

Church History, Lesson 7: The Medieval Church, Part 3: The Age of the Decline and Reform (1294 - 1517)

19. Political

- a. Christendom, the harmony of the Holy Roman Empire and the Church, which began nearly a thousand years prior with Constantine, came under attack. People began to think in terms of “state” separate from “church.” In other words, people were beginning to distinguish between “secular” and “religious” authority, and the rights to each authoritative domain.
- b. The separation of church and state gave rise to “nation-states” (not just “city-states”) in which kings would protect the people in exchange for money that would run state affairs.
- c. Thus, with the separation of powers and the rise of nation-states, papal power began to decline from its height during the prior two centuries.

20. Ecclesiastical

- a. Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy (1305 – 1377)
 - i. Overview:
 - 1. The Babylonian Captivity of the papacy refers to the seventy-two-year period, named after the Jewish exile in Babylon, where the pope resided in a small town called Avignon (modern southeast France) rather than Rome.
 - 2. Seven consecutive popes reside in Avignon, and they are all French.
 - 3. The move to Avignon was not only a geographical change. It stood for a major change to both the political and religious landscape, since Rome was the place of apostolic succession, and since Rome was the symbolic “seat” of the Holy Roman Empire.
 - ii. Historical development:
 - 1. A power play broke out between Boniface VIII and Philip the Fair of France that involved taxation of the clergy. Philip wanted to

tax the clergy to finance a war with England. Boniface rejected the idea.

2. Boniface eventually issued a papal bull, *Unam Sanctum* (“One Holy Church”) that asserted:

The true faith compels us to believe that there is one holy, universal, apostolic church. . . . Outside of her, there is no salvation. . . . Both swords—the spiritual and the temporal—are in the church’s power.³⁶

3. Philip responded with disagreement, and summoned the pope to a council.
4. Before Boniface could excommunicate Philip a mob captured and imprisoned Boniface.
5. Boniface was rescued by his allies but died one month later.
6. The College of Cardinals eventually elected a Frenchman, Clement V, in 1305. He never set foot in Rome, preferring to stay closer to home in Avignon where he could be at the king’s bidding.

iii. Results:

1. Papal taxation: the church received income in a number of ways³⁷
 - a. Income from the papal estates.
 - b. Tithes.
 - c. Annates: the payment of a priest’s first year salary to the pope.
 - d. Right of purveyance: payment of the pope’s traveling expenses while in a certain area.
 - e. Right of spoil: personal property of the upper clergy went to the pope upon death.
 - f. Peter’s pence: paid annually by laity in many lands.

³⁶ Boniface VIII, cited in: Jones, *Christian History Made Easy*, 92.

³⁷ Cairns, *Christianity Through The Centuries*, 241.

g. Income from vacant offices.

h. Numerous fees.

2. With the growing accumulation of papal wealth, the rise of “nationalism,” and the Babylonian Captivity, people did not like their money going to the papacy, especially when the papacy might help an enemy (e.g., the papacy helping the French, England’s enemy). Thus, people resented their wealth being drained by the papacy.

b. Papal Schism (“Western Schism”) (1378 – 1419)

- i. Overview: The Papal Schism refers to the period when there were 2 or 3 popes.

ii. Historical development:

1. In 1377 Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome, but died a year later.
2. The College of Cardinals, heavily weighted with French representatives, elected Pope Urban VI only to appease a Roman mob who wanted an Italian pope.
3. However, shortly into the papacy, the College of Cardinals had second thoughts about Urban’s election because of his poor character. They informed people that the papacy was invalid.
4. The Cardinals elected a new pope, Clement VII, and Clement moved the papacy back to Avignon.
5. Thus, Urban ruled from Rome and Clement ruled from Avignon, which forced the people of Europe to choose sides.
6. In 1409, the College of Cardinals met to resolve the issue (Council of Pisa). They elected a new pope, Alexander V. However, neither Urban nor Clement would acknowledge Alexander. Thus, three popes existed.
7. Finally, the Council of Constance (1414 – 1418) was convened that represented not only bishops but laity. Essentially, representatives from each “nation” (German, Italian, French,

English, and Spanish) casted a vote. They eventually elected Martin V, ending the Schism.

8. In 1460, Pope Pius II issued a papal bull condemning any future councils.
9. Historical note: this was not the first time the Church had two popes. It occurred earlier in the 11th century. The major and important difference here is that the Church (not the Church and State) elected the two popes.

iii. Results:

1. The Papal Schism brought serious question to authority in the Church. Who has more power, the Pope or the council that creates the pope?
2. Conciliarism sought to make the pope have only “executive power,” but the pope would be subject to the council.
3. Generally, the popes did not like conciliarism, because it gave them less power. And thus corruption plagued the papacy till the 16th century.
4. With the corruption of power, people began to think in terms of “national churches,” and churches governed by representative bodies. Thus, the Protestant Reformation became inevitable.

c. Forerunners of Protestantism

i. John Wycliffe (ca. 1329 – 1384) (Lollards)

1. Life
 - a. Professor at Oxford University.
 - b. Translated most of the Latin Vulgate into English.
 - c. Forced to retire because his views were condemned.
 - d. Started a group of lay preachers, known as the Lollards.
 - e. Body was exhumed (i.e., dug up) and burned in 1428.

