

CHURCH HISTORY

The Reform Before the Reformation

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Medieval Church History, part 4

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Reformation which began in 1517 did not start like a “bolt out of the blue.” There were many religious, economic and political factors that had been brewing for centuries during the medieval period that set the stage for the Reformation.
- B. The Roman Catholic Church was a corrupt, sterile and wicked organization as a whole. Genuine believers were crying for reform within the Roman Church. Most of these who were unhappy with the condition of the Roman Church never thought of starting a new church, but rather wanted reform of the old so that Christ could be glorified.
- C. To challenge the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval period was a serious thing, almost always ending in death to the opposer. How much we owe to those Christian martyrs of the Middle Ages who dared to stand up and be counted for their faith in Christ! The reform before the Reformation never really accomplished much for it was almost always squelched, but it set forth an attitude and a spirit that was to come to fruition under Martin Luther.

II. REFORMING GROUPS WHO BROKE WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

- A. *Albigenses*: This group had its beginnings in Bulgaria and was sometimes called “Cathari.” The Albigenses opposed the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, but they certainly were not orthodox in their doctrine. They held to Manichean doctrine, accepting a good god and an evil god; they were also dualists. However, it should be said in defense of these apparently heretical groups that much historical research is still called for in order to bring out the true story and theological positions of these numerous bodies. Most of the things we know about these groups come from their enemies in the

Roman Catholic Church. The Dominican Order applied the Inquisition against this group, and after 20 years they were almost exterminated. By the middle of the fourteenth century there were probably few Albigenses left.

- B. *Waldenses*: This group followed Peter Waldo, who believed that the Bible was to be the ultimate authority for the Christian. The Waldenses were very orthodox in doctrine and committed much of the New Testament to memory. They believed in lay preachers, and would not take an oath or shed human blood. They opposed the concepts of purgatory and prayer for the dead. The Waldenses grew greatly in number in Northern Italy and Southern France. The Roman Catholic Church terribly persecuted the Waldenses and they, too, were threatened with extinction, but many fled to the high valleys of the Alps. They still live there today. At the time of the Reformation, they accepted its teachings and became Protestants. The Waldenses paid a terrible price for their faith, for we're told that for 20 years their "blood flowed like water." Peter Waldo himself may have never become fully evangelical as we would think of it today, but many of his followers were very evangelistic. The Waldenses were very strong on the sovereignty of God, and believed that the true church was made up of God's elect. A strong belief in the sovereignty of God makes great martyrs for the Faith. Of the Christians who broke away from the Roman Church during the Middle Ages, they are the only group that has survived to the present time.

III. REFORMING MEN

- A. *John Wycliffe (1320-1384)*: Wycliffe was born in England in the year 1320. He studied at the University of Oxford. In 1376 he began to criticize the clergy and the corruption of the Roman Church, called the pope "antichrist," and rejected auricular confession, purgatory, pilgrimages, and the worship of saints. It is no wonder that he is called "The Morning Star of the Reformation." Wycliffe wanted a return to simple, first-century Christianity. He believed the Bible to be the supreme authority for the Christian. Although a priest of the Roman Church to his dying day, he declared that the only head of the church is Christ. Those who followed Wycliffe were called "Lollards," and they went about the country of England preaching the gospel. Wycliffe is best known for the Lollard translation of the Latin Vulgate into the English language. Many attempts were made by the Roman Catholic Church to try Wycliffe for heresy with the hope of putting him to death, but various secular nobles protected him from the Inquisition. Wycliffe died in peace in 1384. The

reception given by the laity to Wycliffe's writings reveals how widespread was the desire for reform of the Church.

