

The Hungarian Reformation

By Chris Richards



"...in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. (2 Cor 11:23 KJV)"

With the rise of Islam very much in the news, the history of the Reformation in Hungary makes an interesting study. The Church there not only had to contend for the faith against Roman Catholicism but also against the Islamic Turks who invaded Hungarian territory. The Christian can learn much from the history of the Church in Hungary. For the greater part of its existence it has been oppressed and persecuted. Rome, Islam, or Communist persecutions have never totally destroyed Gospel witness in Hungary. It is also fitting that the Reformation story be retold in this year of 2006, as this year marks special anniversaries for Stephen Bocskay, sometimes known as the Hungarian Oliver Cromwell. Bocskay was born in 1556 and died by poisoning in 1606. He is commemorated on the International Reformation Monument in Geneva, towards the erection of which the Hungarian Reformed Church contributed one of the largest sums of money. Only the Church of Scotland contributed more. Despite the Reformed Church of Hungary claiming over two million adherents, Hungary is often regarded as a wholly Roman Catholic country.

The Early Days

The Gospel was planted among the Magyar peoples who settled in Hungary from Asia by Cyrillus. The rise of the Papacy affected Hungary as it did in all other places where Rome usurped local churches. By the time of the Reformation, Hungary had 150 so-called Holy Places. "Miracles" were commonplace yet the morality of the country was very low.

The preaching of John Huss in Prague affected many students from Hungary who were studying at Prague University. However, it was not until a century later that the populace were reached with the Gospel. Luther's protest against the sale of indulgences in 1517 opened the way for the Hungarian Reformation. Many Germans had settled in Hungary. This German influence led to Luther's writings being circulated. By 1600 it is believed that 60% of the population was Protestant.

Queen Mary, a very influential member of the Royal Family, was won over to the Reformation. She used her influence to protect Protestant preachers, especially John Henkel. From 1523 Reformed Truth had been taught at the Academy of Ofen in Budapest. In Transylvania (then part of Hungary) the Reformers were zealous in catechizing the people. This led to the populace mocking and ridiculing the superstitious beliefs of the Roman priests.

Rome Thwarted

The Roman Bishops demanded that Queen Mary's husband, King Louis II, move against the Reformers. All Lutheran books were ordered to be burnt and all property owned by Lutherans was to be confiscated. Some books were burnt, but before the persecution could take hold an Islamic army threatened invasion. Soliman the Magnificent with an army of 300,000 men marched on Hungary. All the troops Louis could muster were 27,000. These were quickly defeated by Soliman. The King, in making his escape, suffered a riding accident which killed him.

The invasion by the Turks resulted in 200,000 Hungarians being massacred. Two claimants put themselves forward as the rightful king, John Zapolya and Ferdinand of Austria. This division led to civil war and was accompanied by Soliman's occasional attacks. This unrest left the Reformers unhindered. Nobles and two Bishops embraced the Reformation.

In 1537 Matthias Devay began a powerful ministry in Budapest, and Ferdinand was presented with a copy of the Augsburg Confession. Budapest was under Zapolya's authority. Influenced by Roman priests, Zapolya had Devay imprisoned. Also in the prison was Zapolya's blacksmith and Devay witnessed to the smith. Zapolya ordered the blacksmith's release. He, though, said he would not leave prison without Devay, whereupon Zapolya ordered his release too. Devay left the country, visiting Wittenburg in Germany and Basle in Switzerland, where he acquainted himself with printing practice. In 1537 he returned to Hungary and set up a press. On this was printed the first book in the Hungarian Language.

Reluctantly, Ferdinand agreed to move against the Reformers. Devay and an evangelist, Stephen Szantai, were denounced but not imprisoned. Ferdinand arranged for a debate between Szantai and a Romanist theologian named Gregory. The judges of the debate came to Ferdinand explaining that they were in a dilemma. Szantai could prove his doctrine by Scripture; Gregory could not. Yet if they found Szantai the victor they would be guilty of heresy.

The King now found himself in the same dilemma. He spoke with Szantai. Rome demanded that the King have Szantai burned. Instead, he made provision for the would-be martyr to leave his territory.

Reformation Complete

In Hungary there was no sudden fall of the Roman Catholic Church, but rather a gradual weakening of its support. The great progress of the Reformation came from three sources—the evident superior teaching of the Reformation so clearly seen in the Szantai-Gregory debate; the publishing of the Hungarian New Testament in 1541; and the reluctance of the claimants to the Kingdom to offend the Protestant nobility by persecution.

