

# Rome and Civil Liberty – The Fundamental Principle Of The Reformation, And What It Gave Us



Continued from [Rome and Civil Liberty – by James Aitkin Wylie](#)

ALL GREAT MOVEMENTS are commonly traceable to one great principle. It is preeminently so as regards the Reformation. Its manifold developments, political, scientific, and literary, as well as theological, can all be traced up to one primordial principle. What is that principle? It is the substitution of a divine for a human authority. This is the primordial truth of the Reformation.

There is a *jus divinum* (divine law or right) at the foundation of everything that is true and good. There is a *jus divinum* at the foundation of science; for all true science is just an induction of the laws and facts of nature, which are the ordination of God. There is a *jus divinum* at the foundation of all good government; for what is government, but an induction or codification of the laws and facts of society, which, too, are the ordination of God? And there is a *jus divinum* in all true theology; for what is theology, but just an induction of the laws and facts of the Bible, which are the revelation of God? The Reformation was a return to the *jus divinum* of God, in opposition to the *jus divinum* of man, which, in fact, was nothing else than a *jus humanum* (human right).

We are accustomed to say that the doctrine of justification through faith alone is the fundamental principle of the Reformation. This is true if by the Reformation we simply mean a system of theology standing in contradistinction (distinction by means of contrast) and opposition to the theology of the Roman Church. But if by the Reformation we mean a great movement, extending over the entire area of human life and action, beginning, no doubt, in the religious sphere, but developing itself immediately thereafter in the political and social, – a movement enlarging and elevating all the rights and relations of man, and communicating new powers and privileges to human society, – a movement, in short, which gave us a new State as well as a new Church, – then, we say, the fundamental principle of the Reformation was the substitution of a divine for a human authority. This principle is first in order: it is a deeper principle than the other, and of greater breadth of application. Luther must have seized upon it, consciously or unconsciously,

before he dared to open the Bible, and interpret for himself the Word of God, and accept the *divine righteousness* of the Bible, instead of the *human righteousness* of Rome, as the ground of the sinner's justification. This principle is applicable to every department of human thought and action: it is as applicable, in its own way, to the business of politics and of science, as of religion.

The first discoverers, we maintain, of this great principle in modern times were the Reformers of the sixteenth century; and they, too, were the first who had courage to act upon it. From them the statesmen and philosophers who came after received it; and, working with it, each in his own department, they have come, in the course of three centuries, to educe that marvelous and unrivaled combination of political power, social order, scientific and mechanical skill, and commercial prosperity, which at this day is seen embodied in the empire of Great Britain.

*The Fundamental Principle of the Reformation gave us a Scriptural Church.* The Church of Rome put herself in the room of God. She said to man,

I am the one infallible authority upon earth. With the Bible you have nothing to do: with God you have nothing to do. It is with me, and me alone, that you have to do. Whatever I teach, that you are to believe: whatever I enjoin, that you are to do.

And to that claim the conscience of man yielded for ages. This was mere human authority; but upon that authority was founded the mighty Babel of monstrous dogmas and burdensome ceremonies under which the world groaned. The Reformation shook that Babel to the ground, by undermining the authority on which it rested, and substituting a divine authority, – the Bible, to wit. It said to man, this is a perfect and sufficient revelation of the will of God: this is a complete and authoritative directory of all you are to believe, and of all you are to do, in the matter of religion: this is God speaking to you. And when man came back to God as his one Teacher, and to the Bible as his one storehouse of divine truth, mere human authority fell, and the monstrous superstructure of error of which it had served as the foundation fell with it.

"God alone," said the Reformers, "is Lord of the conscience." That was the truth that made Europe free. At the hearing of these words, a world of slaves shook off their fetters, – a world of dead men arose, and stood upon their feet. Thus did the Reformation substitute the authority of God for the authority of man. Loosed from their shackles, men now betook them to the Word of God. They searched its pages with earnestness, with prayer, with dependence upon the Holy Spirit. They no longer inquired, What does this doctor teach? What does that Council decree? What has this Pope decided? Their one question now was, What saith the Bible? This was the unrolling of a black fog from the face of heaven; and men saw with astonished and ravished eyes those eternal lights which God had placed there, but which tradition had so long obscured.

