

Part 2: The Medieval Church (500-1500)

Week 6: Forerunners of the Reformation

Introduction

Q. Who were the major thinkers in the Medieval Church?

Q. When we speak of “forerunners” do we mean that the Reformation was inevitable?

From the standpoint of God’s eternal decrees – yes

From the standpoint of those who objected to the theology and piety of the church – yes

These usually got into trouble with the church’s authority

Waldensians

The Waldensians were the Puritans of the Medieval period who were named after their leader, Peter Waldo, who wanted to make a difference in the moral life of the church. In 1176 Waldo read a translation of the New Testament, gave his life to Christ, sold his property, and gave his possessions to the poor. Founded a group called the “Poor Men” who desired to be lay preachers. The Pope refused, but they preached anyway. In 1184 they were excommunicated. Believed every person should have the Bible in their own language and that it should be the final authority. They confessed the ecumenical creeds, celebrated the Lord’s Supper and baptism, and believed in lay ordination to preach. Waldo eventually died in 1218. The movement started in northern Italy and spread to France. Since they were persecuted they survived in the Swiss alpine valleys until the Reformation.

They still exist in northern Italy with 35,000 believers.¹

Brethren of the Common Life

Centered in the Netherlands and headed by Groote in the 14th century. Taught a simple, ethical piety patterned after the life of Christ. Opposed to formalism and ceremonialism. Did not critique Rome theologically but ethically. This movement was a witness among the laity that something was wrong in the church.

John Wycliffe (1324-1384)

England - Often called the “Morning Star of Reformation.” Anticipated the Reformation on many doctrines, except justification. Was very Christ-centered and followed Augustine on the doctrines of grace.

Born in Yorkshire (north England) and studied at Oxford - then taught there

1366 - Became chaplain to the King John and began to argue against papal supremacy over church affairs as King John had subjected England to the papacy.

1377 – Although Wycliffe enjoyed some support from John, Pope Gregory XI had Wycliffe placed under house arrest. In the meantime the University of Oxford concluded that he was orthodox.

¹ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 227.

1379 – After being freed from arrest he began to speak out even more on such issues as:

- * Christ is the only Head of the church and that the Pope had wrongly taken both church and secular power. Said the church became corrupt with greed of property and that the moral integrity of the church was undermined by church officers having secular authority (like today's Christian Coalition, etc. which has become too much like the world to speak against the world). Said the Pope was the antichrist and wasn't necessary to the church because it's not a divinely ordained institution.

- * The clergy didn't need to be celibate

- * Attacked perpetual monastic vows

- * Rejected transubstantiation saying Christ is not physically present on the altar but rather is spiritually and sacramentally present and that the sacrament has no benefit unless received with love in the soul

- * No need for oral confession of sins to priest in order to be forgiven

- * The Bible is the church's ultimate authority so if there is a disagreement between the Bible and the church's leadership we must follow the Bible

1382 – He translated the Bible into English. His views are declared in to be heretical; arrested and placed under house arrest. His views continued through the preaching of the Lollards.

1414 – Condemned at the Council of Constance, which had his bones dug up, burnt, and had his ashes scattered on unconsecrated ground.

John Hus (1369-1416)

Many Bohemian students in England had taken the views of Wycliffe back with them to eastern Europe. John Hus was influenced by these new ideas.

1398 – Became pastor of the Bethlehem Chapel and professor at the U. of Prague. His theological focus was on the Lord's Supper. He insisted that the laity should receive the cup as well as the bread.

1408 - Ordered to stop preaching and teaching and his writings were publicly burned.

1412 - Left Prague under the protection of the nobility.

1414 - Summoned to the Council of Constance for trial. Was given the promise of safe conduct to travel there and return home. His views were condemned as heretical and the Council ordered him executed after he would not recant.

1416 – Burned at the stake. Rome said that promises of safe conduct which are made to heretics are not valid.

The Renaissance Movement

Foundational to the Reformation. Not only revival of the visual arts but a broad cultural shift with roots in literature, the *studia humanitatis* (humanities). Renaissance said that this world is important as creation is good and man is made in the image of God. A renewed interest in the role and function of human beings in God's plan.

At the heart of the Renaissance is a change of curriculum. Change from dialectical (logical) culture to rhetorical culture. Renaissance argues that effective communication is to the whole person, not just the mind. Same conviction in the ancient world. Great Renaissance ideal is that of eloquence in communication. Blending of wisdom with beauty. Reasoned appeal with appropriate pathos. Not just mind to mind, but person to person. New appreciation of value of

ancient world, particularly words. New careful searching for things ancient. Sought recovery of ancient works, lost texts, library catalogues (by first words). Many works were recovered, edited, and commentaries written about them. About this time, printing was invented, so there was much more widespread availability of all this recovered knowledge. Bibles could also be disseminated, along with the work of the reformers. Renaissance gave a quality of communication skill that was essential to preaching which was an important foundation to the Reformation (Luther was educated as a Renaissance humanist and so was Calvin).

