Reformation in Context (1/4)

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(1 of 4)

It was at the very end of the month of October, when leaves were falling and blown away by chill winter winds, that the blows of a hammer were heard at the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Although today we consider that a great event, and paintings abound in which the man with the hammer in his hand is surrounded by supporters and admirers, most probably the truth is that at the time nobody paid much heed. Everybody in town was preparing for two important religious festivals. The following day, the first of November, would be All Hallows' Day — which is the reason why even today there are special festivities on All Hallows' Eve, commonly known as Halloween. At the time, and still in many Christian calendars, that feast was dedicated to the memory and celebration of the lives of all those who might not have been included in the official sanctoral. Then, on the 2nd of November, would be the celebration of the Day of the Faithful Dead, in which one remembered and celebrated the lives of those who, while not achieving sainthood, however had died in the faith. Commonly known today all over Latin America as the *Dia de los muertos*, or the Day of the Dead, that date is still important for many Latin Americans to remember their deceased parents and ancestors. These were important days in Wittenberg, where there was an impressive collection of the relics of saints

that made the city a site of pilgrimage. Thus, one may well imagine that amidst all the hustle and bustle those who walked past the door when Luther was nailing his theses would have other things in mind, and would have not paid much attention to what Luther was doing. Furthermore, the church door was like a bulletin board of that time, where the authorities affixed their edicts, people affixed news, and scholars posted theses to be discussed in academic exercises. Therefore, to see this friar, well known in town, posting his theses would not have seemed at all extraordinary.

Most certainly Luther himself had no inkling of the significance of what he was doing. Shortly before that time, having become convinced that it was necessary to reform all of medieval theology, he had nailed on that very door another set of theses, this one with 97 theses, fully expecting that they would provoke a widespread reaction and perhaps even consternation. But hardly anyone paid any attention to those radical 97 theses. Now, that 31st of October of the year 1517, Luther's only purpose in nailing his theses was to provoke a discussion about the sale of indulgences and the theological perspectives that were at its foundation.

But, apparently without being really aware of it, Luther was opening deep wounds and stepping on powerful toes.

First, the wounds. For a long time the German people had seen their wealth flowing southward, where the popes sought to accumulate riches, at first mostly to support their political ambitions and then to make Rome the center of Renaissance art and elegance. Now the words of Luther criticizing papal policies fell on attentive ears. Someone took his 95 theses, originally written in Latin, translated them into German, and printed them, so that they were soon circulating widely. As a result, many among the German people began looking upon Luther as the hero of a nation that was just beginning to take consciousness of its own identity. These were some painful wounds that he was touching.

Then, the toes. Although Luther was not aware of it, the particular sale of indulgences against which he was protesting had been agreed upon by Pope Leo X and the very powerful prelate Albert of Brandenburg. Leo wanted to complete the Basilica of St. Peter's, and for that he required funds. Albert, who was already in possession of two bishoprics, now bought also the

archbishopric of Mainz. In order to meet the Pope's price, Albert had to borrow a large amount from the banking house of the Fuggers. To make it possible for Albert to repay this loan, it was agreed that a great sale of indulgences would be proclaimed by the Pope and that the income would be divided between Albert and the Pope. It was that particularly aggressive sale of indulgences that provoked Luther's wrath and led him to write his 95 theses. Apparently unaware of the toes on which he was stepping, Luther sent a copy of his 95 theses to Albert of Brandenburg.

To this were added several other factors that contributed to the outcome of what Luther was doing. One of these was the invention of the movable type printing press by Gutenberg half a century before Luther's theses. As I have already said, someone took Luther's theses and spread them far and wide by means of the printing press. Very soon, as the controversy increased, Luther himself recognized the enormous value of the printing press to make known his views even while the hierarchy of the church sought to suppress them. His numerous treatises, some in German and some in Latin, could not be suppressed precisely because of the printing press.

