

Sermon English Reformation, for 2018-9-30 at BFC

Title: The English Reformation, Cradle of Quakerism

Scripture: John 21:15-17. Mark 12:1-9.

John 21:15-17: [NASB] when they had finished breakfast, Jesus \*said to Simon Peter, "Simon, *son* of John, do you [**f**]love Me more than these?" He \*said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I [**g**]love You." He \*said to him, "Tend My lambs." <sup>16</sup> He \*said to him again a second time, "Simon, *son* of John, do you [**h**]love Me?" He \*said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I [**i**]love You." He \*said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." <sup>17</sup> He \*said to him the third time, "Simon, *son* of John, do you [**j**]love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you [**k**]love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I [**l**]love You." Jesus \*said to him, "Tend My sheep.

Mark 12:1-9 [NASB]: [Jesus] began to speak to them in parables: "A man PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A [**a**]WALL AROUND IT, AND DUG A VAT UNDER THE WINE PRESS AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to [**b**]vine-growers and went on a journey. **2** At [ ] *harvest* time, he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive *some* of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. **3** They took him, and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. **4** Again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. **5** And he sent another, and that one they killed; and *so with* many others, beating some and killing others. **6** He had one more *to send*, a beloved son; he sent him last *of all* to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' **7** But those vine-growers said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' **8** They took him, and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. **9** What will

the [C]owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others.

[The children may leave at this point.]

It was just a year ago this week that we embarked on an overview of the Reformation, on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's challenge to the sale of indulgences by the Church of Rome. I made about 6 presentations on Luther and 3 on John Calvin, and of course this covered only the headlines and slogans of the Reformation.

That brief over-view bypassed many significant figures and events in the Reformation, such as Zwingli in Switzerland, and the rise of various Anabaptists groups. Anabaptists share several features with Quakers, and perhaps we can return to them at some future date. But today, I feel some urgency to cross the English Channel to more familiar territory. Before we get to the origin Quakers themselves, we need to understand the English context in which they arose, more than a century after the Reformation got underway.

To understand this era, I have relied primarily on a book written 50 years ago by Christopher Hill, a historian at Oxford University. The book takes a sociological approach to the English Revolution and the preceding century under the Tudor dynasty which ended in 1603 with the death of Elizabeth.

The situation in England was quite different from that of Germany, France, and Switzerland, where the Reformation first took root. Conditions in the British Isles were, if possible, even more brutal than those on European continent. The English Reformation began about 10 years after the Lutheran Reformation and it starts with King Henry the 8<sup>th</sup> who began to break away from the Church of Rome in 1527 when the Pope refused to grant Henry an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Henry wanted a male heir, and Catherine had produced only one daughter, named Mary, who survived childhood. This was not only a matter of Henry's ego, large

though that was, for it was widely acknowledged that England could be engulfed in a civil war if there was no son to succeed Henry. Therefore Henry's break with Rome received widespread support in the English Parliament, and Henry punished dissenters without mercy. If Henry could imprison his wife Catherine and execute several wives, he would not hesitate to eliminate anyone he wished.

The tawdry and appalling saga of Henry's quest for a male heir fills many tabloid biographies, and there was, indeed, a lot of material to work with there, but what is less widely appreciated about Henry is that he took control of monastic properties in the course of his break with the Church of Rome. Monasteries owned enormous estates in England, where they functioned somewhat as a social safety net, crude though it must have been. Henry dispossessed those monastic lands, and he disbanded the monks and nuns. He later sold the land, primarily to finance a war with France. The people who purchased these monastic estates from Henry were wealthy individuals whom Henry favored. The sale was intended both to raise funds for war and to cement loyalty to Henry. The net result was the privatization of church property. After this land passed into private hands, these landowners were very nervous that Henry -- or any future ruler -- might restore a connection to the Church of Rome, which could demand the return of these former monastic estates. This produced, in the ruling class of England, a nearly hysterical fear of Catholicism that persisted for centuries, even down to the present era. Henry's daughter Mary did, during her short reign, restore England to the orbit of Rome, but she met strong opposition from the owners of large estates, and her early death brought an end to her endeavor. Anti-Catholic feelings persisted and flared up repeatedly over the subsequent centuries in England. This partially reflects English nationalism, and partly theological objections, but economic considerations also played a major role. Here is a much-abbreviated list from Wm Tyndale, the early translator of the Bible, concerning various fees imposed by the Church of Rome:

...tithes, mortuaries, banns, weddings, offerings at weddings, offerings at funerals, offerings to images, offerings of wax and the waste of wax in torches and tapers throughout the land. Then brotherhoods and pardoners,

and lastly, what swarms of begging friars there are! The parson sheareth, the vicar shaveth, the priest polleth, the friar scrapeth, and the pardoner pareth; we lack but a butcher to pull off the skin. If a tenth part of this tyranny were given to the king, what would it grow to?<sup>1</sup>

Other economic developments also began to affect England in the 16<sup>th</sup> C. Spain stole shiploads of gold and silver from Mexico and from Peru over the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> C. This fueled a steep demand for luxury goods in Spain, including fine wool clothing. [Cotton, which originated in Peru, would not replace wool as the principle fiber for cloth until the 19<sup>th</sup> C.] England has a good climate for raising sheep and the demand for wool clothing stimulated a boom in sheep production across England. Large private estates shifted away from a loose system of subsistence farming that supported a large rural population of peasant, and replaced farming with the cultivation of sheep. It is relevant to note here that George Fox spent some time in his youth herding sheep. Peasants were driven from their ancestral lands – which they cultivated but did not own – in a process called “the enclosures.” Lands which had been cultivated in common were enclosed for raising sheep, and peasants were forced to live in towns and cities, under crowded and unsanitary conditions. The urban poor would provide the basis for the industrial revolution a century later, in an ongoing legacy of oppression and neglect.

