

Essential Church History

6

The New Dawn

Before we begin to look at how God began to restore his Church to its former glory, we need to take a look at how far the Church had indeed fallen.

Read Romans 3:23

In this verse, Paul defines sin as “fall[ing] short of the glory of God.” In fact, as we’ve seen in previous lessons, the Greek word Paul uses for sin is *hamartia*, which means “to miss the mark”¹ of God’s standard of righteousness. With the high standard of God’s glory in mind, let’s review the darkness just before the dawn.

The Demise of the Holy Roman Empire

As we saw in the last lesson, the crowning of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, AD 800, had immense significance. On that day, the Holy Roman Empire was born. Alongside a universal empire now existed a universal church. Earle Cairns describes its import:

“The human dream of unity of men seemed again to be realized, for Charlemagne had the largest territory under his control that any man held since the fall of the [Roman] empire. The universal spiritual empire of the papacy over men’s souls now had its counterpart in the revived Roman Empire that Charlemagne had over the bodies of men. The kingdom of God was thought to have two arms: the spiritual, presided over by the pope, was to have responsibility for men’s souls; the temporal was to have responsibility for the physical well-being of man. The pope and the emperor were to give each other mutual support.”²

The Incredible Spread of the Gospel

The Living Church

The Seeds of Decline

Leaven, Leaders and the Word

The Dark Ages

▶ The New Dawn ◀

Truth on the March

Waves of Awakenings

To the Ends of the Earth

The Church of the 21st Century

This imperial structure, however brilliant it may have been, did not survive long. Charlemagne's death signalled its demise. Because of the incapacity and debauchery of his descendants, the splendid Frankish empire eventually broke up, and Catholic Europe descended into a fragmented feudalism.

The Rise of Feudalism

Feudalism is a political system based on the possession of land. During the medieval period, power was exercised locally rather than from a centralized state. The need for law and order was met by the local lord, who governed the immediate area where he owned the land.

Bruce Shelley describes how the system worked:

“Central to feudalism was the personal bond between lord and vassal. In the ceremony known as the act of *homage*, the vassal knelt before his lord, and promised to be his ‘man.’ In the oath of fealty that followed, the vassal swore on the Bible, or some other sacred object, that he would remain true to his lord. Next, in the ritual of *investiture*, a lance, a glove, or even a bit of straw was handed the vassal to signify his jurisdiction (not ownership) over the fief.* The feudal contract thus entered into by lord and vassal was considered sacred and binding upon both parties. Breaking this tie of mutual obligations was considered a felony, because it was the fundamental bond of early medieval society. The lord for his part was obliged to give his vassal protection and justice. The vassal’s primary duty was military service. He was expected to devote forty days’ service each year to the lord without pay.”³

The Church was central to medieval life, so it too was part of the feudal system and could not escape its obligations. The new invasions of Vikings from the north and Magyars from Asia were very unsettling to European life, and forced a close bond between the Church and the only power able to offer protection: the feudal lords. So bishops and abbots were forced to become vassals. They, too, received fiefs but this means they were also obligated to give the usual feudal services. This created a conflict of loyalties for the bishops – a conflict between loyalty to the feudal lords and loyalty to the pope whom they saw as God’s appointed shepherd of the Church. Bruce Shelley continues:

“In the tenth and early eleventh centuries the pope was in no position to challenge anyone. The office fell into decay after becoming a prize sought by local Roman nobles...During the eleventh century the controversy between church and state centered on the problem of lay investiture. Theoretically, on assuming office a bishop or abbot was subject to two investitures: his spiritual authority was bestowed by a church official and his feudal or civil authority by the king or a noble. In actual fact, however, feudal lords and kings came to control both the appointment and the installation of churchmen.”⁴

* A “fief” was a plot of land granted by a feudal lord to his vassal in return for service and allegiance.

Darkest Before the Dawn

The well known saying, “It’s darkest before dawn,” certainly pictures the buildup to the Reformation. It was because the spiritual condition of the Church had become so dark that reformers began to cry out for change. An important fact to help understand what brought about a rise in the power of the Roman Church during the middle ages is the amazing story of the forged Decretals and the Donation of Constantine.