Also, in 1453, once again slightly more than half a century before the episode of the 95 theses, the Ottoman Turks took Constantinople. This had political consequences to which I shall return. But it also led to the flight of many Byzantine scholars who left for Western Europe with their manuscripts of ancient writings. When Western scholars examined these manuscripts, they discovered that through the long process of copying and recopying many changes had been introduced into those ancient texts. Thus, at a time when artists and architects were seeking to emulate the glories of classical antiquity, scholars also sought to return to ancient times by restoring texts that had been corrupted through the centuries. Their cry for a return to the sources made many aware that many of the beliefs and practices of Christianity as it was then known differed widely from the norms of the early church and the New Testament.

Then, there were political factors and circumstances. Emperor Maximilian I died slightly over a year after Luther nailed his theses. This presented the Pope with a difficult political situation. The imperial title was not hereditary, but was rather the subject of election by a few secular princes and ecclesiastical prelates. There were three main candidates. One of them was Francis I, King of France. The Pope feared that if Francis was elected emperor this would result in a

dangerous concentration of power in the hands of the King of France. Europe still remembered the sad days of the papacy in Avignon, when the popes were under the thumb of the kings of France. Thus, from the point of view of the Pope, Francis was not a very desirable candidate. The second candidate was Charles I of Spain. But Charles was not only the King of Spain, but also Archduke of Austria and King of Naples and Sicily, as well as lord of many other lands in northern Italy. Were Charles to be elected, this would leave Rome surrounded by territories of a single ruler who could easily become an enemy. Thus, Charles I of Spain was also not a very desirable candidate for Leo. Then there was a third candidate whose name was suggested not because he was powerful, but rather because he was famous as a wise and just ruler. His name was Frederick, Elector of Saxony. Were he to be elected Emperor, the situation would be ideal for the papacy, for then much of Western Europe would be divided among three possibly contending powers. But Frederick also defended a famous professor in his university at Wittenberg whose name was Martin Luther, and insisted that, were Luther to be brought before the authorities, there must be a fair trial. The result of all this was that the Pope postponed action against Luther, thus giving the nascent movement time to grow and solidify. By the time Charles of Spain was elected as Emperor Charles V it had become impossible to silence Luther and his followers.

The Ottoman Turks themselves also contributed to the survival of the Reformation, for they invaded Western Europe and reached as far as Vienna. Facing such a powerful threat, Charles V could not afford the enmity of the German rulers who supported Luther and had to postpone action against them. Once again, by the time the Turks were defeated and withdrew it was too late-for Charles V to squash the Protestant Reformation.

But then there is another factor that made an important impact on Western Europe and on the church in which historians have often ignored. This is the supposed discovery of the New World, followed by its conquest, colonization, and exploitation. When I was in school, from the early years of my primary education, I heard about Christopher Columbus, Diego Velazquez, Francisco Fernandez de Cordoba and Heiman Cortes. Later I began studying the Protestant Reformation, mostly in seminary and graduate school. But it was never pointed out to me that these two sets of events took place practically at the same time. A few months before Luther nailed his famous theses, in that very year of 1517, there had been a failed attempt to conquer the Yucatan under the leadership of Francisco Fernandez de Cordoba. And two days before Luther's famous words of the Diet of Worms, "Here I stand," Homan Cortes and his allies from Tlaxcala had invaded

Xochimilco as a primary step for the final siege of Tenochtitlan — now Mexico City.

But the relationship between these two sets of events — the Reformation and the *Conquista* — goes much further. Emperor Charles V, whom Luther confronted at the Diet of Worms, would have been only Charles I, King of Spain, had it not been that Charles had purchased the votes of several of the electors who were to name the next Emperor after the death of Maximilian. In order to finance that purchase, Charles had borrowed an enormous sum from the banking house of the Fuggers — the same house that loaned the money to Albert of Brandenburg so that he could purchase the archbishopric of Mainz. According to some historians, the size of the loan amounted to the equivalent of the total annual income of the Kingdom of Castille. Although Charles covered part of the loan by granting the Fuggers lands, mines, and other concessions, when the Diet gathered at Worms in 1521 his economic condition was dire. Little could he suspect that his economic salvation would come from beyond the Atlantic, where a handful of his subjects were leading the siege of Tenochtitlan. That salvation became manifest as gold began flowing to Spain, first from Mexico, and shortly thereafter from.

