

Lesson #10

The Reformation

(16th and 17th Centuries)

God's Answer to the Dark Ages

In the previous lesson, we saw how early Christianity fell away from God and entered into the Dark Ages. But God's answer to darkness is simple; it is light. His Word is light. Psalm 119:130 says, "The entrance of Your word gives light; It gives understanding to the simple." Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." In this lesson we will see how God unleashed His word, and how that word, the very breath of His mouth, began to consume the antichrist influence in the world.

The Light Begins to Shine

John Wycliffe (1320-1384) was an English scholar, theologian and early dissident of the Roman Catholic Church. He is perhaps best known for translating the Bible into the language of the people which, in his case, was English. He is often referred to as *the Morning Star of the Reformation*. The morning star is commonly understood to be the star that appears in the sky just before the dark night is over and the new day dawns. Though darkness was still on the people, a light was beginning to shine that would bring new hope to the people.

For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you.

— Isaiah 60:2 (NKJV)

Wycliffe's work of translation, moved the word of God from an obscure language that only educated priests could read and made it available to common people. It is easy to see how a religious hierarchy who loved preeminence and sought to maintain control over people would be threatened by the idea of common people reading the scriptures. The final authority for Christianity through the Dark Ages had rested with the word of the Roman Pope. However, Wycliffe increasingly argued that the scriptures were the only central authority of Christianity and its interpretation did not belong to any one person. Peter says this about the word of God:

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

— 2 Peter 1:19-21 (NKJV)

In this passage Peter declares that understanding scripture is not a private thing reserved to special individuals. Even the scripture itself was not the result of special men (albeit holy men), but the result of men speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit — and Peter himself, being a common man, had experienced first hand at Pentecost, the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Wycliffe died in 1384, but his influence continued through his followers and they were persecuted. At the Council of Constance, in 1415, Wycliffe's writings were banned and he was declared a heretic retroactively. This was confirmed by Pope Martin V in 1428 and Wycliffe's body was exhumed, burned, and his ashes thrown into the river. Nevertheless, the light was shining and it could not be extinguished. The word of God was on the move and people were beginning to see.

Other early reformers included men such as John Huss (1369–1415), Jerome of Prague (1370–1416), and others who were tried and burned at the stake. They were executed for daring to read the Bible and disagree with established doctrine - for confronting the antichrist spirit. But the seeds they planted, being watered with the blood of countless martyrs, began to sprout and grow.

Technology Joins the Movement

Due in large part to Wycliffe's work, the idea that the common man could study and understand the scriptures began to spread throughout Europe. Hunger for the word of God was growing. However, obtaining a copy of the scriptures was quite difficult since every copy of the scripture had to be made by hand. But it was this demand for more Bibles that inspired German blacksmith and goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg to invent the printing press, which was in operation by 1440. The printing press was the 13th century equivalent of the Internet! Never had the world been able to produce written material so quickly and, as a result, many learned to read. Knowledge was about to explode!

The first book printed on this new printing press was the Gutenberg Bible. With mass production of the Bible, along with other religious tracts and documents, the light of God's word was spreading and growing brighter. By the time the sixteenth century rolled around, darkness was fading and a harvest of reformation was ripening.

Reformation Picks Up Steam

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a Roman Catholic professor from Germany who was more committed to the truth of scripture than to the corrupt Roman Church of his day. He saw many erroneous doctrines in the Roman Church that did not line up with the scriptures. He tried to reason with the existing authorities, but to no avail. On October 31, 1517, he nailed his famous "Ninety-five Thesis" on the church door at Wittenberg, a written protest listing abuses he saw in the Roman Church. He was soon excommunicated, persecuted, and narrowly escaped death.

Luther translated the Bible into German from Latin and wrote many other tracts and pamphlets which, thanks to the printing press, were widely distributed. Though others certainly laid the groundwork, and often paid with their lives, Martin Luther is commonly thought of as **the central figure in the reformation**. He championed the concept of Justification by Faith by challenging the works-oriented teachings of his day and declaring that men are not saved by works, but by faith alone.

Luther had set the Reformation on the fast track and the torch of the Word was burning brightly. The baton was passed on to other reformers including men like Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1581) in Switzerland and John Calvin (1509-1564) in France. Europe was seeing the light.

Zwingli (1484-1581) became known for his denunciation of the Roman Church's sale of indulgences and instituted many scriptural reforms. But when conflict broke out between the Protestants and the

Catholics, Zwingli was killed. Calvin also experienced persecution and fled France, settling in the newly founded Republic of Geneva where he started a school for training pastors. Over 120 pastors trained by Calvin returned to France to carry on the work of Reformation there. John Knox (1514-1572), a student of Calvin, carried the Reformation to Scotland.

