WHEN FOUNDATIONS ARE UNDERMINED

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The old church of St. Peter in Rome was thronged with the faithful. Erected originally by Constantine the Great some six centuries earlier, the vast, decrepit basilica would not be revitalized by Michelangelo's artistry until five centuries later. But those who crowded into it that day would not have expected the creaking timbers and the worn stones around them to have any need to endure that long span of all of those years. Weeping and wailing, they had gathered to await the end of the world. Just before midnight, the grand liturgical procession began to make its way slowly along the shadowy aisles as the tormented cries of the people hung in the air thick like incense. Every sight, sound, texture, and aroma bore the manifest taint of judgment. Grievous, they were observing a wake for the world. The Holy Seers had all foretold this dreadful day indeed—most had expected it for quite some time.

Almost from the beginning of history, men began to anticipate the end of history. But here, at the end of the millennium, the signs seemed unmistakable. Pope Gregory, just before his death earlier that year, had assured the faithful that the wars and rumors of wars, the kingdoms rising against kingdoms, the famines, the pestilences, the earthquakes in diverse places were clear portents of the consummation of the ages. His successor, with the concurrence of each of the venerable patriarchs of the East, confirmed that time had run out for this the terminal generation. Some of those who gathered at the Vatican that evening had rid themselves of all of their earthly possessions as one final act of contrition. Some gave their lands, their homes, their money to the poor. Others simply left their fields, their shops, their villages vacant. Little or no preparation was made for the future because, of course, there was no future.

Now it was New Year's Eve, 999. At long last the hour arrived. A hush fell across the whole congregation as bells began to toll slowly—at the end of the year, the end of the century, the end of the millennium, the end of the

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world. And then, nothing happened. Nothing at all. The silence was deafening. Everyone looked around at one another in astonished relief. The terror was passed—and that is when all the trouble began. Preparing for the end is not nearly so difficult as preparing for what comes after the end.

T.S. Eliot once said, "The historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." Both the pastness of the past and the looming presence of it teach us that it is in times of uncertainty and adversity that character and leadership emerge. It's when there seems to be no hope at all, when the whole culture seems to be coming apart at the seams, when the foundations are undermined, it's then that real opportunity emerges. It's then that leadership and character are made manifest. The counterculture of grace, the coming into a worldview of biblical hope are most distinctive in those seasons of distress—when the foundations give way.

There may be no better example of this truth than the life and career of the seventeenth-century Reformer Jan Amos Comenius. Herman Bavinck called him the greatest figure of the second generation of Reformers. Andrew Bonar said that he was the truest heir of Hus, the chief inspiration of Chalmers, and the first model for Carey. J. Hudson Taylor said that he was the single greatest innovator of missions, education, and literature during the Protestant Reformation. Abraham Kuyper said that he was the father of modern Christian education, and yet most of us have never even heard of him. Or, if we've heard of him at all, it is certainly not in the same way that we've heard of all of these others who sang his praises.

Comenius was astonishingly diverse in all of his interests and endeavors. Comenius helped to shape the educational systems of Holland, Sweden, Prussia, Scotland, and Puritan New England. He launched missionary outreaches to the Jews, the Turks, and the Gypsies. He initiated projects to create a comprehensive Christian encyclopedia and a Turkoman translation of the Scriptures. He wrote and published a veritable library of books of inspiration, of educational theory, cultural criticism, history, practical devotion, exposition, and theology. He was asked to lead both King's College in Cambridge and Harvard College in Boston. He served the Swedish king as a chaplain. He developed innovative plans for a Christian university program. And, he was able to do all of this despite the fact that he suffered a whole series of personal tragedies and faced adversity at every turn in his life, living most of it in uncertain exile. As his contemporary Cotton Mather argued, he was "a man of extraordinary accomplishments amidst inordinate adversity."

Comenius was born in eastern Moravia, an heir of the rich Czech Protestant legacy that traced its roots to the reforming work of John Milic, and his disciples Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague. He was catechized in that rich tradition that traced it origins back to nearly a hundred years before Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door. Alas, at the age of 12, a wave of the Bubonic Plague swept through his little village and his entire family was lost. His neighbors, seeing the promise of this prodigiously gifted young man, sought to see him educated. So, they sent him off to Heidelberg, where he would be trained and ordained in the Hussite Reformed Church. When he returned, he served a small congregation in his home village of Falnek, where he married his childhood sweetheart and began his family. But shortly afterward, a second tragedy struck.

The final decisive battle of the first wave of the Thirty Year's War was fought at White Mountain, just outside of Prague. The Hapsburg Imperial armies overwhelmed the Protestant Czech forces, and a fierce new persecution was imposed on the Reformed community throughout the land. in the melee Comenius escaped a slaughter at Falnek that claimed the lives of his beloved wife and their two young children. And, he was forced into

hiding. This was just the beginning of a life marked by suffering, sadness, and exile.

