

Background of the Protestant Reformation

Jesus of Nazareth was put to death by Roman soldiers in Palestine in 30 C.E. After his death, Christianity, which was viewed as a Jewish sect by the Romans, spread slowly throughout the Roman Empire. The Apostle Paul led the spread of Christianity to gentiles (non-Jews) and it was he who preached Christianity as a world religion and that all people were equal before God. The future of Christianity depended on its communities finding an organization that would preserve unity within the group and help protect it against persecution. Elders and deacons led early Christian communities; and by the end of the 2nd century C.E. cities within the Roman Empire had accepted the religious authority of an elected bishop. The power of the bishops was enhanced by the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, which asserted that the religious authority of the bishop had been passed down directly from the Apostles of Jesus. In the 4th century, Christianity was made the official state religion of the Roman Empire and missionaries were sent throughout the empire to spread the new religion.

In order to unify Christianity, a number of Church Councils were held to define its doctrines. The doctrines that prevailed at these councils were called “orthodox,” while those that were rejected were called “heresies.” The Council of Nicaea resolved a dispute between two opposing views regarding the divinity of Jesus. Arians argued that Jesus was not fully divine and was subordinate to God. Others promoted the Trinitarian view: that God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit were equals and of the same substance. The Nicene Creed declared the Trinitarian view the official orthodox view. The traditional set of beliefs, the “orthodox” doctrines that a majority of the early Christians adhered to was called “Catholic,” which means “universal.” To say you were Catholic simply meant that you were claiming to be part of the universal body of Christ. By the end of the 4th century C.E. an orthodox canon had been formed that included the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles of Paul. By the end of the 5th century C.E. the bishop in Rome was recognized as the most important religious authority within the Catholic Church. Pope Leo the Great claimed to be the supreme leader of the Church on the basis of the Petrine Doctrine, which argues based on Matt 16:18 that Jesus selected his disciple Peter to be his successor. Peter founded the church in Rome and became the first bishop of Rome; hence, the claim that Rome is the center of the Church and that the bishop of Rome is the supreme leader.

The term “Roman Catholic” arose after a split between the Western and Eastern Church within the Roman Empire. The Western and Eastern churches drifted apart in practice, organization, and doctrine as the Roman Empire collapsed. The Church Fathers of the Western Church were St. Ambrose (340-397), St. Jerome (340-419), and St. Augustine (354-430). St. Jerome created the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew sources that would become the official text of the Western Church. St. Augustine wrote the *City of God*, which synthesized Plato and Christianity; and established the Western linear view of history as a progression toward the Day of Judgment. When the political apparatus of the Roman Empire disintegrated, the role of the local church became more important throughout Europe. The Roman Catholic Church essentially filled the void left by the collapse of the Roman Empire.

During the Middle Ages the church promoted monasticism, a life of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The ideals of monasticism allowed the clergy and the bishops to claim moral and spiritual superiority over the lay person. Thus, the clergy and the bishops became associated with morality, as the examples of how to live a good life. Ascetic (self-denying) communities, referred to as monasteries, were founded on the model of early Christian hermits. St. Benedict founded a famous monastery and Benedictine monks lived a life of poverty and meditation. They also served as scribes and founded schools that would evolve over time into the medieval university. The monks and theologians of the 13th century would synthesize the works of Aristotle with Christianity to give rise to Scholasticism. The scholastics used Greek philosophy to systematize Christian theology and philosophize about religious questions.

Beginning in the 12th century, the papacy was transformed into a great secular power with a vast bureaucracy that weakened the Roman Catholic Church spiritually. The pope in Rome increasingly declared himself an authority entirely independent of and superior to secular rulers. In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued *Unam Sanctam*, which argued that secular authority was subordinate to the spiritual authority of the church. The church became more concerned with and involved in political disputes and less concerned with the “body of the faithful.” The Papacy was re-located to Avignon, France between 1309-1377 (Babylonian Captivity) and during this period Pope Clement VI began the practice of selling indulgences. An indulgence is a pardon granted by the Church for good works. If an individual committed a sin for which they would have to seek forgiveness in *this* life, they could receive a pardon called an indulgence. Over time, indulgences were being granted to individuals who simply made a financial contribution to the Church. Thus, the phrase “selling of indulgences” and the view by some that the Church was offering “forgiveness” in exchange for money. The Church became increasingly materialistic and corrupt during the 14th century, which resulted in various reform movements.