Now arose a holy temple, whose foundations were the twelve apostles of the Lamb, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. The pattern exhibited

in the Mount, of the New Testament, which had so long disappeared from the earth, and which some of the better spirits of former ages had sighed over as lost for ever, was again beheld. The Church had become a brotherhood, whose various members were knit together by the same spirit, in the profession of one faith and the enjoyment of one baptism. Salvation was again the free gift of God. And the Church, without the intervention of any intercessor save the One Mediator, had free access to the throne of God and of the Lamb.

*The Fundamental Principle of the Reformation gave us a Free State.* The right constitution of the Church was immediately followed by the right constitution of the State. Both grew out of the same principle, – the substitution of divine for human authority. All true government, – the government of the State as well as of the Church, – is founded on a *jus divinum*. But that *jus divinum*, or right divine, is not the right of one man to govern the rest. This last was the great political axiom universally received before the Reformation. It passed as a truth indisputable and unquestionable; yet was it at bottom nothing better than government by mere human right; for it manifestly resolved itself, as a basis of power, into the capricious, arbitrary, and irresponsible will of one man.

The Reformation came, preaching the true *jus divinum*, when it taught the right of society to govern itself according to those eternal principles of justice, equity, and order which God has graven on the natural conscience. Just as the Reformation exploded the right divine of the priest to teach and rule in the Church by his own infallible and irresponsible authority, so it exploded the right divine of kings to legislate and govern in the State by their tyrannical and irresponsible will. It taught that all power is by delegation from God, – that there ought to be no government but by law, – that law ought to be the expression of the popular will, – and that this will ought to be enlightened and controlled by right reason, and by the principles of Revelation. Thus did the Reformation substitute a really divine basis of government in room of the mere human basis, which had served but as a pedestal to tyranny. Thus were Liberty's everlasting doors open to the nations.

In the sixteenth century, the Reformation and Liberty made the circuit of the European nations hand in hand, and knocked at the gates of the several countries. Those nations that were so happy as to admit the one, admitted at the same time the other: **those that closed their gates upon the Reformation, by the same act shut out Liberty.** This was not so apparent at the time; but three centuries have sufficed to make it palpable to the whole world. Every year that has since elapsed has but widened the immense distance betwixt the Reformed and the Unreformed nations of Europe. The one have steadily pursued a career of ever-expanding greatness; the other have as steadily kept the downward path of decadence, and at every turn have sunk deeper and deeper into slavery and barbarism. And now, look at the contrast!

BRITAIN, at home the abode of order and peace; abroad covering the world with her laws, her arts, and her literature: ITALY, the birthplace of revolutions. Since the fatal day on which the Papal nations rejected liberty, how often have they agonized to attain it! They have sought to woo it with tears; they have sought to buy it with blood. But all in vain. Tears and blood have been

rejected as its price. No! Revolution cannot make liberty take root: the sword cannot make it grow. Liberty comes only in the wake of the Bible.

*The Fundamental Principle of the Reformation gave us our Inductive Philosophy. All true philosophy is divine.* God is its author, inasmuch as he ordained the laws of matter, and endowed every body with its special properties and powers. All true science is just the knowledge of those divinely ordained laws and properties. Before the Reformation there was a human philosophy, just as before the Reformation there was a human religion. Instead of consulting nature, men sat down in their closets, and by the working of their own fancy constructed a system of natural truth, which had no relation whatever to the existing laws and properties of bodies, and which, of course, could form a basis for no useful art. It was the very error repeated over again in the department of science which had been committed in the department of religion.

