**Why Was There a Reformation: Myth and Reality?**

It is a common misconception that Luther and the other Reformers wanted a Reformation because the Roman Catholic Church at the beginning of sixteenth century was so morally corrupt from top to bottom. In reality, the Reformation was about fixing doctrinal corruption and distortions of the Gospel.

The Reformation began toward the end of a period of the Church’s history known as the Renaissance Papacy. It was the period after the crisis of the Great Schism of the Western Church. There was a succession of popes who were worldly, or corrupt, or political, or all of the above. One particularly bad pope was Alexander VI (1492-1503), originally known as Rodrigo Borgia. He was the father of the infamous Cesare Borgia and the notorious Lucretia Borgia. Remember, he was supposed to be celibate not to mention avoid venality, graft, and nepotism. Alexander VI is indisputably right in the top contenders for the title of worst pope in history.

Luther’s dispute with the Papacy began during the pontificate of Leo X (1513-21). Leo X was originally Giovanni de Medici and he was a member of the famous family that ruled Florence. Unfortunately, he viewed the papacy as something for him to enjoy with luxurious palaces, fine clothing, sumptuous meals and a distinct absence of work and stress. That made Luther a great source of irritation. It also meant that the Church was not being well-served by its leader.

There was a brief interlude with a good pope. Adrian VI, (Adrian of Utrecht) was the tutor and advisor of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, served as pope from 1521-23. His honest and devout leadership was not in keeping with the culture of the Vatican of that era. As a result, he was the last non-Italian pope until John Paul II. Adrian’s death led to the election of Clement VII (Guilio de Medici) who was pope from 1523-34. He was a cousin of Leo X and the pope who clashed with Henry VIII over his divorce, although he would have gladly annulled the king’s marriage if the Emperor Charles V would have permitted it. It was not the Papacy’s finest hours with these popes but the Church has suffered from worse strings of popes during the Dark Ages. But in the time of Luther, Rome was far away and news travelled slowly so that papal scandals did not enter the public’s consciousness like sordid news does today.

Local churches in Germany, England, the Netherlands, and France were actually in good shape and getting better. The problem was that rising literacy among the laity and the improved state of the local churches created rising expectations. It is also important to remember that the Church through all the ages consists of people and like many institutions can be burdened with corrupt and nasty people. We are all saints and sinners at the same time and sometimes the balance tips badly toward the wrong direction among some people. So priests preyed on women or boys. People were forced into monasteries as monks or nuns who had no vocation for that life and the results could be sordid. Albrecht of Brandenburg, the man behind the indulgence campaign that so offended Luther was a venal and greedy prelate with no taste for a spiritual life or pastoral leadership something that might have been expected as a job requirement for an archbishop.

The fact is, Luther was a good example of what was right with the Church. He was raised a good Christian and sought a religious life in the Augustinian Order and had embarked on an academic year that would have probably lead to being a famous scholar or a respected abbot or bishop. Instead he suggested that the Church had strayed from the truth of the Gospel, and that got him into trouble.

Luther was not alone either. His mentors George Spalatin from his early days in the Augustinian Order and Johannes von Staupitz, Luther’s dean at Wittenberg, were both model members of the clergy. The same observation applies to Luther’s associates such as Andreas Osiander and Nikolaus von Amsdorf. Other Reformers like Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, Martin Bucer in Strassbourg, John Calvin in France, and Thomas Cranmer in England were all loyal Catholics and exemplary clergy until the call of the Reformed Gospel drew them. The Reformation was about fixing and renewing the doctrine of the Church to its original purity. It was not a crusade to eradicate immorality and corruption. That was a by-product that was by no means completely successful. As Luther has said, “Wherever God builds a church, Satan builds a chapel.” And Luther could have added, Satan has his moles in the Church as well.