

Church History II

(Pre-Reformation to Modern Day)

Week 1 – Papal Decline and Reformers Arise

Introduction: There is an ebb and flow to history. This is true inside Christianity as well. When Christianity gets too powerful or too corrupt, God tends to hit the reset button or branch it out. To some degree, we see this in our knowledge and offspring in the reformation, yet this has always been the case to some degree. God has at many times and places protected the church from the church by bringing in new life when necessary.

I. The Background

1. The Church's Beginning

- A. The Church began with the immense preaching of the Gospel message.
- B. The church originally had some protections and connections to the Jewish synagogues.
- C. After the destruction of the temple and the immense number of Gentile converts, the Jews became a very minor group in the church and were separated in many cases from their Jewish brethren.
- D. The church then dealt more with devastation from the Empire.
 - “As the third-century writer Tertullian declared, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” ¹

2. Dealing with Problems inside and outside the church

3. The Church's Defense Mechanisms **PTQ**²

- i. Creed – The summation statements coming from ecumenical councils (Eastern)
- ii. Canon – The Scriptures (Protestant)
- iii. Episcopate – The Bishops and the church leadership as a whole (Western)
- B. The Empire's prosecutions and protections
 - i. The Roman emperors had varying levels of persecution, the worst of which occurred right before the legalization of Christianity under Constantine.
 - ii. Most destruction efforts were localized and not empire-wide
 - iii. Christianity went from being legal in 313 to the state religion of the empire in 381.
 - iv. The church's connection and protection by the state bothered some and created the desire for many to separate themselves, either alone or in groups, creating a movement called monasticism.
 - The monastics were vital at different times and points in church history and also contained it's own high and low points.

¹ William J. Bennett, *Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), xiv.

² Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 23.

4. The Fall of Rome 476 (The City and Empire) **PTQ**
- A. The Needs for Stability
- i. In the East, this was stabilized by making the emperor the head of the church.
 - 1) This, at times, created weird situations where worldly rulers decided things for the church.
 - ii. In the west that was the Pope, for the lack of good Roman leaders and lands being dispersed amongst different pagan groups.
 - 1) The position and status of the “Pope” grew substantially around this time.
 - 2) This, at times, caused the church to see itself as above the worldly rulers.
 - 3) The Christian faith became the unifying feature among otherwise warring groups of people.
 - 4) This time and those that followed had minimal amounts of Christian education.
- B. The Expression of faith began to change, some from the West and the East.
- i. The West became splintered into differing barbarian tribes (and later countries) and was lightly held together by Christianity.
 - 1) The western church maintained Latin worship
 - ii. The East maintained more power and even at times tried to express itself as equal or a close second to Rome.
 - 1) The western church maintained Greek as its native language.
 - iii. The East focused heavily on the Ecumenical Creeds
- C. The East often begins being called the Byzantine empire, but really it is the remnant of the Roman empire and continues nearly to the time of reformation.
5. The Institution of Islam and vital responses
- A. The Islamic movement completely separated east and west, conquering 3/5 major Christian hubs within thirty years of inception. Within a hundred years, all of North Africa was conquered, and the Europeans were defending their land from Muslims in France.³
- B. The Muslim assaults didn’t just stop, although they are not talked about much outside of that point. These continued up into the modern day in different times and places under the names of different countries and groups, (but under the united faith of Islam.)⁴ **PTQ**
- C. The Crusades were seen and addressed as a defense against the Islamic aggressors, the opportunity to protect one's people, assume glory, and win back the sacred lands of the Christian past. Most of these were abject failures in many of these goals, and, unfortunately, they did help curb Muslim advance further into Europe and extend the longevity of Constantinople, the capital of the eastern Roman empire, into the mid 1400’s.

³ Raymond Ibrahim, *Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War Between Islam and the West* (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2018), Introduction.

⁴ Ibid.