With the fall of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 the Byzantine Empire ended. When it did, many Greek scholars fled to the West and took many Greek texts with them. Accelerated accessibility of Greek texts and teachers; during most of Middle Ages there was no knowledge of Greek in the West. In God's providence, the Greek language is revived just prior to the Reformation. Opportunity to take a fresh look at the Scriptures!

Renaissance learning had revolutionary consequences by disturbing to the status quo, attacking papal power, superiority of asceticism.

Petrarch

Italian poet seen as the "father of the Renaissance" whose interest in classical antiquity elicited the phrase *ad fontes*, "to the [literary] sources" of Western civilization.

Boccaccio

Younger contemporary of Petrarch who wanted to recover Latin antiquity.

Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457)

He wrote about a number of diverse issues. Defends Augustinian view about the lack of free will. Wrote about the monastic life not being the highest form of Christian living. Also wrote *The True Good*, where he argued that true Christianity is better understood through Epicureans rather than Stoics. He says that the "highest good" is also the highest pleasure, and that is God.

Erasmus

Important humanist and Renaissance figure in 15th century. Educated among Brethren of Common Life. Known as the "prince of humanists." Broad learning, great scholar. Very concerned to see moral renewal in the church as the result of Renaissance learning. Devout and pious man. In 1501, he wrote a pointed, brief summary of Christianity. Basic point is to study Scripture, minimize outward ceremonies, cultivate a simple piety and Christ-likeness. Moralistic overcast, but refreshing in light of the church at that time. Calls on all Christians to know Scriptures. Sometimes his writing was sarcastic. In 1509, he wrote *The Praise of Folly*. Folly is represented as the great queen which most of the world serves, being as foolish as possible. A series of people (priests, lawyers included) parade through the court of Folly. Wrote anonymous satire about Pope Julius, *Julius Excluded*; shows why Julius won't be admitted to heaven. Erasmus not a very brave person. In 1519, he published colloquies, satire on a range of things, particularly things related to popular piety of church - veneration of relics, pilgrimages, repetitious prayers, monks and their pride in ignorance. Pointed out the corruption and silliness of the church, using humor to do so. He also did much editorial work, publishing works of notable ancients; critical editions of Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome (his favorite). Most valuable scholarly achievement was critical edition of Greek NT in 1516 - *Textus Receptus*. Most scholastics and monks could not read the Greek but they could read the Latin. They were incensed that Erasmus would dare to tamper with Jerome's *Vulgate*, which had a great hold; considered an inspired text.

Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522)

Not only Greek...Hebrew also important to the Reformation. Most important humanist to work in Hebrew. Uncle of Philip Melanchton. First Christian scholar since ancient times with a good functional knowledge of Hebrew language. Wrote first reliable Hebrew grammar to be done by a Christian. Intrigued by Jewish mysticism as summarized in the Kabbala, claiming to be oral tradition from Moses but really medieval elaboration. In 1506, Jew named Pfefferkorn was converted to Christianity; as a sign of his zeal, he argued that all Hebrew books should be confiscated as blasphemous attacks on Jesus. Reuchlin opposed this, harmful to scholarship. Issue submitted to theological faculty at Cologne, dominated by Dominicans who couldn't read Hebrew and backed Pfefferkorn. Debate raged; Cologne made decision in 1512. In 1514, Reuchlin was charged with heresy; condemned ultimately by Rome and forced to recant. Renaissance scholars soon concluded that this was a test case of the new learning against the old learning, "political correctness." Reuchlin had defied the theological conventions, unwilling to submit to ignorant faculty who didn't even know Hebrew literature. Renaissance humanists rallied to the defense of Reuchlin, publishing book in 1513, *The Letters of Famous Men*, all defending and praising Reuchlin. A couple of irreverent younger scholars published a work in 1516, *The Letters of Obscure Men*, vicious satire. Claimed to defend the old learning but actually a satire holding them up to ridicule in all of their ignorance. Goes on to show the vanity, arrogance, ignorance, greed of these scholastic so-called learned men. Remarkably effective among educated circles of society, set them laughing! This was on the eve of the Reformation. Humanists rallied to the cause of Luther, thinking he was just being attacked like Reuchlin; seemed another stage in confrontation between old learning and new learning. They eventually discovered it was something else!