

## **A brief overview of the Reformation in Hungary: its strengths, weaknesses and some of its consequences for today**

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Hungary today is a tiny country in Central Europe with a population of less than 10 million people<sup>1</sup>. However, if one visits the wall dedicated to the Reformation in Geneva, one finds Stephen Bocskai (1557-1606) standing along with Gaspard de Coligny and other prominent figures from that era. He – as a Hungarian Prince – played a significant role in the defense of the Reformed faith. This shows that our small nation was affected by this great movement, contributed to the preservation of the Reformed faith, and even its present history is much related to what happened centuries ago. But how did all this begin?

### **I. A historical survey of the early years – in a nutshell**

The teachings of the Reformation reached Hungary quite early primarily via German influence. There were significant German colonies in major Hungarian cities and especially in Transylvania<sup>2</sup> of which nearly all embraced

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011 at the general census a bit more than 1.15 million people declared to have some kind of ties with the historic Reformed religion. Of these, only around 400,000 are on church rolls. However, it should be noted that the Hungarian Reformed Church has a nominal membership (if someone was baptized and never attends church, still thinks of him/herself as “Reformed”). According to the most generous estimates around 0.5% of these people on church rolls hold to some kind of Evangelical – not necessarily Reformed – convictions. Thus true Reformed believers are extremely rare today.

<sup>2</sup> Hungary lost this region after the First World War (Treaty of Trianon – 1920). Now it belongs to Romania.

the Lutheran faith by 1545<sup>3</sup>. These ideas penetrated the circles of the aristocracy as well, thus the need of reforms was welcomed at the top of the society. Later some of these aristocrats and landlords became the supporters of the Reformers.

Certain other factors facilitated the spreading of the ideas of the Reformation in the Hungarian lands as well. The population was quite disappointed with the machinations of the pope, especially after the lost battle of Mohács (1526) against the Turks. Hungarians saw this defeat as God's chastisement upon the debauchery of the Papist church. One scholar mentions another aspect: "A large part of the country was occupied by the Turks and they tended to favor Protestantism as against Roman Catholics, presumably because the former were less likely to support attempts by princes of the West, Roman Catholics, to reconquer the region."<sup>4</sup>

So in God's providence even the national tragedy of Mohács helped the cause of Reformation to some extent. But the biggest impact was achieved by the early pioneers who fought the battle for God's truth. Here are the names of the most influential Hungarian Reformers: János Sylvester (1504-1552), Bíró Mátyás Dévai (1500-1545), István Szegedi Kiss (1505-1572), Gáspár Károlyi (1529-1592), Péter Méliusz Juhász (1532-1572) and Imre Ozorai. Nearly all of them studied at least for some years in Wittenberg. The biggest patron of the Hungarians from the University of Wittenberg was none other than Philipp Melancthon; he provided food and shelter for many students at his place. After returning home, these men set Hungary on fire with their fierce preaching and teaching.

## II. The strengths of the Hungarian Reformation

There are certain features of the Hungarian Reformation worthy of being mentioned since these proved to be helpful in the success of the movement. I will highlight just five of them:

1) *A relatively quick translation of the Bible into the Hungarian language.* Following Luther, the Hungarians realized that the Word of God should be available for everyone in their own language. One reformer lamented over the performance of a Catholic priest this way: "he sings and speaks in Latin, but the people understand nothing – he could rather speak to a wall, the result would be the same."<sup>5</sup> By 1541 the first translation of the New Testament was completed by János Sylvester. Then a few decades later, Gáspár Károlyi translated the entire Bible by 1588. He printed its first edition in 1590 in a small place called Vizsoly in Northern Hungary. This had a tremendous impact

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Imre Révész, *Church History*, published by the Transcibiscian Reformed Church District, Vol. II., Debrecen, 1936, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol. II., Harper Publishing, San Francisco, 1975, p. 740

<sup>5</sup> Mihály Bucsay, *The History of Protestantism in Hungary*, Gondolat Publishing, Budapest, 1985, p. 21

on the Hungarian people and their language. The Reformers started preaching in Hungarian and this was much appreciated by the common people.