It is commonly understood that, through the Reformation, the concept of Justification by Faith was restored to the Church. This foundational truth had been lost in the Dark Ages, but was now, thanks to the light of God's word and the sacrifices of the reformers, being restored. People once again began to understand that salvation could not be obtained by works and that through faith alone they could experience grace and have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This **reestablished the truth that every believer is a priest of God** (see 1 Peter 2:9).

Two Key Elements of the Reformation

The Reformation was a grassroots religious movement which in other words is a revival. It was God's answer to the antichrist system described in the previous lesson. Historian Henry Sheldon, identified two key elements that were restored by the Reformation:

- 1) the sole authority of scripture; and
- 2) justification by faith.

Regarding these two principles he continues: "They were a direct connection of the individual with God and the spiritual world. They were a protest against the overgrown system of human mediation and a summons to the fountainhead of grace and instruction."¹

Sheldon's comment that these principles were "...a direct connection of the individual to God..." speaks to the restoration of the priesthood of the believer, which had all but disappeared during the dark ages. The reformation was a direct challenge of the hierarchal priesthood that was set up by the Roman Church which was indeed an overgrown system of human mediation and this protest is of course why most non-catholics to day are called Protestants.

A Foundational Truth Restored

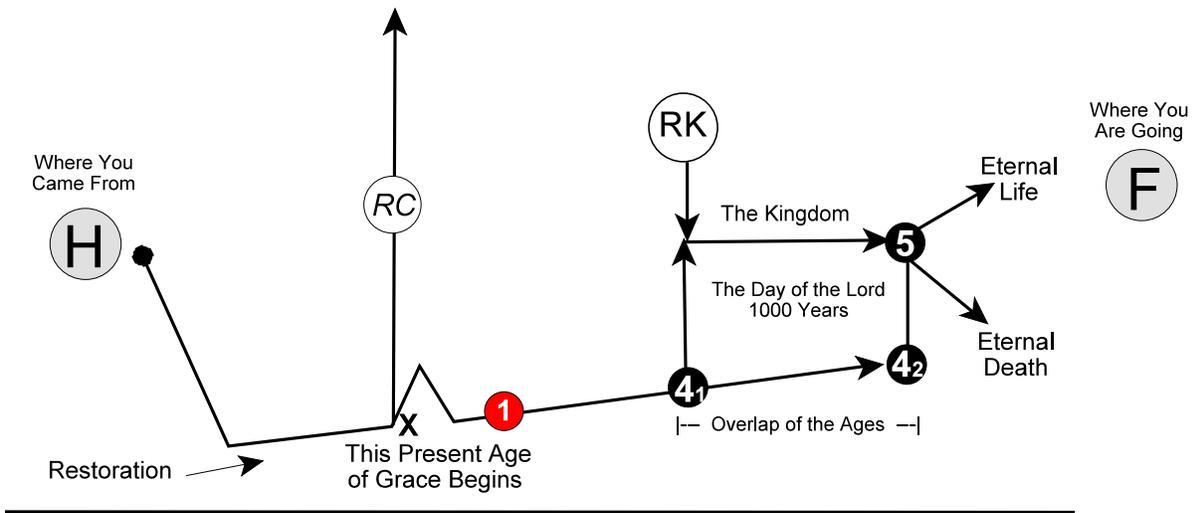
We have seen how This Present Age began with the resurrection of Christ and the birth of the Church. Next we saw how the early believers started out with a powerful expression of the Kingdom, but became corrupt and entered into the Dark Ages. Now we see how the Dark Ages officially ended with the restoration of this foundational principle: repentance from dead works and faith toward God.

Repentance from Dead Works and Faith Toward God may seem like two separate things. But we should look at them here as one, because faith toward God is *how* we repent from dead works. Faith and works always go together. **It is the separating of works and faith that makes both of them dead. James makes this clear: "...faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead" (James 2:17). Therefore, it is adding good works to our faith that makes them both alive.** The restoration of this important foundational truth brings us to the next modification in our Destiny Diagram.

¹Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol 3, p 4

The first foundational principle, repentance from dead works and faith toward God is represented on the time line below by ①. If anything characterized the church of the Dark ages, it was dead works, but through the Reformation, the light of God’s word gave people the revelation to repent from dead works and to be justified by faith.

Destiny Diagram 10



- RC Resurrection of Christ
- 1 Repentance from Dead Works and Faith Toward God
- 2
- 3
- 4₁ The First Resurrection & RK- The Return of the King
- 4₂ The Second Resurrection
- 5 Eternal Judgment

In the next lesson we will look at the portion of history that has been labeled “Great Awakenings” and see how foundational truth continued to be restored to the Church.