Instead of consulting the Bible, men endeavored, out of their own vain heart, to invent a system of religion which was as useless for spiritual and eternal ends as the anti-Reformation philosophy was for temporal and earthly ones. Bacon seized upon the grand principle of the Reformers; and in his hands that principle wrought the same revolution in science it had already wrought in theology. The Reformers said, if you wish to know the will of God, you must go to the Bible. So Bacon said, if you would have a really true and useful science, you must go to nature, – you must study her laws, – you must observe her workings, – you must put her to the question, – you must sit down at her feet, and become her disciple, and listen reverentially to her voice. Thus did Bacon substitute a really divine authority in science for the mere human authority of the middle ages, which had yielded only guesses and illusions, instead of scientific truth. But mark! the principle of the Reformers was the key by which Bacon opened the path to true science.

It was now that the philosophy of the middle ages vanished as vanish the mists at sunrise; and what a glorious world unfolded itself to the eye of man! The heavens stood unveiled; every star unfolded the law by which it is hung in the vault above; every flower, and crystal, and piece of matter, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, disclosed its secret properties, affinities, and uses. Then arose the sciences of astronomy, of chemistry, and others, which are the foundation of our arts, our mechanics, our navigation, our manufactures, our agriculture. Man found himself suddenly re-invested with that dominion over nature which was his birthright, but of which his fall had robbed him, or rather put in abeyance. As sinful, man, instead of being the lord of the elements, had fallen under their dominion: when he rebelled against God, they rebelled against him. But in returning to God, he found he had at the same time returned to his primeval sovereignty over nature: he was crowned a second time. Here were a hundred servants, aforetime all in mutiny and insubordination, now waiting to do his bidding; – the stars to guide his barque over the trackless ocean, – steam to bear his burdens, – the lightning to run on his errands, – the hidden mine to furnish materials for the arts, – and the resources of chemistry to enable him to change the desert into a garden, and replace the brown moorland with the golden grain. In short, out of that principle first proclaimed by the

Reformers has come the whole colossal fabric of our industrial skill, mechanical power, agricultural riches, and commercial wealth.

But not only do our men of science and industry owe to the Reformers their master-principle: they are indebted to them farther for the power to use it. Rome had planted her anathema at the gate of science, just as she had planted it at the portal of religion. Each new discovery she denounced as a heresy, and rewarded with a stake; and had not the Reformers previously struck the bolt from her uplifted hand, she would have crushed science at its birth; a dungeon had been the fate of Bacon and of Newton, as it was the fate of Galileo; and the scientific and mechanical power of Britain had never been.

*It was the Fundamental Principle of the Reformation that gave us our Literature.* Before the Reformation, mind had slept for five long centuries. It would never more have awaked, had it not been touched by the spear of Ithuriel (the angel mentioned in John Milton's 1667 epic poem Paradise Lost) in the hands of the Reformers. Thought was compelled to move in the rut of ages; and many centuries had passed without so much as one noble work, or, we might say, one really new or useful idea, having been given to the world. The human soul had drunk the opiate of superstition, and lay benumbed and stupefied; or, if it waked at times, it was only to rave deliriously, as one who had quaffed an intoxicating cup. But the calm daybreak of the Reformation, the holy light welling once more from its Divine fountain, healed man's sorely wounded spirit, and soothed his troubled mind, so long distracted and maddened by frightful night-visions.

Not only did the Reformation rend the shackles from the human soul; – it opened new fields in which it might expatiate. The imprisoned eagle, escaping from the murky cell of the monk, into the open vault, its rightful inheritance, soared upwards on joyous wing, and basked in the glorious sunlight.

It is true, that a feeble dawn preceded the Reformation, occasioned mainly by the fall of Constantinople, which compelled a few learned men to seek asylum in the West, bringing with them the treasures of Greek lore; but that dawn Rome would have speedily extinguished, had not the Reformation come in time to save it. But, grateful as was this revival of letters, it was as nothing compared with the intellectual outburst that followed the Reformation. In all the Reformed countries mind opened out into an amplitude of faculty, and exhibited itself in a comprehension of judgment, a subtlety and force of reason, a richness, boldness, and brilliancy of imagination, of which the world till then had seen no example. The brightest era of classic times pales before it. The human mind had a second youth. All the leading Reformers as far outstripped their contemporaries in their literary accomplishments as they excelled them in their theological attainments.

