

Church History 101

Lesson 24

Religious Wars

Key Concepts: The rise of both Lutheranism and Calvinism created both religious and civil unrest in Europe. This unrest led to a series of wars 1524 to 1648. Deaths from these conflicts have been estimated at somewhere in the neighborhood of 30% of Europe's population.

The Story: The initial conflict (which was discussed in an earlier article) was the peasant uprising of 1524/1525. Peasants who were followers of Luther interpreted his manifesto of freedom to refer to political as well as religious freedom. At one point more than 300,000 peasants were in open revolt against feudal oppression. The end result was the defeat and slaughter of the peasants.

The second conflict was between Lutherans and the Roman Church led by Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire. Initially the Lutherans had been allowed to expand their influence because the Holy Roman Empire's conflicts with the Ottoman Empire (which had pushed all the way to Vienna) and France. Once these conflicts were settled, Charles turned his attention to enforcing the condemnation of Lutherans. The Lutherans organized themselves into the Schmalkaldic League. Once again however Charles faced other threats and suspended his enforcement, which only allowed the Lutherans to consolidate their power. Eventually two wars broke out (1546/1547 and 1552/1555) which were only concluded with the Peace of Augsburg in which it was declared that German princes could choose either Lutheranism or Catholicism for their subjects.

The third conflict is often known as the Eighty Years War. This was a war between Roman Catholic Spain and the Calvinist residents of the Low Countries (Netherlands and Belgium) from 1566 to 1648. The Low Countries were ripe for rebellion. They were ruled by the Spanish but had been impacted by Calvinist preaching and evangelism. The Calvinists were being persecuted by the Roman Church and so they began to engage in anti-Catholic violence. A group of Protestant nobles led by William of Orange organized an army in order to free the Netherlands. While this freedom movement was supported by many Dutch citizens, there were many others that remained loyal to the Roman Church. The end result after almost 80 years of bloodshed was the division of the country into a Protestant north and Roman Catholic south. This war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Munster (1648) in which Spain officially recognized the Protestant Netherlands.

The fourth conflict was a Protestant-Roman Catholic affair known as the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). This war involved virtually every European nation including Denmark and Sweden. It was fought mainly with mercenary armies which pillaged as they moved from battle to battle. At the same time, famine and disease were unleashed, killing more people than died in battle. It has been estimated that the Swedes destroyed 2,000 castles, 1,500 towns and 18,000 villages in Germany alone. The Treaty of Munster also helped to bring to an end the Thirty Years' War, though it was part of a larger peace settlement called the Peace of Westphalia (1648) which established the concept of the sovereign state that is still the basis for international relations today.

The outcome of these wars was the establishment of sovereign states whose rulers could determine the official religion of their domain (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist), mutually agreed upon national boundaries and an agreement not to interfere in the domestic affairs of other nations.

Questions

1. Where do you see modern expressions of these wars?
2. Why do you believe that the United States avoided these types of conflicts?
3. How do you think Christians could justify killing other Christians?