

Medieval Church History
(Part 12: Internal Reform and External Opposition, 1305-1517)

I. Internal Reform (conclusion).

A. Forerunners of the Reformation (conclusion).

1. There were two main forerunners to the Reformation from within the church: Wycliffe and Hus.
2. But there was also Savonarola (1452-1498). Carnes writes, “Wycliffe and Hus were branded as heretics who made the Bible the first standard of authority, but Savonarola was more interested in reform within the church at Florence. Becoming a Dominican monk in 1474, he was assigned to Florence in 1490. He tried to reform both state and church in the city, but his preaching against the evil life of the pope resulted in his death by hanging. He never took the more advanced position that Wycliffe and Hus held, but he did demand reform in the church. All these men anticipated the spirit and work of the Reformers to such an extent that Wycliffe, as the outstanding exponent of reformation measures, has often been called the “Morning Star of the Reformation” (253).

B. The Reforming Councils (1409-1449).

1. Introduction.

a. Factors that brought it about.

- (i) The Great Schism of 1378, when both Urban VI and Clement VII claimed to be the pope.
- (ii) They decided to settle the matter by a church council, according to the example of the ecumenical councils of 325-451.
- (iii) Dante, in his *Of Monarchy*, insisted that both the state and church were the arm of God. Neither was to seek supremacy over the other.
- (iv) Another important book, *Defensor Pacis* (1324), written by Marsilius of Padua (ca. 1275-1342) and John of Jandun, asserted that the people of the state and Christians in the church were the “repository of sovereignty” and they could, through representative bodies, elect the emperor and the pope, but also that the emperor was above the pope (255). They also asserted “the church in a general council guided by the New Testament alone could proclaim dogma and appoint its officials. The church council and not the pope was thus the highest authority in the church, and it should act for the good of the whole body of Christians” (255).
- (v) Carnes notes, “If Marsilius’s views had been victorious, the Roman Catholic church would have been transformed into a constitutional monarchy, led by a pope appointed by a council, and the absolute papacy of the medieval church would have disappeared. But this view was not to triumph permanently, although the councils did some good in other areas. The council was called to end the schism in the leadership of the Roman church, to reform that church from within, and to put down heresy. It might also put into practice a theory of government along the lines laid down by Marsilius” (255).

b. Characteristics.

- (i) They were made up of members of the Roman church who represented the people.
- (ii) Their task was to eliminate corrupt church leaders.
- (iii) They did not, however, emphasize the Scriptures to the extent that Hus and Wycliffe did, nor did they choose the way of the mystics.

2. The Council of Pisa (1409).

- a. It met in spring of 1409, while Benedict XIII was in control of Avignon and Gregory XII held the chair of Rome.
- b. The council, called by the cardinals, claimed to have the authority to call itself and even to call popes to account. It deposed Benedict and Greg and appointed the man who became Alexander V.
- c. The other two popes didn’t recognize the authority of the council. Now there were three popes. Alexander V was succeeded by John XXIII.

3. The Council of Constance (1414-1418).

- a. It was called by Sigismund, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and John XXIII. The emperor was involved because of the precedent set by Constantine when he called Nicea in 325.
 - b. Over 350 high officials met. Each national group was allotted one vote to keep John from controlling the council, and all five national groups had to vote unanimously for any action to be binding.
 - c. “The council declared its legality and its right to supreme authority in the Roman church. This decree of the council, which substituted conciliar control of the Church of Rome for papal absolutism, was given the title *Sacrosanct*” (256).
 - d. Gregory XII resigned, and after much negotiation, Benedict and John were deposed by 1415. Martin V was elected. This is how the power of electing the pope was taken from the cardinals and given to the council.
 - e. “The council also dealt with the problem of heresy by condemning the ideas of Wycliffe and burning Hus at the stake, in spite of the emperor’s safe-conduct” (256).
 - f. A decree called *Frequens* provided that future meetings be held at stated times in the future – the first in five years, the second in seven, and then every decade – to deal with problems of schism, heresy and reform.
4. The Councils of Basel and Ferrara, (Florence) (1431-1449).
- a. After Hus’ execution, the unrest in Bohemia and the need of further reform called for another council, the Council of Basel in 1431.
 - b. The council deposed Eugenius IV. But a rival council he had called a year earlier in Ferrara, that was later moved to Florence in 1439 because of the plague, stopped his deposition.
 - c. The council of Florence also tried to reunite the Greek and Roman churches, but failed. It declared the seven sacraments to be the accepted dogma of the Roman church, which was later promulgated by Eugenius in a papal bull in 1439.
 - d. “The Council of Basil acknowledged defeat by dissolving itself in 1449” (256). The attempt to create a constitutional monarchy in the church came to an end and the church reverted to papal despotism. Pius II, in a papal bull entitled *Execrabilis* in 1460 condemned any appeals to future general councils.
 - e. In France, however, the clergy sided with the French ruler in the proclamation of the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges in 1438, which effectively made the French church autonomous of the pope but under the power of the state.
 - f. The reforming councils failed to set up a constitutional monarchy, but they saved it from the Great Schism. “The lack of success in securing effective reform destroyed the last chance of reform of the Roman Catholic church from within by mystics, reformers, or councils. From this time the Protestant Reformation became inevitable” (257).