2) *A strong emphasis was put on the subscription to and the use of Confessions and Catechisms*<sup>6</sup>. The Synod of Debrecen adopted the Second Helvetic Confession in 1567. Later in 1646 the Heidelberg Catechism was officially accepted as a second standard regulating beliefs and church life. But even up to this point the church was not without catechisms. Calvin's Geneva Catechism had been in use in Northern Hungary since 1564<sup>7</sup>. The Hungarian Reformers also wrote their own catechisms which were widely used. Among the most noted catechism writers we should mention Péter Méliusz Juhász (he published his Catechism in 1562), Tamás Félegyházi (1579), István Patai (1592). But the most popular Catechism was the one written by János Siderius. This was in use in parallel with the Heidelberg Catechism until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. All catechisms were well constructed and treated all important subjects at length. For example, Péter Méliusz Juhász's Catechism had 332 questions/answers, nearly as many as Calvin's Geneva Catechism.

3) *The Hungarian Reformers kept in touch with their mentors*. This protected them from being isolated and drawn into their particular problems. It also gave them some confidence that they were a part of a larger family. I already noted the close relationship between some Hungarian students and Melancthon. But letters went out from Hungary to other places as well. There was intense correspondence with Heinrich Bullinger from Zurich. Bullinger wrote over 13,000 letters – more than the other Reformers together – and some of these went to Hungary. The Hungarian Reformers were asking for directions and counsel on a variety of theological and practical issues; this included questions on how to relate to the Papists or to the Turks<sup>8</sup>, etc. They even wrote letters – and this is less known – to Wolfgang Musculus.

4) *Doctrinal orthodoxy*. The Hungarian Reformers were able to articulate very well the key doctrines and were not ashamed of the gospel. They were prolific writers, publishing numerous books dismantling the Papist religion. Some of them had impressive apologetic skills and easily entered public debates. According to one story, Bíró Mátyás Dévai was ready to sit on a barrel with gun power to debate a Catholic priest (the loser would have been blown up). The priest refused to accept this arrangement and quickly left the scene. It is by no mistake that Dévai was called the Luther of Hungary. Others – such as Péter Méliusz Juhász – were able defenders of the Trinity. Anti-trinitarian ideas spread out mostly from Transylvania due to the activity of Georgio

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately today the confessions are treated as historical documents – they are no longer normative in the life of the Hungarian Reformed Church.

<sup>7</sup> József Barca in *Studia et Acta Ecclesiastica*, published by the Synod of the Hungarian Reformed Church, Vol. 3, Budapest, 1973, p. 852

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Timmerman, *Bullinger on Islam: Theory and Practice*, Unio Cum Christo, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2017, p. 128

Biandrata, who was an Italian medical doctor at the court of John Sigismund Zápolya. So the Reformers had to deal with this issue as well.

5) *A willingness to accept persecution and suffering.* After 1526 the country was divided into three parts. This caused a lot of grief in the hearts of many – the Reformers included. On top of this, the Reformed faith was under pressure being clogged between two Empires, the Turks and the Habsburgs. In spite of all these difficulties, our forefathers stood boldly on the Word of God. Later, during the time of counter-Reformation, many of them were ready to die, go into prison or to be taken as galley slaves without denying their evangelical convictions. These latter ones were delivered in 1676 from Naples by the famous admiral Michiel de Ruyter.

### III. The weaknesses of the Hungarian Reformation

We need to elaborate on this at some length, since these facts are less known even in academic circles in the Western world. Although the Hungarian Reformers clarified the main theological issues, a solid foundation for the church was not properly established. When we check some of the practical matters, serious flaws appear that affected a lot the Hungarian Reformed Church (HRC) for the coming centuries. This is why by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the HRC had already lost the three marks of a true church<sup>9</sup>.

a) *Nominal membership.* The *cuius region eius religio* principle proved to be detrimental to the church in the long-term. It helped in the beginning when some of the landlords offered refuge to the Reformers. But landlords sometimes changed colours, not because of their own conviction but rather for political reasons (such as being opposed to Papist Habsburgs). Thus the people on their land followed them automatically. Toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century nearly 90% of Hungarians became Protestant, but later this dropped back to 20%. This was due not only to the persecution and other factors, but primarily to the lack of convictions among laity.

