashed by the angry waves of Reformation days. As we glance back over four centuries, well might we ask, What does modern civilization owe to these men? They helped to settle the true relation between the State and its subjects. They were mighty factors in establishing political and religious freedom.

No man in the Presbyterian Church is better able to discuss the Reformation in relation to civil and religious liberty than our own beloved Stated Clerk, Dr. William Henry Roberts.

THE REFORMATION IN RELATION TO CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

BY

WILLIAM H. ROBERTS, D.D., LL.D.

THE discussion of the relation of the Reformation of the sixteenth century to civil and religious liberty will be found at once important and inspiring.

In dealing with the subject it is necessary, first of all, to bring out clearly the fact that the discovery of the art of printing, with movable type, during the fifteenth century, was the first great step in promoting the Reformation. The earliest printed Bible appeared between 1450 and 1455, from the press of Johannes Gutenberg, at Mainz, and was a historic event of a most notable character. It is interesting to recall the fact that when copies of this printed Bible were first put on sale the vendors were arrested for witchcraft; the Bibles themselves were offered in evidence, the statement being made that it was impossible to have produced so considerable a number of copies, exactly similar in every particular, without the help of the Devil. The sufficient answer to the charge, however, was the statement of the discovery which had been made. From 1455 onward, for seventy-five years, the Bible was printed in many countries, chiefly in Latin, and the knowledge of God's Word was thus widely disseminated, and became the

basis of that clear knowledge of divine truth which was the foundation of the Reformation. The Bible, multiplied by the printing press, was a chief instrument of the great movement.

Another important factor in connection with the Reformation was the general consensus of opinion among all the Reformers that the Bible as the Word of God is the only infallible rule of faith and conduct. The Reformers rejected any supreme authority other than that of God in his Word. In all controversies with the Roman Catholic authorities, they appealed constantly to the Holy Scriptures. They declared that the Bible is the only authority as to what is sound Christian doctrine, and they insisted that the rules of conduct found in the Bible apply to popes, kings, and the nobility, as well as to the common people. Resting on God's Word for authority, they evolved from it the doctrine that all men ought to be enfranchised with the liberty with which Christ makes men free. This liberty of which they conceived was the liberty of men as the children of God, without reference to class distinctions. At first, these claims for liberty, either in Church or State, were not so definite as they became later, and there was strongly organized resistance to the Reformers in all countries. The battle in favor of the tyranny of monarchs and of privileged classes was waged with great fierceness, and for a time it seemed as if the opponents of the Reformers would be victors. But the latter had that quality in them which we know as the perseverance of the saints. In the halls of debate, as well as on the

field of battle, the adherents of the Reformation went forward resolutely, with a courage which never failed, and laid broad and deep the foundations of those civil and religious liberties which are so large a possession of humanity in this twentieth century.

Civil liberty, which we consider first, may be defined to be right of the individual to the enjoyment of life, liberty, and happiness, simply and solely as a human being, on terms of equality with all other persons, under the regulations of righteous law.

In connection with civil liberty, as it has been developed during the past three centuries, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that its first teacher in modern days was John Calvin, of Geneva. Calvin was great as a theologian, but he was equally great as a statesman. Modern parliamentary government found in him not only a founder, but also a clear and dominant thinker and advocate. His teachings as to the rights of the representatives of the people, as over against those of kings and emperors, were accepted in all Reformation lands. They were regarded as authoritative in Scotland, Holland, France, and Switzerland, during the sixteenth century, and during the seventeenth by the English Puritans also. It was Calvin who first promulgated not only the fundamentals of popular representative government, but also the idea of a written constitution; and both conceptions were based upon his conception of the teachings of God's Word.

Civil liberty is what? During the eighteenth century the principal development in the line of civil

liberty was achieved through the independence of the American Colonies of Great Britain, and the adoption of the Constitution of the United States of America. In the year 1788 the only other federal republic in existence was the Swiss confederation. To-day more than half the surface of the globe is occupied by republics, and, if the British Empire be counted in, with its thoroughly democratic tendencies, three fourths of the population of the globe is under influences which make for "government of the people, by the people, for the people." Calvin's political ideas seem to have won out all over the world, and permanent victory will be secured for them, it is hoped, through the present war.

As we consider religious liberty it is important, first of all, to understand that its beginnings were, in a peculiar sense, the results of the great Protestant Reformation as a religious movement. Religious liberty is, fundamentally, the right of the individual Christian to his own interpretation of what the Holy Scriptures teach as to faith and duty. This right was not recognized by law in any country in the world at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The authority of the Church, and of the pope as the head of the Church, was the supreme and only power to determine the meaning of the Bible. In every so-called Christian land, the acceptance of one form of the Christian religion was legally required of all persons, and in all these lands the authority of the pope of Rome as the head of the Church was recognized by the civil power. The hierarchy of the Roman Church was further pos-

sessed of so absolute a power that it could require the penalty of death for heresy to be imposed by the State. It is true that men such as Wyclif in England and Huss in Bohemia denied the authority of the pope long before the Reformation, and insisted upon the Holy Scriptures as the only supreme rule of faith and life; but they, and those who thought as they did, were persecuted and many of them put to death.