Comenius gathered a contingent of Protestant refugees and led them across the mountains and into southern Poland in order to try to rebuild their lives, their families, and their churches. It was then that Comenius began writing. He wrote *The Labyrinth of This World*, a beautiful allegory of the Christian life, written half a century before Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.* He wrote *Man of Sorrows*, a classic meditation on the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross. He also began to travel to the other Protestant lands to advocate the cause of his Moravian brethren uprooted from their homeland, impoverished and harried.

The genius of Comenius was soon recognized, not only by the grateful community of Reformed exiles huddled together in the mountain villages of southern Poland, but also by the wider church. In the years that followed he entertained invitations to teach and live in the cities of London, Boston, Stockholm, Paris, Amsterdam, Wittenberg, and Geneva. He was called on to devise universal Christian curricula to reform educational systems, to administer colleges, to oversee theological projects, and to supervise publishing efforts. He corresponded with Cardinal Richelieu, Oliver Cromwell, Charles X of Sweden, and Cotton Mather. He befriended the philosopher Rene Descartes. The great industrialist Louis De Geer was enamored of his gifts and became a patron and a sponsor. He had become one of the most influential men of his day, which is why Rembrandt sought the opportunity to paint his portrait. But the pastoral responsibility for his little beleaguered flock always remained the first and the foremost of his concerns. Comenius attempted to utilize every opportunity and every contact for their sake.

Meanwhile, despite the insecurity of living in exile on very limited resources, his Kingdom vision for a missionary and educational reform never dimmed. Always the optimist, he continued to devise new plans, hammer out new strategies, and formulate new projects. But then, in 1656, after a lifetime of hardship and opportunities deferred, tragedy struck Comenius again. Polish troops burned and looted the Moravian refugee camps, a harrowing experience which forced the survivors across the border. They had lost everything, again. Comenius lost nearly a dozen manuscripts that were then in preparation. He and the other refugees scattered throughout the German and Dutch provinces. There they would live out their remaining days as strangers in yet another strange land.

But Comenius, as energetic as always, continued to set his hand to a host of new projects. Though he had lost his unpublished manuscripts, his printing press, and all of his worldly goods, he was unshaken in his confidence in the gospel to change the course of both men and nations. He had set his ultimate hope on the day that Christ would make manifest the new heavens and the earth. But, he was also steadfast in the certainty that a deposit of that future glory would be made in the tired domains of the old heavens and the old earth. He never gave up. He never settled back to await the end of the world. He never allowed himself to fall into despair. He believed in God's providence, and he pressed forward in the midst of all of his troubles, to achieve God's calling for his life. To his dying day he lived in accordance with the notion that God's purposes would be fulfilled. He began planning for the evangelization of Muslims and Gypsies, and refining his vision for what he called a "Pansophic Collegium" (the first modern integrated classical Christian curriculum). When he died at the age of seventy-eight, he left behind a glorious legacy—a legacy not of this world, but one that would inspire the likes of Whitfield, Wesley, Zinzendorf, Chalmers, Bavinck, and Kuyper.

His legacy would also provide a powerful reminder that success in the Kingdom rarely looks like success in the world. He never had a campus. He never had certainty. He never had an endowment. He never

had any of the opportunities that we would think of as essential for the work of changing the world, of reforming the educational system. What he had was undying, unflinching faith. Faith that the gospel is true. Faith that because the gospel is true, God has come with his incarnational hope, infusing all things with the certainty that Jesus himself has come to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found.

Lessons from the life of Comenius abound for us, particularly in these difficult days of great uncertainty. I was introduced to apocalypticism a long time ago—in the 1970s with the publication of Hal Lindsey's blockbuster *The Late Great Planet Earth* and its 1972 sequel, *The Terminal Generation*. I learned then that the world was coming to an end—probably within the next ten years. It seemed entirely plausible as the Vietnam War continued to rage, the Middle East was wracked with wars, invasions, and terrorism. Environmentalists had begun to warn that the planet had been irreversibly poisoned. The Cold War threatened nuclear annihilation. Africa and Asia were gripped by revolutions, plagues, and famines. American politics seemed to be paralyzed by scandal, corruption, and assassinations. Our urban centers were ablaze with protests and riots. Surely the world could not survive this for very long. It seemed that all the experts agreed. The Club of Rome established their Doomsday Clock and set the time to a minute before midnight.

