

PART 1

The Unanimous Testimony
of Church History:
It Will Happen to Us

1

From Grace to Disgrace

FLYING HOME FROM UGANDA after two busy weeks of teaching, I was eager for an overnight layover in Amsterdam. Africa is a fascinating continent, but I was weary and hungry—and looking forward to Dutch cleanliness and orderliness. As we made our approach to the runway, I admired the beautifully ordered farms and the tidy layout of the city laced with narrow waterways. In my frame of mind, those canals seemed to sparkle in the sunlight like streets paved with gold.

While teaching in a remote area without running water or electricity, I had spent several nights in a Ugandan mud hut; it would be good to get back to civilization. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon, and my colleague and I were eager to find a good meal and explore Amsterdam. After all, it was a city that since 1578 had been a bastion of the Reformation, a city once filled with thousands who had been set free from the bondage of their sins by the regenerating power of the Spirit of God.

Once in the city, it was impossible not to be charmed by the warm evening, the old-world stone houses with Dutch gables, the tantalizing smells of flowers and pastries that hung in the air, and all about us the tall, fair-haired, smiling, affluent people strolling the narrow cobbled streets or dining and drinking together on their canal boats.

And then I halted. A medieval church loomed above the street, and though it appeared now to have been converted

into a boutique shop, its gothic arches, stained glass windows, and hand-chiseled stonework arrested my attention. I had to get a photograph. But there was a problem. The street was so narrow that even with a wide-angle perspective, I couldn't capture it. So I backed up, pressing myself tightly against a shop window. That was better. But just as I depressed the shutter on my camera, I heard and felt someone tapping gently on the window I was leaning against. I turned.

Most of us have heard about the notorious red-light district in Amsterdam. I came to the conclusion on that visit that there is not a clearly contained district—stay out of it and you'll be fine; it seemed to extend its brazen tentacles throughout much of the central city.

On the other side of the window I was leaning against, only inches away, posed an alluring young woman, smiling and offering her body to me. What flashed into my mind were the Scripture's warnings against the prostitute: "Do not desire her beauty in your heart" (Prov. 6:25). She could not have been a day older than my eldest daughter, early twenties at the most, and my heart almost broke. This poor, deceived, entrapped woman was some father's daughter. How had she come to this?

Which set me on a course of thinking: How had Amsterdam come to this? How had a country like the Netherlands, brought by the Spirit of God so overwhelmingly under the influence of the gospel of free grace 450 years ago, how had it come to this? There were no doubt prostitutes in Reformation Amsterdam, but in the gospel-saturated world that it then was, prostitution was clearly seen, known, and censured as a vice. Not so today.

It's not only legalized sex-for-hire peddled by live manikins in street-level windows; Amsterdam is known for its sweeping embrace of legalized hallucinogenic drugs, sex slavery and child pornography, gun running, same-sex marriage, abortion on demand, and state-sponsored euthanasia. How had it come to this?

Calvin's Geneva

After college I worked on a Swiss dairy farm—a sturdy, rustic place—farmed for generations by a Christian family with roots in Calvin's Reformation in nearby Geneva. On August 1, after milking the cows, we cleaned up and drove the twenty minutes to Geneva to celebrate Swiss Independence Day.

I had studied Reformation history in college and had devoured works of John Calvin in those years. Under Calvin's preaching and pastoral ministry, Geneva had become the spiritual and theological capital of the Reformation. Refugees from all over Europe flooded to the city to hear Calvin preach. "Man's only righteousness," he declared from the high pulpit in Saint-Pierre, "is through the mercy of God in Christ, which being offered by the Gospel is apprehended by faith."¹

Walking the promenade along the lake with thousands of revelers that evening, I found it hard to imagine Calvin proclaiming the imputed righteousness of Christ in Geneva. The "tearing wolves" of the city had returned. Drunkenness, indecency, and debauchery were as commonplace as cowbells, alpenhorns, and fondue. Enter the church where Calvin preached, and today one hears clerics still claiming to be reformational Christians but declaring a message mangled by centuries of ministers fudging and tweaking with the central doctrines of the gospel preached by Calvin long ago. It's tragic. But it's not just the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Knox's Scotland

After several years as a refugee in Europe, John Knox returned to Scotland and declared Geneva "the most perfect

1. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), xxix-xxx.

THE UNANIMOUS TESTIMONY OF CHURCH HISTORY

school of Christ since the days of the apostles.”² I wonder what he would call it today. Knox returned to Scotland in 1559, there to lead one of the most wide-encompassing revivals the Western world has known. There may have been more true Christians per capita in sixteenth-century Scotland than in any country at any time in history.

