

Freed & RENEWED in Christ 500 YEARS OF GOD'S GRACE IN ACTION

Reformation ABCs

Reformation ABCs is a project of the Delmarva North Conference of the Delaware-Maryland Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We invite you to use, reprint, and circulate these weekly posts as we observe Reformation 500!

C is for Confessing Church

The Confessing Church was established by Protestant clergy during the Nazi era as a response to the Nazi Party's efforts to co-opt and control the German Protestant church. As the Nazis consolidated power in the early 1930s, regional bodies from Lutheran, Calvinist, and United traditions had formed a new national church called the German Evangelical Church. German Evangelical Christians saw an opportunity for the Church to attain new social prominence by partnering with the Nazis as the party stoked German nationalism through its anti-Semitic propaganda. Nazi ideals influenced and manipulated German Evangelicals' leadership, doctrine, use of Scripture, and understanding of the sacraments. In May 1934, a group opposed to these understandings formally adopted the Barmen Declaration, proclaiming that the true church was rooted in the gospel of Christ and could not be controlled by the state. Karl Barth, Martin Neimöller, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are among the better-known leaders of the Confessing Church. While the Confessing Church did make a strong statement against government interference in church doctrine and church governance, as an institution it did not speak against antisemitism or the Nazi persecution of Jews. Approximately twenty percent of German Protestant clergy were allied with the Confessing Church; a similar proportion identified with the German Evangelical Church; the rest were silent as the Third Reich implemented its brutal policies of deportation and murder.

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C is for Calvin, John (1509-1564)

...a French reformer who became primary leader of the Reformation's "second wave." Luther was twenty-six when Calvin was born. Calvin called him his "father in God," though he would come to differ with Luther in significant ways. John's father Gerard Calvin rose to prosperity working as notary and court registrar for the local bishop. He wanted all of his sons to become priests. John was given a clerk's position and placed on the path for ordination at age twelve. Midway through his preparation, his father withdrew him and sent him to Orleans to study law, believing that he would make more money. Calvin was later ordained in Geneva, and his legal training and development of a keen legal mind would deeply influence his understanding of faith, scripture, and church. Calvin would flee France to continue his prodigious work in Geneva. He would come to develop his century's most clear, coherent and systematic arguments for Protestant Christianity.

Calvin's passion for church renewal began in the early 1530's as he heard and read other reformers, and observed the hierarchy's persecution of those who followed their teachings. He corresponded with

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virtually all of his reforming contemporaries, working closely with Philipp Melancthon and Heinrich Bullinger (Zwingli's successor in Zurich.)

Calvin saw himself as uniquely placed to bring greater unity to Protestant churches in different regions and nations. He sought to unify Wittenberg and Zurich by clarifying and mediating understandings of reform, catholicity, and tradition. Calvin hoped to help reformers see how much they agreed, as well as to resolve conundrums that often divided their movement.

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C is for Counter-Reformation

Who gets to name a religious movement in history? More often than not, it's the opposition instead of the founders: "Brethren" were called Anabaptists; "Friends" called Quakers. Luther himself was scandalized that the reformed church he championed was being labeled "Lutheran" instead of Evangelical.

"Counter-Reformation" was the term long-used by Protestant and secular historians to describe the Latin Church's renewal of vitality from 1500 to 1650. The term made sense for actions which were answers to Reformation charges, but it failed to account for the serious calls for reform from within before 1400. Today, other names for the movement are frequently reached for as few Catholics would defend the Index of Forbidden Books, let alone the unspeakable violence of the Inquisition, and Protestants acknowledge that state-sponsored Reformers also sanctioned violence to coerce belief and punish heresy.

The "Catholic Revival" focused powerfully on correcting clerical abuse and immorality. Clergy and lay education would be improved, and accountability in church administration strengthened. A chastened papacy would be revitalized by leaders of ability and vigorous spirituality. New religious orders of austere simplicity and piety would be founded, and new universities established. Better preaching would often convey a – yes – evangelical zeal.

The Society of Jesus, "the Jesuits," was the most successful new order, becoming the spiritual arm of the Catholic Revival. Their political connections made Spain and its empire the movement's more secular arm.

The most striking gains were in southern Germany and Poland, while Protestantism was stopped or rolled back in an arc sweeping through France, Switzerland, Italy, Hungary, Moravia and Bohemia. Roman Catholicism was brought east to the Orient, and west to the Americas. A Jesuit mission begun in Maryland in 1634 spread to Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

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