All of this leads us to two interesting reflections: First, that the prize that the papacy paid for the Basilica of St. Peter's that is so much admired today was no less than the Protestant Reformation. Second, that it was the Spanish colonies in the Americas that subsidized the policies of Charles V against Protestantism, and even more so those of Philip II as he sought to stamp out Protestantism in places such as the Netherlands and England. Thus, the role of what we today call Latin America in the history of those events in Europe in the 16th century was of utmost importance, even though we often do not recognize it.

But, while we refer to the impact of these lands on the other side of the Atlantic, we must also take note of the impact of events in Europe on the Iberian colonies in the Americas. This fact is so obvious that it hardly seems necessary to mention it. After all, the entire history of Latin America, at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century, was shaped by events in Spain and Portugal, as we all know.

However, in the telling of this story we tend to forget that there was also a Catholic Reformation in Europe, and that this was originally centered mostly in Spain. Quite a few years before

Luther's theses, there was a very serious attempt at the Reformation in Spain under the leadership of Queen Isabella of Castille, commonly known in Spanish as "Isabel la Catolica."

Isabella's main ally and probably also guide in her quest for Reformation of the church was Franciasco Jimenez de Cisneros, who became a cardinal and on two occasions served as regent of the kingdom. Cisneros was almost 50 years old when he decided to set aside the privileges of the diocesan clergy in order to become a Franciscan friar. This also marked a turn to a strictly ascetic form of Christianity that he soon sought to impose not only on himself, but also on other monastics and eventually on the entire church. As confessor to the Queen, Cisneros soon became also her advisor in matters of policy, and it was probably he who inspired her in her tragic decision to expel all Jews from her lands in 1492. As could be expected, his attempts at reform were not always well received. His insistence on the need to be faithful to vows of celibacy caused several hundred Friars to leave Spain with their concubines and families, settle in North Africa, and embrace Islam. Similarly, his attempt forcefully to convert the Moors who still remained in Spain after the surrender of Granada led to an uprising among the "moriseos" — as these Moors were called — and eventually to their expulsion from Spain.

But even as he held to this dogmatic and even tyrannical rigidity, Cisneros was also convinced that it was necessary to reform the church by taking it back to its biblical roots. To that end he gathered in Alcala de Henares a body of scholars — several of them converted Jews — who produced a new edition of the entire Bible known us the Complutensian Polyglot — "Complutensian," because the Latin name of Alcala was *Complutum*, and "Polyglot" because it included in parallel columns the text in Hebrew, Greek, and the Latin Vulgate of Jerome. For 15 years these scholars worked on a critical edition of each of these texts, comparing various manuscripts and trying to approach the original as much as possible. It is said that when Cisneros was handed the sixth and final volume of this great work he rejoiced and declared that "this edition of the Bible . . . opens before us the sacred sources of our religion, from which a theology will emerge that will be purer than any other derived from less this direct sources." These words, which would seem to echo the sentiments of Luther and other reformers, were spoken in April of 1517, that is, half a year before Luther's 95 theses.

Cisneros died on the 8th of November of that year, nine days after Luther nailed his theses. But his policies, enforced both through his influence on Isabella and when he was regent of the

kingdom, could be felt throughout the entire process of the Catholic Reformation. Following the ideals of Cisneros, the Catholic Reformation — which Protestant historians often call the Counter Reformation — sought a transformation that would be morally pure, ending the scandalous corruption of the times, but would remain doctrinally unchanged. Leaving aside much that could be said about this Catholic Reformation, one must at least mention the founding of the Society of Jesus the Jesuits — in 1534. Although quite often the Jesuits have been maligned, there is no doubt that they were a strong force for Reformation, and that their founder, Ignatius of Loyola had profound religious experiences that remind us of Luther's similar experiences.