When John Knox stepped into the pulpit in 1560 and proclaimed the gospel of grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, thousands repented and turned to Jesus Christ. Knox, so fearful of mishandling the gospel in the pulpit, said of his preaching, “I quake, I fear, and tremble.”³ He declared that in his calling, “I sought neither preeminence, glory, nor riches; my honor was that Christ Jesus should reign.”⁴ And so King Jesus was proclaimed throughout Scotland during his lifetime and in the years immediately after his death, and the Church of Scotland grew and flourished.

Visit Scotland today, however, and you will be deeply perplexed. Not long ago I had the privilege of sitting down for lunch (it may have been haggis, nips, and tatties) in St. Andrew’s with David Robertson, pastor of St. Peter’s, Dundee, where Robert Murray McCheyne preached Christ in the nineteenth century. Not only was the Spirit of God poured out in a great revival there, but also as a result Scotland sent missionaries around the globe to proclaim the gospel to unreached peoples in China, Africa, India, and the Pacific Islands. “Today, Scotland leads Europe in drug and alcohol abuse,” David told me, “and Dundee has the highest rate of substance abuse in Scotland.”⁵ He went

2. John Knox, cited in D. G. Hart, “The Reformer of Faith and Life,” in Burk Parsons, ed., *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology* (Lake Mary, Florida: Reformation Trust, 2008), 50.

3. John Knox, cited in Iain Murray, *John Knox: The Annual Lecture of the Evangelical Library for 1972* (London: Evangelical Library; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 22.

4. Ibid.

5. David Robertson, conversation with author, Doll House Cafe, St. Andrew’s, Scotland, April 2008.

on to describe the moral free fall of the country, the devastating effect on the family, the escalating rate of suicide, and in general the dismal condition of Scottish society and the church.

From the glorious revival beginning in 1560 when churches all over Scotland were filled with grateful worshipers, eager to hear the gospel of grace, church attendance in Scotland has been in steady decline for decades. Fewer than eight people out of a hundred attend church with any regularity, and the decline in attendance continues to plummet.

In 1996 I sat in the parlor of the venerable William Still in Aberdeen, Scotland, listening in wonder as he gave glory to God for the gospel blessings on his flock there and on dozens of missionaries—loved, prayed for, and supported by his congregation—proclaiming Christ throughout the world. Pastor Still's widely influential gospel ministry with little doubt was the high watermark of Scottish Christianity in the twentieth century. What remains in the Church of Scotland today, however, is a small huddle of men faithful to the gospel, clinging for life to a sinking ship. In its last gasps, the church for which Knox laid the foundation, the Church of Scotland, voted to install an openly homosexual minister, one who had divorced his wife, abandoned his children, and was living openly in a homosexual relationship.

It gets worse. There are a handful of faithful ministers in the Church of Scotland, but when one of them, David Randall, minister at Loudoun Parish in Newmilns, courageously stated that for its decades of defection from the authority of Scripture the Church of Scotland is apostate and is blaspheming the Holy Spirit, he was the one called up on charges of apostasy.

Apparently a Church of Scotland minister can break his marriage vow to his wife, leave her to care for the children, take up with a male lover, and yet step into the pulpit of his church and be a minister in good standing. But when my friend

Pastor Randall speaks out against it, he is the one brought up on charges. One wonders if there could be a more glaring illustration of ecclesiastical irony. But it's not just the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Scotland.

Edwards's New England

When John Winthrop preached his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" on the decks of the *Arabella*, flagship of the Massachusetts Bay Company fleet in 1630, and declared the Puritan community a "Wilderness Zion" and a "city on a hill," he could not have in his wildest dreams envisioned what New England has become today.

The decline began earlier than most of us want to admit. With the Half-Way Covenant in 1662, people who had no credible profession of faith in Christ were invited to the Lord's Supper. In short order Christ was reduced to a great moral example to follow, but was rejected as the Divine Son of God, the only Lord and Savior of sinners. The result was an erosion of the gospel that devolved into the rationalism and hostile unbelief endemic in the next centuries.

Today New England is the most irreligious, unbelieving region in the United States, with fewer people attending church—any church—than anywhere else in the country.

The compelling question is: how did it come to this?

For Discussion

1. Read Galatians 3:1–3 and 5:7. Discuss the verbs Paul uses and what they reveal about the problem he sees in the Galatian church.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? . . . Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by

the flesh? . . . You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

2. Read Heidelberg Catechism 60 and discuss what it declares about how we are made righteous before God.

Q. How are thou righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined toward all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.⁶

3. What other cities have had great times of revival and gospel proclamation but are now almost devoid of gospel witness? What were features of those revivals, and what led to the unbelief that marks those places today?

Pray earnestly for your pastor and elders that they would be faithful to the all-sufficiency of Christ and the gospel of free grace.

6. The confessions and catechisms quoted in this book can be found in *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, edited by Rick Brannan (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/brannan/hstcrcon.txt>) or at Ligonier Ministries (<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/topics/creeds-and-confessions/>).