It should be noted that this displacement of a rural population also took place during the Roman invasion of Palestine during the 1<sup>st</sup> C. BCE. Jewish peasants, who initially did own land, were dispossessed through taxation and predatory lending, by the Romans in order to create large estates owned by Roman landlords in Italy for the cultivation of grapes to produce wine for export to Rome. This is the situation that Jesus encountered as a young man in the second and third decades of the first C. Peasants lost their land and were forced to live in squalor in towns and cities. The town of Capernaum on the Sea of Gallilee, where Peter was a fisherman, had a processing plant for fish sauce which was exported

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (1958), First Schocken Paperback edition, pg. 42.

to Rome. Fish that were too small to sell were fermented to make a heady condiment favored by the Romans. Urban desperation in Palestine escalates into a civil war and a rebellion against Rome in the 7<sup>th</sup> decade and a full scale invasion by Roman legions with the fall of Jerusalem in 70. A second rebellion takes place in 110 AD and a third and final rebellion in 132-136 AD. Afterwards, Jews become pacifists [*de facto* if not *de jure*] for the next 1800 years until the founding of Israel in 1948. This is very nearly the same time-scale that takes place in England, where the English Revolution occurs about a century after the English Reformation which had produced extensive displacement of rural peasant populations.

[The English Revolution is followed forty years later by a second revolution, often called the Glorious Revolution, which replaces James 2 with William and Mary of Holland in 1688. Quakers arise, flourish, face persecution and become quietists in the interval between those two revolutions.]

In England, landowners took Jesus literally and began to raise sheep rather than people. They could sell wool to Spain for more money than they could make by collecting rent from peasants who had lived on monastic estates for centuries. In England, the Reformation disrupted social patterns and bonds between lords and peasants that had existed for centuries. Under feudalism, both lords and peasants swore allegiance to one another. Loyal subjects were the real wealth of nations under feudalism, and intelligent land owners recognized their dependence on peasants to maintain their estates and to produce food. When Mexican silver and Peruvian gold flooded Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> C., it disrupted those bonds, pushed peasants off the land and promoted the production of wool for export.

This is, among other things, an illustration of taking the Bible too literally. Did Jesus really tell Peter to feed sheep? The next time someone says that the Bible is literally true, ask them how many sheep they own. [] In any event, sheep flourished during the English Reformation, but peasants had a hard time. So did landowners. The influx of silver and gold produced inflation, and economic

instability and indebtedness at all levels of the British economy, and this instability forced landowners to increase rents, which further impoverished the rural population. And in the landowning class, these changes favored thriftiness and industry as profligate habits of royalty disappeared and newly acquired wealth moved in, [often under the influence of Calvinistic theology that encouraged a no-frills frugality.]

Today we can see a similar process at work under yet another dispensation of globalization. American corn production is subsidized and sold, without tariffs, to Mexico and Central America countries where it underprices local corn production, leaving local farmers in debt and ruin. These farmers move to crowded cities, and cultivation is taken over by corporations to grow food for export, while drugs, gang violence and assassination grow commonplace in the cities, leading some people to seek safety in the United States as refugees.

When we look at the parable of the wicked tenants, we should place that parable in the context of peasant life in the 3<sup>rd</sup> decade of the first century, during the ministry of Jesus. We should also see a parable as a device for drawing people into conversation, rather than a coded message for transmitting timeless truths. Jesus told parables not to teach people, but to organize people. The organization he started still survives today as the church.

Remember also that “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” This parable, as we receive it in the written gospels today, appears to vindicate the Landlord, who, while living abroad, makes reasonable demands upon his tenants. He wants some of the grape harvest. [] However, when Jesus told this parable in the back alleys of Capernaum to people who had been dispossessed of their ancestral land by Roman money-lenders, tax-collectors and landlords, the Landlord’s demands might not seem so reasonable. They might resent the cultivation of grapes for export. They might ask, “Whose land was it, after all, that this foreign landlord now controls?” They might say, with some justice, “It’s our land, let’s reclaim it, si se puede!”

So we should read the Bible with historical insight, and we should read history with Biblical insight. Ask yourself how stories that began in the back alleys of Capernaum, reeking from fermenting fish and teeming with people driven from their land, are later refashioned in the written gospels to make them palatable across the Roman empire after the fall of Jerusalem in the 8<sup>th</sup> decade. How does that new set and setting alter the message that appears on the printed page? And remember that the original purpose of parables was to organize the dispossessed.

I regret that I will need to leave early today, so I won't be able to engage with you as fully as I would like, but the period of quiet worship might be one place to continue this conversation today.

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Next installment:

Scripture: Parable of the crooked judge

Protestantism reduces holidays, thus favoring the work ethic, without a theological shift

Effects of common law is to stabilize land ownership

Rise of capitalism in rural England