The first great step in securing religious liberty was taken by Martin Luther on December 10, 1520, when he burned in public the papal bull, or decree, which threatened him with excommunication for heretical opinions. It is true that Luther began his work by nailing Ninety-five Theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, and yet it was the burning of the pope's bull which declared his separation from the Church of Rome. Luther performed many other acts which emphasized his antagonism to the papacy, and wrote many treatises upon Christian doctrine, one of which, "The Liberty of the Christian Man," written in 1520, is a definite utterance concerning the freedom of Christians in Jesus Christ. Indeed the Reformers all took as their motto the words of Paul to the Galatians, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

The struggle in Germany for religious liberty begun by Luther led to bloody wars, extending over more than a century. It was not until 1648 that the right of

Germans to be Protestant in religion was acknowledged in that country.

In Switzerland the struggle for religious liberty began with the teachings of Ulrich Zwingli, and here, too, bloody strife ensued between Catholics and Protestants. Zwingli was killed at a battle fought at Kappel in 1531.

In France the struggle for religious liberty was bitter with wars between the Huguenots and the Catholics, and found a culmination in the Massacre of St. Bartholomew in 1572, when thousands upon thousands of Protestants were massacred. Protestantism was tolerated in France from 1598 to 1685, but renewed persecution under Louis XIV, after 1685, drove out of the country at least five hundred thousand persons, and the refugees were scattered to every country of Europe and to the American colonies, and were a blessing wherever they went. The restoration of Protestantism was decreed by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802.

In England at the time of the Reformation, many martyrs had already suffered for their loyalty to religious liberty. Among these the names which stand out most notably are those of William Tyndale, who translated the New Testament into English in 1525, and Archbishop Cranmer, of the Church of England. When Queen Elizabeth came to the throne, though she was a Protestant, there was no real religious liberty in England for persons who declined to conform to the Church of England. It is only in recent years that the rights of dissenters have been recognized, and Lloyd George, present premier of England, was first elected to Parlia-

ment on an issue raised with the established Church.

In Scotland the struggle for religious liberty began with the martyrdom of Patrick Hamilton in 1528, and reached the first stage of its progress through the Reformation, led by John Knox, in 1560. Scotland, however, was not finally free from ecclesiastical tyranny until 1689, on the advent of William of Orange to the throne of Britain.

In Holland the struggle for liberty was long and arduous. The first martyrs suffered in 1523. The people resisted both Spanish and Roman Catholic tyranny, led by such men as William the Silent, and finally secured independence in 1579. Holland was often the refuge for English dissenters, and it was from Holland that the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620 set sail for New England.

In other European lands such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal, the Reformation failed, and religious liberty was unknown in any measure until the nineteenth century. In Russia there is to-day nominal religious liberty. Because of the sudden rise of the republic, the Greek Catholic Church, however, is the National Church, and it remains to be seen what sort of liberty will be guaranteed for the future.

Toleration is not liberty. The only country in the civilized world in which there has been for nearly a century absolute religious liberty is the United States of America. America has now no State Church. At first, certain of the colonies, as Virginia, recognized the Church of England as the State Church, and Massa-

chusetts and Connecticut established the Congregational Church as such. The Congregational establishment of religion was abolished in Connecticut in 1818, and in Massachusetts in 1834. The only American colony in which there was real liberty of religious opinion from the beginning, was that of Pennsylvania, and the inscription on the Liberty Bell, cast in 1752, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," Lev. 25: 10, was prophetic of the coming of the day when there would be true liberty in the United States.

It is evident from the above facts that the connection between Church and State was the main source of the power which denied religious liberty to men and women. The Roman Catholic Church, it should be said, has always declared that its duty is simply to find men guilty of heresy, and then to turn them over to the State for final punishment. But the State in Europe at the time of the Reformation was completely under the domination of the Roman Church, and the laws of the State were so constructed and construed as to punish heresy with death.

The first Christian leader to take the step which made possible the securing of true religious liberty in America, was the Baptist, Roger Williams, the founder of the Colony of Rhode Island. The first organized American Church, however, which declared as a Church for religious liberty, was the Presbyterian. This was by an act adopted by the General Synod, at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1729.

In this twentieth century, throughout the English-speaking world, there is liberty of opinion. The only form that religious intolerance assumes is the assumption on the part of certain Churches that they occupy in matters of Church order and government a place superior to that of certain other Churches. There is still limitations upon religious liberty in many European countries. It is hoped that the time will soon come when the conditions of religious liberty everywhere may be such as appear in the twenty-third chapter of the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, in the following words:

“It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our Common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his Church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury, to any other person whatsoever; and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical

Assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance."

This declaration adopted in 1788, at Philadelphia, is the true law of religious liberty. That it will become in time the law for both State and Church everywhere is heartily believed. The reason for this faith is, that the Reformation was and is a movement produced within men, a work of the Holy Spirit. The Reformation was and is full of divine life. Based upon the Bible as the Magna Charta of true liberty, it will progress until it fills the earth with the grace and glory of Christian freedom.