The Forged Decretals

Official church pronouncements such as judicial decisions, edicts and papal decrees were known as “decretals.” In about AD 850, a collection of fabricated decretals was put into circulation. Included in the collection were letters, laws and decisions of various bishops of Rome, supposedly going back to the first century. The aim of releasing these decretals was to support the papal claims for dominance in both Church and State. It was largely upon this false foundation the mighty power of the mid-medieval Roman Church was to be built.

The Donation of Constantine

This was another forged document. It alleged that Constantine, when baptized by Pope Sylvester in AD 324, presented him with the Lateran Palace, all the insignia of the Western Empire, with the whole of Italy, and other provinces of the Roman Empire. That this is blatantly untrue is obvious to any historian, for it was not Sylvester who had baptized Constantine, but Eusebius of Nicomedia, and he had not been baptized in AD 324, but thirteen years later, in AD 337. There was, however, a specific aim for the forgery. It was another attempt to rewrite history, claiming that the authority of the pope’s temporal power, in fact granted by Pepin and Charlemagne in AD 800, had been bequeathed almost five hundred years earlier.

Renwick and Harman comment:

“Neither Constantine nor any of his successors ever dreamt of giving away to the Bishop of Rome their temporal power in the West. It is not necessary to believe that any pope actually took part in the production of these forgeries; but they acted upon them, perhaps innocently, in later generations, and without question this strengthened their claims to almost limitless authority.”⁵

The Papacy at its Height of Power

The Papacy reached its zenith of power between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, delineated by the reigns of Gregory VII (1023-1085) and Boniface VIII (1295-1303). Earl Cairns summarizes this period:

“The papacy exercised great temporal power between 1054 and 1305. [Gregory VII] was able to humble the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; Innocent III was powerful enough to force rulers of rising nation-states to do his will; and the papacy inspired the early Crusades. The rise of universities and Scholasticism strengthened the intellectual foundations of papal power. Mo-

nastic reform added to papal power by giving the pope many zealous monks, who were his obedient servants. It is doubtful whether the papacy has ever exercised such absolute power over all phases of life as it did in medieval Europe during this era.”⁶

Gregory VII

Gregory VII (known as “Hildebrand” before becoming pope in 1073) brought about a revolution in the position of the Church. He claimed unprecedented power for the papacy. Renwick and Harman describe his claims:

“He held that, as vicar of Christ and representative of Peter, he could give or take away ‘empires, kingdoms, duchies, marquisates, and the possessions of all men.’ Everyone on earth, from the emperor down to the humblest peasant, must acknowledge him.”⁷

His vision was for a Christian commonwealth under full papal control. He did not concede equality between the Church and the State. Instead he insisted that spiritual power was supreme over the temporal. His campaign was on four fronts:

- **He attacked the marriage of priests** – He insisted on total celibacy for the priesthood.
- **He attacked simony*** – The offices of the priesthood were frequently being sold to the highest bidder by unscrupulous princes and lords.
- **He attacked secular control of the church affairs** – Gregory objected to all interference of the secular powers in church affairs. In his thinking, no ecclesiastic taking up office needed the sanction of the civil ruler.[†]
- **He attacked lay investiture** – This was Gregory’s greatest fight, virtually declaring war on Europe’s rulers. In some countries, large portions of Church property had to be invested, like other lands, under the control of feudal lords. By seeking to dispense with feudal homage, vast territories throughout Europe would be transferred to papal control.

Gregory VII demonstrated his power in 1075 when he boldly summoned the emperor Henry IV to Rome as if he were a feudal vassal. He accused him of simony and lay investiture in the appointment of the archbishop of Milan. When Henry refused to come and tried to have Gregory deposed, the pope placed him under papal interdict. So great was the fear of this interdict, the emperor found himself abandoned by everyone. For fear of eternal torments, no one would have any dealings with him.

Within a year Henry went to make his peace with the pontiff. Dressed as a humble penitent, the emperor stood in the courtyard, barefoot in the snow. For three

* The term “simony” comes from Simon the magician, who tried to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit from the apostles (see [Acts 8:9-25](#)).