This was evident in the coming centuries as well. Religion was chosen depending on one's political views, family traditions, etc., and not necessarily heart beliefs. One scholar puts it this way: "For a long time the issues were divided thus: to be Protestant meant to be Hungarian and to be Roman Catholic meant to be German, or more precisely, to be Protestant meant to stand for the rights of the nation and liberty, to be Roman Catholic meant to stand for denationalization and the betrayal of liberty."<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the HRC was the largest Protestant denomination in the Carpathian basin. But as one of their acclaimed theologian admits: "the Reformed Church was a state/nominal church, where people became members by the

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<sup>9</sup> The true preaching of the Word, the proper distribution of the sacraments and the administration of church discipline.

<sup>10</sup> Péter Török, *Hungarian State-Church Relationships: A Socio-Historical Analysis*, PhD Dissertation – University of Toronto, 2000, p. 97

administration of infant baptism.”<sup>11</sup> So no authentic and credible profession of faith was required for admittance into membership.

b) *Confusion regarding offices and the form of church government.* The HRC is the only Reformed denomination which had bishops and superintendents from its beginnings. It was and it is a much clericalized church where ruling elders play a very small role. In fact, ruling elders were not in place for centuries. The first local session was activated 150 years after the Reformation in the town of Pápa, but this was rather an exception and not a common practice.

One may find it interesting that only the Synod of Buda (1791) decreed that local sessions should be organized and ruling elders should be elected in all congregations. This was reaffirmed in 1821-22, when the session/consistory was named as the governing body of the local church. But when they finally started ordaining ruling elders, those men were not biblically qualified to occupy this office<sup>12</sup>. So we can look upon this system as a mixture of Episcopal and Erastian government. To make a long story short: there was never a proper Presbyterian government instituted in the HRC.

The same applies to the deacons – this office is still non-existent – even 500 years after the Reformation! Instead, what they do in some places is hire social workers (using state money) and call them deacons.

c) *Financial dependency on the landlords and state authorities.* Giving was always a heart issue, but unconverted and nominal people cannot give *ex anima*. Over the centuries this led to a perpetual dependency on landlords and later on politicians and governments. These subventions increased rapidly, especially from 1892 onward. By 1908, the government had pledged to pay the equivalent of 600,000 US dollars<sup>13</sup> annually to the Lutheran and Reformed Church. This practice culminated in October 2017, when an agreement was signed by the government and the leaders of the HRC. As stated in the document, the government takes financial responsibility for various activities and ministries of the church.<sup>14</sup> By this the HRC tacitly admitted its inability to

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<sup>11</sup> Dr. Álmos Ete Sípós, *Ask the Lord of the Harvest*, Harmat Publishing House, Budapest, 2006, p. 49

<sup>12</sup> Instead of paying attention to the qualifications from 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the custom was to elect someone who is influential enough in the community: a nobleman, a major, a businessman, a politician. Then later – in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century – women were allowed to be both teaching and ruling elders at large scale.

<sup>13</sup> This would be around 15 million USD today.

<sup>14</sup> To have an idea of the quantum of this support: just for the various teaching institutions of the HRC this agreement allocates no less than 32,7 million USD/year (8,5 billion Forint). The church also requested the continuation of the policy of annuity in compensation for properties confiscated by communists. There are other channels for state funding as well, which we will not mention here. Knowing these, it is perplexing to see that some evangelical Reformed churches from abroad are still helping this state church financially.

finance herself and thus became heavily exposed to state influence. Some say, this is the last nail in the coffin.