6. The Continued missionary endeavors and the need for education.
 - A. As more of Europe came to know the Lord, the need to teach others the Bible created a desire for improved education, both for those in ministry and ultimately for the people at large. This was rather difficult due to the change of power throughout Europe.
 - B. The creation of different plans for education throughout the centuries, including the eventual creation of universities, which greatly enhanced the ability to enjoy critical thinking and created what has been known as Scholasticism. One of the negatives of Scholasticism is that it removed religious study from the practical aspects of people's lives and placed it heavily in abstract realms.
 - i. The eventual positives of the movement were that universities created breeding grounds for those with the tools to challenge the Catholic church. **PTQ**
 - ii. However, in the time of the scholastics, it was also used to help establish the church. Thomas Aquinas, who was famously dubbed the dumb ox of Aquino, was putting together his *Summa Theologica*, showing that Christ was the logical choice that reason would ultimately bring people to.⁵
 - iii. Aquinas was very much a product of his time, even helping to be the very defender/definer of important doctrines like that of transubstantiation.
 - C. The Church of Rome had garnered major advances in the world as the message of Christ spread through missionaries and at times through the sword. The East had been very effectively weakened by the presence of Islamic leaders.
 - D. The heights of Papal authorities in the 12th and 13th centuries also corresponded with the depth of Catholic dogma being used in the worship of the church. See table below.

II. The Papal Decline

1. Papal Decline ebbed and flowed with the 10th century, housing some of the more wicked Papal leaders and gross misuse of church status and authority. A lot of Scandals occurred during this time.
2. Around the 1050s, some renewals and systems were put in place in the hope of rehabilitating the position itself and the Holy See (Governing Body of the Catholic Church).
3. The struggle between Popes and kings came to a head in 1077 with the investiture controversy (whether or not kings and barons could place or remove religious leaders from positions). One example is given below between Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII. The Pope had excommunicated the king from the Church after his violation of the law of investiture. **PTQ**
 - Henry appeared before Gregory in January 1077 at Canossa, a castle in the mountains of Italy. Dressed as a penitent, the emperor stood barefoot in the snow for three days and begged forgiveness until, in Gregory's words, "we loosed the

⁵ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2018), 139-141.

chain of the anathema and at length received him ... into the lap of the Holy Mother Church.⁶ **PTQ**

4. Unfortunately, the Power established here and during the reign of subsequent Popes ended up going to their heads.
 - A. Boniface VIII marked a turning point in the story.
 - i. He created new pronouncements
 - 1) “Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed a Jubilee—a Holy Year—to celebrate the new centenary of Christ’s birth. It...announced “a full and copious pardon of all their sins” for all who reverently visited the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul during the Holy Year.”⁷
 - These are similar to the indulgences given to those who fought in the First Crusade in the 1090’s.
 - 2) The Pope used these visits to attempt to rake in infinite money.
 - ii. He tried to throw his weight around world leaders.
 - 1) The kings of England and France, who were at odds at the time, decided the best way to fund such a skirmish would be to tax the churches.
 - 2) “In 1296, Boniface VIII had issued *Clericis laicos*, a document threatening excommunication for any lay ruler who taxed the clergy and for any churchman who paid those taxes without papal consent.”⁸ **PTQ**
 - 3) However, Edward I in England and Phillip the Fair in France were not intending to back down. They both gave creative decrees in order to force the Church's hand.
 - a) “Edward’s retort was to decree that if the clergy did not pay, they would be stripped of all legal protection and their extensive properties would be seized by the king’s sheriffs.”⁹
 - b) “Philip’s answer was to place a complete embargo on the export of all gold, silver, and jewels from his domains, thus depriving the papal treasury of a major source of revenue from church collections in France.”¹⁰
 - c) In the face of this difficulty, Boniface backed down, stating allowance for this to happen in times of dire need. **PTQ**
 - 4) Boniface, in 1301, after a French bishop was imprisoned for treason, issued what was called the Unam Sanctam, essentially saying “It is

⁶ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 222.

⁷ Ibid., 260.

