

Light in the Shadows
The Church in the Middle Ages (AD 500-1500)

Matthew 16:18b – “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

A. Key Historical Events of the Middle Ages

1. The Rise of Monasticism (c. 500-600 AD) – Preserved Scripture and education
2. Missionary Expansion in Europe (590-800 AD) – Gospel reaches Northern Europe
3. Rise of Islam and the Church’s Mediterranean Expulsion (610-750 AD) - Muhammad (570-632 AD)
4. Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire (800 AD)
5. The Great Schism (1054 AD) – Split between Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic churches
6. The Crusades (1095-1291) – Capture of Jerusalem – Churches’ Failures
7. Rise of Scholasticism and Medieval Learning – Founding of Universities (1100-1300)
8. Power and Corruption of the Papacy (1073-1300)
9. Early Reform Personalities (1200-1475)

- a. John Wycliffe (1328-1384) - “Morning Star of the Reformation” – 1st English Bible

“Christ delivered His Gospel to the clergy and doctors of the Church, that they might administer to the laity and to weaker persons, according to the state of the times and the wants of men. But this Master John Wycliffe translated it out of Latin into English, and thus laid it more open to the laity, and to women who could read, than it had formerly been to the most learned of the clergy, even to those of them who had the best understanding. And in this way the Gospel pearl is cast abroad, and trodden under foot of swine, and that which was before precious to both clergy and laity is rendered, as it were, the common jest of both. The jewel of the Church is turned into the sport of the people, and what was hitherto the principal gift of the clergy and divines is made forever common to the laity.” [Henry Knighton, Wycliffe accuser and canon of St. Mary’s Abbey in Leicester England]

- b. Jan (Jon) Hus (1369-1415)

- (1) Hus was a Czech (Bohemian) theologian at Prague University.
- (2) Hus was greatly influenced by John Wycliffe.
- (3) Hus spoke strongly against indulgences and the papacy, specifically criticizing the pope for his use of military power.
- (4) Hus was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Constance and suffered burning at the stake in 1415.

B. Key Bible-centered Believers of the Middle Ages

1. The Waldensians (founded c. 1170s)
 - a. Founder: Peter Waldo of Lyon, France
 - b. Beliefs: Emphasized Scripture in the common language; rejected indulgences, prayers to saints, and papal authority; Focused on lay preaching and poverty
 - c. Survival: Waldensians were persecuted by the Roman Catholic church but survived for centuries; later joined the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century
 - d. Classification: Often called “pre-Reformation Protestants”

2. The Lollards (1300s-1400s England)

- a. Founder: John Wycliffe
- b. Beliefs: Bible is supreme authority; Wycliffe translated the Bible from Latin into English; Opposed indulgences, relics, and transubstantiation; Paved the way for English Protestantism
- c. Survival: Wycliffe died a natural death but 30 years later his body was desecrated.

Persecution by the Roman Catholic Church [c. 1414 AD]

“In pursuance of this decree, a few years afterwards [Wycliffe’s death] his grave ... was opened, and his remains removed. These were then burnt, and the ashes cast into the adjoining brook named the ‘Swift,’ and Fuller, describing the scene, quaintly but truly says: ‘This brook conveyed them into Avon, the Avon into the Severn, the Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean; and thus the ashes of Wycliffe were the emblem of his doctrine, which is now dispersed all the world over.’ [Henry Knighton]

3. The Hussites (early 1400s, Bohemia)

- a. Leader: Jan Hus – Influenced by Wycliffe
- b. Beliefs: Salvation by faith, authority of Scripture, and moral reform; opposed corruption in the papacy.
- c. Survival: Hus’s followers continued the Hussite movement long after his death and established reform movements a century before Martin Luther.

C. The Rise of Universities in the Middle Ages and Beyond

The rise of universities (Bologna, Paris, Oxford, from the 12th century onward) revolutionized education by offering advanced studies in theology, law, medicine, and philosophy, bringing clergy and laity together as both students and teachers.

1. Oxford College

- a. Oxford has no single founding charter; it grew organically from teaching communities in the late 1100s and early 1200s.
- b. Earliest royal document dates to 1214, establishing the office of Chancellor.
- c. Wording emphasizes establishment of the "universitas" (academic community) and granting privileges to the scholars.
- d. Governance and statutes were formed as customary law, later augmented by royal charters and university statutes.
- e. Language is formal, legalistic, focused on granting self-governance, rights to hold property, and protection to scholars.
- f. **The charter emphasizes both religious and secular instruction.**

2. Cambridge College

- a. First formal royal charter granted in 1231 by King Henry III.
- b. Charter language explicitly states creation of a corporate body with perpetual succession, power to hold property, grant privileges, and govern itself via statutes.
- c. Specifies instruction of students, formation of a college body "forever."
- d. Emphasizes legal incorporation and clearly delineates rights and privileges.
- e. Reflects medieval royal administration style with explicit legal authority for college operation.
- f. **Along with Oxford College, one of the two primary institutions providing both the scholars and the locations for the translation of the King James Version [1604-1611]**

3. Harvard College

The founding mission statement of **Harvard College**, established in 1636, **focused on training Christian ministers and encouraging students to seek knowledge anchored in Christian faith**. The purpose is stated in the original "Rules and Precepts" of 1646:

"Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, **to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life (John 17:3) and therefore to lay Christ as the basis, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning. And seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, let everyone seriously set himself by prayer in secret to seek it of Him (Prov. 2:3). Every one shall so exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day, that he shall be ready to give such an account of his proficiency therein, both in theoretical observations of language and logic, and in practical and spiritual truths, as his Tutor shall require, according to his ability; seeing the entrance of the word giveth light, it giveth understanding to the simple (Psalm 119:130).**"

4. Yale University

Yale University was originally founded as the Collegiate School in 1701. The founding purpose text from the Connecticut General Assembly's act states the mission was: "to educate youth for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State with the main aim **to educate Congregational ministers and teach sacred languages and theology**."

It was formed by a group of ten Congregational ministers led by Reverend James Pierpont to train Congregational ministers and lay leaders. **The original curriculum was focused on theology and sacred languages as part of religious education**. The founding date commonly recognized is October 9, 1701, when the act was passed by the General Court of the Colony of Connecticut.

5. Princeton University

Established in 1746 as the College of New Jersey, its foundational statement was **"Cursed is all learning that is contrary to the cross of Christ"**. **The original charter called for the "advancement of learning," rooted in preparation for ministry and Christian leadership**.

Princeton University's original charter, signed on October 22, 1746, was established initially to train ministers and prepare youth for various professions, blending religious instruction with liberal education. The charter emphasizes both religious and secular instruction, serving the educational needs through a curriculum that includes languages, arts, and sciences.

6. Dartmouth College

Dartmouth's 1769 charter states its aim: **"for the education and instruction of youth of the Indian tribes in this land in reading, writing, and all parts of learning,"** originally to train Native Americans in Christian theology and as missionaries.

"Know ye, therefore, that We, considering the premises and being willing to encourage the laudable and charitable design of spreading Christian knowledge among the savages of our American wilderness for the education and instruction of youth of the Indian tribes in this land in reading, writing, and all parts of learning which shall appear necessary and expedient for civilizing and Christianizing children of pagans, as well as in all liberal arts and sciences, and also of English youth and any others."

D. The Medieval Church's Theology

1. View of God and Christ

a. Medieval Plagues

Germany in the early 1500s experienced repeated outbreaks of Bubonic plague, part of the ongoing waves following the Black Death. The plague continued to affect major German towns regularly and severely into the 16th century, especially along Trade Routes. Significant plague outbreaks struck German cities like **Nuremberg, Augsburg, and Lübeck during the first decades of the 16th century (c. 1500–1530).**

Nuremberg, a major trade hub, saw multiple plague episodes around 1505, 1517, and subsequent decades; these outbreaks sometimes killed thousands and led to hastily dug *plague pits* outside city walls. *Plague pits* unearthed in Nuremberg reveal burial dates from as early as the late 15th century through the 16th and 17th centuries, confirming the ongoing severity of the threat.

Records from church and municipal registers detail spikes in burials, quarantine efforts, and recurring panic every few years. The recurrent nature of plague outbreaks meant that local populations lived under constant threat throughout the century, prompting changes to municipal health regulations and burial customs.

Symptoms included painful **swollen lymph nodes (*buboes*)**, fever, vomiting, and often, rapid death within days, similar to the Black Death of the previous centuries. **The concept of God as both just judge and inscrutable mystery gained nuance, but for centuries after, disasters were often read as divine punishment. In sum, the plagues challenged—and ultimately reshaped—medieval Christian ideas about God's justice, the meaning of suffering, the urgency of repentance, and the mysteries of the afterlife.**

b. Medieval Sermons and Writings

(1) Theme of Judgment

Dante's Inferno [1314 AD] – 9 Concentric Circles of Hell – Tyrannical God

“Abandon all Hope, Ye who enter here.”

Many sermons and religious writings drew directly on biblical plagues of Exodus and the Book of Revelation, reading the devastation as evidence of collective punishment or a warning of the end times. Apocalyptic language became widespread, and preachers stressed themes of repentance and divine wrath.

