

Who is the Church? The Reformation Legacy of Jan Hus

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Introduction

Purpose of studying History

History! The very mention of the word to some of you brings to mind many unpleasant thoughts. You may have memories of boring classes with long winded teachers telling stories that seemed to have no end or meaning. You may be recalling lists of names and dates and places that had no apparent rhyme or reason. You might be thinking of dusty old books in musty libraries.

Now there are some of you that have pleasant thoughts when the word “history” is mentioned. You think of exciting adventures, special events and near magical times. You recall great characters and people of great character. You have visions of far-away places and legendary scenes.

Many of you that fall into this camp, I have no doubt, are the more, shall I say, mature members of the audience today. This is because you have lived through more of what is now known to some as “history.” The more events that you have lived through, the more you are able to recognize the value of learning from these events. For you, looking at the past takes on a different role and now has greater value.

Purpose of History

Indeed, that is one of the “purposes” of history, to recall, reflect and change *because* of our memories of the past. Many times in Israelite history, God reminded His people to make a memorial, or gave instructions regarding how to remember a particular event so that they would recall, reflect and perhaps change with respect to some previously disclosed act or character of God.

Our Place in History

Also, it is important to remind ourselves that we are indeed imbedded in the flow of history. God’s deeds are not complete. He is continuing His story that began from the beginning of time. It might appear at times that God stopped working when the book of Acts concluded (or at least when John finished his book of the Revelation). But in reality we are still in the sweep of history that entered a new era with the coming of the Messiah and will continue until his glorious appearing at the end of the age that we were reminded of last week. So to brush off events as insignificant is a poor approach. We do need to keep in mind that the events we have recorded in the Bible also have a divinely sanctioned commentary and interpretation, but occasional reflection on history

since the close of the canon has value for today as well. Pastor Russ has often set aside this particular Sunday to reflect upon the past. It coincides with the day celebrated at Reformation Sunday in many church traditions to commemorate the events and legacy of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. This morning and again this evening we are going to briefly explore a figure from this historical era. We do this to understand what has happened in the past to better equip us for today and for tomorrow. But first a bit of exposition...

Exposition: Matthew 13: 24-43

As you open the Scriptures this morning to Matthew's gospel and its 13th chapter, let us think of a time when if the way people thought about Christianity and "church" was a bit different it would have kept them from avoiding many problems. Much of the history of Medieval Europe is bound to poor Biblical interpretation and application. But don't blithely malign them, because we too are often bound by various cultural predispositions in our interpretations.

A large problem in this time was an insoluble link of "church" and "culture," of "church and state" in our vernacular. The secular powers used the religious establishment for its motivations and deeds and vice versa. As Western civilization approached this era in history, this tension between government and church was reaching a boiling point. Indeed in many regions and in many areas it was already beginning to break. In this milieu many were beginning to reread Biblical texts in a new light and expound upon them demonstrating the false connections that had been made. The groundwork was beginning that would enable them to break the links in the chain their forefathers had forged.

In Matthew 13:24-30 we find a parable of wheat and tares. This parable, if it had been properly assigned its place in the history of interpretation, might very likely have prevented much of the religious conflict that has been seen in the history of Christianity.

Let us read it together.

Later, in the passage we are able to read Jesus' own interpretation of this parable as well. Let us read again beginning in verse 36.

Jesus is using a common agriculture situation for this lesson. There was evidently a common "weed" that when it was young looked very much like the wheat that was grown. As it matured, however, it became obvious that it was a weed and would require separation from the grain as it was harvested. We see in his interpretation that the field is the world, and the "crops" represent followers and rebels.

What we have here is in Jesus' own words a description of the conflict of the expansion of the kingdom. He instructs his disciples that this age will be characterized by the mixture of His people and those who would reject his message and law. The parable also alludes to the concept that force will not compel the tares to enter the kingdom.

Here it is clear Jesus is making a definite distinction between those who are believers and those who are not. The advancement of his kingdom (those who believe and obey) is not to be accomplished in the power of the world but with the power of the word. The church is not a religious culture but those who have been placed in Christ. Many have read and applied this text as a justification for many "ungodly" people to participate in the function and ministry of the church. As long as one did not openly repudiate the faith, they were still "in." Compound this with the common cultural denominator that everyone was "in" because they were baptized at their birth. This parable was applied internally (only heretics are out) but yet the "kingdom" was enforced upon the conquered, even to the point of "doctrinal homogeneity."

Let us read from I Corinthians the apostle Paul's on this matter in chapter 1 verse 2. Here he designates the church as those "sanctified in Christ Jesus" and who call upon his name. The church is placed in Christ, set apart but then is also those who "call." This is shorthand for believe, repent and confess the message and power of the gospel (see a little farther in the letter...). When your view of the definition of the church is skewed, your application of its message and method will also be amiss.