II. External Opposition.

- A. “The work of the mystics, reformers, reforming councils, and humanists was an earnest attempt from different angles to bring about internal reform that would make religion more personal, the Scriptures the source of authority, and the Roman church more democratic in its organization. The defeat of these movements or their absorption by the Roman church ended all attempts at internal reform. At the same time external forces were creating opposition to the papal system. These forces were the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance, nationalism, and an expanding geographical world that was a result of exploration in the Far East and in the Western Hemisphere. These forces strengthened the movement that was eventually to break forth as the Protestant Reformation and to bring to an end the dominance of the papacy” (259).
- B. The Renaissance.
 1. What it was.
 - a. “The Renaissance, which took place in the important countries of Europe between 1350 and 1650, marks the transition from the medieval to the modern world” (259).
 - b. The word means rebirth, referring to the rebirth of culture.
 - c. In a narrower sense, it refers to 14th century Italy, when the classical past was rediscovered.
 - d. Northern humanists returned to the Bible in the original languages, while the southern humanists emphasized the study of classical literature and the languages of Greece and Rome.

- e. "In a broader sense the Renaissance may be defined as that era of cultural reorientation in which men substituted a modern secular and individualistic view of life for the medieval religious and corporate approach to life" (259-260).
 - f. The medieval idea of God being at the center of the world was replaced with a man-centered view.
 - g. Man became the measure of all things. Emphasis was placed on his glory, rather than God's.
 - h. It was centered mainly in the small upper class of society, but trickled slowly down to the lower classes.
 - i. Commerce became more important than agriculture as a way of life.
 - j. They still clung to religion, but now as a mere formality on holy days. The tendency was to forget God's claims on the individual in daily life.
2. Contributions to its rise.
 - a. Italy had become wealthy serving as the middleman between Western Europe and Near East commerce.
 - b. This gave leisure time for study and enabled merchants to become patrons to scholars and artists.
 - c. The middle class became more interested in the things that would make life more pleasant and comfortable.
 - d. Centralized government provided order and security.
 - e. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Muslims caused many Greek scholars to flee to Italy, bringing thousands of Greek manuscripts.
 - f. Printing, invented in Germany about 1456, made it possible to quickly spread information during the later part of the Renaissance.
 3. Some of its widespread effects.
 - a. Lorenzo de' Medici commissioned scholars and artists to create beautiful surroundings for himself.
 - b. Popes became interested in literature and the arts, to the point where they took precedence over their spiritual functions.
 - c. It was at this time Michaelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel. Sixtus IV (1471-1484) had built it. Julius II (1441-1513) commissioned Michaelangelo to decorate its ceiling. He also became the architect who supervised the completion of Saint Peter's in Rome and crowned the building with its ornate dome.
 - d. Leonardo da Vinci painted the *Last Supper* and the *Mona Lisa* and drew sketches of machine guns and submarines very similar to what we have today.
 - e. "The dogmas of the church were accepted and the rites of worship were practiced, but there was a divorce between man's religious life and his daily life" (261).
 - f. Nicholas V's (1397-1455) interest in the classical world made him seek to repair the buildings, bridges, aqueducts, and the great churches in Rome.
 - g. The fact that his secretary, Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457), after leaving his papal employment, was able to write a treatise exposing the Donation of Constantine as a forgery through the use of literary and historical criticism, without getting into trouble, showed the indifference of the papacy to religion.
 - h. Leo X (1475-1521), the pope when Luther took his stand against indulgences, and a member of the Medici family, authorized the sale of indulgences to raise money for the building of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome.
 - i. "With such popes it is little wonder that Luther was scandalized at the formalism and lack of real spirituality when he made his famous visit to Rome in 1510-1511.
- C. The Biblical Humanists.
1. The scholars of the North were more interested in using their newfound knowledge to learn about the Christian past.
 - a. They studied the biblical documents in the original tongues as much or more than the writings of Plato or Aristotle.
 - b. "Their emphasis was on the Jewish-Christian heritage rather than on the Hellenic heritage of western Europe. They were essentially Christian humanists who applied the techniques and methods of humanism to the study of the Scriptures. They were more interested in man as a human being with a soul than they were in him as a rational creature" (262).