#### IV. Some repercussions of these weaknesses in the last two centuries

The HRC was never able to recover from its weaknesses and the lack of a good foundation. Consequently, the whole structure was weak and lacking in spiritual vigour. Here is what followed as a result of this:

a) *A weak church cannot stand against the waves of various theological and philosophical trends.* This explains why theological liberalism was so easily embraced by the HRC. Pastors who studied in Germany or Switzerland came home with new ideas. Then the theological seminaries were taken over by these teachers who taught higher criticism. It was not uncommon to have professors who denied core biblical doctrines. For example, the establishment of the first Reformed Seminary in Budapest in 1855 speaks loudly about the influences the church was already under in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most famous professors was Mór Ballagi, who taught there for 22 years. He was an able scholar, teaching a variety of subjects. However, as a theologian he was an adept proponent of “higher criticism and speculative rationalism; that was the main reason why, in the last years of his life, he was so strongly criticized by the opponents of the liberal trend of theology.”<sup>15</sup> Criticized, but never disciplined or removed from the seminary – in spite of the fact that in 1862 he denied the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

b) *Lack of evangelism and missionary spirit.* In a nominal state church, evangelism isn't necessary. However, in the last two centuries several associations were formed within the HRC which started pushing the so-called “inner mission” – an attempt to evangelize the ‘membership’. Even these efforts were many times opposed by the superior bodies, especially the bishops, since the preservation of unity was paramount. Any revival or even individual conversions were seen as a threat to this sacred unity. As for the foreign mission, that was not even on the agenda. Rev. Gyula Forgács (1879-1941), who was one of the promoters of foreign mission within the HRC, stated bluntly that the Protestant churches in Hungary – especially the Reformed Churches – “have no interest at all in foreign mission.”<sup>17</sup> This showed the spiritual condition of the church. A church which loves Christ and takes seriously the Great Commission cannot be idle in mission.

Although the HRC boasted two and a half million members at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the first candidate in the contest of churches which

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<sup>15</sup> Kálmán Benda in *The History of the Reformed Theological Academy in Budapest (1855-1955)*, 1955, p. 245

<sup>16</sup> This was 31 years before Dr. Charles A. Briggs from Union Theological Seminary was suspended from gospel ministry. So Hungary was way ahead of the United States in spreading liberalism! The only difference is that in Hungary there was no proper church discipline administered.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Anne-Marie Kool, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*, Harmat Publishing House, Budapest, 1995, p. 251

sent out the fewest missionaries (especially if we compare it with the large number of missionaries sent out by Scottish churches whose membership was much more modest). To illustrate this, consider the HRC in Transylvania, who sent out Sándor Babos in 1933 to be a foreign missionary in China (Manchuria). At the thanksgiving service, Bishop Sándor Makkai said, “We sent out Sándor Babos as the *first* missionary pastor from Transylvania to an unknown world and unknown people...”<sup>18</sup> He was the first and only foreign missionary till that point! No missionary had been sent out for hundreds of years before! But even in this case, Babos had behind him the financial support of the Scottish churches.

c) *A consistent opposition to any reforms.* For the sake of unity at all cost, the higher echelons of the church opposed any attempt to reform the church during these centuries. Back in 1646, at the Synod of Szatmárnémeti, there was a group of Hungarian Puritans who wanted to correct the course of the church, especially its government. Needless to say, they were defeated. Then later – during the last two centuries – other evangelical associations<sup>19</sup> were formed seeking renewal and reformation. Some of these associations were pietistic, others more Reformed, but none of them had any lasting impact on this shiftless denomination. Furthermore, the hierarchy of the church constantly accused these small associations of seeking schism. Thus all of these modest attempts to facilitate changes in the church failed. After the fall of the iron curtain, the HRC wasted again the historical possibility of returning to the old paths (Jer 6:16) and to the Word of God. As a result, there is an exodus going on today. Few evangelicals are willing to stay within this denomination<sup>20</sup>. New churches are being formed, since it became evident that the HRC is beyond the point where it can be reformed.