The massive death toll among clergy, who often died ministering to the sick, further complicated the sense of divine justice and prompted some laypeople to lose confidence in the institutional Church. Art and literature from this period show a preoccupation with death (macabre images, “Danse Macabre”) and resurrection, reflecting both fear and hope about judgment after death.

(2) Theme of Father and Son as Vindictive Judges

“In Luther's day, far more emphasis was put on God as an eternal judge, one whose holiness was most always offended by us, so that if we were fortunate enough, we might find ourselves in purgatory, facing a steep and painful climb of thousands or millions of years until we were properly purged of our deep-rooted sinfulness.”
[Metaxas. P. 28]

(3) Theme of God's Lacking Benevolence and Love

2. View of Mary and the Saints – The role of Comforter fell to Mary

“Although Christian doctrine had always clearly taught that Jesus himself had been fully human, and could therefore understand and sympathize with our trials and sufferings, the reality of medieval church life was that this part of Jesus had mostly been ignored, so that he was not thought of as every bit as distant and remote and terrible as God the Father ever had been. **So only Mary, his entirely human mother, could truly comfort us. And not only that, but she could appeal to her harsh and perhaps indifferent son as only a dear mother could.**

Similarly, the faithful frequently appealed to the saints to understand human difficulties, believing their humanity made them more patient and more understanding than the God who was far too busy running the vast universe to be bothered with our insignificant concerns. This medieval thinking was in fact as heretical as saying that God was the Devil, but it was not seen as such during that time.” [Metaxas, p. 36]

3. The Medieval Introduction to the Priesthood of the Believer

The repeated inability of Church leaders to explain or halt the plagues contributed to long-term declines in institutional authority, eventually setting the stage for religious reform and the Reformation.

- a. Rejection of the idea the Pope and Roman Catholic Church had exclusive rights to Truth
- b. Demand for a Bible for the common man in the language of the common person

Until the 12th century, Latin was the only language used for formal education, ecclesiastical instruction, and written scholarship across Europe. Around the late 12th century, early forms of vernacular writing began to appear. By the 14th century, vernacular languages — Middle English, Old French, Italian, and others — began to be used in literature, devotional manuals, and occasionally in elementary education for children or lower clergy less proficient in Latin. Prominent figures like Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer helped legitimize the vernacular through literary writing in Italian and English respectively, promoting their use for intellectual and moral instruction.

The use of local languages in catechisms, prayers, and basic reading materials became more common, especially after the Black Death, as clergy sought to instruct laypeople in moral and religious principles in a language they understood. The introduction of printing in the 15th century helped formalize grammar and vocabulary for vernacular languages and encouraged their spread in educational contexts. By the early 16th century, elementary schooling in many regions (especially England, France, and the Low Countries) started using vernacular texts alongside Latin primers for literacy instruction.

4. Biblical Manuscript Copying

a. Copyists of the Bible's Manuscripts

Manuscript production and copying were major roles for copyists of Scripture, preserving and expanding access to the sacred writings, both Old Testament and New.

“An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least to deviate. No word or letter, not even a yod, must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him. The Old Testament copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, wash his whole body, not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink, and should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him.

The Masoretes [Old Testament copyists – AD 500-1400] undertook a number of calculations which do not enter into the ordinary sphere of textual criticism. They numbered the verses, words and letters of every book. They calculated the middle word and the middle letter of each. These trivialities, as we may consider them, had the effect of securing minute attention to the precise transmission of the text.” [Kenyon, pp. 38-43]

b. Contributions to the Bible's format

- (4) Stephen Langton [1205-1227 AD] – Created Biblical chapters, 1st to Latin Vulgate
- (5) Rabbi Nathan [1448 AD] – Created Old Testament's verse divisions
- (6) Robert Estienne (Stephanus) – French printer [1551] – Created New Testament's verse divisions traveling from Paris to Lyons and stopping in Inns along the way.
- (7) The Geneva Bible [1560] was the first widely used English Bible to feature both chapter and verse divisions as found in today's translations.
- (8) The Psalm divisions were present in the original Hebrew Bible with the first verse often the introduction found at the beginning of many of the psalms [Acts 13:33 – 2nd psalm]
- (9) The original complete Hebrew Bible began with Genesis and ended with 2 Chronicles, with all the other books grouped by section in between. [cf. Jesus's saying in Luke 11:51]

“From the blood of Abel [Gen. 4:8-11] unto the blood of Zacharias [2 Chr. 24:20-21] ... it shall be required.”]

God often uses some of the most Unorthodox ways to preserve Orthodoxy

Diocletian Persecution gives us Canonicity and Preservation of Scripture

The Black Death and other plagues give us the Reformation

The writings of an alleged Heretic (Jon Hus) drives Luther to the Bible