- B. *John Hus (1360-1415)*: Hus, who was trained for the priesthood, became the head of the theological faculty at the University of Prague in the capital of Bohemia. He was greatly influenced by the teachings of Wycliffe, but was also a diligent independent thinker. There were many in Bohemia who were sympathetic with the teachings of the Waldenses, so the ground was prepared for Hus. He preached against the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, and believed that the Holy Catholic Church consists of the total number of the predestined. He distinguished between being *in* the church and being *of* the church. He taught that one could be in the church and yet not be a real member of it. He also taught that popes and cardinals are not necessary to the government of the church, although he would not have opposed the episcopal form of government. The whole nation of Bohemia followed Hus, even after he had been excommunicated by the pope. When the pope summoned Hus to the Council of Constance, the Emperor Sigismund ordered him to go and promised safe conduct to and from the Council. But when the Council condemned him as a heretic and burned him at the stake, Sigismund did not interfere. On the day of his martyrdom, Hus was dressed in full vestments of a priest. Then, one by one, every article of clothing was stripped from him with leud remarks made about him. A paper cap was placed upon his head which said, "Here is the Heresiarch." A crusade was organized against the followers of Hus, and for many years Bohemia was ravaged by war. But the spirit of reform lived on, and when the Reformation began in Germany, opposition to the Roman Catholic Church was still strong in the land of Hus. Hus had a profound influence upon Europe, and his teachings spurred Luther to take his stand against the Roman Church.
- C. *Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98)*: He was a monk who became an itinerant preacher. His greatest ministry was in Florence, Italy. There he led a reform movement; and in the midst of turbulent political conditions which resulted in the overthrow of the government of the city-state, he became religious spokesman of the city with the opportunity of reforming it as he wished. He began to attack the corruption of the Roman church and the authority of the pope, and to preach salvation apart from submission to the Roman hierarchy. This led Pope Alexander VI to interfere and ultimately to obtain Savonarola's condemnation and death sentence. As he was being burned at the stake by the Roman Church, he said, "I warn you, O Italy, I warn you, O Rome, the only thing that can save you is Jesus Christ!"

IV. REFORMING GROUPS WITHIN THE ROMAN CHURCH

- A. *The Councils:* There were some attempts to reform the Roman Church from within, but they were not at all successful. The Council of Pisa (1409) deposed the rival popes in the Great Schism. The Council of Constance (1414-1418) accomplished nothing in the way of reform, but it was responsible for having John Hus put to death. This council did declare, however, that the council received its authority from Christ, and that it was authoritative over the pope and other members of the church. This refutes the Vatican teaching that the pope is infallible. The Council of Basel (1431) did nothing but try to deal with the Husite revolt in Bohemia.

The councils were a failure in the area of reform, but their very existence showed the great need for reform. Others after them were to tinker with the matter of reform, for everywhere its necessity was realized. It took Martin Luther finally to bring it to pass by laying an axe to the roots of the whole papal system.

- B. *The Brethren of the Common Life:* Around 1350 this group sprang up in the Netherlands and Germany. They believed in Christian education and hoped to accomplish reform by this means. This group was founded by Groote, but its most famous sons are John of Wessel, Erasmus and Thomas a Kempis. John of Wessel taught justification by faith alone. He said, "He who thinks to be justified through his own works does not know what it is to be saved." He also taught the closely related doctrine that the elect are saved by grace alone, and wrote, "Whom God wishes to save He would save by giving him grace, if all the priests should wish to damn and excommunicate him." He was tried for heresy and recanted. However, they threw him in prison anyway and he died in 1489. Erasmus was a great scholar and his pen smoked against the corruption of the Roman Church. But that was as far as he went. He never joined Luther in the great Reformation movement. It was said, "Erasmus laid the egg [of the Reformation] and Luther hatched it."

V. CONCLUSION

- A. During the last part of the middle Ages, and due to the increased emphasis of the Renaissance, men began to look back into the history of the early church by studying the church fathers. They noticed that these fathers knew nothing about many teachings that were taught by the Roman Church. They began to read Scripture in the original languages and found that the Bible itself

frequently contradicted teachings which the Roman Church had proclaimed as basic. Doubts arose in the minds of many, but there were none that had the learning, personality and leadership ability to spark a continent-wide reformation.

- B. When the Reformation broke over Europe, it came as a climax to the voices of these earlier reformers, and at a time when the social, political and intellectual climate was ready for a change. At this point Luther entered the scene and led the movement that shook the Roman Church to its foundations.