One of the most elegant Latin writers since the days of Cicero was our own Buchanan. Knox excelled all the writers of his country in graphic vigor and idiomatic purity. In the hands of Luther the German language attained at once to classic terseness and rhythm. Need I mention the galaxy of great thinkers and writers which illuminated the horizon of England in the days of Elizabeth? By one quality were all of them marked in common, – great creative

power and mental boldness; but that boldness and power they owed to the Reformation. But for the Reformation, not one of these deathless names should we ever have heard of, and not one of their immortal works should we ever have possessed. Bacon had never opened the path to true science; Newton had never discovered the law of gravitation; Shakespeare's mighty voice had been dumb for ever; Milton had never sung; Taylor and Barrow had never discoursed; or Watt invented the steam-engine.

But, after all, these great names and immortal works are the least part of the service which the Reformation rendered to knowledge. Not only did the Reformation give us learned men; – it gave us institutions of learning. It gave us arrangements by which the lamp of learning, like the lamp in the temple of old, might never go out. The Reformation gave us an educated nation, or would have done so had it not been hindered. The idea of educating the masses, – of putting a whole people to school, – had no more dawned upon the middle ages than had Newton's discovery of gravitation. Even in Papal countries to this day the masses are scarce more educated than are the brutes; and yet Knox three hundred years ago produced a scheme of education which not only would have suited the Scotland of his own day, but would suit the Scotland of the present hour, – would, in fact, be a mighty boon to it. All the great educationists of our times are but following in Knox's steps, whose nobly comprehensive plan they have never exceeded in theory, as, unhappily, they have never reached it in practice.

These are a few of the benefits, and but a few, – for time would fail to tell all, – which the Reformation has conferred upon us. Besides our holy faith, with its Sabbaths, its sanctuaries, peace in our land, virtue and love at our hearths, hope at our death-beds, and the blessed words of inspiration dispelling the gloom above our graves; – besides all this, – and how much all this is worth, eternity only can tell, – we owe to the Reformation every generous art which distinguishes our nation.

If law now reigns where violence formerly prevailed, – if the lamp of learning now burns where darkness formerly brooded, – if noble cities now rise where hovels aforesaid stood, – if the ocean is whitened with our ships, and the land is covered with our factories and our workshops, – if our flag floats on almost every promontory of the earth and every island of the sea, – and if our population is flowing outwards in mighty waves, and peopling the ample regions of Canada and Australia, – these are but the developments of the Reformation, – the workings of that mighty and still unspent impulse communicated to our nation three centuries ago.

But the Reformation is not completed: its work as yet is but half-accomplished. The pause that has occurred has made some misdoubt the power of its great principles, and their adaptability to modern times, and to talk of seeking somewhere for some new and mightier moral forces. Instead of being led away by this hallucination, which tends only to retrogression, let us arise, and, assured that the Reformation is but another name for Christianity, – Christianity come out of its sepulcher of a thousand years, – and believing that its principles are for the whole world, let us strive to send its regenerating and healing influence downwards among the masses of our own country, and outwards to the very extremities of the earth.

Completed the Reformation never will be till it has made every country under heaven what Britain now is, and more than Britain now is. Completed it never will be till it has laid prostrate every tyrannical throne, rooted out every idolatrous Church, razed every dungeon, broken every fetter, emancipated every nation and tribe that dwell beneath heaven's cope, and assembled them all in one ransomed and glorious throng before the throne of the Lamb, to join their voices in the song, never again to cease upon the earth, as it never will cease in heaven, –

“Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever” Revelation 5:13

(To be continued.)

## **All chapters of Rome and Civil Liberty – by James Aitkin Wylie**

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