- f. His influence and life spread over Europe even into the Anglican Reformation.

2. Beliefs

- a. Christ, not the pope, was head of the church.
- b. The Scriptures are the sole authority for the believer.
- c. Opposed the Church's accumulated of wealth/property and the sale of indulgences.
- d. Denied the doctrine of transubstantiation.

ii. John Huss (ca. 1373 – 1415) (Hussites)

1. Life

- a. Priest in Bohemia.
- b. Professor at University of Prague.
- c. Burned at the stake by order of the Council of Constance.
- d. Followers became known as Hussites and later became known as United Brethren, which exist today in the Moravian church.

2. Beliefs

- a. Defined church by Christ-like living rather than the sacraments.
- b. Opposed the sale of indulgences and the veneration of images.
- c. The Scriptures are the sole authority for the believer.

21. Intellectual /Theological/Philosophical: Mysticism

- a. Overview: a mystic seeks to have direct contact with God through extra-rational ways rather than through formal religious practices. This desire became strong in this period due to all the pomp and circumstance of the Church.

b. Causes of mysticism:³⁸

- i. Scholasticism contributed to the rise of mysticism because it emphasized the reason over the emotions.
- ii. The movement was a reaction and protest against the troubling times of the Church.

c. Prominent Mystics

i. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153)

1. Noted opponent of Peter Abelard. Whereas Peter Abelard would say “nothing is to be believed until it is understood,” Bernard would say, “God is known so far as he is loved.”
2. Encouraged the Second Crusade.
3. Influential hymn writer (“O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”).
4. “Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge. That is curiosity. Some seek knowledge to be known by others. That is vanity. Some seek knowledge to serve. That is love.”³⁹

ii. Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260 – 1327)

1. Sought union with God through a mystical experience.
2. Credited with the founding of German mysticism.
3. His views were condemned as pantheistic.

iii. Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380)

1. Dominican nun at age 18, and ministered to victims of Black Death (1346 – 1353).
2. Convinced Pope Gregory XI to end the Babylonian Captivity.

iv. Thomas À Kempis (ca. 1380 – 1471)

³⁸ Ibid., 242.

³⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, cited in: Jones, *Christian History Made Easy*, 84.

1. Member of Brethren of the Common Life.
 2. Famous for writing *The Imitation of Christ*.
- v. Joan of Arc (1412 – 1431)
1. At age 13 claims to hear voices that she believed came from God.
 2. Led French troops to victory at Orleans during the Hundred Years' War.
 3. Eventually condemned for witchcraft and burned at the stake.
- vi. For more mystics during the medieval period, see Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, chart 43.
- d. Evaluation of mysticism
- i. Positive: brought a needed correction to the rigid scholastic approach that divorced Christianity from the heart (“affections”).
 - ii. Negative:
 1. Inner feelings replaced external authority (i.e., Bible and/or Church).
 2. Minimized doctrine.

22. Cultural

- a. Renaissance (ca. 1350 – ca. 1650)
- i. Culturally, marks the transition from the medieval world to the modern world.
 - ii. One historian defines the Renaissance “as that era of cultural reorientation in which people substituted a modern secular and individualistic view of life for the medieval religious and corporate approach to life.”⁴⁰
 - iii. Emphasis was placed on the glory of man rather than the glory of God.

⁴⁰ Cairns, *Christianity Through The Centuries*, 253.

- iv. A divide between man's religious life and daily life emerged.
- v. An interest in the world, which prompted explorers to discover new lands, including the Western Hemisphere.

b. (Christian) Humanism

- i. Definition: This is not "secular humanism" in the sense of humanity being at the center of the universe, but a study of the humanities, what we call liberal arts today. The Christian version was a return to the Christian past sources (*ad fontes*). For example, people studied the Bible in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek).
- ii. Movable-type printing press invented in 1439 by Johan Gutenberg had a large impact on humanism, making literature more accessible.
- iii. Prominent advocates
 - 1. John Reuchlin (1455 – 1522): promoted the learning and study of Old Testament Hebrew.
 - 2. Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466 – 1536)
 - a. He attacked the abuses of the church using satire (e.g., *In Praise of Folly*).
 - b. He published a Greek version of the New Testament based on four manuscripts, later known as *Textus Receptus*. He didn't have the last few verses of Revelation, so he back translated from Latin into Greek. Luther would later use Erasmus' Greek text.