† The warfare over lay investiture continued until a compromise agreement was made in the Concordat of Worms between Emperor Henry V and Pope Calixtus II in 1122. You can read the original (translated) papal decree regarding State and Church authority, and the Holy Roman Emperor’s response, at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/worms1.html>.

days he begged for forgiveness. On the fourth day, the pontiff deigned to receive him “into the lap of the Holy Mother Church.” The triumph of the papacy seemed complete.

Although later Henry emerged triumphant and Gregory VII ended his life in exile, what Gregory had accomplished was cherished by the popes who came after him. It could never be forgotten that even the secular head of the Holy Roman Empire had come to bow at the feet of the pope.*

Pope Innocent III

The papacy reached its acknowledged height of power under Pope Innocent III who believed, as “the vicar of Christ,” that he had supreme authority on earth. This meant he could excommunicate, depose, or lay an interdict on kings and princes because they derived their authority from him. As successor of Peter, God had given to him not only the task of ruling the church but of “ruling the whole world.” With all the prestige and power of the papacy in his hand and with this view of his authority, it is not surprising that Innocent had the rulers of England and France in his control and was able to defeat the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

As a result of the humiliation of Henry IV at Canossa and of Barbarossa at Venice, the people came to regard the pope as all-powerful. They now believed that every ruler was under the pope’s authority. Innocent III’s success was dramatic. His political power extended over almost all Christian lands.

The Crusades (1095-1291)

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were the time of the Crusades. Earle Cairns gives an overview of the spirit of this period:

“Christianity in western Europe was marked by bursts of crusading and reforming zeal during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Expeditions of Christian knights fought for religious ends instead of private gain or political ends. Between 632 and 750 Muslims had aggressively threatened the West, but between 1095 and 1291 crusades against Muslims in Europe and Asia, and heretics in Europe, were carried on, for the most part under the aegis of the Roman church.”⁸

Before the notorious expeditions to the Holy Land, other crusades had been carried on for some time against the Moors in Spain and the Muslims in Sicily. The aim of the crusades to Palestine, however, was the recapture of Palestine from the Muslim Seljuk Turks. The Turks had conquered Jerusalem and threatened Constantinople. In 1095, Pope Urban II appealed for Western Christians to aid Eastern Christians in their fight against the Turks, and the response was enthusiastic. The First Crusade, with 600,000 men, set out in 1096 via Constantinople.

* A similar incident was to be repeated a century later, when the emperor Frederick Barbarossa “spread his cloak upon the pavement, knelt before Pope Alexander and kissed his feet. Then he behaved like a menial, holding the pope’s stirrup and leading his horse by the bridle along the street. It was an even greater triumph for Pope Alexander than was Canossa for Hildebrand a century earlier.”⁹

Tens of thousands died in the cold highlands of Asia Minor on the way. Finally reaching the Holy Land, the crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099. They established four crusader states, including the “Latin Kingdom” of Jerusalem.

John Clare writes of the Crusades:

“The Crusades joined together two themes which were developing strongly in eleventh-century Europe; the holy war, or military expedition blessed by the church, and the pilgrimage to a holy place. The journey of a Christian army to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims fulfilled both of these. There is little doubt that the crusaders were largely driven by religious motives...The Crusades may be seen as part of the expansion of Christian Europe after centuries of being on the defensive against Islam and paganism. Crusading enthusiasm remained strong in Europe until at least 1250.”¹⁰

In 1187, the crusaders were soundly defeated by Saladin at Hattin. After almost a century of Christian rule, Jerusalem was captured and the crusaders’ lands were overrun. Though part of the lost territory was recovered by Christian crusaders during the Third Crusade, led by King Richard the Lionheart of England and the rulers of Germany and France, crusader victories were restricted to a coastal strip. Since Jerusalem was never retaken, the seaport of Acre was established as the crusader capital. After 1250, the crusader states were gradually worn down by the Mameluke Sultans of Egypt, and Christian rule in Syria ended when Muslim forces captured Acre in 1291.