The reader might think that I am a bit harsh with my assessment of the spiritual condition of the state Reformed Church. As a Hungarian who loves the Hungarian people, I can assure you this is not the case. Unfortunately, the Reformed faith and Calvinism today are large, empty slogans; cultural baggage. One conservative professor who taught for many years in Hungary at various seminaries stated: “Theologically, like other denominations, the HRC is in a confused state. It runs four theological seminaries, and higher criticism is taught in each of them. Barthianism has been the dominant influence, even from before the Communist take-over. In fact, in Hungary it is a mistake to equate the title ‘Reformed’ with true Calvinism.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sándor Némethy, *In the Shadows of Pagodas*, Hungarian Reformed Foreign Mission Association, Budapest, 1944, p. 25

<sup>19</sup> Christian Endeavour Society (CE), Hungarian Evangelical Christian Student Association (MEKDESZ), etc.

<sup>20</sup> Those who stay in have to compromise their practice in order to conform to the nominal and liberal setting.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Robert E. L. Rodgers, *Hungary's Ineffective Church*, Evangelical Times, 1999, August issue

We can even travel back in time and ponder Dr. Merle D'Aubigné's words. He wrote a foreword to a church history of Hungary in 1853. His diagnosis – even back then – was very much along the same lines. Listen to what he has to say:

... the Protestant Church of Hungary erred by departing from this divine authority, and therefore did not escape that blight of rationalism which swept over the whole of Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century... There were some ministers – blind guides – who thus yielded to the spirit of the age and thought themselves wise in their folly. This was the inward canker of the Hungarian Church – an evil more dangerous in its consequences than the most cruel persecution... The first thing needful, then, to restore the Hungarian Church, is to establish within it the perfect and undivided control of the will of God as revealed to us in Holy Scriptures. This was the working principle of our glorious Reformation... It is to this divine authority that Protestant Hungary ought to give in her hearty allegiance. She has sought a cure for her wounds in the sphere of politics, when she should, before all else, have sought it in the sphere of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

We agree wholeheartedly with the above cure. But those who are within this church are still turning a deaf ear to this.

Last year Hungarians commemorated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Huge amounts of government money were spent via the HRC for these celebrations. Unfortunately, the true gospel and the central doctrines of the Reformation remained hidden under the veil of outward festivities. The message of the Reformation was reinterpreted and falsely contextualized. Indeed, there was a lot of talk on culture, language, education, Christian values, social impact, national heritage, etc. Just the essentials were missing.

Brothers, pray for Hungary and the adjacent lands populated by Magyars. Hungary today is a vast mission field which needs to be reached again by the true Reformed faith. And this task cannot be entrusted to this state church. Will you consider partnering with us?

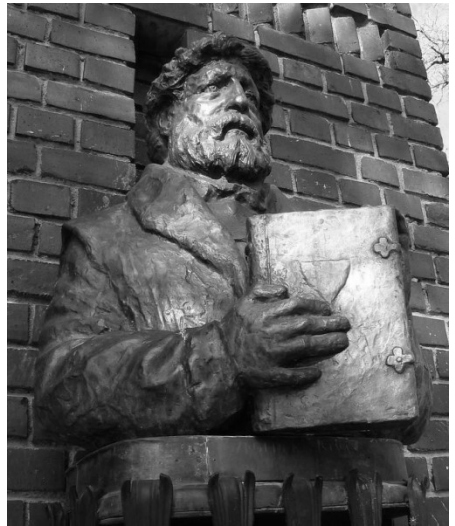
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<sup>22</sup> J. H. Merle D'Aubigné's Introduction to *History of the Protestant Church in Hungary* by Georg Bauhofer, reprint by MoPress & Sprinkle Publications, 2001, pp. vii-ix





Gáspár Károlyi – the translator of the entire Bible (above)



István Szegedi Kis (right)



Péter Méliusz Juhász (above)