⁸ Ibid., 262.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

altogether necessary,” he declared, “for every human being to be subject to the Roman pontiff.”¹¹ **PTQ**

- iii. The French government raised charges against the Pope, many of which were likely made up, but even still, they came and took him out of his house and held him prisoner. He was eventually saved by the people of his hometown, but died not too long after.
 - iv. “It reveals that European Christians no longer accepted papal interference in what they regarded as purely political matters. No one could say with certainty what a purely political matter was, but a king’s power within his own country was a generally accepted fact.”¹² **PTQ**
- B.** Shortly after the death of Boniface was the election of a French Pope called Clement. During this time the Pope never entered the city of Rome he stayed in France and began what became known as the Avignon Papacy or the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy. This portion lasted 72 years with French Papal leaders and being assisted / directed by the Kings of France. **PTQ**
- i. The Popes being away from Italy caused the Papal seat to run almost bankrupt which encouraged different money making schemes like take the first years pay from newly appointed bishops or the Sales of indulgences.
 - ii. The silliness of what was going on and what had happened previously once again raised the question on if this was really what God had intended for the leadership of his church.
 - iii. This encouraged the idea of Conciliarism (The use of the pope as the authority of a holy counsel Instead of a kind of religious despot) **PTQ**
- 5.** The Conciliar movement was attempted for a time out of necessity.
- A.** The necessity arose due to what was called the Great Papal Schism, which was a time in which two Popes were in power at one time. Each had different people who followed them and minority followers for both people throughout otherwise seemingly monolithic countries. This caused division and craziness. **PTQ**
 - B.** “In 1395, leading professors at the University of Paris proposed that a general council, representing the universal church, should meet to heal the schism. But difficulties immediately arose. Canon law said that only the pope could call a general council, and only the pope could ratify any decision of a general council. Which pope had those rights? In effect, canon law prohibited the reunion of Christendom! Was necessity a higher law?”¹³
 - C.** In attempts to fix the problem of having two popes, the two groups of cardinals got together and decided on a third Pope. Unfortunately, this did not solve the issue because the two former Popes refused to back down.

¹¹ Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), 263.

¹² Ibid., 264.

¹³ Ibid., 267–268.

- D. Finally, a council of nations called the Council of Constance was essentially successful in accomplishing the task, convincing one Pope to step aside, two were deposed, essentially solving the issue, putting in a new Vicar of Christ named Martin V. **PTQ**
- E. “The conciliar movement aimed at transforming the papacy into something like a limited monarchy.
 - i. Constance solemnly decreed that general councils were superior to popes and that they should meet at regular intervals in the future. The pope called this heretical. His return to power plus the inability of later councils to introduce much-needed reforms enabled the popes, by 1450, to discredit the conciliar movement.
 - ii. They busied themselves not with religious reforms but with Italian politics and patronage of the arts. The pope often could not make up his mind whether he was the successor of Peter or of Caesar.”¹⁴ **PTQ**
 - iii. Justo Gonzales commenting on this says, “As a result, while most people still believed in the supreme authority of the Roman see, many found it difficult to reconcile their faith in the papacy with their distrust in its actual occupants.”¹⁵

III. The Reformers

1. The earliest Reformers, which generally get addressed, are not actually the first reformers. Often, reform was required of and established through the church's history by well-meaning Christians who sought a church that more closely reflected the Lord or the early Christians. What made this time different was the historical backdrop with the strengthening of nations and weakening of the Pope.
2. A couple of notable Proto-Reformers.
 - A. John Wycliff
 - i. The English Scholar Wycliff found himself arriving into the scholarly world in 1373 at about the end of the Avignon Papacy. He saw the difficulties and abuses within the church, even though he was a very learned man in his day. **PTQ**
 - 1) “One of Wyclif’s professors, Richard FitzRalph, had argued, “Why should the state of grace be required only of temporal rulers? Do churchmen have the right to rule when they live in mortal sin?” If grace is essential in a lay ruler, said FitzRalph, it is no less necessary in a churchman.
 - 2) Wycliff argued, “that the English government had the divinely assigned responsibility to correct the abuses of the church within its realm and to relieve of office those church officials who persisted in their sin. The state could even seize the property of corrupt church officials.”¹⁶ **PTQ**

¹⁴ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 269.

¹⁵ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Harper One, 2014), 7.

¹⁶ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 272.