Scholasticism (1050-1350)

The eleventh to fourteenth centuries were marked by more than just crusader ideals. The re-emergence of classical Greek philosophy gave rise to a whole new movement that was to shape Europe, and the world, for centuries to come – scholasticism.

The term “scholastic” was originally applied to the teachers in Charlemagne’s court and later to the medieval scholars who used philosophy in the study of religion. In western Europe, at the height of the Middle Ages, the Church controlled the education system. All the great thinkers were monks and clergy. They based their thinking on the classical philosophy of ancient Greece, as well as the Bible and the teaching of the early Christian writers. The aim of the scholastics or “schoolmen” was to put this great body of knowledge into a logical system.

Earle Cairns describes Scholasticism :

“Scholastics were not so much seeking truth as they were trying rationally to organize a body of accepted truth so that truth, whether it came by faith from revelation or by reason from philosophy, might be a harmonious whole. The medieval mind sought intellectual as well as political and ecclesiastical unity... For the Scholastics the data or content of their study was fixed, authoritative, and absolute. The content of their study was the Bible, the canons and creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the writings of the fathers of the church. The

question that they wished to settle involved whether or not the faith was reasonable...”¹¹

The medieval Scholastics based their study on the authority of both the Church and Greek philosophy, seeking to create a logical system which combined faith and reason.

In the early thirteenth century, a new scholarly development began to emerge out of Scholasticism – the university. All over Europe, universities sprang up as centers for teaching and research, basing their curriculum largely upon Scholastic studies. By the turn of the fifteenth century, there were over seventy universities in Europe. A revival of learning had begun and the gloom of the Dark Ages was slowly being dispelled.

The Mystics

At the same time as the scholastic element developed in medieval theology so did the mystical element. Mysticism was a reaction to the liturgical formalism of medieval catholicism. Mystics sought direct contact between the human spirit and God, rather than indirect contact through rites and ceremonies. As *The History of Christianity* records:

“The last two medieval centuries were noted for mysticism. This was perhaps the most personal form of expressed relationship between an individual and God to be found in medieval Christianity.”¹²

As opposed to Scholastics, the mystics sought personal communion with God “through inward devotions and spiritual aspirations, by abstraction rather than by logical analysis, by adoration rather than by argument, with the heart rather than with the head, through the spiritual feelings rather than through intellectual prowess, through the immediate contact of the soul with God rather than through rites and ceremonies.”¹³

The mystic was interested more in experience than in definitions. They were equally opposed to rationalism and to ritual formalism. This mystical undercurrent was to feed the growing desire for reformation within medieval catholicism. Even while it sought out mystical experiences that were sometimes outside the parameters of the Gospel, still there is the echo of Augustine’s heartcry:

“Thou hast made us for thyself and the heart is restless till it rests in Thee.”

As Earle Cairns points out:

“The recurrence of mysticism in eras when the church lapses into formalism testifies to the desire of the human heart to have direct contact with God in the act of worship instead of passively participating in the coldly formal acts of worship performed by the clergyman...Scholasticism contributed to the rise of mysticism because it emphasized reason at the expense of man’s emotional nature. Mysticism was a reaction against this rationalistic tendency...The movement was also one of protest and reaction against the troubled times and a corrupt church.”¹⁴

The Papacy in Decline (1303-1439)

After its peak in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, papal power steadily began to decline from the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303)

The papacy's power did not begin to decline until the days of Boniface VIII (1294-1303), and it was the very arrogance of his claims that brought him down. He insisted that all rulers were subject to him. "We declare, state, define and pronounce" he wrote in his bull *Unam Sanctam*, "that for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pope is altogether necessary for salvation."¹⁵

The claims of the papacy could go no further than this and it provoked violent reactions from many of the rulers. The attitude of European nations towards the papacy began to change, and Philip the Fair of France and Edward I of England waged wars against Boniface. He was finally arrested and treated so roughly that within a month he was dead. A nationalist spirit was rising within Europe and this was proving more difficult for a pope to control than a single emperor. As Europe began to emerge from the Dark Ages of a Church barely founded on the Gospel, a new era of challenge to the papal claims had begun, revealing the first hints of the Reformation that would soon sweep across the continent.