The foundations had been undermined and shaken. What do the righteous do in time like these? In 1981, the famed science writer Isaac Asimov wrote his classic *A Choice of Catastrophes*, claiming that if nuclear war, environmental disaster, overpopulation, or a collapse of the food supply did not do us all in, then surely falling meteors would. In 1989, the UN Environmental Council warned that the world would see entire nations wiped off the face of the earth by rising sea levels if global warming was not reversed by the year 2000. Do you remember Y2K? A computer glitch was going to shutter modern civilization as we know it. Remember Al Gore's Oscar winning film *An Inconvenient Truth*? In it, he warned that within 10 years, the planet would face the point of no return. That was in 2006. We have faced one catastrophe after another. Many doomsayers and many Christians have assumed that we were done for.

Comenius, facing more adversity and more uncertainty than any of us could have ever imagined, changed the world. He did this by remembering a few basic principles:

First, he understood that our first job—our only job—is just to do the next right thing. People would oftentimes ask him, "How do you keep your perspective? How do you maintain hope?" His response was simply, "I keep myself in the way of grace. I remember the truth of the gospel, and then I just put one foot in front of the other." What do we do in days like this? Days of profound uncertainty? We do the next right thing. We can't fix everything. But what we can do is the next right thing. That's our first calling.

Second, Comenius understood that he was working for a day that he would not see. To be sure, he was also working for those that he lived with, in his own day. He was committed to them in covenant community. He sacrificed all he was and all he had for them. But he understood that in the end he really was working for another day. He was laying foundations for his grandchildren, his great-grandchildren, and their children after them by keeping his eyes fixed on the long-distance goal, as well as the immediate needs of those around him. He was thus, able to persevere.

Third, Comenius understood that, in order to do persevere like that, he would have to undertake work with enduring excellence. Comenius wrote classics—classics that are still read 300 years later, shaping an educational philosophy that is now being digitally broadcast around the world. It was Comenius who imagined what it is that we're doing right now in classical Christian schools. It was Comenius who

understood that beauty, goodness, and truth needed to be grounded on the foundations of a comprehensive biblical worldview. It was Comenius who understood the importance of working for real reformation, starting with the little ones, starting with the discipleship of our children, starting with covenantal succession.

Fourth, Comenius understood that in order to now portray the gospel before the world it is vital that he live every moment in the joy of hope. People were constantly amazed by the joy that Comenius manifested, at every turn. He had suffered so much and yet he was filled with an overwhelming sense of certainty that God's purposes were perfect—and that He gives joy.

These are the principles enabled him to accomplish more than anyone would have ever imagined when he was first sent into exile with a bedraggled group of refugees. It really is astonishing, isn't it? The modern missions movement was really launched by Moravian refugees (disciples of Comenius) who found that shelter on the estate of Count Zinzendorf? It was those refugees who brought the gospel to Whitfield and Wesley. They were the ones who inspired Thomas Chalmers to lay the groundwork for the foreign missions movement from Scotland that eventually transformed the world. These are the fruits of Comenius' legacy across the ages.

T.S. Eliot in his wonderful choruses from The Rock said,

In the vacant places
We will build with new bricks . . .
Where the bricks are fallen
We will build with new stone
Where the beams are rotten,
We will build with new timbers
Where the word is unspoken,
We will build with new speech
There is work together,
A Church for all
And a job for each
Every man to his work.

Those of us who have tasted the beauty, goodness, and truth of the gospel and seen it made manifest in classrooms with little ones and the moments of our teenagers as they begin to grasp the riches of this world-changing vision, we are the ones who, in moments like this, must seize the opportunity. When the foundations are shaken, when the foundations are undermined, that is when we have our greatest opportunity. That is when leadership and character emerge.

We were made for this moment. We were called to this moment.

Remember how rough the recession of 2008 was? Remember the good old days back before COVID-19 and the death of George Floyd? That was just a little while ago! The opportunities that are now before us may be the greatest in our lifetime. And so, my prayer is that in your school, in your community, in your land, God would raise up a host of new Jan Amos Comeniuses. I pray that you would understand that your first job, your only job, is to do the next right thing. I pray that you would realize that it is important for you to work just as diligently for the day that you will not see as for the day that is just before you—and that you will work with enduring excellence.

It's striking to me that Augustine finished the *City of God* when the Vandals were at the gates of Hippo! It's striking to me that Gerhard Groote planted his Brethren of Common Life schools when the Hundred Years War was raging, when the Bubonic Plague was sending wave after wave of hysteria across Europe, when the Babylonian Captivity of the Church and the Hanseatic League had given the people of Europe no sense of hope that the future could possibly bode well for them.

These are the moments when real reformation can take hold. I believe this is the great day of beginnings to live every moment in the joy of hope.

God bless you.