Yet the high point of the Catholic Reformation was the Council of Trent, whose sessions began in 1545 and did not end until 1563, as a result of the complex and fluid political conditions of the time.

That Council took the task of seeking the Reformation of the church both in its organization and in its practical and moral life, but at the same time rejecting the doctrinal and liturgical reforms

proposed by Protestantism. The church that resulted from that process, usually known as the "Tridentine church," was very different than it had been before the Reformation. It was much more centered on the Pope and his authority. It was this church that promulgated a list of forbidden books, in 1559. It was this church that, with the advice and support of the Jesuits, also produced the first curriculum that was to be followed in the training of clergy. (Surprising as that may seem, until that time there had been no educational requirements for ordination.) It was also this church that first organized "seminaries" — a word that actually means "seedbeds" — where candidates to the priesthood, like the tender plants raised in the protection of a seedbed, could be formed and protected from contamination from modern ideas, in order then to be transplanted to the parishes and to other ecclesiastical functions.

If we then return to this side of the Atlantic, the first thing to be said is that the Tridentine reforms seldom were fully applied in the Iberian colonies. The main reason was that during the entire colonial period the centralization of ecclesiastical power on the person of the pope was not feasible in the colonies. Almost immediately after the so-called discovery of America by Columbus, Pope Alexander VI granted the Spanish and Portuguese crowns the right of “royal

patronage" — in Spanish and Portuguese, *patronato real*. Simply stated, what this meant was that the church in the colonies would not be under the direct supervision of Rome, but rather of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns. Although technically the popes would still appoint bishops and other prelates, he would name those proposed by the crown —a practice that was known as the "right of presentation." Although it is frequently said that during colonial times the wealth that the church extracted from this hemisphere went to the papal treasury, this is not true. Tithes and all other offerings went to the royal treasury, which was also responsible for all the expenses of the church. Obviously, when Alexander VI made these concessions he was not aware of the gold that would eventually flow from Mexico and Peru. At the time, it seemed to him that to build a church in the colonies would be both a distraction from his political ambitions and a drain on his treasury. In any case, since bishops and other high officers of the church were practically named by the crown, the church in Latin America followed and applied the decisions of Trent only insofar as they coincided with the interests of Spain and Portugal.

From the very beginning, this brought conflict within the Roman Catholic Church in the Iberian

colonies. The high church officials, who were actually servants of the crown, wished to make it appear that all was well. But then there were others, mostly Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits, who saw things under a different light. They were not willing to buckle under pressure from above. The most famous of these is Bartolome de Las Casas. But there were many others. Antonio de Montesinos, in the very early days of the conquest, told his Spanish parishioners in Santo Domingo that their behavior towards Indians made it impossible for them to be saved. In Cartagena, Jesuit Peter Claver east his lot with the slaves and impoverished Blacks. It is said that when he met a slave along the road he would doff his hat; but when he saw a slave owner coming he would simply cross to the other side of the street. When his holy life made him famous, and all wanted to come to him for confession, he declared that he would listen to confessions in the order that he believed Jesus would have done: he would listen first to the children, then to the Blacks and the poor, and by then he would be out of time! In Chile, Dominican Fray Gij Gonzalez de Santo Tomas declared that theft is a capital sin, that those who have committed it and have not made restoration cannot be admitted to communion, and that therefore any who were in possession of lands or goods they had taken from the Indians were excommunicated until they made restitution. His fellow Dominicans agreed, and for a time most Spaniards in Chile were excommunicated, until the authorities managed to silence the