The Avignon Popes (1309-1377)

This period of time has been described by some Roman Catholic writers as "the Babylonian Captivity" of the Roman Church. Because Clement V had secured his election as pope through a corrupt deal with Philip of France, and because the people of Italy were so indignant about it, the pope moved his residence from Italy to Avignon in 1309. This proved to be the next step in the weakening of the papacy. For nearly seventy years, the popes resided outside Italy and under the French monarchy. In their absence, the political and religious climate in Rome was volatile. But then, after much effort had been expended to convince the papal court to return to Rome, Pope Gregory XI finally returned from the long exile in 1377.

The Great Schism (1378-1417)

Upon the death of Gregory XI, an Italian, Urban VI, was elected as pope, spurring what later became known as "The Great Schism." For in opposition to the Italian electee, the French cardinals elected a fellow Frenchman, Clement VII, who then returned to Avignon. Europe was divided in its support of the rival contenders. Some supported the pope at Rome, some the pope at Avignon. For nearly forty years, two popes claimed to be the true occupant of Peter's chair. For the Catholic world that believed their salvation depended on acknowledging the successor of Peter, this situation was most distressing.

The need to support two papal courts through papal taxation proved a great burden to the people of Europe. "The now-powerful rulers of national states and the strong middle class that supported them resented the drain of wealth from the national treasury to the papal treasury."¹⁶

Failure of the clergy

The Roman Church also sank to a new low in the eyes of the people during this time because of the decline in clerical morals, caused by the demand for celibacy. Many priests had illicit love affairs with women in their congregations. Some took concubines and had children born to these unions. Others were living luxuriously. The acts of councils from this era are full of complaints of clerical immorality and drunkenness. On top of all this, in many cases the cleric had divided interest because of his dual allegiance to the pope and the feudal lord. A priest's secular responsibilities often received more attention than his responsibilities to the people of the church.

Corruption of the Papacy

Alexander VI, whose pontificate coincides with the closing years of the fifteen century and the opening of the sixteen, has the dubious distinction of being the most corrupt of the popes. He knew no restraint and there were no bounds to his immorality and corruption. The state of affairs became so serious that, under Alexander, the French again entered actively into the affairs of Italy, even to seizing Rome.

The History of the Christian Church describes the extent of moral corruption within the Church at that time:

“The records of the Middle Ages are full of the evidences that indiscriminate license of the worst kind prevailed throughout every rank of [Church] hierarchy.”¹⁷

The Dawn Begins to Break

Beneath the veneer of unity that was the keynote of medieval society were the rumblings of dissent. These rumblings would explode at the time of the Reformation, but even before then, reforming movements were rising within the fabric of medieval religion. Many reacted against the corruption they saw in the papal hierarchy and in its secular activities. As Earle Cairns says:

“The return to the Scriptures did not begin with such leaders of the Reformation as Luther and Calvin. There were earlier attempts to halt the decline in papal prestige and power by reforms of various kinds. From 1305 to 1517, protest and attempted reform challenged the authority of the Roman church. The corrupt, extravagant papacy that resided in France instead of in Rome and the schism that resulted from the attempts to get the pope to return to Rome provided the impetus that led mystics, reformers (such as Wycliffe, Hus, and Savonarola), the reform councils of the fourteenth century, and the biblical humanists to seek ways to bring about a revival within the Roman Catholic church.”¹⁸

One group of reformers – the Paulicians – go back as far as the middle of the seventh century. They appeared in the region of the Euphrates and later spread to Armenia, Asia Minor, and Thrace. Then, in the tenth century, the Bogmils

(meaning “Friends of God”) appeared in Bulgaria and Bosnia. The Cathari (“The Pure”) came later still. They were ascetic-minded and had a marked reverence for the Scriptures. They spread westward from the Balkans. The Beghards flourished in the Netherlands and along the Rhine from the end of the twelfth century. The Albigenses multiplied in southern France, and the Waldenses in northern Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Renwick and Harman describe these multiple reforming movements:

