

# The 14th & 15th Centuries

Stars Before the Dawn: Forerunners of the Reformation

## I. The Church in Crisis

- The church reached peak power under Pope Innocent III (late 12th–early 13th c.)
- The 14th–15th centuries brought a series of humiliations that shattered papal prestige
- Yet God was still at work — raising up individuals who kept the flame of biblical faith alive

## II. The Avignonese Captivity (1309–1377)

### Background

- Popes and kings were in constant tension over authority
- Roman Catholicism was the official religion of European territories — giving popes political leverage

### The Crisis

- French king Philip IV ("Philip the Fair") claimed absolute authority over French affairs, including taxing clergy
- Pope Boniface VIII responded with Unam Sanctam (1302) — the most sweeping claim for papal power ever written
- Philip had Boniface kidnapped and imprisoned; Boniface died a month later
- A French pope, Clement V, was elected — never went to Rome; moved the papal court to Avignon in 1309
- Seven French popes followed over nearly 70 years with a largely French college of cardinals
- Critics called it the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy — severe damage to Rome's credibility

## III. The Great Schism (1378–1417)

- Papacy returned to Rome in 1377 — French cardinals were unhappy
- Under mob pressure, cardinals elected Pope Urban VI (Italian); later declared the election invalid and elected Clement VII (French)
- Result: two men claiming to be the true pope — each excommunicated the other
- Europe split: England and Germany backed Rome; France, Spain, and Scotland backed Avignon
- Council of Pisa (1409) deposed both and elected a third pope (Alexander V) — neither would yield: now three popes
- Council of Constance (1414–18) finally resolved the crisis; elected Martin V as undisputed pope

### Conciliarism

- New idea: a general church council holds superior authority over the pope
- Would have returned the church to the model of 4th–6th century councils
- Once the Schism ended, the papacy quietly reasserted control — conciliarism faded; structural problems remained

## IV. Mysticism & The Devotio Moderna

### The Mystics

- Sought direct personal experience of God — not mediated by sacraments or clergy
- Key figure: Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), German Dominican preacher
- Ministered to ordinary people; wrote in native languages rather than Latin (controversial for the Church)
- Their core conviction: Christ was always immediately available to the believing soul

- Martin Luther praised several mystic sermons as "pure theology"; reprinted German Theology with his own introductions

### The Devotio Moderna

- Founded by Gerard Groote (1340–84) in the Netherlands
- Communities of men and women who pursued serious devotion without formal monastic vows
- Held regular jobs; supported themselves financially; devoted to copying and distributing religious literature
- Most enduring work: The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis (c. 1418)
  - Second most-translated Christian book after the Bible
  - Themes: setting the heart on eternal realities; walking with Jesus in daily life

## V. John Wycliffe: "The Morning Star of the Reformation"

- Born c. 1330 in Yorkshire; taught theology at Oxford — one of the most brilliant minds of his generation

### Key Teachings

- **Dominium:** All authority is delegated by God; kings and popes hold it only while faithful to God
- Christ alone is the true head of the church — not the pope
- The church = the whole body of the elect, not an institution ruled by pope and bishops
- Scripture alone is the source of Christian teaching — not tradition or papal decree
- Rejected: necessity of confession to a priest, indulgences, clerical wealth
- Rejected transubstantiation — argued Christ is truly but spiritually present in the sacrament

### Consequences

- His denial of transubstantiation cost him his protectors at Oxford and at court
- Retired to Lutterworth; organized the first complete English translation of the Bible (from the Latin Vulgate)
- Died 1384; in 1428 Pope Martin V ordered his bones exhumed, burned, and scattered in the river
- His followers (the Lollards) were never fully suppressed — they became the Reformation's earliest English supporters

## VI. Jan Hus & the Hussites

- Wycliffe's writings traveled to Bohemia via students; Jan Hus (1372–1415) became their champion
- Preacher at Bethlehem Chapel, Prague; agreed with Wycliffe that Christ alone is the church's head and that preaching is the heart of ministry

### Confrontation

- 1411: Hus attacked the sale of indulgences; Pope John XXIII excommunicated him and threatened Prague with an embargo
- Hus withdrew to southern Bohemia under noble protection and continued writing and preaching

### Council of Constance

- Summoned to the council with a personal guarantee of safe conduct from the Holy Roman Emperor
- The guarantee was ignored — thrown in prison for six months; his health destroyed
- Refused the right to defend himself; bullied for three days to force recantation — refused
- Stripped of vestments; paper crown painted with demons placed on his head
- Burned at the stake, July 6, 1415 — his last words: "I shall die with joy today in the faith of the Gospel which I have preached."

## **Legacy**

- His martyrdom ignited Bohemia; Hussite armies defeated papal crusades for 14 years
- The Catholic Church was forced — for the first time — to negotiate with a dissenting movement
- When the Reformation came, most Bohemians welcomed it; the Hussite movement flowed into Protestantism

## **VII. The Renaissance & the Road to Reformation**

- Renaissance ("rebirth") — a rediscovery of the ancient world; rallying cry: ad fontes ("to the sources")
- Fall of Constantinople (1453) brought Greek scholars and manuscripts to Western Europe
- Scholars could now read the New Testament in its original Greek for the first time in centuries

### **The Discovery That Changed Everything**

- Comparing the Greek NT to Jerome's Latin Vulgate (the Western church's Bible for 1,000+ years) revealed critical discrepancies
  - Vulgate: Jesus' call = "do penance" (basis of the entire Sacrament of Penance)
  - Greek original: simply "repent"
- The printing press amplified everything: Church Fathers were widely read; people noticed the gap between Augustine and current teaching

### **Erasmus**

- Dutch scholar Erasmus published a Greek New Testament with a fresh Latin translation
- Most significant biblical event in over 1,000 years
- Recognized the need for church reform — but never imagined his scholarship would help ignite the Protestant Reformation
- The Reformer who would use that Greek New Testament to set the world on fire: an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther