

## **The Christian Revolution**

The scriptural witness is clear that those who wanted Jesus killed were themselves religious leaders, comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees and other followers supportive of the Jewish religious hierarchical system. Why did these religious leaders want Jesus killed? Because they had witnessed a groundswell of people, both Jew and Gentile, who became captivated by him and his message and they felt threatened. They became frightened of Jesus and what he would do to their religious system.

This came to a climax in the cleansing of temple, when Jesus threw out the money changers and said "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." He was referring to the temple of his body, not the huge temple of stone in which he stood. This anti-temple statement of Jesus meant that the activity Jewish people sought from God in the temple could now be found in the person of Jesus Christ. This disempowerment of the temple was a huge threat to the power and financial income of those who controlled it, namely the Priests, Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees.

This anti-temple movement was symbolized during the crucifixion scene itself, where the scriptures record that the curtain between the Holy of Holies and the common people was torn in two when Christ died. The symbolism was clear, God and God's activities are now available to all people without having to jump through the hoops of those who controlled the Temple. I don't know if we can comprehend the enormity of this change for people within the Jewish faith.

We saw something similar with Luther 500 years ago when he proclaimed that the pope and the priesthood was no longer necessary for people to connect to God. He too set aside a hierarchy in favor of a non-hierarchical approach to God. This was a huge threat to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. They condemned Luther and would have killed him were it not for Frederick the Wise, the governor in the province where Luther lived in Germany, who hid him away in one of his castles to protect him.

Today we see a similar kind of attitude toward institutional Christianity. Many people question why they need to attend church on Sunday when they can connect with God in other ways. As a result, churches throughout America and the Western world are having to come to terms with what this societal shift means for their future.

It may be helpful to know that there are many theologians today who believe that Jesus never intended to start a church, such as we see today in our society. They argue that what Jesus wanted was for people to know that they were loved and accepted by God and that God was concerned about them and their struggles in life.

Jesus taught that God cared about them even though they were on the margins of society and powerless. These were the people that were Jesus' major concern and who comprised the majority of his followers. They were the people that were looking for their daily bread and whose kitchen cupboards had little in them.

The early church was a gathering of those who followed the Carpenter and experienced his life-giving transformation. They came together to hear his message and to participate in a communal life, where they received his body and blood and enjoyed one another's fellowship. However, a dramatic change was soon to come to the early church.

In 380 AD Emperor Constantine issued a decree that made Christianity the universal religion of the Roman Empire. Everyone, whether they liked it or not, was expected to practice Christianity in a manner dictated by the Empire. This changed everything. While the number of Christians dramatically increased, it was during this time that Christians began putting fellow Christians to death because they were perceived to have insufficient belief. This was the era marked the end of the early church and the birth of Empire Christianity.

Ironically, with Constantine's decree, the Empire that crucified Jesus assumed control of his church. Many church leaders were more than willing to cooperate because of the enormous power they were granted. When the Roman Empire fell in 476 AD, out of its ashes arose the Roman Catholic Church whose papacy and structure was fashioned after the Roman Empire. History would soon prove the old adage: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Empire Christianity eclipsed the movement Jesus had started centuries earlier.

The fruit of this kind of empire religion manifested itself in our own country 75 or so years ago, when crosses were set afire and black men were lynched on Saturday night and the lynchers attended church services the next day. Empire Christianity represents the values of the empire which, more often than not, contradict the values of Jesus found in the Gospels.

Martin Luther and subsequent generations of Christians have stood under the Reformation banner: "Semper Reformanda", which means the church is "always reforming". One generation after another of Jesus' followers have tried to wrestle Christianity from one empire or another. Luther, in the first verse of his hymn, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word", prays for the church that it may remain rooted in the teachings of life of Jesus: "Lord keep us steadfast in your word; curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the kingdom from your Son and bring to naught all he has done."