“In all these sects, and in others besides, we find a strong testimony being borne against the errors prevailing in the Catholic Church. They attracted a numerous following of passionately earnest men. Their doctrines were not identical, and, in some cases at least, heresy existed among them...But whatever else these numerous sects stood for, they represented a common trend to organize life and worship independently of the Roman Catholic clergy, and on the basis of the Bible in the vernacular.”¹⁹

The common aim of all these groups was moral and religious reformation, and beneath the discontent could be found the spiritual hunger of the people. Nor was the Bible a forgotten book. Popular preachers quoted from it and relied on its authority. The Waldensian movement, for example, made an attempt to publish the Scriptures in the common language. There was a growing hunger for the Gospel, which was not being met by the Church. There was a cry from the people to get beyond the clergy and the rituals to Christ himself.

The people, who had observed first hand the abuses of the clergy, heard the best men of the times complaining and this must have increased the restlessness that was rising. Bernard rebuked the clergy for their pride, lust and ambition. Grosseteste called them devils and antichrists. Although these men were not meaning to condemn the office of the priest itself, the people made no distinction between the office and the man who abused it.

The seeds of the coming Reformation had begun to take root in the soil of Europe. As the *History of the Christian Church* observes:

“Of an independent ecclesiastical movement [these reformers] had no thought. But they cried out for clerical reform, and the people, after long waiting, seeing no signs of a reform, found hope of relief only in separatistic societies and groups of believers.”²⁰

Individuals Call for Reform

Individuals within the Church began to call for reform. Renwick and Harman write of two of them:

“One of the most remarkable was Marsilius of Padua (1270-1342), a physician by profession. In his *Defensor Pacis*, written in Paris in 1324, he maintained that the supreme standard is the Bible. The supreme authority is a General Council made up of representative clergy and laymen. The clergy are equal, he declares, and such offices as those of popes and bishops are of human origin.”²¹

Similar views were also expressed by William of Occam (1280-1347), a renowned philosopher at the University of Paris, and a leading Franciscan. Men like these represented the strong individualism that was rising and the determination to resist accepting blindly all that came from the high echelons of the papal court. Most of the arguments of these men against the papacy were later taken up by the Reformers.

John Wycliffe (1320-1384)

The Englishman John Wycliffe is considered by many to be the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” and was highly regarded by many of the later leaders of the Reformation. Both a scholar at Oxford and a priest of the Roman Church, John Wycliffe voiced all of the key elements of the call for Reformation. He declared:

“...the only head of the Church is Christ. The pope, unless he be one of the predestinate who rule in the spirit of the gospel, is the vicar of Antichrist. The power-grasping hierarchy, and the monk and friars, who claim special religious sanctity are without Scriptural warrant.”²²

Wycliffe repudiated the doctrine of Transubstantiation as “contrary to both Scripture and reason. He denied the infallibility of the Roman Church in matters of faith, rejected auricular confession, and criticized belief in Purgatory, pilgrimages, worship of saints and veneration of relics, as being all unscriptural.”²³

At a time when priests seldom preached and there was no instruction for the people, Wycliffe organized bands of teachers, called “Poor Preachers,” to go throughout the land preaching the Word. One of the most important accomplishments by his followers was the translation they made of the Vulgate into English – the first Bible in the English vernacular. It had far-reaching effect, for the unencumbered truth of God’s Word could now be heard by people of all classes of society.

“In its most developed form, Wycliffefe’s philosophy represented a complete break with the Church. He believed in a direct relationship between humanity and God, without priestly mediation. By a close adherence to the Scriptures, Christians would, Wycliffefe believed, govern themselves without the aid of popes and prelates. Wycliffefe denounced as unscriptural many beliefs and practices of the established Church.”²⁴

The people’s reception of Wycliffe’s writings reveals how widespread the desire for the reform of the Church really was.