Dominicans through a theological subterfuge. The church, as an agent of the crown, could not tolerate preaching that subverted the colonial order. And yet, even in a church so subjugated there were reformers and exemplary Christians. On this point, allow me to say, just for the record, that when pressed about the possibility of attaining Christian perfection in this life John West!.., less than a handful of names that he-could offer as examples, and one of them was Gregorio Lopez, a Roman Catholic Spaniard who spent most of his life serving the Indians in northern Mexico. Back to the theme of royal patronage, this patronage was also one of the main reasons why, when the struggle for independence began, mostly in the early 19th century, most of the higher echelons of the Catholic hierarchy opposed independence, for they were in fact servants of the crown. This was also the reason why, when independence was achieved, there were already strong anti-clerical feelings. Since the new Republics now claimed for themselves the right of patronage, and the Pope did not want to acknowledge their independence, bishoprics went vacant for decades. Where there are no bishops no new priests can be ordained. Where there are no priests there can be no mass. Where there is no mass, the vacuum is filled by other rites that can be directed by the laity, such as the rosary, or simply by elements of popular piety such as pilgrimages to holy places, offerings before the altars of the saints, and others.

As a result, the form of Catholicism that became typical of Latin America was very distant from the ideal of the Council of Trent. It is a Catholicism where believers go to "hear Mass;" a Catholicism whose believers often declare "I am a Catholic, but after my own fashion," or "I am a Catholic, but I don't believe in priests."

Although much of this began changing with the Second Vatican Council, this is still the most common form of Catholicism in Latin America, and the background of many Latinos and Latinas coming now to the United States and calling themselves Catholic. To many of them the Catholicism that they now find in this country is rather alien.

As to Protestantism, it originally entered Latin America from two sources. One was the immigration of a large number of Protestants who were offered lands and opportunities that they could not have in their native countries, mainly Germany and Scotland. The other source was the missionary enterprise. Although we often forget it, most of the early governments of the newly independent countries favored both Protestant immigration and Protestant missions. They did not do this because they were particularly interested in Protestantism as a religion,

but rather because they saw it as a counterbalance against conservative and even reactionary parties allied to the Catholic Church and seeking to preserve as much as possible of the old order. James Thomson, generally considered the first Protestant missionary to Latin America, was made an honorary citizen of Argentina and Chile. When he arrived at Pert, President Josh de San Martin unexpectedly arrived at his hotel room, held a long conversation with him, and decided that Thomson would lead a radical restructuring of the entire educational system of the country. In Guatemala, President Justo Rufino Barrios went to New York to request that Presbyterian missionaries be sent to his country, and granted them a plot to build the church — which is the stand side-by-side.

Contrary to what we might think, the early Protestant missionaries to Latin America were not fundamentalists. They were invited to the various countries, not because they insisted on the inerrancy of the Word of God, but bemused the promold freedom of thought, freedom of assembly, freedom to interpret Scripture, and above all - from the point of view of the national governments - freedom of trade. This was important to those governments, because Conservatives advocated for state-controlled economies for the advantage of monopolies and

owners of vast lands. While the Liberal governments of the time promoted a *laissez-faire* economic policy supposedly left to be ruled by the invisible hand of the market and the law of supply and demand - a policy that served the interests of the growing bourgeois and capitalist class.

The early Protestant missionaries made great progress particularly by founding schools, which although often originally intended for the entire population, eventually became the schools where the new elite was educated. In these schools, and in the churches emerging from them, Protestantism was promoted not only as a truer form of Christianity, but also as the ideological foundation and as a paradigm for a similar development of Latin America.

All of this began to change in the 20th century. Two world wars, ignited mostly by rivalries within the North Atlantic, undermined the myth that the North Atlantic was somehow superior in civilization and a worthy paradigm for the development of Latin America. Within Latin America itself, began doubting what they had been told, that poverty was the result of ignorance-or-laziness, and that work was a way out of poverty. The traditional claim of

Protestantism, to be the herald of new freedoms, lost its original luster. Free-trade came to be seen as the freedom to exploit the powerless, and as a ploy by which neocolonial foreign interests could join corrupt governments for the exploitation of entire countries, at the same time, as a result of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church began to respond positively to many of the traditional claims of Protestantism — the authority of Scripture, worship in the vernacular, greater participation of the laity. And Protestantism itself was making roads among the poor, both in cities and in rural areas, who were not so much interested in the promises of Liberal parties as in the promise of a new Reign of God where the present injustice and the present pain would be undone.