- 3) “The concept of the papacy as a political force was anathema to Wyclif. He detested the trappings of power; he denounced the worldliness and luxury of the popes.”¹⁷ **PTQ**
 - 4) Wycliff held the idea of equality amongst believers and that there was an invisible elect in God, which was shown by the actions of the individual. **PTQ**
- ii. His beliefs extended beyond his disdain for Popes.
- 1) “In time Wyclif challenged the whole range of medieval beliefs and practices: pardons, indulgences, absolutions, pilgrimages, the worship of images, the adoration of the saints, the treasury of their merits laid up at the reserve of the pope, and the distinction between venial and mortal sins. He retained belief in purgatory and extreme unction, though he admitted that he looked in vain in the Bible for the institution of extreme unction.”¹⁸ **PTQ**
 - 2) Wycliff thought everything ought to be judged by the scripture or, as he declared, “Christ’s law.” **PTQ**
 - 3) Wycliff’s attack on Transubstantiation ended up being his downfall. (the belief that the blood and wine are transformed in the sacrament to the actual body and blood of Christ.) Before he was fully silenced, he had a Bible translation made in English from the Latin. **PTQ**
 - 4) He had men preaching the Word in the of god throughout the countryside called Lollards (mumblers) **PTQ**
 - 5) Wycliff, although allowed to die in peace, was shown the church’s disdain by digging him up and burning his body, tossing his ashes into a river.¹⁹
- B. John Hus
- i. John Hus, the Czech reformer, found access to Wycliff’s ideas during his student days in Prague in the early to mid 1390’s, but became further acquainted with his views once he had been ordained a preacher.
 - ii. Hus used his proximity to the Prague university to teach Wycliff’s views, including the abuses of the Papacy. Although Hus had been excommunicated, he had some protection until he attacked the sale of indulgences, which led to the area being placed under a Papal interdict. **PTQ**
 - iii. Hus was encouraged to go to the Council of Constance, but instead of pleading his case, he was made a victim of the inquisition.
 - iv. This is unfortunate because Hus had been promised “safe conduct”, or in other words, they told him they guaranteed his safety to and from said

¹⁷ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 273.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 274–275.

¹⁹ Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord*, 148.

council in order to convince him to come. (This historical breach will be remembered by Luther later) **PTQ**

- v. Hus was unwilling to back down from the truth he preached, nor was he willing to accept the trumped-up charges that were leveled against him at the inquisition in Constance; thus, his only option left was to be burned at the stake.
 - vi. Hus, whose name translates to Goose, which wordplay he used in his preaching at times prophesied that although for now God had sent a goose, he would one day send an eagle. Many believe this to be Luther.²⁰
 - vii. Sadly, this goose was cooked. However, his views and history made a profound impact on the future.
- C. Hus's final prayers and words are telling of his character.
- i. "O most holy Christ," he prayed, "draw me, weak as I am, after Thyself, for if Thou dost not draw us we cannot follow Thee. Strengthen my spirit, that it may be willing. If the flesh is weak, let Thy grace precede us; come between and follow, for without Thee we cannot go for Thy sake to cruel death. Give me a fearless heart, a right faith, a firm hope, a perfect love, that for Thy sake I may lay down my life with patience and joy. Amen."²¹
 - ii. "For the last time, the marshal of the empire asked him if he would recant and save his life. Said Hus, "God is my witness that the evidence against me is false. I have never thought nor preached except with the one intention of winning men, if possible, from their sins. In the truth of the gospel I have written, taught, and preached; today I will gladly die."²²

Conclusion: The story closes with a seemingly dreary conclusion. In the fires of Wycliff and Hus the reformation will begin to bloom. God's truth will not be stopped, and his church will not be defeated. The story of Christianity, although already well established, is getting ready to enjoy a new life in the Reformation.

²⁰ Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord*, 150.

²¹ Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), 279.

²² *Ibid.*, 279.

Chat GPT - Summary Table (Quick Reference)

Doctrine	Period of Growing Acceptance	Officially Defined
Papal Supremacy	5th–9th c.	1870
Papal Infallibility	Late medieval 14th– 16th c.	1870
Purgatory	6th–12th c.	1274
Transubstantiation	12th c.	1215
Seven Sacraments	12th c.	1439
Immaculate Conception	12th–15th c.	1854
Assumption of Mary	6th c.	1950
Faith + Works	Formalizes Theology 12th–13th c.	1547

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