John Hus (1360-1415)

John Hus was born a poor peasant. By sheer ability, he became the rector of Prague University which at that time was, after Oxford and Paris, the most important university in Europe. Renwick and Harman write of John Hus:

“He had a genuine experience of conversion, and became a powerful preacher in the Bohemian language, proclaiming the gospel with fiery zeal and rebuking fearlessly the common vices. The clergy turned on him only when he at-

tacked their own covetousness, sloth and luxury. In those days there were close links between the universities of Oxford and Prague, and the teachings of Wycliffe made a deep impression on Hus and others in Bohemia. As he was a fervid patriot the Germans avenged themselves by charging him with heresy. His books were publicly burnt at Prague, and the archbishop tried to stop his preaching.”²⁵

Hus was eventually called to face the Council of Constance. Sigismund, the German king and emperor elect, promised him safe conduct, and so he went. He was thrown into prison, however, and the treatment he received was barbarous. The pope and the cardinals forced the emperor to cancel his order to release him. Hus suffered cruelly for seven months and faced a mockery of a trial. Shouts of ‘Recant, Recant!’ drowned out his defence. He declared that unless they could show it was contrary to God’s Word he would retract nothing. In 1415, he was burnt at the stake.

Savonarola (1452–1498)

In northern Italy, Savonarola took up the reformist call against the corruption in the Church. As the prior in a local Dominican convent, he was regularly invited to preach in the cathedral of Florence, attracting a positive response from the people. H F Vos writes:

“His studies in the Old Testament prophets and the book of Revelation helped to make him a powerful preacher against the evils and corruption of society, with a prophetic tinge to his utterances. He believed that God had given him the mission of calling people to repentance before the impending day of judgment. The populace was greatly moved – in fact struck with terror – by his utterances, especially after some of his predictions came true: the death of Pope Innocent VIII, the coming of a foreign power with a large army as a scourge of God (fulfilled by the invasion of Charles VIII of France in 1494), and the collapse of the Medici power in Florence. Savonarola preached against the worldliness of the clergy and the corruption of secular life and was especially opposed to the ruling class.”²⁶

In 1497, Savonarola was excommunicated by Pope Alexander. The next year, he was arrested, tried for heresy and sedition, and cruelly tortured. He was then hanged and his body burned.

Three Reforming Councils (1409-1449)

Between 1409 to 1449, three Reforming Councils were held, each of which were early echoes of the coming Reformation.

The Council of Pisa

The first General Council was called in an attempt to find a solution to the Great Schism. John Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, and Cardinal d’Ailly of the same University, claimed that a gathering such as theirs, which was representative of the whole body of the Church, had greater authority than the pope

and could therefore judge him, remove him and bring reform to the Church. This was clearly a brand new attitude to the papacy, indicative of the changing religious climate of Europe. Renwick and Harman describe the resolution of this council:

“Thus it was that the Council of Pisa (1409) desposed the two rival popes, Gregory XII and Benedict XIII, declaring them to be notorious schismatics, heretics, and perjurers, and elected Pope Alexander V. When, however, the Council proceeded to the work of reformation, they were thwarted by the new pope who wanted no curbing of his powers, and on the earliest opportunity he dissolved the gathering.”²⁷

The Council of Constance

A second General Council was convened at Constance between 1414 and 1418. This was the council that condemned John Hus to death, provoking the anger of the people and costing the Roman Church much support. This council, however, “also compelled Pope John XXIII to resign because of his ‘destestable and unseemly life and manners’, and appointed Cardinal Colonna to succeed him, who took the name Martin V. It also again deposed the rival popes, Gregory XII (who died during the Council) and Benedict XIII (who refused to acknowledge its sentence and maintained his claim to be the lawful pope until his death in 1424). Although the Council had little or no success in effecting any lasting reform it is important since it declared that its authority was derived ‘immediately from Christ’ and was effective over the pope as well as over other members of the Church.”²⁸

The Council of Basel

A third General Council met a decade later in 1431, convened both to suppress the reforming movement of Hus in Bohemia and to seek general reform within the Roman Church. “The pope tried to dissolve it but its members refused to obey his orders, again maintaining that a General Council was superior to the pope. With the passing of the years, however, it lost credit and was finally dissolved by the emperor Frederick III in 1449.”²⁹

Although all three General Councils failed to secure even a moderate reform, they had successfully raised awareness of the need for general reform in the Church.

