

# THE REFORMATION ROOTS OF WESTERN CIVILISATION



Western civilisation has been blessed with the greatest freedom, productivity and prosperity ever known in history. The liberty, standards of justice and creativity enjoyed in Western civilisation is a direct result of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Our Lord Jesus Christ taught: ***“But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”*** Matthew 6:33

## **The Question of Authority**

Martin Luther’s earnest quest for peace with God, intensive study of the Scriptures, and 95 *Theses* challenge over the unethical fund raising tactics of the papacy, led to primary questions on authority. Martin Luther’s love for the Word of God and dedication to truth led him to challenge the entire ecclesiastical and political authority of the Roman Catholic church and the Holy Roman Empire:

***“Unless I am convinced by Scripture or by clear reasoning that I am in error – for popes and councils have often erred and contradicted themselves – I cannot recant, for I am subject to the Scriptures I have quoted; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. It is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against one’s conscience. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. So help me God. Amen.”***

## **Freedom of Conscience**

In this incredibly courageous stand against the assembled political and religious might of Europe, Luther argued for freedom of conscience based upon the authority of Scripture alone. Until that time, the prevailing practice was authoritarianism both in church and state.

## **Scripture Alone**

All religions supported the monarchy, aristocracy and authoritarianism. However, Martin Luther and the Reformers maintained that because of the depravity of man, no human authority could be trusted as absolute. *“Popes and councils have often erred and contradicted themselves.”* He rejected ecclesiastical totalitarianism and championed the principle of *Sola Scriptura* – The Bible alone is our ultimate authority.

## **Religious Freedom**

By translating the Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew into the common tongue and making it widely available to both nobles and peasants, Luther championed universal education and literacy, the priesthood of all believers, freedom of conscience and religious liberty.

## **Love in Action**

By rejecting the sacramental system of the medieval Roman Catholic church, with its encouragement of the devout retreating into monasteries and convents to subjectively seek inner holiness and salvation within themselves, the Reformers freed society from this introverted and ultimately selfish obsession. The Reformation released that energy and redirected it to seeking to serve God and our neighbour, putting feet to our faith and love in action.

## **Energy Unleashed**

The Protestant Reformation freed society from the religious subjectivism and stagnation, which had crippled progress. The Reformation redirected the energy of Christians towards applying the Lordship of Christ to all areas of life – intellectually, politically, socially and economically.

## **Representative Governments**

The Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers became the foundation for modern representative republics. The equality of all men before God and the law undermined the absolutism of monarchs and popes who set themselves above the law.

## **Lex Rex**

Instead of the prevailing *Rex Lex* (the king is the law), the Reformers championed *Lex Rex* (the Law is king!) No one is above God's Law. Jesus Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Everyone is under God's Law.

## **Constitutional Authority**

*Sola Scriptura* eroded the foundations of ecclesiastical and political totalitarianism. The Protestant emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and the supreme authority of Scripture led to the concept of representative government and constitutional authority as the supreme law of the land.

## **Liberty of Conscience**

Martin Luther wrote that Christians should be free of the arbitrary control of both church and state. God alone is the Lord of the conscience. Luther wrote: *"It is with the Word that we must fight, by the Word we must overthrow and destroy that which has been set up by violence. I will not make use of force against the superstitious and unbelieving... **liberty is the very essence of Faith...** I will preach, discuss and enlighten; but I will constrain none, for Faith is a voluntary act... I have stood up against the pope, indulgences and papists, but without violence or tumult. I put forward God's Word; I preached and I wrote – this was I all I did, the Word did all... God's Word should be allowed to work alone... it is not in my power to fashion*

*the hearts of men... I can get no further than the ears; the hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart... we should preach the Word, but results must be left solely to God's good pleasure."*

By emphasizing the Biblical doctrine of Faith as a gift of God, Luther undermined the Catholic Inquisition and provided the theological foundations for religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

### **Faith and Freedom**

The social implications of this religious Reformation were enormous. The doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* led to constitutionalism. The priesthood of all believers led to the concept of representative republics and democratic forms of government. Religious liberty and freedom of conscience led to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and all the other out-workings of political and social freedom.

### **Foundations for Freedom**

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century German historian, Leopold Von Ranke described John Calvin as the "*virtual founder of America.*" Reformer John Calvin laid the foundations for the English and American Bills of Rights, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the privilege against self-incrimination, the independence of judiciary, the right of *habeas corpus*, the right not to be imprisoned without cause, and other key principles of separation of powers, checks and balances, constitutional and representative government, etc.

### **The Protestant Work Ethic**

Sociologist, Max Weber's book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1908), documented that the free market economy was a product of the Protestant Reformation. Free market capitalism had historically flourished in those Protestant countries where the Calvinist principles of hard work, honesty, frugality, thrift, punctuality and doctrine of a Christian work ethic had created conditions for the greatest innovations and successes in economics ever experienced in all of history.

### **Christian Roots of America**

French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, observed that the unprecedented liberty, justice and productivity achieved in the United States of America was a direct result of its Christian principles. "*There is no country in the world where the Christian religion maintains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.*"

### **The Fruit of Faith**

Historian Carlton Hayes, in *Christianity and Western Civilisation*, observed: "*Wherever Christian ideals have been generally accepted and their practice sincerely attempted, there is a dynamic liberty; and wherever Christianity is being ignored or rejected, persecuted or chained to the state, there is tyranny.*"

### **Moral Compass**

Jewish author, Kevin Abrams, has written: "*The American civilisation rests on the basic principles of Christian morality, which have their origin in the Hebrew Scriptures... without the Bible as the constellation that guides the American ship of state the whole edifice that guides the American civilisation collapses.*"

## Liberty and Justice

Professor Alvin Schmidt, in *Under the Influence – How Christianity Transformed Civilisation*, concludes: *“In whatever nations Christianity has had a prominent presence, there have been marked improvements in liberty and justice as opposed to societies that have been, and continue to be, dominated by non-Christian religions.”*

## The Reformation Heritage

**Ideas have consequences.** There is no doubt that the Reformation in Europe during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century has to be seen as one of the most important epochs in the history of the world. The Reformation gave us the Bible – now freely available in our own languages. The Reformation pioneered the principles of religious freedom, liberty of conscience, the rule of Law, separation of powers and constitutional limited republics. All of these foundational principles were unthinkable before the Reformation.

The Reformers emphasised **God’s Sovereignty**, that **Scripture alone** is the final authority, that **Christ alone** is the Head of the Church, that justification is by **God’s grace alone**, on the basis of the finished work of Christ, received by **faith alone**.

The Reformers teachings on the depravity of man, the Covenant, and Church government have influenced positive political developments in liberty throughout the Western world and beyond, establishing checks and balances, the separation of powers and constitutional authority.

All of us are beneficiaries of this tremendous movement for Faith and freedom. If you love liberty, you need to re-examine the history and the principles of the Reformation.

***“If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God, except precisely that point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, then I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.”***

- Martin Luther

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