Paul addresses this distinction of culture and Christianity in his letter to the Philippians as well. Philippi was a Roman colony and prided itself in this designation. Their "Romanness" colored all of their culture. Those who were now believers needed to see themselves in a new light. In the thesis statement of the letter in 1:27 he tells them that their manner of life should be worthy of the gospel. The word behind our English "manner of life" is a word that means to live as a citizen, indeed here a citizen worthy of his position. He is even more direct in this regard later in the letter in 3:20 where he tells them that their (and all believers' for that matter) citizenship is in heaven. They live in a culture but are not "of" that culture any longer. There are many other texts that speak of this same context but they were not interpreted in this light at this time in history.

Hus biography

Jan Hus was one such leader who was beginning to see the truth of this distinction. In order to follow Hus's biography (or anyone's life in the Middle Ages for that matter) a bit about the geography and culture is in order.

Jan Hus was Bohemian. Bohemia is the German-derived name for a historical region of central Europe. It forms roughly the westernmost two-thirds of what is now the Czech Republic. It is in essence a plateau surrounded by several mountain ranges. Slavic peoples settled in the area after the 5th century. In 950 Bohemia was forced to recognize German supremacy and become part of the Holy Roman Empire. From 1310 to 1437 the country was ruled by kings of the house of Luxembourg. And during this time was pressured to become more German in its cultural identification.

Their language was originally an old Slavic dialect that eventually broke down into more regional dialects of Slovak, Slav, and Czech, this being derived from the native name of the area of Bohemia.

After centuries in which Czech was suppressed as a peasant tongue, Jan Hus standardized Czech spelling. His stature as a national hero endowed the peasant vernacular he used with a new dignity. The work of Hus was consolidated and advanced during the 15th and 16th centuries by the Moravian Brethren, effectively stabilizing the Czech language.

Jan Hus was born in a southern Bohemian town named Husinec. The actual date of his birth is a bit obscure, but the best estimate is the year 1372. Very little is known of his parents and family. John Huss is a common English designation. Hus is an abbreviation from his birthplace made by himself about 1399. In Latin he would be Johannes de Hussinetz.

Bohemia became an important area in the mid 1300's with the establishment of a new university in the city of Prague and the rise of the Bohemian aristocracy in the life of Europe. The marriage of King Wenceslaus' sister, Anne, with Richard II of England in 1382 enhanced this development. (Yes, this is the "Good King Wenceslaus" of Christmas carol fame.) Students were exchanged between Oxford and Prague freely during this time and the philosophical writings of John Wycliffe became known in Bohemia. As a student Hus had been greatly attracted by them and eventually the theological writings of Wycliffe spread widely in Bohemia. Wycliffe died in 1384, having been publically declared heretical and having had his influence in English politics overturned. We have spoken of Wycliffe previously. He strongly advocated a high view of Scripture as the orienting point for theology and practice. In this he spoke out openly against clergy abuses and failures.

Jan Hus earned his Master's degree from University of Prague in 1396, became dean of philosophical faculty in 1401, and eventually the rector (or president) of the university in 1403. He was ordained to the priesthood and in 1402 was appointed to a preaching ministry in the Bethlehem Chapel. The chapel stood adjacent to the University of Prague. Czech nobles had built and maintained the chapel as an avenue for promoting

vernacular sermons and to address a need created by the lack of preaching in parish churches. "A scholar/preacher always occupied the chapel's pulpit -- and always attracted the hierarchy's suspicion on the grounds that such a priest couldn't be controlled. Supported and protected by the nobility, however, preacher after preacher managed to survive both the hierarchy's suspicion and its eagerness to dismantle the institution."

John Wycliffe had challenged church hierarchy and its sinfulness by asserting that spiritual realities are more "real" than are experiences. The power of the church did not reside in the structure of the clergy but in its people as they followed the Word. Jan Hus was in essential agreement with this and spoke freely regarding the obvious infidelities seen in the hierarchical clergy of his day. More and more, the secular authorities were calling upon the people to submit out of religious sentiment to obey in taxation and military activities. The rule of the pope was often used as the common designation of the church as "the pope and the cardinals" was the rod of correction. This inequity was even more compounded in that from 1378 to 1417 (our era in question) there were two men who claimed the title pope and who had their own secular followings.