“The disease was more deadly than they knew. Others after them were to tinker with the matter of reform, for everywhere its necessity was realized; but only a Martin Luther could bring it to pass, and that in the only way it could be done – by laying an axe to the roots of the whole papal system.”³⁰

The Inquisition (1231-1542)

In response to the steady growth of dissent within the Church, however, the papal court produced a machine of terror known as the Inquisition.

The Inquisition was an attempt to rid the Church of what it believed to be heresy and apostasy, which were seen as cancers to be excised. *The History of Christianity* describes how it worked:

“The Inquisition was a special court with a peculiar power to judge intentions as well as actions. It was made up of several officials who assisted inquisitors in various ways: delegates – examiners who handled preliminary investigations and formalities; the *socius* – a personal adviser and companion to the inquisitor; familiars – guards, prison visitors and secret agents; and notaries, who carefully collected evidence and filed it efficiently for present and future instances of suspected heresy. Usually a few dozen councillors were present, but since the inquisitor was not bound to follow their advice, their role was often merely formal. The bishop, too, would be represented, even though there was not always co-operation between bishops and inquisitors.”³¹

Sometimes the trials continued for years with the suspect languishing in prison during the whole time. Torture would be used to elicit an admission of guilt, and to secure repentance. A much more terrible fate, however, awaited the ‘unreconciled’ heretic – death at the stake. In all such cases, the secular authorities carried out the sentence, since the Church itself could not shed blood.

The Renaissance

During the fifteenth century, a movement called the Renaissance began to flower, marking the official end of the medieval period. The word Renaissance means “a rebirth” – a revival of Latin and Greek literature, which brought with it a change in the climate of European education and art. Renwick and Harman comment on what emerged from this artistic and scholarly movement:

“When in 1453, Constantinople fell to the Turks, many great scholars fled to the West, bringing not only knowledge, but treasures of Greek literature which had been carefully preserved throughout the years. Several of the popes were most enthusiastic supporters of the New Learning and the Arts, not realizing that the new spirit of independent enquiry would deal a deadly blow to the authoritarian system which the papacy represented.”³²

It was a time of intellectual awakening, of geographical discovery, and a spirit of enterprise and adventure was abroad. Because of the newly invented printing press, knowledge was spreading as never before. The shackles of the hierarchy that had been imposed for centuries were breaking, and men’s minds were being opened to horizons never previously conceived. Dry Scholasticism was being replaced by genuine science with its exciting discoveries. The world was entering a new era, and the secular Renaissance was preparing the way for the spiritual Reformation.

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- ¹ *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, 266, *hamartia*.
- ² Earle E Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p.187.
- ³ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.178.
- ⁴ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), pp.179-180.
- ⁵ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.85.
- ⁶ Earle E Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p.209.
- ⁷ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.89.
- ⁸ Earle E Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp.219-222.
- ⁹ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp.91-92.
- ¹⁰ John Clare, quoted in *The History of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.278.
- ¹¹ Earle E Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).
- ¹³ *The History of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.348.
- ¹³ *History of the Christian Church*, extracted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- ¹⁴ Earle E Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp.248-250.
- ¹⁵ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.94.
- ¹⁷ *History of the Christian Church*, extracted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- ¹⁸ Earle E Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p.245.
- ¹⁹ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.97.
- ²⁰ *History of the Christian Church*, extracted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- ²¹ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp.98-99.
- ²² John Wyclif, quoted by A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.99.
- ²³ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.99.
- ²⁴ Microsoft Encarta, "John Wycliffe," <http://encarta.msn.com/index/conciseindex/03/0034A000.htm?z=1&pg=2&br=1>
- ²⁵ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.100.
- ²⁶ H F Vos, *Who's Who in Church History*, extracted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- ²⁷ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.102.
- ²⁸ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp.102-103.
- ²⁹ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.103.
- ³⁰ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.103.
- ³¹ *The History of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.321.
- ³² A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.104.

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