2. Some prominent Biblical humanists:
 - a. Jimenez Francisco de Cisneros, archbishop of Toledo, Isabella's confessor and the Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition for some years, founded the University of Alcalá to train clergy in the Bible and printed a Greek New Testament by 1514.
 - b. John Colet (ca. 1467-1519), one of the Oxford Reformers, after visiting Italy, began to develop the literal meaning of the Pauline Epistles, as opposed to the former allegorical interpretation. The work of the Oxford Reformers was instrumental to later Reformation in England.
 - c. John Reuchlin (1455-1522), developed a Hebrew grammar and dictionary that he called *Of the Rudiments of Hebrew* in 1506, which helped others to study the Bible in the original language of the OT. He also advised Melancthon, the man who became the first theologian of the Reformation, in his education.
 - d. Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536).
 - (i) Early educated in a school of the Brethren of the Common Life, later studied at many of the universities of Europe and England and became a universal scholar.
 - (ii) He sought to reform the church through the publishing of such books as *The Praise of Folly* (ca. 1511) and *Familiar Colloquies* (1518), in which he used satire to point out the evils of the life of the priestly and monastic hierarchy. What the humanists satirized, the Reformers denounced.
 - (iii) His greatest contribution was a Greek New Testament published in 1516, based on four Greek manuscripts, all of which were missing the last few verses in Revelation, but which he completed by translating the verses from Latin back into how he thought the Greek would read.
 - (iv) This Greek New Testament allowed scholars to make a more direct comparison between the church of the New Testament and the church of their day, which proved to be "decidedly unfavorable to the latter" (264).
 - (v) Erasmus at first sympathized with Luther, but later opposed him because Erasmus didn't want to break from the church of Rome. He later wrote the book *Free Will* (1524), upholding the freedom of the human will, which Luther opposed in his book *The Bondage of the Will*.

D. Results of the Renaissance:

1. "The study of the classical pagan past led to a secular approach to life in which religion was reduced to a formal affair or ignored until one came to the hour of death. The ideal of the person as an independent human being with the right to develop as his tastes led him took precedence over the medieval ideal of one who was to be saved by taking his humble place in the corporate hierarchical society of the Roman Catholic church. The impetus given to the use of the vernacular by the scholars and poets of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe was helpful later in bringing to the people the Bible and the services of the church in their mother tongue. The return to sources of culture from the past and the scientific study of them made possible a far more accurate knowledge of the Bible than had been the case before this time. In the political realm the amoral note struck in Machiavelli's *Prince* led to the ignoring of moral principles in the conduct of the foreign affairs of the city-states of Italy and the rising nation-states of northern Europe. One who seeks a balanced view of the impact of the Renaissance can call it neither a tragedy nor an unmixed blessing but will have to consider it a mixture of blessing and bane to the people of Europe" (265).
2. "In addition to the development of man's interest in himself as an individual with a mind and a spirit, the Renaissance resulted in the development of a wider knowledge of man's physical universe. Man became interested in his environment as well as in himself, and scientific and geographical studies led to a new world of science and to an increased knowledge of how large man's world actually is. The beginning of geographical exploration was again the work of the Latin. Prince Henry of Portugal (1394-1460) sent out explorers from Portugal until Vasco da Gama discovered the way to India around the southern tip of Africa. Columbus (1445-1506) made the Western Hemisphere known to the world, and his work was speedily supplemented by that of French and English explorers, all of whom were seeking a shorter route to the wealth of the Far East. Copernicus and Galileo also made men conscious of the immensity of the universe about them, and the invention of the telescope and its increasingly effective use substantiated their earlier theories" (265).