The papacy and orthodox Catholic theology were challenged by English theologian John Wycliffe (1320-1384) and Czech theologian John Huss (1369-1415). Both attacked the bishops’ and papacy’s involvement in politics and claimed that the Bible alone – not the church hierarchy or the pope himself – was the highest authority for Christians. They emphasized the study of the Holy Scriptures by the laity (non-clergy) and promoted sermons in the common language of the people. Wycliffe even undermined the clergy’s authority by denying that priests had the power to change the bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood during Holy Communion. The concept that the bread and wine changes into the body and blood of Christ is called “transubstantiation.” Wycliffe denied that it was true and provoked further controversy by challenging “papal infallibility.” Wycliffe rejected the notion that the pope’s doctrinal rulings were free from error simply because he was the pope. Wycliffe also argued that personal merit, not rank and office within the church hierarchy, was the true basis of religious authority. His beliefs had an implicit egalitarianism that challenged the social and religious hierarchy of the Middle Ages and his ideas were declared heretical.

Pope Gregory XI moved the Papacy back to Rome in 1377. Pope Urban VI succeeded him in 1378, but a group of cardinals elected a competing pope, Clement VII. This event is referred to as the Great Schism (1378-1417) and the Council of Pisa (1409-1410) resolved the conflict between the two popes by electing a third pope, Alexander V. Neither Urban VI nor Clement VII recognized Alexander V as legitimate and the church had three competing popes until the Council of Constance (1414-1417) elected Martin V. The Conciliar Movement, which peaked between 1432-1449, sought to regulate and limit the power of the pope by arguing that the church was the whole “body of the faithful.” Such an egalitarian doctrine is representative, in addition to the arguments of both Wycliffe and Huss, of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church during the Late Middle Ages was under pressure to reform itself. However, the Conciliar Movement was short-lived and in 1449 Pope Pius II declared representative church councils that limit the pope’s power heretical. Nonetheless, the lay religious movements of Wycliffe and Huss and the Conciliar Movement within the church planted seeds of reform that would grow slowly throughout the Late Middle Ages and receive much nourishment during the Renaissance.

The Renaissance was a rebirth in the humanist culture of ancient Greece and Rome, which emphasized individualism and the dignity of man. The humanistic educational program, the liberal arts, flourished in the Italian city-states and spread to Northern Europe due to the printing press. The Italian Renaissance had been quite secular, while Christian Humanism and an emphasis on church reform characterized the Northern Renaissance. Humanists such as Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) aspired to unite classical ideals of humanity and civic virtue with the Christian ideal of love. Erasmus edited the works of the Church Fathers and produced revised translations of the New Testament. Erasmus, like the monks of the Middle Ages, promoted a simple life in imitation of Christ. The Christian Humanists believed in the ability of humans to reason and improve themselves by studying the classics and religious texts. They wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church rather than abandon it.

Rudolf Agricola (1443-1485) introduced humanistic education to Germany and the political decentralization of the German territories allowed for the free exchange and growth of ideas concerning church reform. The lavish lifestyles of the Renaissance popes, the Papacy’s obsession with secular political matters rather than spiritual issues, the corruption of the church’s finances and clergy, the refusal of the church to reform itself, and the rebirth of individualism proved to be the combination of factors that would allow reform to blossom in a manner it had failed to during the Late Middle Ages. The invention of the printing press fueled the reform by allowing many writers to criticize the Renaissance popes and corruption of the church, encouraging popular religious piety, making the Bible available to a wider audience, and enabling new ideas to spread more quickly than ever before. The medieval worldview towards art, philosophy, and history had already become severely eroded during the Renaissance. Ultimately, the humanistic impulse of the Renaissance, the development of the printing press, and the desire for reform would lead to a permanent break with the Roman Catholic Church and the medieval religious worldview that had held European society together for over 1,000 years.

The lower class gradually came to view the bishops as part of a wealthy and oppressive ruling class. Their dissatisfaction with the church became part of their general dissatisfaction with the entire social order. The middle class increasingly wished to manage their own religious affairs, much as they did their own business affairs. Kings and princes had long quarreled with the church over taxes, law, and political issues. Secular rulers wanted to control their territories without church interference. Thus, *the social and economic situation was conducive to a reform movement.*

Many Christians had become disillusioned with the church as an institution, while interest in Christianity had not declined and people began to take a more active role in their own salvation. Mysticism, which had its origins in 14th century German territories, promoted an immediate experience of oneness with God. Meister Eckhart led the Mystical Movement in Germany and his student Johannes Tauler gave sermons stressing the need to prepare the soul for the mystical experience by expressing the love of God in the ordinary activities of everyday life. Mystical ideas deepened the religious life of both clergymen and laymen. The Mystical Movement gave rise to the Modern Devotion, founded by Gerard Groote, a lay religious movement where people took no monastic vows, but chose to live by self-imposed monastic rules. The Modern Devotion, also called the Brothers of the Common Life, established schools where they stressed a simple life in imitation of Jesus. Modern Devotion avoided the complexities of theology and focused on a simple morality based on Holy Scripture. Thomas a Kempis summarized the philosophy of the movement in the *Imitation of Christ*. The Catholic Church feared the movement because it was not controlled by the church and one of the Common Life's students, Erasmus, grew up to become one of the most influential Christian Humanists and precursors of the Protestant Reformation.