Young men studied theology in Wittenburg and Geneva. On their return they took up evangelical ministries. On John Zapolya's death, his infant son was proclaimed his successor. His mother invited Soliman to become the child's protector. The army of Soliman entering the Kingdom led to many fleeing before it, including many Reformed preachers. When things settled down these returned, the Turks allowing them to preach unhindered. By 1554 Transylvania was almost entirely Protestant. The last priest left the city of Huns as the place was without a single Roman Catholic. Count Petrovich undertook, as Regent to the infant King, a political reformation. Metal idols were melted down, monasteries turned into schools and the Church lost all political patronage.

Troubles Within

Unfortunately a difference arose within the Church that would lead to a split. The trouble arose over the Lord's Table. Ministers who studied in Wittenberg followed Luther's teaching while others followed Calvin's teaching. In 1545 and 1546 two confessions were published, one from each camp. At this time separation was not practiced by either side. The publishing of these Confessions, however, did lead to the Hungarian church organizing itself and not relying on German help. It also completely broke off ecclesiastical contact with local Roman Catholic Bishops.

Romanists tried to bribe the Turks to kill Protestants. However, as Protestant meeting houses had no idols, which the Turks abhorred, they refused. The Pashas ordered that no hindrance should be put in the way of those who preached the faith of the "Great Mufti of Wittenberg"! A change of Regent could have caused the Reformers many problems. However, the enemy of the Reformation, Losonezy, was killed in battle against the Turks.

The differences between the two Protestant groupings remained even during the fierce persecutions which were to follow. Publications and counter-publication from both sides vied with one another. Pronouncements from both sides precluded any coming together.

Stephen Bocskay

The claim of Ferdinand passed eventually to Rudolph II. He had no interest in Reformed teaching, being more concerned with astrology and alchemy. His

lack of concern at the treatment of his Protestant subjects, now confronted by a Jesuit led counter-reformation, led to an uprising. The Protestants of Holland had risen against the persecuting Hapsburg emperors of the Holy Roman Empire who ruled them. The Hungarian Protestants, facing similar despotic rule and active persecution, sought to defend themselves. Their captain was Stephen Bocskay who was elected to lead the Protestant forces, called hadjous. Rudolph refused the Protestants' call for religious freedom and was determined to destroy any attempt to secure this. Bocskay led his hadjous to victory and was urged to accept the title Prince of Hungary. He would not accept this claim to the Kingdom. He did however accept the simple title of Prince of Siebenburgen.

Bocskay Victories

Bocskay victories over the Hapsburg Rudolph called for great military skill. Not only did Bocskay have to face Romanist forces but also to keep a watchful eye on the Turks, who were always looking for an opportunity to invade. The victories over Rudolph forced him to sign a treaty called the Peace of Vienna. This gave rights to all citizens to practice their faith without state interference. The Peace of Vienna was accepted by the hadjous at the Diet (legislative assembly) at Kassa. During the Diet, Bocskay was poisoned, probably by a false friend, the Chancellor Katay. Bocskay died on 29th December 1606. On his death the outraged hadjous put Katay to death. The death of Bocskay was a great setback for the Protestant cause. The provisions of the Peace of Vienna proved short-lived and a fearful persecution came on the Church once again.

The Fall of the Hapsburgs

In 1616 Ferdinand II came to the Throne. He repudiated the Peace of Vienna. The Jesuits set up courts of Inquisition. Pastors and Protestant nobility were hung and villages forcibly made to accept Roman Catholicism. Again the Protestants were driven to take up arms to defend themselves. Again the Protestants had a great military leader, Gabriel Bethlen. Three times he secured promises of peace from the Romanist Ferdinand only to see the Treaty broken once the Protestant forces dispersed.

Bethlen never seemed to realize that Rome could not be trusted. The last Treaty Bethlen secured by arms from the Hapsburgs also gave an undertaking by Bethlen never to take up arms again. Although Bethlen kept his part of the bargain, Rome did not keep her side. Like Bocskay, Bethlen was poisoned by Romanist doctors. During this time 100,000 were forcibly "converted to Rome." The country was depopulated through martyrdom and Protestants fleeing.

Ferdinand II was followed by a succession of persecuting monarchs. Just as many came to view the French Revolution as God's judgment on the persecuting Romanist French Royal family, so, when in 1866 defeated Austria

fell from the front rank of nations, this was viewed in the same light. Another fifty years on from this the Hapsburg Empire collapsed in the First World War. Protestants called the House of Austria the House of Ahab. The Protestants of Hungary adopted a policy of passive resistance. Pastors sent to row in the galleys were freed by Dutch men-of-war, who hearing of the punishment given to the Hungarian pastors, made it their business to board the Hapsburg vessels and free the pastors. Finally, as revolution threatened the Romanist despots of Europe during the 18th Century, religious toleration was granted. The Act of Toleration of 1781 was superseded in 1848 by the guarantee of complete religious liberty.

The Hapsburg Empire went into history at the end of World War 1.

The Church remained, having withstood both Rome and Islam!

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