At about the same time, beginning early in the 20th century, but particularly by midcentury, new forms of Protestants began to emerge, mostly through the influence of movements abroad such as the Azusa Street Revival, but also among Latin American believers themselves. Sometimes these movements have been carried in heterodox directions that were merited by the name of heresies — for instance, the so-called people of the prosperity networks that call all others the church of Jezebel, and many that combine both. One of the largest International

corporations in Brazil is the Assembleias de Deus, whose motto is "suffer no more," on the premise that suffering is a curse from God, and if people give faithfully to the church they will suffer no more. I am also told of a man who was once a pastor, then became a bishop and founder, then an apostle, and is now an arcangel! But such aberrations should not obscure the fact that most of the Pentecostal movement has remained within the parameters of traditional Christian orthodoxy, and has often had quite a significant and generally positive impact both on Catholicism and on traditional Protestantism.

I know that I have gone far astray from what was announced as the subject of this first presentation, but the events and conditions at the time of the Reformation have to be compared with the events and traditions in the present day. For instance, one could speak of the invention of the printing press as parallel to the present development of the Internet and of cybernetic communication. Just as the printing press allowed Luther's ideas to circulate widely, today the Internet plays a similar though exponentially more powerful role. We could then compare the varying responses of Protestants and Catholics in the 16th century to the information explosion of their time, soon leading Catholics to issue a Syllabus of Forbidden

Books, and try to see if there are any lessons from that time that apply to our present Internet opportunities and challenges.

Or we could look at the role that nationalism played in the religious struggles of the time, and try to derive some warnings and lessons for a time and a country in which so-called Christian nationalism is on the rise.

Or we could look at how in the 16th century the traditional centers of ecclesiastic and intellectual power — Rome and Paris — reacted to a movement coming from what many considered to be the outskirts of Christendom, and see if there are lessons to be derived at a time when new movements and new vitality are coming from beyond what we considered the centers of mission, theology, and authority — and I do intend a bit of that later on in another session.

But as I considered the matter more carefully, taking into account that this event seeks to deal jointly with the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and with issues having to do with

Hispanic/Latino ministries, it seemed to me that such was not the best approach. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century took place mostly among the northern, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Celtic populations of Europe. For almost five centuries its history has been told and interpreted mostly by people of the same ethnic and cultural background. As people in Latin America joined any of the churches that resulted from the Reformation, this often implied also them.

In so saying, I am speaking of personal experience. I remember, growing up Protestant in a Catholic country, how proud I was when I came across a book originally written in French by an Alsatian by the name of Frederik Hoffet under the title of Protestant Imperialism, whose thesis was that the "backwardness" of southern Europe as well us of the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies was due to their allegiance to Roman Catholicism, He listed all sorts of statistics to support his view that his own part of the world was better and more civilized than the rest, and that this was due to Protestant Christianity. Naturally, he omitted the fact that twice during that 20th century that supposedly more civilized part of the world led the entire globe into the two most destructive wars that the world has ever known. But I must now

confess that, as a young Protestant accosted and criticized by my own classmates and partly alienated from my own culture by my religion, Hoffet made me proud.

The time for this sort of missionary alienation is now passing, and I hope that it will soon be a matter of the past. When we Latinos and Latinas join the churches stemming from the Reformation, we wish to do so as people whose culture and traditions are as valuable as any other, as people who expect that our gifts to the entire church will be welcomed and considered equal to any other gifts.

Later, in some of the other sessions, I shall spell out what I consider some of those gifts to be. For the present, as a historian, as a Latino, and as a United Methodist, I hope I have conveyed to all of us, Hispanics or not, that we Latinos and Latinas, even though our ancestors were not Protestant, are also heirs and bearers of a long tradition of reformation, and that we come to the United Methodist Church, not only to join its glorious tradition of reformation, but also to offer ours. I trust that this will be part of the outcome of this gathering, and that on this score, as earlier in many others, the United Methodist Church will be a beacon pointing to the future.