In 1408, the University of Prague was directly affected by this ongoing papal schism, in which Pope Gregory XII in Rome and the Avignon Pope, Benedict XIII both laid claim to the papacy. King Wenceslaus felt Pope Gregory XII might interfere with his plans to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor; thus, he renounced Gregory and ordered his prelates to observe a strict neutrality toward both popes, and said he expected the same of the university.

At the instigation of Hus and other Bohemian leaders, Wenceslaus issued a decree (that the Bohemian nation should now have three votes (instead of one) in all affairs of the university, while the foreign nations (Bavarian, Saxon, and Polish) should have only one vote. As a consequence somewhere between five thousand and twenty thousand foreign doctors, masters, and students left the university in 1409. The emigrants spread news of the Bohemian "heresies" throughout the rest of Europe. The German Holy Roman Empire would have held its allegiances to the Roman pope rather than the one who held allegiances to the French in Avignon.

Jan Hus published his treatise on the church in 1412 in which he carefully makes his Scriptural and historical claim that the church is essentially found in the people that God has chosen, whose lives evidence this work of grace. He states in this quote:

"Now for the right understanding of these things and the things to be said, we must lay down out of the apostle's words that Christ is the head of the universal church, that she is his body and that everyone who is predestinate is one of her members and consequently a part of this church, which is Christ's mystical body, that is, hidden body,

ruled by the power and influence of Christ, the Head, and compacted and welded together by the bond of predestination.”

This did not make him popular with the ecclesiastical nor many of the secular authorities, especially when he made a direct assault on the current, common definition of the church. Again in the words of Hus:

“... it is argued that the Roman church is the church of which the pope is the head and the cardinals the body — ...that is, as the pope — whoever he may be — in conjunction with the cardinals — whoever they may be and wheresoever they may live. But it is denied that this church is the holy, catholic and apostolic church...”

Hus worked hard to clear the ethical abuses in the church, with one of his recurrent themes being “live the truth.” But even he himself was still bound in the chain of his culture. As you read his works he too cannot move himself out of the structure of culture and kingdom. He is calling for reform, but is mired in the culture that has him blinded to a better understanding of “the truth.” Don’t get me wrong, Hus was an accomplished thinker and theologian. He was passionate for the correct understanding of the gospel and Christ’s church, but for our reflection on history, he was still bound to much that kept him from breaking free in his thinking. Perhaps he didn’t have enough time.

After several years of conflict and controversy, Hus was eventually brought into custody, tried as a heretic and given numerous chances to recant. While imprisoned in 1415 he wrote:

“I, Jan Hus, in hope a priest of Jesus Christ, fearing to offend God, and fearing to fall into perjury, do hereby profess my unwillingness to abjure all or any of the articles produced against me by false witnesses. For God is my witness that I neither preached, affirmed, nor defended them, though they say that I did. Moreover, concerning the articles that they have extracted from my books, I say that I detest any false interpretation which any of them bears. But inasmuch as I fear to offend against the truth, or to gainsay the opinion of the doctors of the Church, I cannot abjure any one of them. And if it were possible that my voice could now reach the whole world, as at the Day of Judgment every lie and every sin that I have committed will be made manifest, then would I gladly abjure before all the world every falsehood and error which I either had thought of saying or actually said!

I say I write this of my own free will and choice.

Written with my own hand, on the first day of July.”

On July 6, 1415 he was condemned by a small majority in council and sentenced to death. That same day...

"The executioners undressed Hus and tied his hands behind his back with ropes, and his neck with a chain to a stake around which wood and straw had been piled up so that it covered him to the neck. Still at the last moment, the imperial marshal, Von Pappenheim, in the presence of the Count Palatine, asked him to save his life by a recantation, but Hus declined with the words *"God is my witness that I have never taught that of which I have been accused by false witnesses. In the truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached I will die to-day with gladness."* There upon the fire was kindled with John Wycliffe's own manuscripts used as kindling for the fire. With uplifted voice Hus sang, *"Christ, thou Son of the living God, have mercy upon me."* Among his dying words he proclaimed, *"In 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed."* His ashes were gathered and cast into the nearby Rhine River."

Conclusion

What lessons do we learn?

1. Live in the truth!

We must apply ourselves to know and live in God's Word even to the point of yielding our lives.

2. Be humble and aware of cultural bonds.

Beware of cultural pride that will not be able to see where we too can be blinded by our culture and affect our reading of Scripture and our practice in ministry.

3. Reflect upon history as our continued story.

There are some who aschew the reading and study of history, especially where error is likely to be found. Remember, reflect and position ourselves for change as we see God's continued work in history and all the more as we see the day approaching.

4. Embrace the gospel!

You may be here and not know of the power of the gospel truth that would cause someone to yield his life for this truth. Christ came into this world to save sinners.

